

Bella Abzug¹

By Blanche Wiesen Cook

Born in the Bronx on 24 July 1920, Bella Savitzky Abzug predated the women's right to vote by one month. A fighter for justice and peace, equal rights, human dignity, environmental integrity and sustainable development, Bella Abzug's work and vision have advanced human goals and political alliances worldwide. Most recently, as co-creator and co-chair of a global organization, the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), Bella galvanized and helped transform the United Nations agenda regarding women and the environment. WEDO represents the culmination of her lifelong career as public activist and stateswoman.

Known by her colleagues as a "passionate perfectionist," her idealism and activism grew out of childhood influences and experiences. From her earliest years, Bella understood the nature of power, and the fact that politics is not an isolated individualist adventure. A natural leader, although a girl among competitive boys, she delighted in her prowess at marbles or "immies." When the boys tried to beat her or steal her marbles, Bella was ready in fierce defense and unmatched skill. She also played checkers, traded baseball cards, climbed trees, became a graffiti artist, and understood the nuances, corners and risks of city streets, which were her playground.

In synagogue with her maternal grandfather, Wolf Taklefsky, who was her babysitter and first mentor, Bella's beautiful voice and keen memory enabled her to delight the elders with the brilliance of her prayers, her ability to read Hebrew and dovvenn. Routinely dispatched to the women's place behind the curtain (the "mechitezah"), by the time she was eight, she was an outstanding student of Talmud Torah, a community star.

Her Hebrew school teacher, Levi Soshuk, recruited her to a leftwing labor Zionist group, Hashomer Hatzair (the young guard). By the time she was eleven, Bella and her gang of socialist Zionists planned to go to Israel together as a kibbutz community. In the meantime, they were inseparable and traveled New York City, hiked the countryside, danced and sang all night, went to free concerts, museums, picnics and meetings, and worked together to raise money for a Jewish homeland. Bella figured out a way to raise the most money: At subway stops she would give impassioned speeches; people tended to give generously to the earnest, well-spoken girl. From her first gang, Bella learned about the power of alliances, unity, alternative movements.

Hitler came to power the year her father Emanuel died, and Bella emerged an outspoken 13 year old girlchild willing to break the rules. Prohibited by tradition from saying kaddish for her father in synagogue, Bella did it anyway. Every morning for a year before school she attended synagogue, and dovvened. The congregants looked askance, and never did approve. But nobody ever stopped her. She just did what she needed to do, for her father, without a son; and learned a lesson for life: Be bold, be brazen; be true to your heart.

¹ From *Jewish Women in America*. eds. Hyman, Paula E. and Deborah Dash Moore. (1997). Routledge, New York.

Bella never doubted that her father would have approved. The butcher whose shop bore his personal signature, his sign of protest during and after World War I, "The Live and Let Live Meat Market," in the Clinton-Chelsea section of Manhattan, an hour by train from home in the Bronx, had a profound impact on his daughter's vision. Protest was acceptable, activism took many forms. He had, after all, learned to tolerate her socialist zionist friends who kept her out all night from the time she was eleven. Manny adored his daughters, and there was always music in her parents' home. Her father sang with gusto, her sister Helene (five years older) played the piano -- the grand piano that filled up the parlor -- and Bella played the violin. Every week the entire family, including grandparents, congregated around music, led in song by her father.

Besides, her rebellion -- all her rebellions -- was supported by her mother. Esther Savitsky appreciated Bella's talents, and encouraged her every interest. By the age of 13, a leader in the crusade for women's rights, equal space, dignity and empowerment for girls was in active training. According to her mother, "Battling Bella" was born bellowing. A spirited tomboy with music in her heart and politics in her soul,, beautiful energetic Bella was vastly popular, and also studious.

She continued violin lessons through high school; went from Talmud Torah to Florence Marshall Hebrew High School after classes at Walton; to the Hebrew Teacher's Institute at Jewish Theological Seminary after classes at Hunter College. She earned additional money for her family teaching Hebrew, and also committed herself to political activities. Elected class president at Walton High School in 1937 and student government president of Hunter College in 1941, Bella made a profound impression on teachers, contemporaries, and history.

As student council president at Hunter she opposed the Rapp-Coudert committee which sought to crush public education, and was on a witch-hunt against "subversive" faculty. A political science major, Bella was active in the American Student Union and was an early and ardent champion of civil rights and civil liberties. At Hunter, Bella was at the center of a permanent circle of friends who remained political activists and life-long champions of causes for women, peace and justice. Journalist Mim Kelber, who first met Bella at Walton, was editor of Hunter's student newspaper THE BULLETIN, remained a political partner, co-founded WEDO and now edits its impressive newsletter and publication series.

With her brilliant college record and leadership awards, Columbia University Law School gave Bella a scholarship. Her record at New York's most prestigious law school was splendid; she became an editor of the Law Review; and her reputation as tough, combative, diligent, dedicated and awesome continued to grow. While in law school two new enthusiasms entered Bella's life: poker and Martin Abzug.

Bella Savitsky met Martin Abzug while visiting relatives in Miami after her graduation from Hunter. At a Jehudi Menuhin concert for Russian War Relief, she saw this young man staring and smiling at her. Love, chemistry, magic. They met; they dated; he left for the service; they corresponded. Upon his return, he wanted to party. She wanted to study. He would meet her at midnight at the law library. A writer, novelist, he knew how to type; she never did. Martin typed Bella's briefs, promised even when they married and had children she would continue to work -- her major hesitation to the idea of marriage.

The son and partner of an affluent manufacturer (the Better Blouse Company), who published two novels and later became a stock broker, Martin encouraged all Bella's interests and ambitions -- including those that were demonstrably dangerous during the McCarthyite years of the Cold War. Married on 4 June 1944, he admired her integrity, vision, combative style, and until his death remained her most steadfast supporter. For 42 years their marriage based on love, respect, and a generosity of spirit unrivaled in political circles, enabled Bella's activities.

Immediately after law school, Bella joined a labor law firm that represented union locals. Routinely overlooked when she entered an office to represent the United Auto Workers, or the Mine, Mill and Smelting Workers, or local restaurant workers, she decided to wear hats. Hats made all the difference when it came to recognition, and even respect; and they became her trademark.

During the 1950s Bella Abzug was one of very few independent attorneys willing to take "communist" cases. With Martin's encouragement, she opened her own office, and defended teachers, entertainment, radio and Hollywood personalities assaulted during the witchhunt, including Jay Gorney, Elliott Sullivan, Pete Seeger, and dozens of unknown victims.

She also defended Willie McGee, in an internationally celebrated case of a Black Mississippian falsely accused of raping a white woman with whom he had a three year relationship. Sentenced to death in a much publicized frame-up, Bella achieved two delays which she argued before the Supreme Court. They resulted in a special hearing board appointed by Mississippi's governor.

Pregnant, Bella went south to Jackson. She realized she was in trouble when the hotel room she booked was denied to her; no other made available; and a taxi driver offered to take her 15 miles out into the country. She returned to Jackson's bus station and spent an unsettling night. At court the next morning she argued fervently for six hours on behalf of racial justice, the clear conspiracy to deny Willie McGee's civil rights, the long tradition of race prejudice and unfair discrimination. To cancel his death sentence, she argued in 1950, would restore faith in US democracy throughout the world. Despite worldwide publicity, protest marchers, and Bella's fervent plea, McGee went to the electric chair. Bella had a miscarriage, and her dedication to the cause of justice was strengthened by her days in Jackson, Mississippi, and every case she took during the 1950s benefited by her experience.

During that time her two daughters Eve Gail called Eegee (13 May 1949), now a sculptor and social worker, and Isobel Jo called Liz (13 June 1952), now an attorney, and political consultant, were being raised in Mount Vernon, a suburb which Martin believed the girls benefited from, and which Bella longed to leave. When they returned to NYC, to Greenwich Village particularly, everybody was happier.

In 1961, Bella and her Hunter circle (Mim Kelber, Amy Swerdlow, and Judy Lerner) joined others (including Dagmar Wilson, Claire Reid, and Lyla Hoffman) to create WOMEN STRIKE FOR PEACE. For the next decade they lobbied for a nuclear test ban treaty, mobilized against Strontium 90 in children's milk; and intensified the protests against the war in Indochina. During the 1960s Bella Abzug became a prominent national speaker against the war, and the entire segregationist-nuclear McCarthyite sham of poverty, racism, violence, and empire that mocked the promise of democracy in America.

A leading reform Democrat, an able and successful attorney, a popular grassroots activist, Bella was urged to run for Congress, which she agreed to do at the age of 50 in 1970. Stunning and galvanizing, her hat and her homilies became household symbols for dramatic change. Representing Greenwich village, Little Italy, the Lower East Side and Chelsea, she was the first woman elected to congress on a women's rights/peace platform. New York agreed, "This woman's place is in the House -- the House of Representatives." "And so," her daughter Eve (herself a fervent campaigner) proclaimed, "we get her out of Our House and Into Your House."

A creative powerhouse for good, Bella Abzug understood pork, alliances, and the contradictions of leadership. Representing women, justice and peace, her first vote was for the ERA. As a member of the Committee on Public Works & Transportation, she brought more than \$6 billion to New York State in public works, economic development, sewage treatment and mass transit, including ramps for the disabled and buses for the elderly.

As chair of the Subcommittee on Government Information and Individual Rights, she co-authored three most important pieces of legislation: The FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT, the GOVERNMENT IN THE SUNSHINE ACT, and the RIGHT TO PRIVACY ACT. Bella's bills exposed many secret government activities to public scrutiny for the first time; and enabled her and others to conduct inquiries into covert and illegal activities conducted by the CIA, FBI, and other government agencies. The first member of congress to call for Nixon's impeachment, her work enabled journalists, historians and public citizens to combat the disinformation, misinformation and generally abusive tactics that marked so much of the Cold War and blocked for so long the path towards human rights.

Above all, Bella achieved splendid victories for women. She initiated the congressional caucus on women's issues; helped organize the National Women's Political Caucus; served as chief strategist for the Democratic women's committee which achieved equal representation for women in all elective and appointive posts, including presidential conventions. Bella wrote the first law banning discrimination against women in obtaining credit, credit cards, loans and mortgages; introduced pioneering bills on comprehensive child care, social security for home-makers, family planning and abortion rights. In 1975 she introduced an amendment to the Civil Rights Act to include gay and lesbian rights.

Reelected for three terms, she served from 1971-1977, and was acknowledged by a US News & World Report survey of House members as the "third most influential" House member. In a 1977 Gallup Poll she was named one of the 20 most influential women of the world. Attacked by men of mean spirit, she is a hero to most women. That pipe-smoking Republican Lady of the House, Millicent Fenwick once said she had two heroes -- women she admired above all: Eleanor Roosevelt and Bella Abzug. They shared one thing, she said: They meant it! Women of vast integrity, they spoke from the heart, and they spoke truth to power. Although they agreed politically about virtually nothing, Fenwick explained, Bella was her ideal! The NY Times called them "the odd couple," because their bipartisan friendship seemed so strange.

Defeated in a four-way primary race for Senate in 1976 by less than one percent, Bella was appointed chair of the National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year, and later co-chair of the National Advisory Commission for Women by President Carter.

Active in the UN Decade of women conferences in Mexico city (1975), Copenhagen (1980), and Nairobi (1985), she became an esteemed leader of the international women's movement; and led the fight against the obnoxious Zionism Is Racism resolution passed in 1975, finally repealed in 1985 in Nairobi. Bella insisted that Zionism was a liberation movement. Always controversial, her own definition of Zionism embraced the international peace movement represented in Israel by Shulamith Aloni and others who promoted the peace process.

During this time, Bella's not-for-profit advocacy organization, Women USA Fund, organized with Brownie Ledbetter, Patsy Mink, Gloria Steinem, Maxine Waters and Mim Kelber, published educational materials and created the Women's Foreign Policy Council, which led to the creation of WEDO.

In November 1991 WEDO convened the World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet. 1,500 women from 83 nations met in Miami, Florida, to produce the Women's Action Agenda for the 21st century. This Agenda became the focus of UN conferences throughout the preparations for Beijing, created an international women's caucus which transformed the thinking and policies of the UN community, and Bella went trooping for the program -- at the 1992 Earth Summit in Brazil, the September 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development, the March 1994 Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development. After the September 1995 women's conference in Beijing, Bella dedicated herself to the implementation of its promises, and launched a global campaign to achieve the platform for action -- to transform it into a binding contract with the world's women.

An indefatigable force for global survival, Bella has been awarded countless honors. From the Hunter Hall of Fame to the National Women's Hall of Fame, to her most recent 1996 awards from the American Bar Association and from the UN community for "Invaluable Contributions to the UN and the NGO Community in Building Peace," presented at the 49th Department of Public Information and NGO Conference at the UN, her achievements have been recognized -- locally and globally. Now, in her 76th year, she continues to galvanize a movement with memorable speeches throughout the world:

"I know that the time we have on this planet is what we make of it. Security is what we all seek but it also comes from within, from inner strength. It emanates from our ability to love and treasure the peoples of the earth, especially those with whom we may not necessarily agree or who are different than us. We each are powerful creatures. When we talk of the empowerment of women we are simply talking about releasing what is inside each of us.... Our responsibility is to use this power to offer a fundamental challenge to today's elitist policies...."

"Women have been trained to speak softly... and carry a lipstick. But women today 'are carrying a bigger stick,' moving beyond the kitchen table, demanding a place at all decision-making tables, and actually transforming power, extending the 'boundaries of progress'."

In the face of personal medical challenges, including breast cancer and heart disease, Bella continues to confront world challenges of poverty, discrimination, and the violent fallout of this "bloodiest century in human history." As chair of New York City's Commission on the Status of Women

(1993-1995), and in partnership with Greenpeace and WEDO, she launched a national grassroots campaign against cancer: "Women, Cancer and the Environment: Action for Prevention."

She eats macrobiotically, swims regularly, plays poker fiercely; maintains a loving relationship with her daughters Eve and Liz, with whom she shares a vacation home; entertains her countless and loving friends, her "extended family," with her great good humor and in song. Her friendships from Hollywood to New York are legion. Woody Allen directed her in MANHATTAN; she played alongside Shirley Maclaine in MME. SOUZATSKA; and her magical rendition of FALLING IN LOVE AGAIN inspired feminist troubadour Sandy Rapp to compose a ballad, WHEN BELLA SINGS MARLENA: "On the second refrain of 'moths to the flame,' spirits fill the room."

Shameless about enlisting her friends and colleagues to her causes, Bella's personal generosity is boundless. She remains an optimist, and her mission, her challenge, her legacy is clear:

"It's not about women joining the polluted stream. It's about cleaning the stream, changing the stagnant pools into fresh, flowing waters."

"Our struggle is [against] violence, intolerance, inequality, injustice."

"Our struggle is about creating sustainable lives, and attainable dreams."

"Our struggle is about creating violence-free families... violence-free streets, violence-free borders."

"Our call is to stop nuclear pollution. Our call is to build real democracies not hypocracies. Our call is to nurture and strengthen all families. Our call is to build communities not only markets. Our call is to scale the great wall around women everywhere."

Bella Abzug's understanding of the need for an international network of women working across this troubled planet for decency, justice and peace has fortified a global sisterhood never before imagined. With a song in her throat and a very high heart, Bella Abzug is a boundless source of hope for the future. She lives every day to the fullest, and blesses every day with the spiritual fervor of her responsibility and commitment to all people -- one life, one weave.