



Esther Rosenblatt Landa, newly elected national president of the National Council of Jewish Women, delivering her acceptance speech at the closing banquet of the convention in San Francisco. Photo courtesy of Esther Landa.

## ESTHER ROSENBLATT LANDA

### Her Price Is Far above Rubies

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When Jews the world over recognize the selflessness and courage of a woman, they often turn to Proverbs: 31 to recite the following verses:

A woman of valor who can find?  
 For her price is far above rubies . . .  
 Strength and dignity are her clothing;  
 And she laugheth at the time to come.  
 She openeth her mouth with wisdom;  
 And the law of kindness is on  
 her tongue.

Utah, too, has produced its Jewish women of valor. First among them is Esther Landa. For six decades she has volunteered herself to public service, answering the call of her community, people, and nation. In length and breadth of activities she has few rivals. The tasks of the volunteer are often thankless and unacknowledged. It is time to mark her contributions:

Give her of the fruit of her hands;  
And let her works praise her in the gates.  
(Proverbs: 31)

Esther was born in Salt Lake City on December 25, 1912, the first-born of Simon and Sylvia Rosenblatt, long-time Utah residents. Esther's grandfather Nathan had left Poland in 1885 and journeyed to Denver before arriving in Salt Lake City four years later. Beginning as a horse-and-wagon peddler, he and his sons built up their business, the profitable Utah Junk Company, which developed into EIMCO, an international corporation. Simon, a leading businessman, provided well for his family, and Esther and her siblings Barbara and Bernard enjoyed comfort and security.

Much, however, was expected of Esther for her parents did not raise her for a life of leisure. While Simon's formal education ended when he left school at an early age to help in his father's business, he held her to high scholarly standards. Esther did not disappoint him. She attended public schools in Salt Lake City and twice skipped a half grade to graduate at age sixteen from East High School.<sup>1</sup>

A religious education was another Rosenblatt requirement. Simon Rosenblatt sent his oldest daughter to the religious school of Orthodox Congregation Montifiore, which his father Nathan had helped to found. This was a formative time for Esther. Her identity took shape as she absorbed the history and culture of the Jewish people. She also internalized values from the Five Books of Moses that would be her guiding lights: "If you ever were to read all my speeches, every speech is inspired by the same ideals, 'to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with God.'"<sup>2</sup> Esther's mother and father reinforced these precepts in their daily lives. They encouraged their children to assume a responsibility to help those

less fortunate than themselves. Both were actively involved as volunteers in Jewish groups and the wider community. For example, Simon was a member of the Zionist Society of America, the Rotary Club, Masons, and Shriners. Often, he left work to play the piano for the sick children confined to the Shriners' wing at the old St. Mark's hospital. Sylvia joined the Jewish Relief Society and the synagogue sisterhood. They instilled in Esther, by word and deed, a sense of service, an imperative "to give something back."<sup>3</sup>

Esther confronted few barriers growing up as a Jew in Mormon Utah. In fact, the handful of Salt Lake City Jews fit easily into this philo-Semitic world. The Mormons see Jews as Biblical brethren descended from Joseph, their mutual patriarch. A recent history of midwestern pogroms, an exodus across the Mississippi River into the western wilderness, and the settlement in a promised land with its own dead sea confirmed in Mormon minds a similar chosen destiny. Latter-day Saints are, as well, fervent zionists, predicting in accordance with ancient covenant and prophecy the eventual gathering of the Jews in Israel. Because conversion of the Jews was expected to occur only after their return, Mormon proselytizing efforts are inconsequential. Jews had long participated actively in Utah economic, social, and cultural affairs. A Jew, Simon Bamberger, would be elected governor of Utah just a few years after Esther's birth, continuing a tradition of service in state and local government. Esther fondly recalls her childhood as "the good life," free of any hint of anti-Semitism. She was active in school politics and well liked by her classmates. They remember her with affection as reflective, quiet, and the "smartest girl in the class."<sup>4</sup> Even though her closest friends were Jewish and her "tomboy" behavior acted to insulate her from schoolgirl cliques, she never felt "excluded."<sup>5</sup>

On graduation from East High in 1929, Esther Rosenblatt enrolled at Mills, a women's college in California. Her years there would prove life-shaping. Esther worked hard at her studies and earned a bachelor of arts degree and a Phi Beta Kappa key. Yet the influence of Mills went beyond the lessons of the classroom. Away from home for the first time, she encountered the "independent women" of the Mills faculty.<sup>6</sup> To Esther, they stood in sharp contrast to her mother, a "traditional" woman who never learned how to drive a car. "I had good female role models," she

remembers. "You could be an achiever there."<sup>7</sup> This sense of personal efficacy was not solely academic. She credits her professors with nurturing her belief that individual activism can bring fundamental social and economic change.

When Esther left Mills in 1933, America was submerged in the Great Depression. Thousands of banks had failed, businesses across the nation had gone bankrupt, and nearly twenty-five percent of American workers were unemployed. Such circumstances further exacerbated women's already-restricted opportunities in the work place. "It wasn't fashionable then," declared Esther, "for a woman to go into business. We had a family business, but I wasn't encouraged to join."<sup>8</sup> Although cushioned by her family's resources and never experiencing hard times, she had few options. She remembers, "You had a BA, you had a Phi Beta Kappa key, you graduated with honors, but unless you could type, forget it."<sup>9</sup> Thus, Esther enrolled in a business college in Salt Lake City to learn the requisite secretarial skills to compete in the market place. Also during the thirties, convinced that the educational process was never completed, Esther Rosenblatt returned to Mills College to earn her master of arts degree in English literature.<sup>10</sup>

Networking through her Mills College connections, she parlayed her new skills into opportunities. Esther did public relations work for her alma mater and then moved east to seek, as she jokingly put it, "fame and fortune."<sup>11</sup> She worked at Bennington College in Vermont and later as an account executive for a New York City public relations firm.

In light of future loyalties, it is curious that during the depression Esther voted Republican and opposed President Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal. Perhaps her successes in the work place strengthened her commitment to political conservatism. Surely, they firmed her belief in self reliance and individual responsibility, values instilled in her as a child. Family and socio-economic status also influenced political choice. Her parents were spared the trauma of the depression and had maintained their allegiance to the Republican party. Only later would Esther Rosenblatt turn to the Democratic party and become one of its most determined partisans.

The coming of World War II summoned Esther, as it did millions of Americans, to national service. She resigned her position in New York

City soon after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and went to Washington, D.C., where she worked as a mail sorter, stenographer, and then information specialist for the Office of Production Management, which later became the Office of War Information. Although "not the dating kind," Esther began seeing Jerry Landa, whom she had met previously through her Mills College connections.<sup>12</sup> Landa, from Texas and in the millinery business, was now serving with the Army Air Corps. They married in September 1943, shortly before Jerry's unit was shipped overseas. The couple's first child, Carol, was born in August of the following year.<sup>13</sup>

With the war's end, the Landas resumed their life together. Jerry Landa's firm sent him to Tulsa, Oklahoma. "Not really interested in sewing, cooking, and housekeeping," Esther looked for an outlet for her energies.<sup>14</sup> With the support of her husband, she found it in community service and became active in the League of Women Voters, the American Association of University Women, and the Tulsa County Public Health Association's drive to fund tuberculosis research.<sup>15</sup>

These diverse activities did not distract her from a commitment to Jewish causes. For Esther and American Jewry there have been three significant facts of life since World War II—the holocaust, the rebirth of Israel, and assimilation. Between 1939 and 1945, one-third of the world's Jewish population was butchered. The loss of the six million vitally shaped Jewish social, cultural, and religious perceptions. On the ashes of the holocaust the Jewish future was rebuilt. Jewish men and women reified the promise of "next year in Jerusalem" when they hoisted a star of David over the city in 1948. After a quest of almost two millennia, a homeland and haven had been restored in the land of Israel. Triumph in the American golden land, meanwhile, has presented Jews their greatest dilemma. The passing of the immigrant generation and the acculturation and assimilation of later generations have profoundly shaped the Jewish experience.

In the face of these challenges, Esther Landa acted and her Jewish identity strengthened. The memory of the holocaust, as for many Jews, was deeply etched in her mind. She was determined to combat any recurrence of the anti-Semitism that spawned it. Landa later remarked: "That's why we don't keep still now. If we have something to say, we say it."<sup>16</sup> She continued her work with Hadassah, a Jewish women's philanthropic

organization, and the United Jewish Appeal. She also assumed a leadership position in the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW), a group founded in 1893 to foster social action and community service on educational, welfare, child care, and women's issues. NCJW also set as key priorities the enhancement of Jewish life in America and support for the state of Israel. In this vein, perhaps it was President Harry Truman's strong commitment to Israel that moved Esther finally into the Democratic party fold.<sup>17</sup>

The death of Simon Rosenblatt in 1948 led the Landas to relocate to Salt Lake City to be closer to family. Jerry joined the city's business community as manager of a chain of millinery stores and later owned a wholesale house of his own. The Landas now counted a second child, Howard, born in Tulsa, with a third, Terry Ellen, soon to make her appearance. Returning to her home town, Esther not only resumed her volunteer work but accelerated it. She was involved in the Anti-Defamation League, Hadassah (becoming chapter president), the National Council of Jewish Women, and the Salt Lake Jewish Welfare Fund. She joined the Synagogue B'nai Israel sisterhood and in 1948 chaired the women's campaign for Israel. Esther did not neglect other concerns. She became a member and later president of the League of Women Voters. For two years, she served as the vice president of the Salt Lake area United Fund.<sup>18</sup>

In 1958, Esther Landa decided to run for a position on the Salt Lake City school board. Operating out of her basement, she conducted a successful campaign that made her only the second woman in the community's history to secure the post.<sup>19</sup> On the board she worked hard to convince members to seek federal dollars to bolster schools. Items high on her agenda were increasing aid to inner city schools, decreasing class size, raising teacher salaries, and expanding the program of adult education. The fight against racial and religious bigotry and discrimination was also given high priority. As she later summed up her goals: "Equal education for all."<sup>20</sup> Voters rewarded her efforts with two more four-year terms and then elected her twice to the Utah State Board of Education (1970 and 1972). Related to these efforts, Esther was a co-founder of the Utah Head Start Program, designed to prepare preschoolers for primary education, and vice-chair of the Community Action Program, a War on Poverty agency. Such activities, along with her other service projects

would garner Esther the Utah State Bar's Liberty Bell Award (1963), the American Association of University Women Award (1965), and the Civil Rights Worker of the Year Award from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (1968).<sup>21</sup>

Esther Landa made one bid for political office, running for nomination as a state senator in the Democratic primary in 1964. In her campaign, she advocated consumer protection laws, women's rights, educational reform, support of the civil rights movement, and opposition to political extremism. Apparently, these positions proved too progressive for Utah Democrats and she was defeated.<sup>22</sup>

The women's rights plank in her platform was more than a reflection of a changing national agenda. It also indicated Esther's enhanced focus on a theme that has animated her life. In response to women's raised consciousness of their second-class citizenship, John Kennedy established in 1961 the President's Commission on the Status of Women. He charged the commissioners to examine the economic, social, and legal position of American women and make recommendations that would redress disparities and foster equal treatment. The commissioners' report recommended that women be allowed equal access to educational institutions and that they receive opportunities similar to those granted men in hiring, job training, and promotion. In light of women's multiple roles, commission members invited businesses to offer their employees paid maternity leaves and the government to expand child care services and supports. The report concluded with a call to women to enter politics and end their invisibility in government.

In the federal wake, state forums were created to discuss the problems of women at the local level. In 1962, Esther Landa helped organize and served as co-director of the University of Utah's state-wide conference on the changing role of women in a changing society. Two years later she directed a second meeting of Utah women. At the conferences, women drew attention to inequalities in economic, educational, and political spheres. Reviews of state statutes prompted calls for repeal of laws limiting women's property, legal, and economic rights. Such gatherings did more than generate a series of recommendations. They legitimized women's complaints of sexual inequality and raised the salience of the issue. A body of evidence now existed to substantiate

claims of discrimination, to clarify targets, and to set a future course. From these bases networks of feminists grew to absorb women in labor unions, professions, private industry, the media, and universities. On common interests and through friendships, feminists erected in the states and through the nation the scaffolding critical to the construction of a women's movement.<sup>23</sup>

As the Director of Women's Programs in the University of Utah's Division of Continuing Education (1964-1969), Esther Landa was in a position to advance an equal rights agenda. To facilitate learning, she introduced special classes in the humanities for women. She also was instrumental in organizing management institutes for business women. Even more important was her role in chairing a faculty-community committee to survey educational opportunities at the university. In a wide-ranging investigation, the committee studied the status of women on campus, spotlighting disparities in curriculum, athletics, student aid, and faculty hiring and salary. One result of her committee's work was the creation of the University of Utah Women's Resource Center designed to enhance the educational experiences of women and men by providing programs, counseling referral, and information. Through these activities the center seeks to foster a better understanding of women's issues among the student body, faculty, staff, and the wider community.<sup>24</sup>

Critical life-changing events in the early 1970s led Esther Landa to shift her energies to activities beyond Utah's borders. Husband Jerry, who had long supported her service work, died in May 1971. The Landa children were now grown and had begun lives of their own. The end of her term on the state board of education in 1974 left her free to consider national opportunities. She found her calling as president of the National Council of Jewish Women. The NCJW, the oldest Jewish women's volunteer organization in the United States, enrolled over 100,000 members in 200 communities. Esther's election as president in 1975 and reelection two years later were the culmination of twenty-nine years of NCJW service in local, district, regional, and national leadership positions. Still, it was remarkable that someone from so small a Jewish community as Salt Lake City could rise to lead so prestigious an organization. Clearly, it testified to the high esteem in which members held her.<sup>25</sup>

President Landa wasted little time in enunciating her aims. In her acceptance speech she reminded members that as Jews they had a special obligation to respect the "infinite value, dignity, and sanctity of life." Translating this into concrete issues, she called attention to the central concerns of the times: the threat of nuclear war, overpopulation, pollution, and hunger. Esther recommitted the organization to justice for children and service to the aging. Women's rights, which she described as "a movement toward human liberation," meant support for displaced homemakers, an expansion of child care options, prevention of domestic violence, and an end to stereotyping and tokenism. She did not neglect the international scene and asserted American Jewry's common fate with Soviet Jews and the people of Israel.<sup>26</sup>

She was no figurehead president. Esther moved quickly to restore the fiscal health of NCJW by fixing a moratorium on spending and assigning greater emphasis to fundraising. Eager to keep in touch with the local chapters and maintain contacts around the world, she traveled 100,000 miles and gave scores of speeches during her presidency. Her message was always consistent and reached back to the words of the Biblical prophets that she had learned as a child. For example, in a talk in Johannesburg, South Africa, she eloquently declared not only the mission of her organization but the meaning of being a Jew: "We are commanded to redeem the captive, care for the poor, bury the dead, visit the sick, educate the young. Every institution in the Jewish community is predicated upon these values. . . . To give is to show our humaneness—to give of our feelings, deeds, time, money—to give beyond ourselves—that is the authentically Jewish experience."<sup>27</sup>

She reiterated, as well, the mission of her generation in the face of the challenges of its time: "It will profit us little to support Israel in the present, if we are not building a basis for the future of Israel. How can we build that foundation without support for our Jewish educational institutions, our synagogues, our schools. . . . If we in the Diaspora are not strong we will not have the means to support Israel in the future. And how do we remain strong? Only through the strength of our local communities."<sup>28</sup>

While her efforts as NCJW president had an unquestionable women's rights emphasis, Esther was even more directly involved on

other fronts in the battle for equality. Esther was a strong advocate of ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), lobbying the Utah State Legislature unsuccessfully for passage. In the face of the counter-attack on the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision, she assumed a determined pro-choice stand. Planned Parenthood, Utahns for Choice, and the Women's Equity Action League counted her as a member. None of this made Esther, in her words, "a flaming feminist." Rather she was someone who simply believed that women should have the "same choices and opportunities that men have."<sup>29</sup>

In recognition of her prominence and activities on the state and national levels, Esther Landa was invited in 1977 to chair the Utah conference on women's issues. The meeting, preliminary to a national gathering in Houston, Texas, of delegates from the fifty states, was an event in the United Nations proclaimed International Women's Year. At Houston, delegates would set forth America's positions on women's rights, health, and economic and educational opportunities. Landa expected the Utah gathering to be a quiet affair attended by a few hundred women who would reaffirm support for equal opportunities, choice, and the ERA. That expectation was quickly shattered as more than 13,000 conservative women flooded the convention and under the direction of their male leaders methodically voted down every resolution in support of equal rights. Only in their opposition to pornography could liberals and conservatives find common ground. Despite the ideological chasm between them, Landa won the respect of the conservatives. Fair minded and even tempered, her leadership kept the proceedings from degenerating into a free-for-all of bitter name-calling and recrimination. The affair disturbed Landa: "It brought out in the open the latent prejudices of right-wing Utahns toward feminists, minorities, and any who don't hold their views. . . . It really broke the hearts and spirits of many." Still, her democratic instincts were assuaged. The results, she believed, reflected what the majority thinks and feels, "whether we like it or not."<sup>30</sup>

Esther was not elected by the Utah women to represent them at Houston but, because of her national reputation, she gained a seat as a delegate at large. In Houston, she stood in the majority and a progressive platform was approved. Esther basked in the victory because she saw it as a defining moment: "It was a great meeting because . . . it was cultural

pluralism, intellectual pluralism, all the good things about our country were there and all different points of view were represented.”<sup>31</sup>

In 1980, Esther Landa attended the United Nations second conference of the International Women’s Decade in Copenhagen, Denmark, as a member of the U.S. delegation. She expected the gathering to focus on such issues as education, health, female infanticide, domestic violence, and poverty. Instead, she and Jewish feminists were stunned when the conference was “hijacked” by supporters of the Palestine Liberation Organization who advocated a U.N. resolution which equated Zionism with racism.<sup>32</sup> Ideological difference mutated into personal vendetta. According to Letty Cottin Pogrebin, who also attended the conference, Jewish women “were isolated, excoriated, and tyrannized.” Her Jewish consciousness was raised: “So this is what it means to be a Jew in the world.”<sup>33</sup> Esther Landa confirmed Pogrebin: “Everyone of us who was there was irrevocably changed by the experience—we were obsessed by it—some of us even suffered psychic trauma.” Rather than immobilizing Esther, the experience further energized her. She called, for example, for a “tripling” of efforts to save Soviet Jews: “We must focus on the emigration issue like never before. We must turn the spotlight on those in prison, on the Refusniks, on the harassment they are suffering.”<sup>34</sup> Also reconfirmed in her mind was the paramount need to safeguard the security of Israel.

After an assignment on President Jimmy Carter’s Committee for a National Agenda for the Eighties, Esther again made Utah her base for activism. Although in her seventies, she showed no sign of slowing down. During the 1980s, she participated in Utahns against the Nuclear Arms Race, an educational group that warned of the dangers of nuclear war. For Esther, peace work was the legacy one generation leaves to another: “Yes, we believe that the Lord is the giver of peace. Peace will not be handed to us on a silver platter. We must work for it. . . . For the sake of my children and grandchildren—and their children—and all of you and your families—those here on earth now and those yet to come.”<sup>35</sup> She continued to be active in feminist causes and served in the Utah Domestic Violence Council, Equal Rights Coalition of Utah, National Organization for Women, Salt Lake Council of Women, Utah Women’s Forum, Women’s Legal Defense Fund, and Women’s Equity

Action League. In speeches she scolded America for ignoring the gender gap in salaries, the rise of pink collar ghettos that kept women confined to low paying, dead-end jobs, the plight of single parents, the inadequacy of day care facilities, and the feminization of poverty. It was time, she insisted, "to make the slogan 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' a reality for all of us."<sup>36</sup>

The growing danger from extremists roused Esther as well, causing her to sound the alarm and reiterate her vision of the national purpose: "We should," she contended, "be committed to the *idea* of America, which is not blind patriotism or nationalism, but that we are an open, pluralistic democracy . . . that groups with different interests and different points of view should negotiate with one another in the market place of ideas and play politics under the accepted rules of the game."<sup>37</sup> Politically, Esther remains a strong liberal and a fierce Democrat. She has been continuously active in local and national campaigns and is especially determined to see women win their rightful share of seats in government.

Even with this plethora of activities, Esther still devotes herself to the Utah Jewish community, which absorbs her energies in a variety of organizations. She is in the vanguard of defenders of the state of Israel yet tuned to local concerns of anti-Semitism, assimilation, and project funding. Of particular interest to her are the needs of the Russian Jews and she is deeply involved in immigration and resettlement matters.

Esther Landa, now in her eighties and slowed somewhat by arthritis, is not content to rest on a lifetime of achievement. This self-described "widow, mother, grandmother, busybody, buttinsky" remains focused on her still unfinished agenda.<sup>38</sup> Racism and sexism still haunt America and while the national consciousness has been raised, she fears that "we're losing a lot of the gains that we made."<sup>39</sup> If young professional and business women have made strides, she insists that there has been "little progress" for those in service industries.<sup>40</sup> Esther shares the common concern of American Jewry for the continuity of Jewish life in America and hopes her grandchildren will embody the basic principles which have guided her life: "to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with God." Her eye is also fixed on the Middle East, where Israel and its neighbors are entering a new era of negotiations that may prove as dangerous as their

time of war. Still, she is infused with a powerful sense of purpose that convinces her that women and men will respond to reason and bring necessary change. Esther asks only that people recognize their common humanity: "Don't stereotype me as a woman. Don't stereotype me as a Jew. Just talk to me as Esther."<sup>41</sup>