

MARGARET RANDALL

Poet. Feminist.
Revolutionary.

I NEVER LEFT HOME

a memoir of time & place

"A striking
remembrance
by an intellectual
whose radical,
fierce nature is
unflappable."
—Kirkus



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Duke University Press

Durham and London

2020

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© 2020 Duke University Press
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Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by Aimee C. Harrison
Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro and Avenir by
Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Randall, Margaret, [date] author.

Title: I never left home : poet, feminist,
revolutionary / Margaret Randall.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2020. |
Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019032709 (print)

LCCN 2019032710 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478006183 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478007616 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Randall, Margaret, 1936- | Authors,
American—20th century—Biography. | Women
political activists—Biography. | Women college
teachers—Biography. | Jewish women authors—
Biography.

Classification: LCC PS3535. A56277 z465 2020
(print)

LCC PS3535.A56277 (ebook) | DDC 818/.5403
[B]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019032709>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019032710>

Cover art: Photograph by Bud Schultz.

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*For my
great-grandchildren,
Guillermo Manuel Martín
and Emma Nahuí;
grandchildren,
Lía Margarita, Martín,
Daniel Pablo, Ricardo Sergio,
Sebastián, Juan, Luis Rodrigo,
Mariana, Eli, and Tolo;
children, Gregory,
Sarah, Ximena, and Ana;
and wife, Barbara.*

THIS IS
WHAT I
REMEMBER.

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TO THOSE BORN LATER

You who will emerge from the flood
In which we have gone under
Bring to mind
When you speak of our failings
Bring to mind also the dark times
That you have escaped.

Changing countries more often than our shoes
We went through the class wars, despairing
When there was only injustice, no outrage.

And yet we realized:
Hatred, even of meanness
Contorts the features.
Anger, even against injustice
Makes the voice hoarse. O,
We who wanted to prepare the ground for friendship
Could not ourselves be friendly.

But you, when the time comes at last
When man is helper to man
Think of us
With forbearance.

—BERTOLT BRECHT

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We have never been what we are,
the faces of our lives are not our own,
the voices that you hear, the voices that
 have spoken so loudly above the storm
are not our own,
nothing you have seen is true,
nothing we have done is true,
we are entirely different.

—VICTOR SERGE

Those who do not move, do not notice their chains.

—ROSA LUXEMBURG

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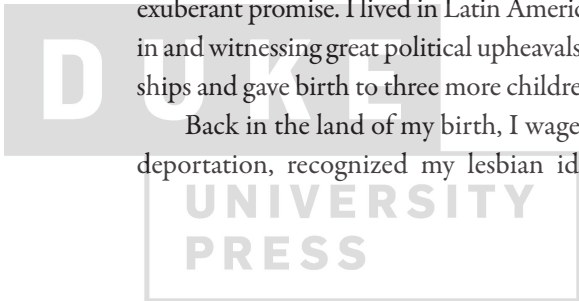
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Chapter One

HOW THIS BOOK CAME TO BE

For those coming into adulthood long after the events that shaped my life, let me begin by saying that I was born in 1936. My parents moved my siblings and me from a suburb of New York City to New Mexico in 1947, where I began falling in love with the high desert landscape. From an early age I knew I wanted to be a writer. McCarthyism cast a pall on my consciousness, although I was too young to understand that or how. Despairing of college, which I found dull in mid-twentieth-century America, I returned to New York to seek out communities of other creative people. As a young single mother with a son, I traveled to Mexico, then Cuba and Nicaragua, places where social change exploded with exuberant promise. I lived in Latin America for twenty-three years, participating in and witnessing great political upheavals. I moved in and out of other relationships and gave birth to three more children. In 1984 I came home.

Back in the land of my birth, I waged a successful five-year battle against deportation, recognized my lesbian identity, and retrieved a long-buried



memory of incest at the hands of my maternal grandparents. What I endured personally and when and where I lived allowed me to make important connections between the private and public spheres: the invasion of a child's body by someone with power shared important similarities with the invasion of a small country by a more powerful one; even the victims' responses are comparable. Propelled by civil rights, the American war in Vietnam, and eventually a feminism that helped me develop a gender analysis of society, I have worked for social justice wherever I've been. And I did become a writer—I think of myself first and foremost as a poet, essayist, oral historian, and translator—having published more than one hundred books in those genres (I include a list in an appendix at the end of this memoir).

The idea of a memoir is complicated. We may be moved to publish one too early in life. Emphasize the wrong things. Say too much or too little. Or wait so long that memory itself begins to fray. We may give in to another's plea for censorship or censor ourselves, include what is better left unsaid or omit what is most important, bore our readers and embarrass some of them.

This time around, I started by writing about my years among the abstract expressionist painters in New York City. I'd long thought of the 1960s as an era that has been misunderstood or misrepresented: depoliticized, trivialized, reduced to drugs and scandal. Within that context and compared with the earlier exponents of social realism, most historians have portrayed the abstract expressionists as apolitical. I hoped to be able to create a memoir in which time and place were the central protagonists and, in so doing, return cultural and political identity to the time about which I was writing.

At eighty-three, my memory is diminished. I've forgotten people and events or the order in which some events took place. After writing an advanced draft of my time in New York City, I continued with the decade in Mexico, including my clandestine escape to Cuba. Chronologically, that Caribbean country came next. I'd already written a memoir of my life on the island, though, and wondered what I might add. As my current assessment superimposed itself on the previous book, I realized I did have more to say.

After Cuba came Nicaragua, and that's where I hit a wall of posttraumatic stress. Increasing anxiety as the Contra war heated up seems to have erased many of the details of my years among the Sandinistas. I also may retain some residual guilt about having left my comrades in a situation of intensifying war. It was difficult for me to get more than a general outline of that chapter on paper. I kept returning to my storyline though and, to my relief, when on a reading trip to New York and staying at my daughter Ana's house, I was able

to break through the writer's block and the experience began flowing back. Ana and I didn't talk about Nicaragua on that visit, but she was the child who accompanied me there, so perhaps some osmosis was involved.

While Nicaragua was on hold, I'd moved farther back again. I'd begun thinking about what it had been like to be a young woman in a provincial southwestern US city during the suffocating 1950s. Toward the end of the twenty-first century's second decade, women in this country and others have developed new forms of resistance, and #MeToo has enjoyed some dramatic successes as well as dangerous backlash. We would be wrong to think we've dealt with patriarchy, although we have made an important breakthrough. But during my adolescence and young adulthood, we were imprisoned by a cruel conditioning. Individual girls and women broke free from time to time, but collective consciousness and movement was still a long way off.

The Brett Kavanaugh congressional confirmation hearings showed how frightened the power structure continues to be of anything resembling gender equality.¹ It was dispiriting to observe the similarities between the treatment of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford and that of Anita Hill three decades earlier. I wanted to write about my experiences coming of age in the 1950s because I don't believe any woman not old enough to have lived through that time can imagine the spirit-killing degradation. From my high school years, I continued going back in time as far as memory and family lore allowed.

In the midst of extending what started out as an essay about my time in New York City to a memoir covering my life to this point, a fortuitous event changed everything. I'd been telling a dear friend, Robert Schweitzer, about my project. He reminded me that twenty years earlier I'd sent him a 607-page memoir. In manuscript form, it had never found a publisher. "You must have a copy," he said. I didn't. What's more, I had no memory of having written such a manuscript. I still don't. Robert lives in Italy and offered to send me his copy via the postal service. I didn't want to trust what may have been the only existent text to the mail, so my friend scanned every one of those 607 pages and sent them to me digitally, in batches of forty to sixty. I downloaded and printed each JPEG image. When we were done, I had a very thick loose-leaf binder filled with an enormous book written twenty years before and containing details I could not have accessed without Robert's generosity. In the memoir you are reading, I've preferred to go with today's version of my life—the places I've lived, people I've known, events I've been part of, and how I remember each—but that earlier text helped me fill in some of the blanks.

In almost every instance I've decided to use people's real names rather than disguise them with pseudonyms. I want to pay tribute to those who walked briefly in my life as well as to those who have enriched it significantly. Each was important in weaving the whole. Naming them is part of making their story one that belongs to us all. I hope they will feel well represented, or at least not misrepresented, and I thank them for our relationships, short-lived or enduring.

Poems and quotes from others are springboards to the book as a whole and to these chapters. Throughout, I've also inserted poems of my own, particularly when they reflect a moment about which I'm writing; I still include some of these in my public readings. And I've reproduced photographs that often speak louder than words.

I want to express my deepest gratitude to Greg Smith for urging me to write about New York; to my wife, Barbara, and my friend V. B. Price for listening to chapters or parts of chapters and making valuable suggestions; to John Randall, Sabra Moore, and Rita Pomade for important input; and to my son, Gregory, who read the entire book and offered a critical view that saved me from what would have been some embarrassing omissions and errors. My editor, Gisela Fosado, took to the project with her usual enthusiasm. Many other professionals at the publishing house worked hard to make this a better book. Duke's two blind reviewers also made comments that helped me produce a more coherent narrative. Thanks to all.

The foregoings explains the mechanics of this memoir. A need to explore feelings and historical periods explains the texture. I am fortunate to have lived at a time, been in places, and taken the risks that shaped me. I am privileged to have interacted with people central to that history.

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NOTES

CHAPTER ONE HOW THIS BOOK CAME TO BE

1. In September 2018 congressional confirmation hearings were held for Trump's Supreme Court nominee, Brett Kavanaugh. Although Kavanaugh was accused of sexual assault by several women and one of them, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, gave eloquent testimony to that effect, a Republican-controlled Congress confirmed Kavanaugh.

CHAPTER TWO WHERE IT ALL STARTED

1. *This Is about Incest* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988).
2. This hugely popular syndicated column was written by Eleanor Roosevelt almost every day from 1936 to 1962.
3. From 1979 to 1999, Salt of the Earth Books moved from one location to another, all around the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. It was known throughout the country for readings and lectures, protests against the banning of books, and other contributions to the community. It and many other independent bookstores were forced out of business when the chains took over. Later Amazon closed some of the chains. Today, despite the increase in digital publishing, a few literary bookstores are making a comeback.

CHAPTER THREE LANDSCAPE OF DESIRE

1. Although Jews were by far the greatest number of Nazi victims, Communists, socialists, and homosexuals were also sent to the death camps. Their victimization wasn't publicized until much later.
2. An example was Anne Revere (1903–1990), who won an Academy Award for her portrayal of Elizabeth Taylor's mother in *National Velvet*, resigned from the Screen Actors Guild in 1951 (she was a member of the US Communist Party at the time), and refused to testify before HUAC. She would be blacklisted for the next twenty years, and never again play an important role. This gender aspect of the blacklists was brought to my attention by my friend V. B. Price, who observed its effects in his own family.

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