

EARLY LIFE OF "THE REBEL GIRL"

Some contacts with Jews in the youth of a great defender of the rights of labor and freedom now imprisoned under the Smith act

By Elizabeth Gurley Flynn

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn has for decades been a participant in the central struggles in our country for the rights of labor and civil liberties. On August 7, Miss Flynn celebrated her 65th birthday—in a federal prison at Alderson, West Virginia, where she is serving a three-year sentence under the Smith act, herself a victim of the cold war assault on civil liberties. Helen Keller expressed the sentiment of firm democrats when she sent Miss Flynn a handwritten greeting which read, "Loving birthday greetings, dear Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. May the sense of serving mankind bring strength and peace into your brave heart.

Before she left for jail, Miss Flynn completed I Speak My Own Piece!: the Autobiography of "The Rebel Girl." The book will be published in the fall by Masses & Mainstream, 832 Broadway, New York City (cloth edition, \$2.75; popular edition, \$1.75). Below are excerpts from this book.—Eds.

IN New England we had bought wood by the cord and coal by the ton. But here [at the turn of the century], in the South Bronx, we bought coal in bushel bags and wood in little bundles, which were three for 5 cents at first. This was sold by "Joe," the only Italian in the neighborhood. In the summertime he sold ice and wine all year round, if he trusted you. There was only one Jewish family for many years, that of Mr. Isaacs, who kept a pool room. My mother insisted that we treat him courteously, though others did not. She approved of his place, which she said he ran like a social hall for the boys and the neighborhood, and it kept them out of trouble. She was firm in teaching us respect for other people's nationality, language and religion. Most of our neighbors were German and Irish. The Germans owned the stores. The saloons were owned by the Irish. Italian women, with colored handkerchiefs over their heads, shawls over their shoulders, and great circular earrings would come up from Harlem to the open fields in the Bronx to pick dandelion greens, which they carried back in great bundles on their heads. In the evenings, Italian laborers would walk back over the bridge, on the way home from work. The children threw stones at them and shouted "Dago." As little children, in Manchester, New Hampshire, and Adams, Massachusetts, we had lived near Polish and French Canadians, who were called "Polaks" and "Canucks." My mother would tolerate none of this and would

say firmly, "How would you like to be called *Micks?*"—as the Irish were for so many years . . .

AFTER GRADUATION FROM GRAMMAR SCHOOL [IN 1904], OUR debating society continued outside as the Hamilton Literary Society. We met weekly during 1905 at the home of a Dr. Cantor on East 143rd Street and were supervised by Joseph Weinstein, a college student, later a school teacher. Many newcomers from other schools joined, most of them were Jewish. This was my first intimate contact with Jewish people, and I liked them very much. I found them idealistic and progressive. Their mental curiosity and intellectual acuteness were stimulating. Our discussions encompassed every possible social problem. I began to realize that the Irish were not the only national group that had suffered persecution because of their religion, language and culture. I was influenced greatly in my thinking at the period by a youth in high school I met at this club. He was Fred Robinson, the son of Dr. William J. Robinson, who edited an unorthodox trail blazer on medicine called "The Critic and Guide." Dr. Robinson was one of several doctors who were pioneer advocates of birth control, long before Mrs. Margaret Sanger became its chief spokesman.

Fred used to walk me home the nine blocks after our meetings. He was my first boy friend, although he never as much as held my hand. He talked about Walt Whitman, Jack London, Emma Goldman—and other people of whom I had never heard. He wrote me letters full of ideas of "social significance," enclosing clippings and poems. Fred was more of an anarchist than a socialist, I believe, though the words were loosely interchanged in those days. Albert Parsons, for instance, the martyred leader of the eight-hour movement in the 80's had called himself a socialist and an anarchist and had run for office on a union labor ticket. . . .

WHILE I HAD BEEN AWAY IN THE WEST, SEVERAL LARGE strike struggles had taken place in the East. One in 1909 was centered in New York's East Side, involved 20,000 waist makers and was called "the girls' strike." Eighty per cent in the trade were women and 70 per cent between 16 and 25 years old. They worked 56 hours a week in seasonal work, speeded up in dirty fire-traps known as "sweat-shops." "Learner" wages were \$3 to \$6 per week.



The 16-year-old Elizabeth Gurley Flynn in 1906.

The highest paid to operators was \$18. The strike started in two shops, one the notorious Triangle Shirt Waist Company. A meeting was held at Cooper Union with union officials and prominent sympathizers as speakers, cautiously discussing if a general strike was possible. The overflow filled all the halls in the vicinity. After two hours a girl striker demanded the floor. She said: "I am tired of listening to speakers. I offer a resolution that a general strike be declared now." Her motion was enthusiastically carried. Her name was Clara Lemlich and she is known today as an active and progressive worker.

The strike lasted two months. The picket lines were broken up again and again by the police. Over 1,000 strikers were arrested. Twenty-two young girls were sent to Blackwell's Island Workhouse, a horrible, filthy place. The Women's Trade Union League and the suffrage organizations came to the aid of the strikers. Five hundred school teachers, led by Henrietta Rodman, president of the Teachers' Association (there was no union then) met at the New Amsterdam Theater, to pledge aid to the strikers. Mary Drier, then president of the Women's Trade Union League, was arrested on the picket line. A meeting to protest against police brutality was held at the Hippodrome, Dr. John Howard Melish was chairman. A similar meeting at Carnegie Hall was addressed by Rabbi Wise.

Young girls told at these meetings of violence and insults by the police and how the prostitutes in jail jeered at their low wages and told them they could do much better at *their* trade. When the strike started there were two union shops. When it ended there were over 300 union shops, with shorter hours and more pay. This heroic struggle

of women laid a firm base for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. In 1910 over 45,000 men and women were out in a general strike. Yet it took years for one woman to be elected to their executive board. It has always been a man-run organization, with the biggest local unions of women in existence. . . .

IT WAS A LONG BUT FASCINATING TRIP FROM THE SOUTH Bronx to the liberal Art Club, at 106 East Broadway, where I was often invited to speak in 1906 and '07. It took an hour to Canal Street on the Third Avenue "El" with its lurching cars pulled by chuggy little coal-burning engines, before the days of the deadly third rail. The East Side opened up another world to me, beside which the South Bronx Irish railroad workers and German piano workers drinking their beer in corner saloons seemed sedate and dull. On the East Side crowded meetings abounded, with animated discussions. I met "Jews Without Money" of whom Mike Gold wrote later so graphically. The halls were long and narrow, poorly heated and lighted, with sawdust on the floor to protect it for the dancing. Usually there was a canopy for Jewish weddings with faded velvet hangings and dusty flowers. On the walls were charters of "landsmen" clubs and beautiful red banners of Socialist locals and unions, hung carefully under glass, taken out only for special occasions like May Day.

There was dire poverty among these newly arrived immigrants, who lived crowded together in dingy firetrap tenements. They toiled in vile sweatshops for starvation wages until they struggled to bring other members of their family to America. Not speaking the language, they were cheated and overworked. At all meetings there was a constant moving about and a commotion at the back of the hall of people talking together who did not understand English. These forums were a haven for homesick people. They brought music, art and comradeship before there were any settlement houses or union halls. Professor Platon Brounoff, a talented pianist, presided at the East Broadway forum. He was a composer of an opera based on American Indian music. He entertained with original short stories, witty criticisms of American life, such as "Moses Comes to Hester Street" and "Jesus Comes to Ellis Island." Often same half-starved violinist played for us, some of whom later became famous.

Brounoff always paid everybody a little—up to \$5—a fabulous amount. He fed the hungry souls of his audience with intellectual and musical manna. He fed his performers later, including the speakers, in dingy little coffee houses, where we ate cake and drank tea with lemon out of a glass. Finally, he left the East Side, due to his wife's social ambitions, and was swallowed up in the prosperous mediocrity of what was then Jewish lower Harlem, where he taught music. He did not live too long after being uprooted. I saw him one night at a theater. He boomed through the lobby as of old: "Comrade Flynn! How's the revolution?" . . .