

SARAH BLACHER COHEN

(1936 – 2008)

Elaine Safer

Sarah Blacher Cohen, professor of Jewish literature for thirty-three years at the State University of New York at Albany, playwright, comic, scholar, and dear friend, died on November 14, 2008, at age 72 of a degenerative neurological disease: Charcot-Marie-Tooth. Her husband of forty-two years, Gary, was with her when she expired. Sarah was the most courageous person I have known. She came close to death at least twice before her final demise, but always managed to beat it. Somehow, she drew upon an inner strength that yearned to live. So many of us thought that Sarah would pull through this last time as well.

I met Sarah in 1964 when she was a graduate student in the English department at Northwestern University, and I was a predoctoral instructor there. So began a friendship that lasted for more than forty-four years. After Sarah obtained a position in the English department at the University of Illinois, Chicago, and I got a position in the English department at the University of Delaware, we kept in touch by visiting each other's homes, meeting at conferences, and traveling to plays together. I recall that we both attended Cynthia Ozick's production of *Blue Light* when it was performed at the Bay Street Theatre in Sag Harbor, Long Island; after the show, Sarah, her friend Cynthia, and I had a little ice-cream celebration.

When Sarah came to Philadelphia to produce her own plays and those written with her longtime collaborator Joanne B. Koch, I introduced her to my little theater group of friends, who loved the performances: among them *The Ladies' Locker Room*; *Molly Picon*; and *Sophie, Totie and Belle*. This also was true when Sarah produced performances at the University of Delaware: among them *Henrietta Szold* and *Molly Picon*. And because Sarah was such a social person, who loved to introduce people to one another, we often went backstage to chat with the actors, and then out to dinner. The performances of Sarah's plays in Albany gave us another chance to be together. I recall reading *The Ladies' Locker Room* in manuscript. What a treat it was to speak with Sarah about her ideas and how to turn them into drama.

Sarah had a wonderful sense of humor and joy in living. We would discuss experiences until the serious nature would give way to the humorous—causing us to rock with laughter. Sarah helped me to see the comic aspects of our daily lives. Sarah had amazing energy and was at the center of our Jewish American literary group, which essentially became a *mishpocha*: an extended family. Sarah introduced many of us and other people to publishers, including those at the presses at which she was an editor. She was first the editor of a series at Wayne State University Press and later general editor of the Modern Jewish American Literature and Culture Series at SUNY Press. At the latter, in particular, she helped countless people by reading their manuscripts and encouraging them to publish their books in her series.

Sarah once told me that putting together a collection of essays on a specific subject was like getting people together for a dinner party. The joy she took in setting up these “parties” is reflected in the titles of her books: *Comic Relief: Humor in*



Contemporary American Literature; *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor*; and *Making a Scene: The Contemporary Drama of Jewish-American Women*. Her pleasure in the comic sense of life is also reflected in talks she gave, such as “The Unkosher Comediennes: From Sophie Tucker to Joan Rivers,” talks in which Sarah enjoyed impersonating the Jewish entertainers. Sarah's work on humor, especially her books on Saul Bellow and Cynthia Ozick, are classics in the field: *Saul Bellow's Enigmatic Laughter* (University of Illinois Press, 1974), and *Cynthia Ozick's Comic Art: From Levity to Liturgy* (Indiana University Press, 1994).

Sarah had been working on a book that she tentatively called *A Memoir of a Junk Dealer's Daughter*. The title is revealing in that just as a dealer may turn his collection of rags into profitable form for others, so Sarah turned her disability into positive form: in a course she developed called “Drama of Disability,” in which she treated *The Glass Menagerie*, *The Miracle Worker*, and *Children of a Lesser God*; in her own plays, including *The Ladies' Locker Room*; and in working for the rights of disabled persons. Indeed, Sarah was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Muscular Dystrophy Society.

Among Sarah's other honors are a Distinguished Fulbright to Yugoslavia and her roles as media consultant to the National Endowment for the Humanities and humor consultant for the Library of Congress. Sara wrote and edited eleven plays and musicals (often with her longtime writing partner Joanne B. Koch). Sarah is survived by her husband Gary, her sister Bess Rosen Lichterman of Milwaukee, and nine nieces and nephews, including her great-niece Rabbi Julie Pelc of Venice, California, who recounts that Sarah told her she "was like the daughter she never had." "And, in many ways," Julie explains, "I was her progeny. . . . Sarah and I shared more in common than anyone else in our family; our relationship was profound and sacred. . . . My Aunt Sarah was feisty, rebellious, outrageous, brilliant, and creative. . . . My Aunt Sarah didn't just choose life, she took a lasso and wrung it around life and dragged life toward her. . . . In her death Sarah remains my greatest teacher about life." Another person who devoted herself to Sarah is Marla Frazer, longtime assistant, friend, and helper particularly in the last phase of Sarah's life. Marla promised Sarah and Gary that she would be a caregiver for them throughout their illnesses.

Sarah was memorialized at a service at Levine Memorial Chapel in Albany on Friday November 11, 2008, and buried at the Independent Cemetery in Guilderland. Sarah's sheer joy in living, her excitement in engaging in dialogue over all matters, and her sense of humor: these are the things I remember and these are the things that bring Sarah back to life for me.

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BENNY KRAUT

(1947 – 2008)

Eugene Korn

Professor Benny Kraut passed away at age 60 on September 26, 2008, after a week-long coma caused by sudden cardiac arrest. He enriched the lives of all who met him, and his untimely death left both the academic and Jewish worlds significantly diminished.

Benny studied Jewish and general philosophy at Yeshiva College, where we first met and nurtured a close friendship that endured through the decades. He earned MA and PhD degrees in Jewish history from the Department of Near East and Jewish Studies at Brandeis University in 1970 and 1975, respectively. After teaching briefly at Vassar, Benny built the Jewish studies department at the University of Cincinnati, where he was department director from 1976 to 1998. Later in 1998 he moved to Queens College, CUNY to become professor of history and director of its Jewish studies program, as well as the director of the Center for Jewish Studies. He remained the Center's director until spring 2006, while continuing to teach in the department until his death. He augmented the center, revitalized its public Jewish Lecture Series, and created the Jewish Music and Theater Performance Series as well as a Cinema on Sundays Film/Dialogue Series. Under his academic leadership, Queens' Jewish studies program expanded and diversified, and earned national recognition for its quality and innovative programs. As Queens College president James Muyskens stated, "Benny injected the Center and the Program with new energy and ideas, turning them into first class institutions." At both Cincinnati and Queens, Benny won university awards for teaching excellence.

Benny was no detached scholar consumed by esoteric concerns but a passionate advocate for, and explorer of, Jewish identity, ideas, and the experiences of his people in modernity. His personality seemed to merge with his scholarship and he instinctively embraced the dilemmas of contemporary Jewish existence. More often than not, he intertwined his academic interests with his Jewish communal involvement in both Cincinnati and Queens.

Benny focused his academic work primarily in two areas: antisemitism and the Holocaust; and the American Jewish experience. His first book, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Revolution of Felix Adler* (Hebrew Union College, 1979), was also the subject of his doctoral dissertation. He published two other books on Jews and the founding of America and on German Jewish Orthodoxy in America, and more than forty scholarly articles. A voracious reader with a fine critical eye, Benny was book review editor for *American Jewish History* and a member of the editorial board of *Shofar*. Over the course of his career he managed to pen a remarkable 170 reviews for a variety of scholarly journals and popular publications. He also published essays in Jewish-Christian and Jewish-black relations and participated in a number of academic activities in these areas.

Biography underlay Benny's résumé and his unusual conjunction of interests. He was the son of two Holocaust survivors. His father, Pinchas Zvi Kraut of Novo Sandz and Prezemysl, Poland, spent the entire war in flight one step ahead of the SS and imminent death. Wounded and ill with typhus in 1943, he was saved by a Christian woman who hid him for almost a year until the Russian liberation. The SS killed his wife and young daughter, and when the war ended Pinchas emerged as the only survivor of a family that had numbered more than thirty prior to