

Prohibition Wine: A True Story of One Woman's Daring in Twentieth-Century America

Marian Leah Knapp

She Writes Press

Softcover \$16.95 (120pp)

978-1-64742-061-1

Prohibition Wine is a sincere biographical tribute to a grandmother's sacrifices that's set during a colorful time in American history.

Prohibition Wine is Marian Leah Knapp's compact, elegant biography of her grandmother, an immigrant who forayed in bootlegging.

Rebecca Wernick Goldberg died when Knapp was too young to remember her, though she was captivated by family lore about her grandmother. With only a few photographs, newspapers, and relatives' memories to steer by, Knapp researched further to piece together this account of her elusive Jewish ancestor.

Rebecca's father left Tsarist Lithuania for Boston's North End; Rebecca and her sisters followed in 1889. They trained as glovemakers and worked in a factory. Background details about their lives are filled in using meticulous research into the social history of the times, including descriptions of nineteenth-century Boston's streets that vivify Rebecca's outer world.

Rare, sharp specifics about the Wernick family, including about the death of Rebecca's sister in a workplace fire, stand out amid the book's otherwise broad portraits of the family. Knapp avoids speculating on the emotional impact of events; instead, the book's matter-of-fact tone points out the grimness of the period, in which deadly incidents were common. The effect is a stark portrayal of immigrants' lives, in which hardships were a familiar fact.

Rebecca's 1900 marriage to Nathan Goldberg is set in the context of her structured, family-oriented upbringing. Careful phrasing about what she "may have" thought make it clear when the book is following plausible conjectures. In an authentic, eye-opening acknowledgment of women's realities at the time, which were often only known about because of the men in their lives, and because of public records made in their father's and husband's names: Rebecca, too, is often defined by her relationships. Straightforward accounts of births and death are followed by details of Nathan's itinerant jobs, which led to unsuccessful moves and the Goldbergs' return to Boston. Such sections hint at Rebecca's fortitude; in their linear focus, their practical details provide a bridge into the book's livelier second half, following Nathan's death in 1918, which sparked Rebecca to make blueberry wine and other drinks during the Prohibition era. Intrigue surrounds the court case that led to her enterprise's closure, though the book's account of these proceedings is swift. Succinct details about the Volstead Act and small-scale bootlegging expand the section, showing that Rebecca's illegal activities were far from glamorous, and were driven by economics.

The biography concludes with summaries of what became of Rebecca's children in adulthood, and of her death. An afterword reiterates how Rebecca, despite her binding circumstances, made sure that her children were educated. But as vital as Rebecca's trials were to her family's lessons about resourcefulness and forward-thinking hopes, their impact proves dimmed by the over a century's distance. The resultant lack of archival material means that her brief story has morphed into a steady sequence of common milestones; as a figure, she blurs into a fleeting outline of a pragmatic everywoman.

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KAREN RIGBY (January 20, 2021)

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