



Gidlow, Elsa (1898-1986)

by Arlene Istar Lev

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Elsa Gidlow, known to many as the "poet-warrior," was unabashedly visible as an independent woman, a lesbian, a writer, and a bohemian-anarchist at a time when such visibility was both unusual and potentially dangerous.

Born in Hull, Yorkshire, England, on December 29, 1898, Gidlow emigrated to French Canada with her family when she was a child. The eldest of seven children, she lived her young life in poverty. She was emotionally affected by witnessing her mother's harsh life and her strong commitment to her children, at least three of whom struggled with mental illnesses.

While still a young girl, Gidlow vowed to live an independent life--an unusual and brave decision in the first decades of the twentieth century--and follow her dreams to write poetry. Throughout much of her life she was torn between wanting to help her family financially and needing to maintain her commitment to a life dedicated to writing.

In 1920, Gidlow moved to New York City, where she worked for *Pearson's*, a progressive magazine. In 1926, she relocated to the San Francisco Bay Area, where she later became active in the Daughters of Bilitis and where she cofounded the Society of Comparative Philosophy in 1962.

Gidlow published the first North American book of lesbian love poetry, *On a Grey Thread*, in 1923, when she was twenty-five years old. She continued to write poetry and essays throughout her life, supporting herself as a freelance journalist. She published a total of nine books, including *Wild Song Singing* (1950), *Letters from Limbo* (1956), and *Moods of Eros* (1971). Her *Sapphic Songs, Seventeen to Seventy* (1976) was celebrated by the then burgeoning lesbian-feminist community. It was reissued in a revised and expanded edition as *Sapphic Songs, Eighteen to Eighty* in 1982.

Gidlow's life has been documented in her autobiography, *Elsa, I Come With My Songs*, published just a month before she died in 1986, and in Peter Adair's 1977 documentary, *Word is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives*.

From the 1920s through the 1950s, when homophile groups first began organizing, Gidlow was living openly as a lesbian. She documents in her autobiography how difficult it was to find other lesbians in the years before glbtq communities became visible; she also describes the passionate relationships--with friends as well as lovers--that she was able to cultivate even in those days.

Gidlow spent thirteen years--from 1926 to 1938--partnered with one woman, Violet Winifred Leslie Henry-Anderson, aptly nicknamed "Tommy," until Tommy died of lung cancer. Gidlow later lived openly with Isabel Grenfell Quallo, a biracial woman.

During the McCarthy era, soon after the end of World War II, Gidlow was accused of Communist sympathies and became the subject of an investigation. Her cohabiting in an interracial, lesbian relationship may have

provoked the investigation as much as her politics. Indeed, when she was questioned by the House Un-American Activities Committee, she had nothing good to say about Communism, since her own political sympathies lay with the anarchists, who considered Marxism just another oppressive ideology.

Despite her passionate and devoted lesbian relationships, Gidlow maintained a strong commitment to her independence and her poetry throughout her life. After the ending of a relationship, she vowed "to know and realize my fullest powers, to make poetry, to *live* poetry, weave it into all phases of my life. Freedom to love in accord with my nature, but never . . . never again to permit love to bind me, nor myself to bind a lover."

Gidlow was a social reformer, cultural critic, peace activist, and self-proclaimed anarchist. She participated, often in a leading role, in many San Francisco liberation movements: from the bohemian-beat generation of the 1950s, to the 1960s anti-war movement, to the early years of feminist and gay organizing. She was also drawn to alternative spiritual traditions, finding great solace in Eastern religious teaching. Through the Society of Comparative Philosophy, she helped to popularize Buddhism among non-Asians in America.

In the 1940s, Gidlow purchased property above Muir Woods in Marin County, California, where she created a rural, Zen-inspired retreat that she named Druid Heights. Druid Heights became a haven for artists, musicians, and cultural and political radicals.

As a consequence of Druid Heights and her other activities, Gidlow socialized with many famous artists, radical thinkers, and political activists, including Alan Watts, Ansel Adams, Gary Snyder, Dizzy Gillespie, Neil Young, Tom Robbins, Catharine MacKinnon, and Margo St. James.

In her autobiography, Gidlow describes how women in the 1970s and 1980s kept asking her what it was like for her and Tommy to be lesbians in the 1930s, and she answered: "Being a lesbian, for me as for Tommy, was happy. She took it for granted as the given of her nature, as I had done We were profoundly sure of our right to be as we were, to love and live in our chosen way, we were happy in it." Comfortable with her lesbianism, yet also completely at ease in the fullness of her humanity, Gidlow insisted, "I was, and am, first a human person, then a woman, then a woman whose primary identification and loyalty is with women as lovers and friends."

Gidlow perhaps expresses her insistence upon an independent life best in this stanza of her poem, "For the Goddess Too Well Known":

I have brought her, laughing,
To my quietly dreaming garden
For what will be done there
I ask no man pardon.

Alan Watts, cultural interpreter of Eastern philosophy and Gidlow's good friend and colleague in the Society for Comparative Philosophy, once said that she was mysterious. She answered him in her book, *Makings for Meditation* (1973), by replying,

You say I am mysterious
Let me explain myself
In a land of oranges
I am faithful to apples.

In 1975, Gidlow published *Ask No Man Pardon: The Philosophical Significance of Being Lesbian*. In this work, she defends the naturalness of lesbianism, arguing that lesbians are born with different needs and desires.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Gidlow was recognized as one of the foremothers of the lesbian feminist movement, and her poetry was praised by Kenneth Rexroth and others.

After suffering a series of strokes, Gidlow died on June 8, 1986. Her papers are now part of the archives of the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California.

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