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Marie Syrkin: Values Beyond the Self (Brandeis Series in American Jewish History, Culture, and Life & HBI Series on Jewish Women)

Carole S. Kessner

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This book covers the life and times of Marie Syrkin, polemicist of pragmatic idealism.Marie Syrkin's life spanned ninety years of the twentieth century, 1899-1989. As a polemical journalist, socialist Zionist, poet, educator, literary critic, translator, and idiosyncratic feminist, she was eyewitness to and reporter on most of the major events in America, Israel, and Europe. Beautiful, as well as brilliant, she had a rich personal life as lover, wife, mother, and friend. During her lifetime Syrkin's name was widely recognized in the world of Jewish life and letters. Yet, inevitably, since her death, recognition of her name is no longer quite so immediate. Carole S. Kessner's intention is to restore for a new generation the singular legacy of Syrkin's life.Syrkin was born in Switzerland, the only child of the theoretician of socialist Zionism Nachman Syrkin and Bassya Osnos Syrkin, a feminist socialist Zionist. Following short stints in several European countries, the family immigrated to the United States in 1909. By the age of ten Marie was fluent in five languages. Educated in American public schools and at Cornell University, by the time she was twenty-three she had published translations, as well as her own poetry.After her first trip to Palestine in 1933, Syrkin joined the staff of the Jewish Frontier. This began her lifelong contribution to Zionism, Jewish life, and responsible journalism. In 1947 she published her most celebrated work, Blessed Is the Match. In 1950 she became a professor of English literature at Brandeis University and later published a biography of her father and the authorized biography of her longtime close friend Golda Meir.Syrkin married three times: the first, to Maurice Samuel, annulled by her father's intervention; the second, to the biochemist Aaron Bodansky, the father of her son David; the third, to the poet Charles Reznikoff, lasted on and off for more than forty years. In the course of her life, Marie had many influential friends, such as Hayim Greenberg, Ben Gurion, and Irving Howe, and she served as inspiration to many younger intellectuals, including Martin Peretz, Michael Walzer, and Leon Wieseltier.As poet and journalist, Zionist activist and public intellectual, Syrkin's work and actions illuminate a wide range of twentieth-century literary, cultural, and political concerns. Her passions demonstrate, as Irving Howe said, "a life of commitment to values beyond the self."

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