



Eulogy Marcia “Marty” Cohn Spiegel

The sun shone through the windows. The lush green garden waved outside. A friend of Marty’s from the Jewish women’s collective Benot Esh, a chaplain, and myself sang together Lechi Lach. Caretaker Nura sat by Marty’s side, smiling.

That was the last time I saw Marty.

She rested in her reclining armchair, wearing one of her famous large necklaces. Her eyes were often closed, but she was alert, present with everyone in the room.

When her friend chanted a melody from Benot Esh’s repertoire, Marty opened her eyes. They sparked recollection, knowing. Endurance. Wisdom gained throughout a life dedicated to raising Jewish women’s voices. A life of resilience and strength and courage; of Torah, poetry and song; of fire and passion.

The life of a trailblazer, a maverick. The life of a woman.

A life that was about healing.

Healing from falsehoods. From silence. From double standards.

When essential aspects of one's personality are not acknowledged, one cannot be whole. One cannot have *shlemut*.

Marty experienced this early on, and throughout her life. Much of what fueled her intensity and radical quest for visibility might go back to her childhood and youth.

The life of Marcia Gladys Cohn began on October 16, 1927, when she was born the middle child of Helen and Al Cohn in Chicago. Her parents, both born in the States, at the cusp of a new century, in 1899, raised three children—Selma, Marcia, and Burton—within a lower-middle-class Jewish community during the Depression.

Marcia was a precocious child. She learned to read before she was “supposed to.” One early life lesson was that she had to hide, diminish parts of herself—her ability, her pride. A kindergarten girl who could already read was considered strange. So, she learned to pretend she was slow. To forego the praise she deserved, the giddiness of a young child who knew she had something unusual.

A girl who wanted to learn, who wanted to educate herself, was considered strange also in her parents' eyes. When, at sixteen, she was offered a place in a new program for gifted students at the University of Chicago—at a time when Jews were admitted only by quota—her parents turned it down.

She did later enroll at Rockford College, earning a liberal arts degree, though she always also had an interest in science and might have gone to medical school had it been up to her.

Marty was not only a young woman struggling with the limits placed on all women of her time and society.

She was also a young Jewish woman.

At Rockford, she was the only Jew. Antisemitic tropes and biases were everywhere. But she also enjoyed her time on campus: She loved fencing and dancing and swimming in the lakes; she rode horses and even managed to own one, saving it from the butcher. She had friends. She had mentors.

Yet decades later, she learned of a betrayal that would taint the memory of her Rockford chapter. The mentor she had trusted and admired most had denied her the honor of valedictorian.

Because she was Jewish.

For someone who spent her life fighting for recognition and dignity, this revelation must have cut deeply.

Even the fiercest advocates have vulnerabilities. They can hold their heads high and still go home and weep, knowing their essence has not been honored with the *kavod* it deserves. Knowing they have to accomplish everything by themselves, without support from family, pedigree, money, society, generic leadership pipelines.

Although Marty had lasting relationships with childhood friends, she knew early on that she was basically on her own. And she sensed that if she did not want to repeat what she had seen her mother's generation endure-lives constrained, damaged by gender-bias and bigotry-she would have to create new spaces for herself. But it would take time.

After marrying Sidney Spiegel, an engineer and Harvard Business School graduate, she became the mother of five children. Over the course of thirteen years, the couple welcomed Linda, Randi, Judy, Edward, and Steve.

At some point-somewhere between Chicago, Rockford, and Boston-she also decided she was done being cold.

When the family moved to Los Angeles, first to Westchester and then to Rolling Hills Estates, she found the place that would be her home for the rest of her long life.

The Palos Verdes peninsula was still largely wilderness then. There were horses, which she loved. But there was also rampant antisemitism. Clubs that wouldn't admit Jews. And few Jews at that time had ventured beyond the West Adams and Fairfax districts. Marty was a literal and figurative pioneer, as she began to forge her way through the canyons and valleys of "the hill", the estates of the South Bay.

Drawing from her own childhood experience, she became an advocate for academically advanced students. She stood up for her children's Jewish identity. She became deeply involved in synagogue life, at Temple Menorah, Congregation Ner Tamid, and Temple Beth El.

Over thirteen years, family dynamics can shift. The marriage and family life began to be affected by Sidney's alcoholism—a condition that to this day is often a stigma for those impacted by it, especially in the Jewish community where the prevailing narrative was (and often still is) that Jews don't get drunk like the gentiles - and

overall in a society that would blame a wife's negligence or hysteria for a husband's shortcomings and failures.

What do you do when you are surrounded by things that anger you because they cause you pain, that make you feel like all your resolve might not go anywhere, by realizing how your voice is not recognized as it should be, by living with societal double standards, lies, self-serving biases and denials?

Again, like a child in kindergarten, like a young curious girl ready to go to university, Marty faced a choice: to pretend, to shrink, to accept. Or to act.

And this time, and even more so after her husband's passing, she was ready to act. To tear down wallpaper, smash idols, expose falsehoods, and pull back the curtain, throw out the rug to expose the truth, to let in the light.

She joined a radical feminist consciousness-raising group, Benot Esh. She learned of other women's stories. She spoke relentlessly about alcoholism and abuse in Jewish families. She earned a degree in Jewish communal social work. She taught at Hebrew Union College. She founded lecture series, study groups, *hevrotot*, poetry and art circles that lasted decades.

She crossed borders: inside and out. She rafted the Amazon and the Colorado. She hiked to Machu Picchu. She rode the Trans-Siberian Railway and the Orient Express. She crossed oceans on freighters. She studied women's rituals and power portals across cultures, documented them, and brought them back to her growing community of peers that spanned age and gender gaps.

After decades of feeling alone she knew she was no longer on her own.

Her impact on Jewish feminist agency, her influence on Jewish women proudly claiming and reshaping, rewriting the tradition is huge.

She created lifelines for Jewish women, a legacy that lives on in the current generations and in generations to come. In those of her own grand-and great grand-children, whom she loved very much, and in others.

Marty believed in people's capacity to praise and rise and to grow toward healing. She exacted that people need not be an expert in order to achieve something positive, but that they must be open and willing to try.

Her life was complex and especially in her later years, it was not easy. But she loved being alive. She was able to stay in her house, supported by caretaker Nura and other caretakers, her children and their families, her friends and community, until her last day. Even when she was ill and depended on the help and care from others, she would answer a doctor's questions by stating that her health was excellent and that her quality of life was great.

She was not able to heal her body.

But she was able to heal her mind and the minds of many others, to find the kind of wholeness, of shlemut, that brought her peace.

There is a poem by the Israeli poet Zelda about the many names a person carries.

Marty's Hebrew name was *Miriam*, a name that was deeply important to her.

Like Miriam, she carried the power of women dancing and singing. But not in a sweet or bucolic way.

There was fire inside Miriam, when she danced at the water's edge. And there was fire inside Marty as well.

Alongside that fire, Miriam provided water. She was a wellspring of life, of wisdom, of community. Like Marty, who planted and watered a whole chorus of Jewish feminist voices, a lush, shining and waving orchard.

Like Miriam, Marty was outspoken. She rallied around the feminine. She was industrious. She said things she came to regret.

A trailblazer, a wellspring, a ritual-maker and song-leader—any leader—cannot, need not, must not always be nice and smooth. Cannot always be conventional. And Marty was anything but conventional.

Zichrona livracha. May her memory always be the blessing that it already is.