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'The Confidante' Review: Citizen Rosenberg at War

As the twin crises of Depression and war shook America, one fashionably dressed citizen was a force in domestic policy and abroad.



U.S. Assistant Defense Secretary Anna Rosenberg meets with Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson, 1951.

PHOTO: BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES

By Brandy Schillace

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Sometimes, it's the contrast that gets to you. There were the Bavarian Alps, white peaks iridescent in the sun over valleys blooming with late-spring flowers. Then there was the Nordhausen concentration camp, some 400 miles and a world away, where trenches were piled high with the emaciated bodies of the Nazis' victims.

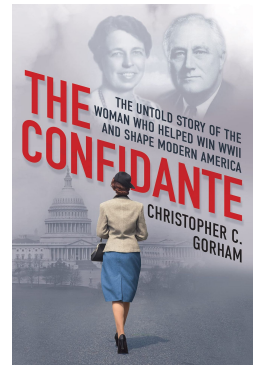
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The Confidante: The Untold Story of the Woman Who Helped Win WWII and Shape Modern America

By Christopher C.
Gorham

Citadel

384 pages



When Anna M. Rosenberg visited, in April 1945, shortly after the camp was liberated, some 4,000 survivors remained. Their eyes were sunken into their faces, their skeletal frames thin and fragile. Those who could walk made their way forward. Shocked and horrified by the atrocities, Rosenberg looked through her purse for something to give—and found her lipstick. She was ashamed to have so little to offer, but one woman took it tenderly. “The lipstick was nothing,” Rosenberg later recounted, “and yet to this woman it was everything” because everything had been taken from her, even her humanity, simply for being Jewish. Somehow, Rosenberg thought, we must give them back their dignity.

If you haven’t heard of Anna Rosenberg, you aren’t alone. Yet, as Christopher Gorham explains in “The Confidante,” this astonishing woman—born in Budapest to a prominent Jewish family—would rise from being a driven and patriotic new U.S. citizen to becoming one of the most powerful women in the world, a force for labor unions, an adviser to several U.S. presidents and ultimately the U.S. assistant secretary of defense. She would counsel Franklin D. Roosevelt on the New Deal, help him through the complicated negotiations of World War II and serve on two missions abroad—one of them to Nordhausen. She helped broker deals between the warring factions in FDR’s cabinet, sometimes including the formidable first lady herself. And yet, despite it all, Rosenberg remained in the shadow of the very success she helped to achieve.

Not anymore. Mr. Gorham, who teaches modern American history at Westford Academy in Massachusetts, offers an incredible catalog of adventure; we follow the well-dressed Rosenberg as she out-curses labor leaders and outwits big business. “The Confidante” provides a record of the most important events of the 20th century, rushing us along through the Great Depression, Progressive Era politics, World War II and its aftermath, and even the civil-rights and women’s movements. Rosenberg was always there, often at the beating heart of the action.

She could also be something of a heart throb, with her bobbed hair and large brown eyes, excellent figure and expensive fashion sense. One observer described her as “blustery, hearty, and businesslike on the one hand, and visibly feminine on the other.” Her hats were conversation pieces, a “froth of pastel plumes” that conflicted with the more utilitarian presentation of the era’s feminists.

But this, Mr. Gorham explains, was at least partly by design. Rosenberg managed board rooms of angry and volatile men by being at once alluring and demanding, flirtatious and no-nonsense. She was the primary breadwinner in an unusual marriage; despite having no education beyond high school, she knew exactly how to maneuver and manipulate. During her work for the National Recovery Administration, we are told, this combination of charm and chutzpah allowed her to answer even her most scathing critics in a way that left them with “no reply to make,” while disarming other opponents by “cooing, ‘Now let’s hear your pretty little speech.’ ” She could awe anyone into submission. Perhaps even FDR himself.

The book’s title can be slightly misleading. Rosenberg was certainly FDR’s confidante, but she was much more. Mr. Gorham delves into their relationship, before and during the presidency, but through it all Rosenberg was indefatigably her own woman.

After FDR’s passing, Harry Truman suddenly found himself president of the United States. Rosenberg carried on, flying to the war front, sleeping on the ground and eating with the troops. She would be there at the Nordhausen camp for its liberation, and she would be there for the declaration of peace. During the Truman administration, Mr. Gorham writes, Rosenberg “combined her political and business contacts into a potent behind-the-scenes policy-shaping force,” pushing for national healthcare and desegregation and opening New York City’s Veterans Service Center.

It was President Truman who nominated Rosenberg to be assistant secretary of defense. At her nomination hearing, Joseph McCarthy, who had ousted a number of previous nominees with his false accusations of communist ties, came after her with false charges and false witnesses. Never one to back down, Rosenberg made McCarthy look dirty and small. She won the nomination and later wrote presciently to Eleanor Roosevelt: “Maybe it will wake us up to the fact that we have not only enemies without but very dangerous ones within.” Racism, sexism, antisemitism, extremism—they didn’t go away. They only changed tactics.

I found myself engrossed and amazed by the “sparrow of a woman” and her endless energy. “The Confidante” covers four decades and some of the most future-shaping legislation ever passed by the U.S. government. Through it all, we can see Rosenberg’s fingerprints across the

nation's major events. As a result, Mr. Gorham's biography is also a mystery. How could we have forgotten such a woman? We have plenty of circumstantial evidence: Despite her angling for the rights of other women, being a woman herself in a man's world still pushed her accomplishments out of the limelight. Mr. Gorham describes, too, the fallout from the McCarthy trial and the continued discrimination that dogged her. And there's her brand of feminism, which was not always embraced, even by other feminists: Her penchant for fashionable suits, jewelry and extravagant hats were used as marks against her seriousness.

Then again, this self-made woman may have engineered her own disappearance from history: She refused to write her biography, preserved her privacy, burned her letters, and except for a few tantalizing hints hid much of her private dealings with FDR. Rosenberg, writes Mr. Gorham, "was the unseen hand. Hers was a soft power, exerted indirectly," which complicated, if not erased, efforts to "measure her place in history."

What "The Confidante" provides, with cinematic color and encyclopedic clarity, is a resurrection of that history.

—Ms. Schillace, the editor in chief of the journal Medical Humanities, is the host of the online "Peculiar Book Club" and the author of "Mr. Humble and Dr. Butcher."

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