

The Communist and the Communist's Daughter: A Memoir

Jane Lazarre

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017

214 pp., \$29.95 (cloth)

Jane Lazarre's memoir about her father is at once an intimate look into a rocky father-daughter relationship and an account of the fascinating life of a leader in the American Communist Party. Lazarre is not new to the art of the memoir. She is the author of *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*, which shares her experience of raising black sons as a white Jewish mother married to a black man, and her book *The Mother Knot*, originally published in 1976, continues to be a classic exploration of the myth of "the good mother." In her latest memoir, *The Communist and the Communist's Daughter*, Lazarre comes full circle to examine her relationship with her father, who spent his life as a dedicated organizer in the Communist Party. The book is an amalgam of "chaotic shards of experience, memories both lucid and vague, at times consecutive and coherent, then suddenly crossing time and space as sounds and silence gather into images and words" (1).

This book reads much like a novel. The reader is quickly swept up into the life of Lazarre's father—a man with at least three names, which Lazarre moves among depending on the memory. Born Itzrael Lazarovitz in Romania, his name evolves to William Lazar (then Lazarre, on the recommendation of his wife) on his citizenship papers, and then as the Communist Party organizer, Bill Lawrence. This multiplicity of names alone tells an important story in American immigration history as this Jewish immigrant transforms himself in response to internal and external social pressures to assimilate.

Through the lens of William Lazarre's life, the reader catches glimpses of major upheavals in American history. The book opens with Lazarre visiting Ellis Island as she begins to draw a picture of her father's migration story and his life in his adopted homeland. An older father whose "elegant wife" died relatively young, he raised Lazarre and her sister in a New York City apartment and left a powerful imprint as he shared ideas and books with his children, battled depression, and sang songs in English, Russian, and Yiddish. He had been a member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade during the Spanish Civil War as well as a witness to the Red Scare's Palmer Raids and the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. Like many adolescents, Lazarre often resisted her father's influences, and the tangled emotions of this resistance course throughout the book.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of this book is the opportunity to get a bird's-eye view of the inner workings of the Communist Party during its heyday. Through her memories, FBI records, interviews, and news clippings, Lazarre shares her father's "soul work." While working as a weaver in a Philadelphia factory, her father pursued political work that evolved into a life dedicated to organizing workers and recruiting young radicals (59). Despite the factionalism and eventual split between the American and Soviet Communist Parties, Bill Lazarre/Bill Lawrence spent 1930 to 1958 working for the Party. Initially, Lazarre wanted to write what she calls "a clear and coherent story about the Party and Bill's place in it"; however, she finally realized that it was impossible to "ascer-

tain the truth.” Rather, she writes a story that is as complicated as the history of the Communist Party. Yet the personal narratives offer a picture of the Party that cannot be found in more scholarly treatments of the Party, and this sets this book apart.

Throughout the book we learn about the shifts within the American Communist Party, the impact of the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings on Lazarre’s family and friends, the tensions immigrant families experienced, and the toll that “soul work” can take on intimate relationships. In a powerful recollection of her father’s 1958 departure from the Party upon Khrushchev’s acknowledgment of Stalin’s atrocities, Lazarre writes: “The break was sudden, and unexpected for us, the children. Our parents’ actions seemed inexplicable. . . . I remember shouting at my father in confusion and anger, denouncing him for his denunciations. . . . But the breakdown of the Party that had nurtured Bill, has brought him up in a way . . . was a betrayal that brought him to public tears” (109).

The magic of this book is also one of its only weaknesses. Lazarre organizes it much like the chaotic history that she is telling. While this works to a certain degree, I often found myself confused by what I was reading. Am I reading a memory? An FBI transcript? A letter? A dream? Lazarre’s use of bold and italicized lettering as well as indentations makes for confusing reading. And, while perhaps this should matter more, the memoir as a writing form allows for some artistic license.

This is one of those books that deserves many audiences. And for that I am grateful, as I believe its appeal, like that of Lazarre’s earlier memoirs, makes an important contribution to understanding aspects of American history and social consciousness that are not explored nearly enough.

Emily E. LB. Twarog, *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*