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Review of *Rachel Calof's Story: Jewish Homesteader on the Northern Plains* By Rachel Calof

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intimate, compelling story, written for her family, introduces the reader to a personal world seldom revealed in historical accounts.

Descriptions of Rachel's childhood in Russia include brutal situations that today would be considered acute child abuse. Under the control of uncaring relatives who arranged for her to travel to America to become the wife of a man she had never met, Rachel, at age eighteen, is sent to face marriage to a stranger, acceptance by a family whose life circumstances repelled her, and exposure to extreme poverty.

The narrative moves from one crisis to another. The power of her words, however, lies not in her graphic details of hard times, but in the intensely personal revelations of her reactions to these events. Her candid accounts include superstitious fears, panic, and terror; but in the end her indomitable spirit prevails. Even though her life was largely controlled by others, Rachel found ways to resist that domination: at the age of eight, "I spoke to my father about the intolerable conditions under which we lived. The servant girl . . . beat me mercilessly, but I persisted and continued to appeal to our father . . ." (p. 2); in response to a family decision, "I raised my voice against the arbitrary selection of Abraham . . ." (p. 30); in an exchange with her husband, ". . . I stood face to face with him and gave as good as I received" (p. 59). Rachel's narrative reaches beyond her own reactions to provide a sensitive, insightful glimpse into the complex dynamics of family life strained by conditions of subsistence. "In those precarious winters of the first years when so many people, and animals as well, huddled together in a tiny space, my yearning was not for a larger shack but rather for the dignity of privacy" (p. 90).

Against this background of disaster, Rachel weaves threads of optimism into her story. "I guess you could say that I had an optimistic nature" (p. 60). The legacy she left for her descendants and now a wider audience is strong and clear: one can win out even in the worst of situations, but there are agonies associated with triumph.

Rachel Calof's Story: Jewish Homesteader on the Northern Plains. By Rachel Calof. Edited by J. Sanford Rikoon. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. Preface, photographs, index. xiii + 158 pp. \$20.00 cloth, \$12.95 paper.

I was born in Russia in the year 1876, and when I was four years old my dear mother died, leaving me a half orphan in company with an older brother, a younger sister, and a baby brother of only eighteen months . . . from that day onward, unyielding misfortune became our lot . . . (p. 1)

So begins Rachel Bella Calof's personal narrative, written in 1936, at the age of sixty. Rachel reflects briefly upon her childhood but focuses primarily on her life between 1894 and 1904 when, as a wife and mother, she struggled to survive on a North Dakota homestead. Her

Along with the original narrative this volume provides an epilogue by Jacob Calof, Rachel's youngest child, and two essays, one by J. Sanford Rikoon, the other by Elizabeth Jameson. Jacob Calof's comments confirm the strength and courage we find in his mother's words.

The essays lend significant context to the narrative. Rikoon gives a concise and informative explanation of the history of Jewish families that left Russia and eastern Europe to settle on farms in the Heartland. Jameson's analysis places Rachel's narrative in historical perspective and emphasizes the importance of recognizing diversities of ethnicity, class, and gender in the interpretation of history.

This volume is among the finest work I have read in illuminating women's roles and the intricacies of family dynamics. It gives strong support to a vital and more realistic settlement history.

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