

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE 80TIME  
3 September 1984

## Books

### Gingerly Removing the Veil

JOSEPHINE HERBST by Elinor Langer; Atlantic-Little, Brown; 374 pages; \$19.95

"Josie, I'd love you whether you wrote or not," said Saul Bellow in a letter to Josephine Herbst. He had plenty of company. During her long literary life Herbst attracted such disparate admirers as Maxwell Anderson, Katherine Anne Porter, Ernest Hemingway, James T. Farrell and John Cheever. When she died in 1969 at the age of 76, Critic Alfred Kazin, who had once dismissed her work as "desperate pedestrianism," wrote that he had never known any other writer who was "so solid, so joyous, so giving."

Elinor Langer's evocative, infatuated biography has brought the novelist to life with her quirky charm intact. Much of the book shows her as she appeared to her friends: more spontaneous and independent than any woman of her generation had a right to be. For more than 30 years she defended the underdog in leftist journals and in novels like *Rope of Gold*.

The Iowa girl had first been moved by the Depression-era plight of the Midwestern farmers. On a visit to Cuba in 1935, she chronicled the hopeless resistance to the new Batista dictatorship. The same year she was in Nazi Germany reporting on opposition to Hitler. In Spain in 1937, she witnessed the death throes of the Spanish Republic. Her biographer asks: "What could be a more vivid embodiment of a life lived according to principle?"

A more pertinent question posed by Langer's book might be: How well did Herbst's friends and admirers really know her? Apparently, not well enough. The misunderstanding is rooted in Herbst's involvement in the Communist Party after 1930. As Langer regrettably relates, when party interests were at stake Herbst was an accomplished liar. On occasion she could deceive herself. In 1930 the writer and her husband John Herrmann journeyed to the U.S.S.R. at the invitation of a party official. When they came home, Herbst plunged into party activities, just short of membership. Herrmann joined up and became a courier of stolen federal documents.

Langer's one-page account of the couple's decisive journey to the U.S.S.R. blandly echoes the letters Herbst was writing home at the time. Russians in the street look "vital and alert." The workers' kitchens are "so shining." This was the year of the great famine, a direct result of Stalin's enforced collectivization. Though Herbst may have been shielded from the

#### Former S. C. Girl Is Leader of Delegation Demanding Lifting of Spain Arms Embargo

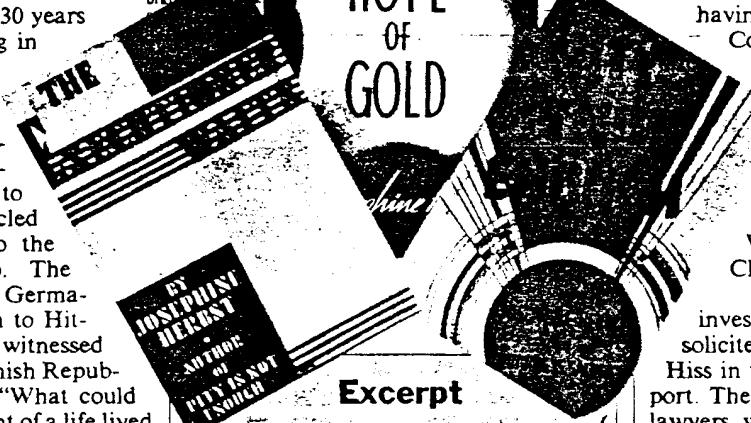
Josephine Herbst, Novelist, in Fight Against U. S. Rule

Washington — (AP) — Spanish-American women, numbered by police at 1,500, marched on the State department Monday to demand that the embargo against the shipment of arms to Spain be lifted.

The marchers were stopped in the park just south of the State department and adjacent to the north lawn of the White House. They carried banners calling for speedy action by this government.

Police permitted a delegation to enter the State department and see Assistant Secretary Smith.

The delegation representative John labor of Miss O'Connell, wife of Ernestina O'Connell, director of the organization.



#### Excerpt

"I would like to be able to question without having someone accuse me of disloyalty," she wrote to Granville Hicks at the *New Masses*. . . This letter [and one other] are virtually the only references to the Soviet purges in Josie's letters. . . Josie was at Yaddo during the announcement of the Nazi-Soviet pact. A group photo taken the day before the invasion of Poland shows her face dark with worry. Why didn't she 'break' publicly with the Communist Party when she was so 'disillusioned' with it privately? 'If you burn your immediate past there is nothing left but ashes which are all very well for those heads that like nothing better than to be sprinkled with ashes,' she wrote in the middle of the McCarthy era. She felt far too keenly the stir of the revolutionary idea to be able to abandon it now."

grislier effects of the mass starvation that cost 6 million peasant lives, she could not have failed to see what other travelers were reporting: hordes of hollow-eyed families begging at every railway station.

The only work Herbst published at the time about her experience was a piece in the *New Republic*. The description of a writers' conference did not mention a shortage of food, only a plenitude of books.

Thirty-eight years later Herbst published a brief reminiscence of the trip that should have prodded Langer, usually an indefatigable researcher, into inquiring about conditions in the U.S.S.R. at the time of the visit. Herbst wrote that she had failed to ask about the collectivization that had uprooted "flocks of human beings, to starve or die." Instead, not a word about the famine appears in Langer's book.

Herbst's behavior in connection with the Hiss-Chambers case further demonstrates her growing inability to discern truth. In 1948 Whittaker Chambers accused Alger Hiss of having been a fellow spy in the Communist underground. Herbst was privy to information that partly substantiated Chambers' claim. In fact, as this book discloses, Herbst's husband, in his role as aide to the party's chief recruiter of agents in Washington, first introduced Chambers and Hiss.

Yet she repeatedly lied to FBI investigators. At the same time, she solicited a meeting with attorneys for Hiss in the hope of giving aid and support. The encounter was a disaster. The lawyers were appalled by Herbst's off-hand attitude about espionage. In their notes they observed that she had "no real concern about people working for the Government, taking papers and supplying information surreptitiously to the Communist Party." Later Herbst confided to a friend, "The Hiss case was handled wrongly . . . as indeed I suggested to his lawyers all along. He should have been more frank . . . Admitting smaller things would have validated major denials. Any novelist could have told them that."

A novelist who offers advice on how to lie as effectively in life as in fiction is likely to have trouble writing anything honest, especially memoirs. For the last 15 years of her life, Herbst vainly attempted to compose hers. But as Langer notes, to be straight with herself and others, the writer "would have had to remove the veil over some very sorrowful private and political moments." Langer has gingerly removed that veil. In the process, she has exposed more than she wanted to and more than Herbst's loving friends could ever have suppressed.

—By Patricia Blake