

A Milwaukee Woman's Life on the Left
The Autobiography of
Meta Berger

Edited by Kimberly Swanson

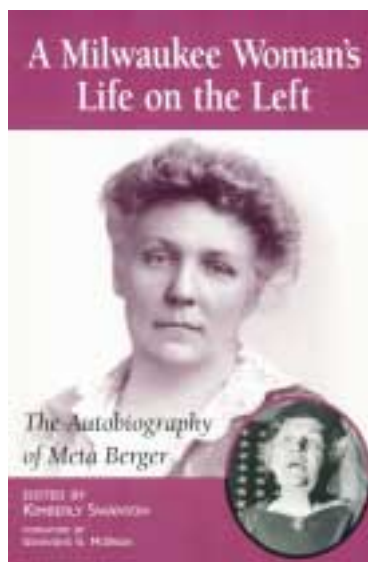
Wife, mother, schoolteacher, and politician, Meta Schlichting Berger became an activist at a time when women's role in public life—indeed, even their right to vote—was hotly contested. Berger's never-before-published autobiography, recently released by WHS Press, offers an intimate view of this extraordinary woman's life and times. Kimberly Swanson, the book's editor, recently shared some thoughts about Meta Berger in celebration of Women's History Month (March).

WMH: Beyond the simple fact that she was a woman, why would Meta Berger's autobiography be especially relevant for Women's History Month?

KS: Meta Berger cared a great deal about expanding women's opportunities in life. From the start of her political career she supported women's rights: she was active in suffrage groups, and she defended women's interests as a member of the Milwaukee School Board. But the relevance of Berger's autobiography for Women's History Month lies not only in her work on behalf of women but also in the story of her life itself. By her own description, she was a timid housewife who became a locally prominent activist and school administrator at a time when women rarely played a role in public life. Her autobiography describes this transformation.

WMH: Who was Meta Berger in the context of Wisconsin history?

KS: Meta Berger's life touched on many themes in Wisconsin



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history. Born in 1873 to German immigrants in Milwaukee, she grew up in an increasingly urban and multicultural society. As an adult she took part in reform movements at a time when progressive ideas were popular and Robert M. La Follette dominated state politics. She married the leader of Milwaukee's powerful social-democratic political organization, Victor Berger, who later represented the city's Fifth Congressional District as the nation's first Socialist congressman. She also experienced firsthand the anti-German and anti-Socialist hysteria that swept the state when the United States entered World War I. Although Berger was far from typical, her story brings Wisconsin history to life.

WMH: Last year Wisconsin voters elected Elizabeth Burmaster to run the Department of Public Instruction (the state's education agency), the second woman to hold this office in its history. Could you see Meta Berger in this position today?

The Author



Kimberly Swanson earned masters degrees in American history (1989) and library and information studies (1994) from the University of Wisconsin—Madison. She is currently a librarian at the Shapiro Undergraduate Library at the University of Michigan and lives in Ann Arbor.

KS: Certainly. Meta Berger was an early pioneer for women in education in Wisconsin. Not only was she one of the first women elected to the Milwaukee School Board—a position she held for thirty years—she was also the first woman to serve as the board’s president. Later in her life she served on boards at the state level. Education was Berger’s passion, and her service honed her administrative skills. I believe she also had the ambition and drive necessary to take on a job such as the one Burmaster faces today.

WMH: What was the biggest challenge you faced editing an autobiography?

KS: Researching the footnotes was probably the biggest challenge. This was also the most enjoyable part of the project. I researched each person and event and many factual statements in the autobiography to provide additional context and detail for the reader. Meta Berger wrote for a midcentury audience and assumed that readers would recognize names such as Lincoln Steffens and Alice Paul. It was easy to find information about these once well-known figures, but many other people were difficult to identify. I pored over school board proceedings, census records, personal papers, city directories, trial transcripts, newspapers, and many other sources in my search for information.

WMH: What part of this book do you just have to share with other people? What event did Meta Berger describe or thought process did she share that you find the most interesting?

KS: In one of my favorite stories, Meta Berger introduced a suffrage resolution at the Wisconsin Teachers’ Association’s annu-



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Meta with her granddaughter Deborah Welles, c. 1928.

al convention in 1917. The story is in chapter 7, in which she describes wartime traumas such as the indictment of her husband for antiwar activity. She spoke after a “Four Minute” propaganda speaker and before the featured speaker, Jeannette Rankin of Montana, the first woman elected to the U.S. Congress. Apparently unaware that Berger shared the stage with him, the Four Minute man denounced Victor Berger. When she rose, nervously, to introduce her resolution, she discovered that the crowd of teachers supported her and her embattled husband: they applauded before she even uttered a word. ❧

Excerpt from *A Milwaukee Woman’s Life on the Left*

At this time Jeannette Rankin, first congresswoman from Montana, was much in the public eye. Consequently she was to be the guest speaker at the annual convention of the Wisconsin Educational Association. And everyone in town and in the state waited to welcome Jeannette Rankin.

When the meeting was called to order, the chairman introduced the first speaker. He was a Four Minute speaker and his job was to create enthusiasm for the war. . . . To my consternation and horror, he started a tirade against Senator La Follette and Victor Berger, telling these teachers that Wisconsin had two snakes in the grass, two men who ought to be taken out and shot at sunrise. . . .

Miss Rankin knew what emotional strain I was suffering and

leaned over to me to say, Please, Mrs. B. let me be the next speaker. This I could not do, knowing crowds as I did; I knew that as soon as she had finished the audience would leave and my suffrage resolution would never be introduced. So I insisted on going on next. Then the chairman stepped to the edge of the platform and in a very precise way said It now becomes my duty to present Mrs. Victor Berger, the emphasis being on the name of course. I didn’t know how I ever reached the edge of that platform. My heart pounded, my knees trembled, my mind was a blank. But suddenly the great mass of people in the audience rose en masse and cheered and cheered and called bravo to me. . . . The audience were seated again and upon my first word of Friends once more they arose and cheered.