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Rachel Calof's Story: Jewish Homesteader On The Northern Plains



Synopsis

"Calof's [story] has the 'electricity' one occasionally finds in primary sources. It is powerful, shocking, and primitive, with the kind of appeal primary sources often attain without effort.... it is a strong addition to the literature of women's experience on the frontier." —Lillian Schlissel

In 1894, eighteen-year-old Rachel Bella Kahn travelled from Russia to the United States for an arranged marriage to Abraham Calof, an immigrant homesteader in North Dakota. Rachel Calof's Story combines her memoir of a hard pioneering life on the prairie with scholarly essays that provide historical and cultural background and show her narrative to be both unique and a representative western tale. Her narrative is riveting and candid, laced with humor and irony. The memoir, written by Rachel Bella Calof in 1936, recounts aspects of her childhood and teenage years in a Jewish community, (shtetl) in Russia, but focuses largely on her life between 1894 and 1904, when she and her husband carved out a life as homesteaders. She recalls her horror at the hardships of pioneer life—especially the crowding of many family members into the 12 x 14' dirt-floored shanties that were their first dwellings. "Of all the privations I knew as a homesteader," says Calof, "the lack of privacy was the hardest to bear." Money, food, and fuel were scarce, and during bitter winters, three Calof households—Abraham and Rachel with their growing children, along with his parents and a brother's family—would pool resources and live together (with livestock) in one shanty. Under harsh and primitive conditions, Rachel Bella Calof bore and raised nine children. The family withstood many dangers, including hailstorms that hammered wheat to the ground and flooded their home; droughts that reduced crops to dust; blinding snowstorms of plains winters. Through it all, however, Calof drew on a humor and resolve that is everywhere apparent in her narrative. Always striving to improve her living conditions, she made lamps from dried mud, scraps of rag, and butter; plastered the cracked wood walls of her home with clay; supplemented meagre supplies with prairie forage—wild mushrooms and garlic for a special supper, dry grass for a hot fire to bake bread. Never sentimental, Calof's memoir is a vital historical and personal record. J. Sanford Rikoon elaborates on the history of Jewish settlement in the rural heartland and the great tide of immigration from the Russian Pale of Settlement and Eastern Europe from 1880 to 1910. Elizabeth Jameson examines how Calof "writes from the interior spaces of private life, and from that vantage point, reconfigures more familiar versions of the American West." Jameson also discusses how the Calofs adapted Jewish practices to the new contingencies of North Dakota, maintaining customs that represented the core of their Jewish identity, reconstructing their "Jewishness" in new circumstances.

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Customer Reviews

This book has several parts, the most important of which is "My Story," by Rachel Bella Calof. This remarkable memoir was written in 1936, by a 60-year-old woman who was recalling her early life, particularly her years as a homesteader in North Dakota at the turn of the century. She was not rich or famous and would probably be the first to say she was just an ordinary person. But her story strikes one as extraordinary, indeed. This is followed by an epilogue by her youngest son, Jacob Calof; and two essays from historians placing her story in context of the time it took place. The best part is unquestionably Rachel Bella's own story. The tale of one tragedy after another is punctuated by moments of beauty, joy, and tenderness. This is a woman whose hard life was a triumph over circumstances. It was a constant source of amazement to this reader that she survived at all—let alone that her nine children, born and raised in primitive circumstances—also survived. It is a testimony to superior genetics and incredible strength of will. It is also fascinating to read. The author's style is straightforward and unpretentious, but also shows evidence of the true storyteller: suspense, humor, romance, and wit. Personal relationships come alive as Calof describes herself, her family, and the people they met along the way. There are some times when we know that Calof is going to some lengths to soft-pedal the less than noble aspects of human nature, but we get the point. The two sections written by scholars are academically dry and are simply as not interesting to read. However, they do contain some helpful background information.

My family lived close to the Calof family as well as to the other Jewish settlers in this area. I remember my Father speaking about the settlement in nothing but the fondest terms, but he also

discussed with us the hardships these people lived. Their cemetery was built on land that is owned by my uncle's family. I read this book, therefore, with knowledge of the history of the settlement. I can only say, talk about history becoming alive. This is one of the rare true stories of courage, love, faith and determination that we as lovers of our nation's heritage will have the privilege of reading. It is completely absorbing and I feel that it would make a wonderful production for a movie or theatrical event. Read this story, it bypasses any fictional story for reading, this is how the West was settled. Some people had great success but many, many, had to strive to keep hope and life alive.

For the last 26 years I have taught American History at the high school and college levels. I have read hundreds of history books on a variety of subjects over the years. Rarely have I found a book that is revealing as this one. This short, very descriptive and moving book is exactly what students should be reading if they want to learn about history. To those who think history is boring, I say--read this book! It tells more about life in the West than books five times its size.

Rachel Calof's spellbinding narrative gives a rarely seen view of life on the frontier. In her story there are no cowboys, Indians, or saloons. Instead, she recounts battles with the harsh winters, crops, family, and privacy, giving the modern world a realistic view of life in the 'Wild West.' Calof's style is incredibly powerful - her simple, matter of fact narration not only gives the reader a new perspective on frontier life but also moves one emotionally. Her emotions are so raw and intense, one finds oneself sharing Calof's anger, tears, and joy. Historically, Calof's novel has much merit, it is not often that one hears about Jewish or female settlers on the frontier. This realistic glimpse of existence on the frontier brings the hardships and trials of the early settlers to life. Besides giving a clear historical perspective, Calof's narrative gives the reader an important message. Calof teaches the reader that if one wants to improve one's life, or reach a goal, one must work hard and patiently for it, and never give up. As a whole, Rachel Calof's Story is truly both a historical and literary treasure, and as Rachel Calof teaches us in her own words, "if you love the living of life you must know the journey was well worth it," and through Calof's book, readers are able to understand both the hardships and the joys of the long American journey westward.

On finishing Rachel Calof's autobiography, the reader should spontaneously count his blessings, regardless of current circumstance. Virtually forced to enter a marriage arranged in her Russian homeland, Calof survives a brutal pioneer existence on the featureless prairie near Devils Lake, North Dakota while bearing child after child. The brief memoir could easily be assigned to high

school or college students. A short afterward by the translator, Calof's youngest son, completes her story, and an essay by the editor, J. Sanford Rikoon, sets the experience of Jewish pioneers in North Dakota in historical perspective. The other academic essay included is of no value.

This is one of my favorite books. It's the true story (in her own words) of Rachel, an impoverished young Russian Jewish woman who was abandoned by her family and came to the US in the late 1800s for an arranged marriage to another poor Jewish immigrant. Together they became homesteaders in the bleak midwest, where they forged a life and created a large family while braving harsh winters in dire poverty. Rachel and her husband had no privacy, as his parents shared their tiny, one-room shack for a large part of every year. Rachel's writing is unsentimental and very moving. I wish someone would make a movie of this book.

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