



**ETTA**

*Once I was wealthy,  
And all my desire was to give.  
Now I am a child: begging,  
Walking aimlessly,  
Damned, forgotten and banned.  
Nothing more have I to give.  
- Etta Federn, (1947)*

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**Marietta Federn**, was born in Vienna, April 28, 1883, dying at the age of 68 on May 9, 1951 in Paris. She married twice (subsequently hyphenating her name -Kirmsse and -Kohlhaas, respectively) and would on occasion publish with the *nomme de guerre* Esperanza however she preferred Etta, a Yiddish name from the Hebrew “hidden”, and this is how she is remembered.

Born into an intellectually vibrant family, her journey led her through the cultural capitals of Berlin, Barcelona, and Paris. She lived through the tumultuous historical upheavals and raging war brought on by the rise of fascism.

She knew over a dozen languages, could recite Faust by heart, read the palms of artists and politicians, fought dearly for the liberation of women in revolutionary Spain, and for all peoples in occupied France. Though under-recognized, Etta’s unwavering commitment to freedom, education, and social revolution made her a crucial contributor to anarchist movements, women’s liberation and radical pedagogy.

She would, like too many Anarchists, spend the her twilight years near forgotten, in poverty and overcome with grief and memories. Estranged from her family and rather misleadingly remembered most prominently in fellow anarchist Stig Dagerman’s play “Marty’s Shadow” as the barb wielding Mme. Angelica.

I started compiling this with the intention of giving a brief summary of Etta’s life to accompany a photograph on the anniversary of her death. I subsequently spent a many hours researching her life and that of the figures around her, friends, family, and comrades, many of who lead fascinating revolutionary lives. I’ve taken samplings from across the board for this collected biography which I hope does her memory justice and shares her memory with fellow anarchists.

I am no historian and like most people pulling back the veil on our shared past started with a Nick Heath biography on Lib-Com. Pretty soon I’m picking through any of a number of fragments across the internet which pull up new pieces of information. Ultimately, *The Writer and the Refugee* by Nancy Pick and Lo Dagerman and subsequently the academic works of Marianne Kröger, consolidate much of her story. I pilther turns of phrase from many of the above.

Unfortunately, it seems many of the English language sources are less than great. I faced poor translations, factual errors, obfuscated details and details ignored, minutia that fascinates me but is disregarded by others (and vis-versa), and the eternal bane of the casual historian - citations which do not say what it is suggested they do.

Two example of this would be the date of her death, which most biographers agree is May 9, is given as September 29 on various genealogy sites and her son Han/Jean, of whom there seems to be some confusion over his actual name and when the moniker appears. My point is, If you have any corrections, please share them with me and I’ll correct them in any future printing. Like I say, I am no historian, this is not an academic volume, accept the information within or don’t, it’s up to you.

At the end is a list of various resources for further study, I heartily encourage you to pick out names and situations and go on a deep dive of your own. Shortly we’ll be republishing Etta’s work *Mujeres de las Revoluciones* (Women of the Revolutions) in English as we couldn’t find a copy, so keep your eyes out for that.

In solidarity  
Peter Ó’Máille



**ETTA**



## Early Life and Intellectual Foundations

The youngest daughter of Ernestine Federn, a women's suffrage activist in Austria, and Salomon Federn, a pioneering physician in blood pressure research, whose father Elias Bunzel-Federn was a noted liberal rabbi in Prague, Her family was steeped in intellectual pursuits.

Her brother Paul would become a leading psychoanalyst, Walter would make his living as a journalist, Karl, a writer and lawyer, and her sister, Else, championed the Settlement movement - a reformist social idea that aimed to get elevate the working class via interdependent living communities and support from middle class volunteers, an often forget sociological experiment of which Toynbee Hall was the first university-affiliated institution off. The last of her five siblings, Robert would become the black sheep of the family and set about cutting his own path in the UK.

It was during her childhood she would develop a deep and lifelong fascination with Palmistry. This life long interest - and later vocation - came to here while she was seconded to her bedroom for almost two years from the age of twelve, the suggested remedy for her "*meloncoly*". She viewed Palmistry as scientific study and would later frame is as "character analysis" and would later in life introduce her to many prominent figures of the day, in Berlin, Barcelona and later still, keep her from abject poverty, in Paris.

Raised in an environment that deeply valued education, Etta and Else were both given an education equal to their brothers, a rare privilege for women of the period. She pursued studies in literary history, German Studies, and Ancient Greek.

Gifted in languages and literature, she expanded her scholarly focus to include foreign languages and philosophy.

Still as it often does for young anarchists, a rift with her family over her independent spirit and political ideals prompted her to forge her own path. In 1905, in her early twenties, Etta moved to Berlin, beginning a new life that blended scholarship, literary creation, and ultimately, political activism.



Etta in Barcelona, 1934

## Literary Success and Political Awakening in Berlin

She lived in Berlin throughout the rise of The Weimar Republic, The First World War and through-out the “Golden Twenties” which saw Berlin become flourish in the liberal arts, scientific endeavor and culture. Etta earned recognition writing for prominent publications like the Berliner Tageblatt, and was a prodigious author of critical essays, biographies, autobiographies, poetry, and fiction. She also translated a vast range of works, from A variety of European languages, and even Ancient Greek and Bengali writers into German.

Her own literary output during this time included biographies of major figures like Dante Alighieri and Christiane Vulpius and her 1927 biography of Walther Rathenau (Germany’s liberal Jewish Foreign Minister), who was assassinated by members of the Organisation Consul, an ultra-nationalist and anti-Semitic terrorist organization founded by disbanded Freikorps members. This second biography was particularly influential and praised as “amazingly lucid and precise” by the New York Times, it also saw her become the target of Nazi death threats, underscoring the dangers faced by Jewish intellectuals in Weimar Germany.

In 1931, her translation of the Yiddish poetry collection “Fischerdorf” (Fishing Village) by Abraham Nahum Stencl was published, the work and it’s translation seeing high praise. It would soon be destroyed en-masse in the Nazi book burnings of 1933.

During all this, she gravitated toward anarchist circles, joining a community that included saw her build a close friendship with Milly Witkop Rocker, the Ukrainian Anarcho-syndicalist

and prominent feminist, and her husband Rudolf Rocker, the German Anarchist and theorist. She also would also build friendships with Emma Goldman, the Lithuanian Anarchist who would become deeply influence amongst anarchists and labour organisers in particular, Max Nettlau, the German anarchist and Archivist, Mollie Steimer, a Ukrainian organiser and part of Der Shturm (“The Storm”) a Radical Jewish publisher of Anarchist texts and the periodical Frayhayt (“Freedom”) and her partner in crime Senia Flechine, the Ukrainian anarchist, Russian Revolutionist, and photographer.

These relationships brought Etta fully into the anarchist milieu, where her literary talents and intellectual rigour found new revolutionary purpose and would begin contributing regularly to anarcho-syndicalist newspapers tied to the Free Workers’ Union of Germany (FAUD) and became an active participant in the Syndikalistischen Frauenbund (Syndicalist Women’s Organization). Among her anarchist and literary peers she would become known as a champion of the radical education, solidarity, and women’s liberation.

From her first marriage, with Max Bruno Krimsee, a therapist she had a first son, named Hans (*tho he would also go by Jean*), born October 16, 1917. From her second marriage to Pierre Paul Kohlhaas was born a second boy, Michael. Neither marriage lasted particularly long and the boys would stay by her side into adulthood.

## Exile and Revolution

By 1932, as Nazi pressure mounted and her professional opportunities dried up, in a letter to relatives in Chicago she laments, “I would have written to you long ago but the tension of the public life here in Germany was such a strong one, that I was not able to free myself of it,” she goes on “And the oppression... is so bad, that I have made up my mind to leave Germany and to begin a new life somewhere else.” She asks for \$250, enough to set her self up, living cheaply of course, but enough.

Etta fled to Barcelona with her two sons Hans and Michael. It was a daring move at age 49, but it marked the beginning of the most politically vibrant phase of her life.

In Spain, she quickly integrated into anarchist circles, aided by her Berlin comrades. Her adjustment to Barcelona was remarkably swift; within weeks, she was publishing articles in the Spanish press and learning Catalan. However, she faced ongoing financial hardship, relying on small remittances from family members in the U.S.A and occasionally from Anarchists who remained in Berlin who were keen to support her work in Barcelona not only with the Catalan locals but helping fresh German émigrés find their feet.

Throughout this time she would continue to study and practice palmistry, for amusement amongst friends and as a rigorous study. By 1934 she lived in a bright and open house in Sant Gervasi district decorating her house with a variety of objet d’art from Photographs of deaths masks, Egyptian figures, various paintings and a huge array of books.

Etta quickly became deeply involved with Mujeres Libres (“Free Women”), the anarchist feminist organization founded in 1936 to address the specific struggles of women within the revolutionary movement. Mujeres Libres worked to empower women through education, healthcare services, and political training, emphasizing the need for women’s full participation in the broader social revolution. Etta threw herself into the movement’s educational efforts. She taught literature, language, and pedagogy at the cultural centre Casa de la Mujer Trabajadora (“House of the Working Woman”), which was influenced by the libertarian educational theories of Francisco Ferrer. Inspired by Ferrer’s secular, anti-authoritarian principles, she helped design curricula that emphasized critical thinking, co-education, and emotional well-being.

In 1937, She founded and directed four libertarian schools in Blanes, Catalonia, where she trained both children and future teachers. These schools were groundbreaking: co-educational, atheistic, anti-militarist, and committed to creating a nurturing, stimulating atmosphere for young learners. Education, for Etta, was a revolutionary act and one that could cultivate free-thinking individuals capable of shaping a just society. 52% of the population was illiterate, 60% of children out of school. The work carried out by the CENU (Council of the School New Unified) was a vital work and she took to it with great skill and insight. Sporting long black dresses and short cut white hair, locals take to calling her La Bruja or The Witch. Meanwhile her son, Hans, took up arms and fought against the fascists on the front lines, earning himself the rank of lieutenant.

During this time, she contributed to the Mujeres Libres magazine, writing impassioned articles on women’s education, sexual freedom, and motherhood. She articulated a vision



of motherhood not as passive care giving but as an active, educated engagement with a child's intellectual and emotional development. "Educated mothers," she wrote, "relate their own experiences and sufferings to their children; they intuitively understand their feelings and expressions. They are good educators, as they are also friends of the children they educate."

In May 1937, her book *Mujeres de las Revoluciones* (Women of the Revolutions), featuring twelve biographical sketches of revolutionary women, was published by *Mujeres Libres*. Highlighting figures from bourgeois activists such as Emmeline Pankhurst to communist revolutionaries such as Veraigner, Difference feminist and educationalist Ellen Key and the dancer Isadora Duncan who broke from the rigid mould and brought expressionistic and evolutionary movement to the art. Her aim is clear, to illustrate the many ways women had influenced social evolution, not necessarily through armed struggle necessarily, but also through radical shifts in consciousness and societal norms.



Etta in her hotel accomadation in Quartier Latin, Paris 1947

## Flight and The Resistance

The fall of Barcelona in 1938 forced Etta to flee again, taking her sons to Paris and the Quartier Latin, living in dank refugee housing. Shortly afterward, the wave of Fascist aggression would break out into The Second World War which soon engulfed Europe. Etta continued her resistance against fascism, working clandestinely as a translator, propagandist, and organiser for the French Resistance.

During this time, Etta and sons were rounded up and interned on numerous occasions and moved with other Jews and foreigners between camps throughout 1939 – 1941, after which Hans would be drafted into the Foreign Legion before joining the Resistance.

Etta and Michel's survival during the Nazi occupation was precarious. Hunted as a Jew and anarchist, she was forced into hiding, at times taking refuge in a monastery in Lyon, her survival due to the solidarity amongst the French working class against the Vichy and Occupational forces. Despite severe physical exhaustion and illness, Etta remained committed to the struggle against tyranny.

By 1944, Hans had joined the maquis resistance, fighting as "*Capitaine Jean*" or simply "*Jean portal*". He would unfortunately be murdered by French collaborators in Chavarinnes, Isère on 9 August 1944. He was gunned down while riding a motorcycle while on a mission for the resistance. The war takes it's devastating toll.

He was 26, a matter of weeks later the region would be liberated. His death was a shattering blow from which Etta never recovered.



## Final Years and Legacy

Because of Hans's sacrifice, Etta was awarded French citizenship and a modest pension, which alongside donations from relatives in the U.S.A and work as a palm reader kept her from the worst of financial troubles. Still, she lived out her final years in relative poverty living in Paris' outskirts in Joinville-lePont before moving once again to the Quarter Latin in 1947 and filled with overwhelming grief. Her schools rubble. Horrified by the corruption and capitalist self interest which flourished following the war. Far from the relative opulence of her youth and the self driven bohemia of her live in Spain, she lived in cramped, dirty conditions, a exile and refugee.

During this time she would be visited by Annemarie Götze and her husband the Swedish anarchist, Stig Dagerman. Etta had taken Annemarie under her wing when she was just twelve after her anarchist mother was imprisoned and her father forced underground by the Nazis, Following the war, living in Sweden, Anarchism near erased, they reach out across the ruins of Europe and rekindled their friendship. The story of their meeting Stig, Annemarie, and Etta and the subsequent friendship and works has been beautiful composed by her relative Nancy Pick and Stig's daughter, Lo Dagerman in *"The Writer and The Refugee"* and I would highly recommend everyone take the time.

To say the least, Stig would project much of his own inner turmoil onto the strained relationship between Etta and her surviving son, Michel and immortalise her as Mme. Angelica in 1947's *Skuggan av Mart* or *Marty's Shadow*, a well regarded work that would later be preformed the world over and later a 2019 film.

In *Marty's Shadow*, Mme. Angelica relentlessly bullies her 'unmanly and cowardly' son and she is depicted as a monstrous mother. However, this isn't supported by contemporary accounts which report little more than an old woman's maternal prodding and the general tempestuous relationships that come with living in small, impoverished conditions. She wrote well of her son in letters to others and who talk of him with as much high regard as she would beratingly.

Dagerman, would also write a profound memoria (*A la mémoire du Captain Jean*) for Hans/Jean in 1948, he was a man of action, and anti-fascist from his youth to his all to early death.

Despite the depiction of Etta in *Marty's Shadow*, he clearly felt a bond of fealty with Etta and would return to visit her after it's release with Annemarie, unfortunately the last of these journeys ended with them discovering she had died a handful of weeks earlier.

She had died on May 9, 1951. Worn down by years of illness, hardship, and heartbreak, yet leaving behind a legacy of fierce intellectual and political commitment. Her literary and educational contributions resonated beyond her lifetime.

Her collection *Mujeres de las Revoluciones* remains a testament to her belief in women's power to shape history, as well as her lifelong dedication to the idea that social revolution begins with individual consciousness and education.

Etta is also memorialised in *Utan Våktare Stad* (1948) by her friend, the Lutheran Minister Arne Forsberg, a documentive work on the lives and experiances of Jewish refugees.

She was lay to rest in Thiais Cemetary on the outskirts of Paris,  
The grave was ploughed over and reused in 1981.

Etta's life, shaped by exile, struggle, and resistance, serves  
as a reminder that true revolution requires both cultural  
transformation and political courage. Her name is not as widely  
recognised today, her influence persists wherever education is  
seen as liberation, and wherever the ideals of anarchism, freedom,  
equality, and mutual aid are pursued.

No mere participant in history; she was one of its architects,  
wielding words and actions in the service of liberty.

Remember her.



Painting of Etta by Aram, 1948

## Further Study

Lo Dagerman & Nancy Pick, *The Writer and the Refugee*  
(Independently published, 2018)

Marianne Kröger, *Jewish Ethics and Anarchism in the Spanish Civil War*  
(Frankfurt am Main, Verlag Peter Lang, 2009)

Ernst Federn, *A life with psychoanalysis. From Vienna via  
Buchenwald and the USA back to Vienna.*  
(Psychosocial publishing house, 1999)

Dagmar Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History*  
(Cambridge University Press, 2011)

Kaymakçioğlu, Göksu, “Strong We Make Each Other”: Emma  
Goldman, *The American Aide to Mujeres Libres During the Spanish  
Civil War, 1936–1939* (University of Ankara. June 2010)

Nick Heath, *Federn, Marietta aka Etta 1883- 1951*  
([www.libcom.org/article/federn-marietta-aka-etta-1883-1951](http://www.libcom.org/article/federn-marietta-aka-etta-1883-1951))

“Paul”, *La feuille Charbinoise: Germany, Spain, France... the long  
fight for freedom of Etta Federn*  
([www.lafeuillecharbinoise.com/?p=11267](http://www.lafeuillecharbinoise.com/?p=11267))

Stig Dagerman, *A la mémoire du Captain Jean*  
(extracted from “Printemps français”)

Martha Ackelsberg, *Free Women of Spain: Anarchism and the  
Struggle for the Emancipation of Women*  
(AK Press, 2005)

*“It’s a mistake to believe that a revolution is made only by struggles and battles in the streets, for bloodshed, acts of terrorism, and all kinds of violence. Revolutions are effected also in an intellectual and spiritual sense. Men and women who make us see and understand new problems that will not find their solutions until later, in activities palpable, they are revolutionary, and they engender a revolution spiritual and intellectual before or while the revolution is a reality.”*

- Etta Federn

Introduction to *Mujeres de las Revoluciones* 1937

*Trans. by Peter Ó'Máille*

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