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## *Building Jerusalem*

Alison Light

I met the novelist Ruth Adler thirty years ago. She was then in her eighties, an elegant, quietly spoken but forthright woman. For a while she had been, as my husband put it, one of his many mothers. For much of his childhood during the Second World War and in the years that followed, while his own mother was working after her divorce, Raphael was parked on relatives or close friends. All of them, like Ruth Adler – the pen name of Ray Waterman – were members of the British Communist Party, the majority having joined in the 1930s. 'Party' households were not renowned for their comfort; Raphael's mother scorned domesticity as bourgeois. So he generally found himself in cheerless, spartan rooms strewn with a few utilitarian items, table and chairs piled up with pamphlets, as if awaiting a committee meeting. But Ray's house was special. Soft furnishings, pottery, paintings and, above all, the feeling of a *home*.

These memories came to mind as I read Ruth/Ray's novel *Beginning Again* (1983) for the first time recently. At its centre is Rebecca Lederman and her love for her husband, Morris, a man entirely given up to his political work. Rebecca shares and respects his views – they are both 'Bolshies' – but she also wants time to herself to write. Rebecca, Morris says, is a romantic. She would rather read Dickens than the *Daily Worker*, the Communist Party newspaper. She argues that great art is universal, not to be reduced to a political point of view. What's more she believes in beauty. Yet her writing always comes second, or third, or fourth, because she too feels a deep debt to the past, to those who have suffered before her, whose memory must be upheld, and to those who are suffering injustice in the present. How, she asks herself, can one be a writer, selfishly scribbling away, when so much in the world is wrong?

The book opens in 1945 as the Ledermans arrive at their new house in north London. Rebecca is 35; she has been married to Morris for fourteen years and they are putting behind them his recent love affair with her best friend; her sons, who were evacuated, are about to return, and her parents, billeted in Leicester after escaping London's Blitz, are coming to live with them. It is a time of reconstruction for them and for Britain too: 'Europe was at peace, Fascism in disarray.' As communists, they want Britain to go further than the watered down capitalism of the Labour Party. They want a transformation of the old hidebound, class-bound society, 'returning the land to the people, production for use not profit'. Only the Party, they believe, is fighting imperialism abroad and racial prejudice at home. 'In Rebecca's fantasy', a telling phrase, her comrades are 'pure in heart, the only ones engaged in the battle with evil'.

Houses in English literature have often symbolized the state of national life – think of Austen's *Mansfield Park* or Forster's *Howards End*, for example. Frequently too a house is identified with

the woman who lives there, with her interior life, her dreams and dilemmas. Rebecca's house on four floors is multi-occupied, draughty and dirty; it is full of the past but far from insular. The Ledermans are one step away from their roots in Poland. Their politics are Internationalist, but Morris devotes much of his time to the Jewish Centre within the Party, working alongside refugees and immigrants.

While Rebecca and Morris look to the future and their boys happily play ping-pong and squabble over their homework, Rebecca's parents, Leah and Herschel, are adrift and bereft. Anxious and lonely, they miss the lively intimacy of their Yiddish-speaking community in the East End. They are haunted too by a more terrible loss. When Herschel, fussy and highly strung, searches for the ring with which he always used to seal the wax on letters home to Poland, Leah taunts him: 'What for you want it now? You want to send them money to the next world? Hitler looks after them there free of charge as he did in this one.' But Herschel wants to find the ring just to look at it, to know it is there.

Without being dry or doctrinaire, and also without making fun of it, the novel captures the lost world of the British Communist Party in the late 1940s: branch meetings dominated by earnest and sometimes acrimonious discussion; hardworking cadres who live on next to nothing and spend every weekend canvassing, marching, distributing leaflets, organizing meetings or fundraising; people from across all walks of life who form study groups, to read together and debate. Rebecca's meandering thoughts – has she left the gas on at home? what is there for dinner? – and her self-analysis often provide an ironic counterpoint. Feeling pressured she volunteers to sell papers and take on donkeywork, briefly glowing, as she notes, with self-approval. Mostly, though, she burns with resentment as Morris's increasing commitments leave the domestic work to her.

Morris's faith, on the other hand, never waivers. More remarkably, the reader never ceases to like him. A large man, in every sense, overflowing with generosity and good humour, his politics are a vital part of him. Being a communist and being Jewish are for him indivisible. In Leipzig for the International Book Fair, back on hated German soil, Morris conquers his repugnance by meeting young people eager to build the new Democratic Republic. At the heart of the book is his journey to his home village. He finds only one Jewish survivor, a young woman who is now the memory of an entire community, the archive of its annihilation. She lives with the elderly Polish peasant who risked his life many times over, keeping her in the cellar under his floor for three years. Wouldn't she be better off in Warsaw with company her own age or other survivors, Morris wonders. 'I would as soon abandon my father as this old man,' she replies. Communism for Morris means creating such bonds across humanity.

*Beginning Again* is breathtakingly honest. Nothing in this novel is simple and no one is holier than thou. The Ledermans are landlords – 'a dirty word in the Party. As bad as bourgeoisie or shareholders'. They send their boys to a private school, albeit a local, progressive one. The Jewish family, for all the affection in the portrayal, is far from sentimentalized. Rebecca's brother, Ben, a returned soldier, is slowly being throttled by parental demands and expectations. Broken down by the war, unable to find girls physically attractive, he desperately needs to get away from those 'who'd die for him'.

Rebecca also fends off her mother, who trips downstairs from her lodgings on her tiny heels every ten minutes to interrupt her daughter, to display the fine piece of meat she has bought, or to gossip about nothing in particular. Any hint of comic or nostalgic 'Yiddishkeit' is soon dispersed by a dream in which Rebecca imagines herself walking round and round a

concentration camp with her mother on her back; there are times when she wishes her mother were dead and the burden of guilt lies heavy on her shoulders.

Rebecca knows she is her own worst enemy. She is trapped by her need to create a nice home, to keep up high standards of cleaning and cooking, and to buy new things. She is constitutionally incapable of letting the housework go to pot, like her painter friend Julia; nor can she slough off family responsibilities or be like Helen, a doctor who lives alone and has 'free unions' with different men. Eventually she can afford a char, but she is only too aware that she is now shuffling part of her dirty work on to another woman. Yet when she finally escapes the house to Hampstead Heath for an hour, pen and paper at the ready, she gives herself up to the trees and the sunshine, and writes not a word.

*Beginning Again* won the 'Woman of the Eighties' Book award in 1983. It would certainly have chimed with the spirit of the contemporary Women's Liberation Movement, the campaign around 'Wages for Housework', for instance. But Adler's outlook belongs more to Bolshevism than to 'second-wave' feminism. When Rebecca lambasts 'all this ridiculous shopping, cooking, cleaning up and thinking about meals for each little family on its own', she imagines collective canteens and laundries. Like latter-day feminists for whom the personal was political, Rebecca and Morris believe that the inner life should be worked on too: they make love before marriage and see jealousy and possessiveness as a disfigurement, treating a person as property. But in making Rebecca's touchstones George Bernard Shaw and other free-thinkers, Adler reminds us that radical experiments in living have a long history.

Though the novel is a fictional retrospect, not reportage, Adler wisely ends it in 1949. Any later and it would become a chronicle of disillusionment as the horrors of Stalinism, already half-suspected, could no longer be denied. After the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, many adherents, like Adler herself and most of her circle, left the Party. In the novel, Rebecca has to lower her sights. She accepts, though not ungrudgingly, that she cannot have everything, and that self-fulfilment is not enough of a goal. Without those prepared to fight for something beyond their own needs, women and children, she thinks, would still be down the mines and fascism would never have been beaten. Men will have to be domesticated, she decides, and she will have to work on it.

It comes as no surprise to discover that Ruth Adler was a late starter, only finding time to write after the death of her husband and her parents. She wrote two novels. The first, *A Family of Shopkeepers* (1973), vividly evokes her parents' life and her growing up in Stepney in the 1910s and '20s. Ten years later she finished its sequel, *Beginning Again*, published when she was 70. Both deserve to be reprinted.

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