

Gertrude Himmelfarb (1922-2019)

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Published online: 8 May 2020

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Gertrude Himmelfarb died on December 30th of 2019 in the Watergate apartment she and her husband Irving Kristol had made their home after leaving New York in 1987. She was 97.

Both, though in rather different ways, were major influences on American public discourse and thus natural adornments to the capital's intellectual life. But they were also quintessential New York intellectuals as well as part of its greatest generation, the one matured in economic depression and world war, rising to influence during the tense, troubled peace that followed. This brilliant circle, or at least those within it who didn't succumb to utopian temptations, midwived the birth of the National Association of Scholars. Though the NAS now has a nationwide reach and flavor, the organization's founders, and its foundational principles, took their inspiration from these cognoscenti. Most were Jewish, most had struggled up from humble origins, and all were devoted to the ideals, institutions, and Anglo-American culture that made their ascent possible.

Gertrude Himmelfarb was this cohort's most notable historian, indeed among the very greatest to have graced academe during her near century of living. She had graduated, like myself, from Brooklyn College, but with a triple major in history, philosophy, and economics, capped by a doctorate from the University of Chicago. Like many of her time and background she had an early fling with Marxism but in her case one with a happy larger consequence, the finding of her future husband and philosophic soulmate, Irving Kristol, at a Trotskyite conclave. She would go on to teach for about twenty years at her alma mater as well as the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

Editor's note: Gertrude Himmelfarb served on the National Association of Scholars' Editorial Advisory Board from its beginning in 1987 until 2019.

It was toward the end of her career in New York that she crossed paths with the fledgling NAS. Irving Kristol had been the principal speaker at its first meeting at John Jay College of the City University, where, in 1982, I was teaching. (We then still went by the name Campus Coalition for Democracy.) That kickoff was followed by a series of soirees held at the Manhattan residences of our earliest members. Irving and Bea (as she preferred to be called by those who knew her personally) invited me to use their apartment for one of these. I felt honored and excited to have the opportunity to get a glimpse of the private side of the life of two nationally celebrated intellectual movers and shakers.

Theirs was by no means a huge living space, though nicely situated overlooking the south side of Central Park. When I arrived it was crowded with the folding chairs the Kristols had rented for the occasion, together with several tables of hors d'oeuvres. I was immediately put at ease by Bea's total lack of airs as she assumed a role indistinguishable from the hostesses (and hosts) at our earlier "salons," taking coats and, with Irving, deploying more chairs as needed. (And they were very much needed since many others were as excited as I was with being able to spend time at home with the Kristols.) We had a splendid time and though I can't remember what was discussed by the panel we assembled, I do recall one of the panelists taking a sudden but harmless tumble when his folding chair tipped over backwards.

Afterward we were able to avail ourselves of the help Bea was most fitted to provide, as she became a contributor to *Academic Questions*, a conference panelist, and a member of the NAS's advisory board.

The most important service Bea provided to the NAS's larger project was argumentative. She publicly unveiled and strongly advocated the idea of reseeded the academic landscape with programs of a richness appropriate to authentic liberal education.

In 1994 I had the pleasure of sitting down with the Kristols at an expensive French restaurant (their treat!) on the Watergate's ground floor. As a stronghold of nouvelle cuisine it was a perfect place to talk with two giants of mind, the portions being too small to let eating get in the way of discourse. (My "salad" consisted of four upright and most carefully balanced blades of romaine lettuce.) Our conversations covered a lot of ground, partly my review of what the NAS had been plotting, partly their suggestions and benedictions. Finally it turned to what might best be done going forward. I advanced an idea just gaining initial traction at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where NAS member Dave Mulroy and I were working together to establish what we hoped would be a model Great Books Program, the first we hoped of many. Bea took up this embryonic possibility and ran with it in a *Commentary* article entitled "What to do about Education: The

Universities” that appeared in the magazine’s October 1994 issue. This was an important turn in the project’s history, giving it an immensely distinguished imprimatur as well as a wonderful motto, “oases of excellence.”

Of course Bea’s whole career, indeed life, was a model. The greatest teachers, like the greatest classical philosophers, have modeled ideals not only through simple espousal but also compelling narrative, analysis, and enactment. That is to say, by telling powerful, true stories, displaying an unusual sharpness of mind, and last but hardly least, living a virtuous life.

As far as narrative is concerned Bea’s style was erudite without being scholastic, unflinchingly readable, garnished with dry wit and always centered on engaging empathetically with the subject matter. Most frequently this involved the Victorians and their efforts to maintain the moral fabric of a society undergoing rapid change, aiming to understand how they themselves experienced the stressful process. That for her was how historical imagination was legitimately exercised.

Victorians aside, her analysis was wide ranging, including an assessment of Darwin’s shortcomings as a scientist and science’s own shortcomings as universal oracle. But as the years passed the chief target of her cultural criticism was increasingly Western society’s deepening moral and intellectual folly. She found greatest peril in its demoralization under the weight of a relativism devolving toward nihilism, which she saw as academic postmodernism’s most insidious product. Her initial major work on this theme was *The New History and the Old*, whose first edition appeared in 1987, the year of the inauguration of NAS. Quite literally we followed her path.

Anyone who knew Bea could attest to her supereminence of character expressed in a long and loving marriage, personal warmth, a disarming openness, and her dedication as an historian to avoiding easy conceptual shortcuts in treating the complex subtleties of whatever she examined. When she was severe, it was with fellow historians who narrowed their interests and coarsened their sensibilities to fire off polemics or cater to simplistic intellectual fashions.

In all, Gertrude Himmelfarb authored sixteen books, edited another eight, and wrote numerous articles and essays in a career bridging seven decades. None were mere academic exercises. They were each offered instead as services to our civilization. When it came to that civilization’s rectitude she had become completely “woke.” Her oeuvre’s insights have the capacity to rouse others from their dogmatic slumbers. It befits her many friends and admirers to ensure they remain in education’s library.

—Steve Balch, *Founding President, National Association of Scholars*