

BEING CHRISTIAN, BEING JEWISH

a review by Judy Goldman

Mirinda Kossoff. *The Rope of Life: A Memoir*. Lystra Books & Literary Services, 2020.

We do not write memoirs because we believe we have something important to say. We write because we have questions. North Carolina author Mirinda Kossoff fulfills this charge with passion, intelligence, and a keen desire for fairness. Throughout the pages of her debut memoir, *The Rope of Life*, she seeks answers.

Her most crucial questions involve her father: "Was he conflicted about the choice he made to renounce his birth religion and Jewish identity?" (202) "Did he regret his marriage and conversion?" (217) "Had he felt an outsider with his family as I did with mine? Is that why he sought the opposite of what he'd grown up with?" (222) Pondering these questions, she arrives at this conclusion: "I would never be able to wring out of him the answers I sought" (212–13).

Kossoff's father was born into a New York Jewish family. As a young bomber pilot in World War II, his B-17 plane is "riddled with German bullets" (149). Terrified, he prays to God that if he survives, he will become a Christian. This is the split-second decision that sets the course for his life, his wife's life, and – most important to the reader of this memoir – their daughter's life.

When this Christian convert meets a fundamentalist Southern Baptist woman, she does not realize that he was once Jewish. The couple marry and eventually settle in Danville, VA, where they become prominent members of the Christian community. Although he is a professional (a dentist), he seems to be more comfortable with "the men at

the country store" than with the country club set (59). He plays the role of a redneck, a good ol' boy, going on weekend hunting trips with buddies, chewing and spitting tobacco. The family belongs to the Baptist church. Their daughter Mirinda accepts Jesus as her savior and, soon after, is baptized. The minister cups her head with his hand as he slides her under the water.

Early in her life, she discovers that Southerners view her as different. They ask about her last name: "'Kossoff,' they'd say, as if biting into some exotic fruit. 'That's an unusual name. Where y'all from?'" (63). In Sunday school, she is asked by her teacher to explain the Jewish holidays to the class.

This is the story of a father and a daughter. It begins with a Cessna: reluctantly, she agrees to go up with him in his private plane. (The young girl does not want to disappoint her father by saying no.) Minutes into the flight, she notices him frantically searching the sky, sweating. He admits to her that he doesn't have a transponder in the plane yet, which means he must navigate by landmarks.

The situation worsens.

Now he's lost. And the plane is low on gas. Because he cannot locate the landmarks he originally intended to use, he is now trying to find new ones. Kossoff writes, "A surge of fear heated up my intestines. But I stayed mum" (Prologue).

Staying mum is what every member of this family does. There is great tension inside the walls of their house, primarily the result of parental neglect of the four children, sometimes to the point of cruelty. But no one



COURTESY OF MIRINDA KOSSOFF

speaks of any of this. Kossoff's mother resorts to the silent treatment when she is upset with her husband. Her silences are a key feature of her personality, regardless of which family member she's dealing with. An uncle and cousin veer close to sexually abusing young Kosoff. Through it all, everyone in the family stays mum.

Kossoff's father is more overt in his cruelty. He calls his eldest daughter derisive nicknames: Cruella, after the evil villain in *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*. When he takes her out for a driving lesson and she is unable to use the clutch properly and the car stalls on a hill, he says, "Just floor the damn thing, bitch" (130). He does not apologize.

The pull of belonging/not belonging – within her family and in the outside world – creates a deep insecurity in Kossoff. Is she good enough . . . to win her father's love? Her mother's love? Good enough to win acceptance from her Christian

friends? She writes, "Not being good enough would become a permanent part of the story I told myself and would follow me through the years and the challenges to come" (72).

After graduating from The College of William & Mary, Kossoff is eager to escape her family home and smalltown life. She becomes a hospital social worker for the Red Cross in Fairfax County, VA, hoping the job will lead to work abroad. Soon she is transferred to Yokosuka, Japan. But loneliness and depression follow her. She resigns from the Red Cross, returns home, to Danville, then is soon hired as a medical social worker at UNC Memorial Hospital, serving on the spinal cord rehabilitation team, becoming a specialist in sexual function for post-trauma patients.

Kossoff identifies more with her cultured Jewish grandparents than with her rigid fundamentalist Southern Baptist grandparents. In her twenties, she explores Judaism, attending services at a Durham synagogue. But she does not find a home there. "I felt as much an outsider in synagogue as anywhere else. I realized that organized religion of any variety was not a natural for me. . . . I would take my place with the agnostics and atheists" (178).

During this time, she is also searching for love. She meets Will, a college-educated, counter-culture craftsman who lives in a Durham, NC, commune. Will knows about depression from his family but will not talk about it. Like her, he grew up

in a family that copes with turmoil and tension by staying mum.

They are married in the Baptist church. Even on her wedding day, Kossoff's dad uses his demeaning nickname for her. Just before the ceremony, he comments on her bouquet: "Hey, Cruella, look at those flowers" (193). A reception follows the ceremony – no dancing or alcohol allowed.

The first two years of the marriage are happy. But as time passes, Kossoff realizes she has married a man who, like her dad, is emotionally unavailable.

She gives birth to identical twin sons.

Her dad suffers serious back problems. They grow worse. He finds it more and more difficult to handle the pain and, finally, commits suicide.

After she learns of her dad's death, her husband drops her off at the bus station so that she can attend the funeral. She writes:

The bus followed the familiar highway. Route 86 North. I had driven it many times, as recently as the previous week. The lowering sun slanted across the grimy bus window. I watched the farms with their harvested fields slide by. There were yellow stalks where rows of tobacco stood earlier. Other fields were only stubble. It was October 1, 1980, and a foreboding of fall was in the air. The bus passed a vacant two-story farmhouse set back in a field with a large tree sheltering one side. I always looked for it on 86, to see if it was still standing. Its sightless windows reminded me of abandonment. (211)

Abandonment. Loneliness. Longing. The promise of re-inventing oneself. The promise of hope. The rope of one woman's life. ■

ABOVE The memoirist with her father shortly after his return from World War II

MIRINDA KOSSOFF has written for national magazines and newspapers, including a weekly column for *The Spectator*. She has also taught essay writing at Duke University Continuing Studies.

JUDY GOLDMAN is the author of seven books, the most recent, *Together: A Memoir of a Marriage and Medical Mishap* (Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2019). Her new memoir, *Child*, will be published Mother's Day in 2022.