

"I'd never heard of Virginia Woolf, most Americans hadn't, but I rushed out and bought her books... I was absolutely mesmerised by her writing"

In the sixty-odd years since her death, Virginia Woolf has been the subject of innumerable PhDs but Ruth Gruber led the way. She was just 20 when the University of Cologne awarded her a doctorate, in 1931, for her thesis *Virginia Woolf: The Will to Create as a Woman* which, extraordinarily, discussed, *inter alia*, the polarity of her writing, notably in *Orlando*, long before the world knew Woolf suffered from bipolar disorder. Gruber sent her study to Woolf, who eventually invited her to tea, pronouncing her work "quite scholarly" before going on to discuss the rise of Nazism, which Gruber had witnessed. Woolf was "dressed in grey, very elegant, and she reclined in front of the fire. Her silver cigarette-holder never left her fingers." And she bore little or no resemblance to the woman portrayed decades later by Nicole Kidman in *The Hours*. "That was just Hollywood."

Leonard Woolf was fascinated to learn that the young Dr Gruber had recently returned from the Soviet Arctic, a vast area where prisoners who'd escaped Stalin's death squads were building cities in the gulag. She'd met them under cover of darkness, notebook stuffed in her bra, and her exclusive access resulted in a series of articles published internationally, and then a book, released on the day Hitler invaded Poland.

were Jewish – two of her teachers were black, including her first-grade teacher.

"In our house, the teacher was next to the rabbi on the totem pole, so when she came to the door my mother asked if I'd done anything wrong. She said 'she didn't do anything wrong. I want you to take good care of her. She's going to be a writer some day'. How did she know? I was six!" The other was her history teacher, who "taught us how slavery developed, and I would go to the theatre with him. My parents thought nothing of it. Afterwards he would take me to Harlem where this white woman – I don't know if she was his mistress – would make me discuss the theme of the play. He felt a responsibility to all the children he taught."

Her parents were happy for her to go to New York University, then a small campus "full of people who really wanted to study" where, again, there were teachers who truly inspired her, one of whom recommended a six-week summer German programme at Mount Holyoake College. She graduated from NYU in three years and then won a scholarship to the University of Wisconsin for a Masters, hitchhiking half-way across the country to Madison in 1929. Her father helped plan her route while her mother worried that, far from home, she'd get herself pregnant. And when, two years later, she returned with news of a scholarship to study in Cologne, her mother wished she had! "She was

A witness to history

Ruth Gruber met Virginia Woolf, worked for FDR, reported from Nuremberg and witnessed the birth of Israel. Liz Thomson enjoys a remarkable encounter

Gruber: always had dreams

Next stop was Alaska, on behalf of Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, to examine the possibilities for homesteading GIs after World War Two. It was Ickes, acting on orders from President Roosevelt, who, in 1944, sent Gruber to Italy to escort 1,000 mostly Jewish refugees to America. "On that ship, I became a Jew," she recalled later. It was the beginning of a half-century's involvement with the Jewish cause, one important aspect of which is chronicled in *Exodus 1947: The Ship That Launched a Nation*, published originally in 1948 – and published in Britain for the first time this week. There were 4,500 refugees crammed aboard a vessel designed for 400. Gruber waited on the wharf in Haifa as the British Navy rammed the ship to prevent the refugees coming ashore in Palestine. One of her dramatic pictures show a Union Jack daubed with a swastika, a *Life* picture of the week.

Sixty years later, talking in her Manhattan home in the Eldorado, a magnificent art deco co-op on Central Park West, Gruber describes the incident as though it were yesterday. The light and airy apartment, to which she moved with her late husband in 1951, is crammed with books and artefacts collected on her travels, with work by Miró and Chagall, and with countless photographs showing Gruber with such figures as Golda Meir and Ben-Gurion, Eleanor Roosevelt and Hillary Clinton, for whom she has great hopes.

A tiny, elegant woman, with a kind face and still-sharp eyes, she tells her remarkable story. One of five children, she was born in the Brooklyn "shtetl" of Williamsburg". Every Saturday, her grandfather, "my Moses", would take her to the Synagogue. "Little girls in an Orthodox Jewish house have no gender, so I could sit with the men downstairs." Unusually – for in those days most of them

terrified of course. Hitler was already very much in the news – people could see what was happening... I wore an American flag on my lapel and always carried my passport. I went to see Hitler at a rally: I've never forgotten it – he was so filled with hatred. The audience yelled and applauded and waved swastikas... I tried to be as inconspicuous as possible." Having witnessed the hysteria, Gruber foresaw the consequences – and, eventually, reported from the Nuremberg Trials on the outcome.

She was a few weeks into courses in art and philosophy when her English professor proposed she try for a PhD. Gruber said it would take too long and she lacked the money, but Herbert Schoffler was insistent, suggesting she might complete in one year. "He said 'I have a special reason. I love Virginia Woolf, but I can't ask my students to analyse her work because they don't know English... I'd never heard of her, most Americans hadn't, but I'd always had dreams, so I rushed out and bought her books... I was absolutely mesmerised by her writing.'"

So, Dr Gruber returned to New York the world's youngest PhD, a *cause célèbre*, and reporters greeted her as she walked down the gangway – toward, she hoped, a career in academe. But there were no jobs and instead she turned to journalism, finding an early champion in Helen Rogers Reid at the *Herald Tribune* who, unusually for the time, insisted she write under her own name, even after her marriage. With a notebook and a Leica, she was a true pioneer whose life and work – like the late Bill Deedes' – represents the best of journalism. And though she simply did what came naturally, she was, and is, a true feminist. Woolf would surely be proud.

Exodus 1947: The Ship That Launched a Nation is published this week by Union Square Press, at £7.99

