



Katherine Joseph: Photographing an Era of Social Significance.

Suzanne Hertzberg

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133 pp + maps, photographs, index,
bibliography, notes.

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Review by Shelby Shapiro. To be published in *The Independent Scholar* Vol. 3 (2017, forthcoming)

In *Katherine Joseph: Photographing an Era of Social Significance*, historian Suzanne Hertzberg has written a fascinating account of her mother's short career as a professional photographer. The subtitle alludes to "Sing Me a Song of Social Significance," one of the hits of the musical revue *Pins & Needles* written by composer/lyricist Harold Rome. Staged by the Education Department of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), the revue debuted in 1937 and ran for a record-breaking three years in the depth of the Great Depression. Its cast was composed entirely of ILGWU members. For a taste of the revue, Harold Rome, singing and playing piano, assembled a recording for Columbia Records on its 25th anniversary (Stereo LP OS 2210; CD CK 57380). At his insistence, a young singer who had debuted in his musical about the garment industry, *I Can Get It for You Wholesale*, was included: Barbara Streisand.

The author has been faced with a daunting task, due to the fact that her mother fabricated much of her past and obscured the rest. In the course of her research, Suzanne Hertzberg has had to tease details out of daily schedules and interviews to fill in the blanks, more than once noting that what occurred within a given period remains unknown. In the course of research and writing, Hertzberg has tracked down details of her mother's life – including when she was born and when her family emigrated to the United States from Tsarist Russia. She has however had to overcome major discrepancies in her mother's reported history: for instance, not only was her

mother older than she claimed, but certain events could not have been part of her experience.

Hertzberg follows the family from Russia to various cities in the United States, giving an account of family businesses and activities. While the sons took managerial roles in these enterprises, Katherine's sister did not. Katherine did not follow the same path: she was a modern woman, one of those whose career paths and personal choices predated the post-World War 2 women's movement. But she had a short photographic career – which *a priori* started and ended during President Franklin D. Roosevelt's time in office. Once she married radio engineer Arthur Hertzberg, her photographic career ended. Only after her children were grown did she re-enter the world of work, going into the travel business.

Katherine's photographic career began after quitting college, when she got a job with the ILGWU. Somehow – nobody knows how she became interested or who interested her – she became a photographer for the union's publication, *Justice*. It was in that capacity that she met the union's main photographer, Harry Rubenstein. The two of them attended the *Pins and Needles* command performance at the White House. That led to the last photograph for which she and Rubenstein shared credit: after that, her name appeared alone in the credits.

She then went to northern Mexico on assignment for *Mexico Speaks: Mexico's Magazine of Distinction* (1941), as well as being part of a promotional tour for

the American, an auto manufactured by Willys-Overland Motor Company, which later gained fame with the Jeep. She and two other women, one a labor organizer, the other a French *émigrée* interested in photography. Together they travelled through northern Mexico and Mexico City, into the mountains where there were silver mines, including a secret one owned by William Randolph Hearst.

Hertzberg introduces the reader to the complicated geopolitics of 1930s Mexico. A major center of espionage, Nazi agents had infiltrated the Mexican government and economy as moles. Soviet spies also were present, along with Americans and others. How the Mexican government dealt with these conflicting international pressures is dealt with by Hertzberg, and she notes that many of those Katherine and her companions suspected of being Nazi spies in fact were spies.

She also includes a photograph of Hearst and actress Marion Davies. While in Mexico, the three women saw American movie stars who were there as part of a goodwill tour meant to change the hearts and minds of Mexican authorities and people towards the U. S.; these included Norma Shearer, Wallace Beery, Joe E. Brown, Frank Sinatra, Johnny Weissmuller, and Mickey Rooney. While in Mexico, she also covered a devastating earthquake, a May Day parade, and a convention of the Confederation of Mexican Workers.

Rather than present a collection of photographs preceded by an extended essay, Hertzberg integrates photographs and biography, putting both into context. The production values for the book are excellent. Most photographs appear on a single page: where there is more than one photograph, there are not so many as to detract from any particular image.

Hertzberg's attention to detail is such that she tracked down the identity of an ILGWU cartoonist Lola - Leon Israel - even though he played no part in the story, except for the appearance of two *Justice* cartoons.

Suzanne Hertzberg has done an excellent job in this account of a relatively unknown photographer - her life, times and achievements. Since most of the publications in which her work appeared did not have mass circulation, discovering these photographs opens a window on a photographer and her hitherto unknown world. Hertzberg proves that, given strength, tenacity and the proper historical tools, you can squeeze biographical blood from celluloid. Highly recommended!

Shelby Shapiro is an Independent Scholar who obtained his Ph.D. in American Studies with a dissertation on the Yiddish press and how various publications of differing political and religious viewpoints sought to construct different identities for Jewish immigrant women. He has written about Jazz, Anarchism, and the labour movement, and presently is Associate Editor of Records of the State of Connecticut.