Chapter 7

Memory Is Power: Rosa Manus, Rosika Schwimmer and the Struggle about Establishing an International Women’s Archive

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I think there is a very great merit in Madame Schwimmer’s proposal to assemble archives of women from all over the world. It is particularly fitting and timely when the progress of women is threatened as it is today. Such a collection of archives seems to me would have not only an intrinsic value but it would give the women an opportunity to express their resentment against those forces which are again attempting to curtail their sphere of activities.

Letter by Fanny Fligelman Brin, president of the US National Council of Jewish Women, to Mary Ritter Beard, August 15, 1935.¹

A superficial look at the numerous and diverse women’s archives all over the world nowadays may lead us to forget about the enormous obstacles women encountered in gaining public space as well as gaining space for the sources documenting their struggles and successes.² The zenith of archival establishments to document herstory happened in the interwar period, particularly the 1930s.³ The reasons for this boom of archival foundations during the interwar

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² The website http://www.iisg.nl/w3vlwomenshistory/archivesandlibraries.html (accessed 25 September 2015), maintained by the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, provides an excellent list and description of international women’s archives. Equally useful—though unfortunately not kept entirely in English—is the University of Vienna’s directory of feminist private collections, http://www.univie.ac.at/Geschichte/sfn/ (accessed 25 September 2015).
³ Research about women’s archives generally and women’s archives in interwar times specifically is rather tangential. One of the few titles dealing extensively with the formation
period were manifold: after the so-called first wave of feminism in Western countries had ebbed away, there emerged a certain socio-political vacuum. Enthusiasm and success of first-wave feminism—in the early twentieth-century gravitating around suffrage—peaked in the enfranchisement of women in most European countries and the United States. Having accomplished this mission, women’s movements somewhat lost momentum and had to search for new paths to redefine themselves. As an intense phase of the women’s rights movement was over, a phase of reorientation seemed necessary. Furthermore, sobriety set in and disappointment spread after numerous political, economic, and educational achievements, such as gaining the franchise or wider access to the job market and academic institutions. Women pioneers, like Carrie Chapman Catt, founder and first president of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA; later International Alliance of Women, IAW), for instance, felt that although women had become integrated into politics and society to a certain extent, they still lacked full equality in many sectors. A generation gap opened up as well, with most former suffragists now being in their grandmother age and younger women, so it appeared, articulating their emancipation differently.

The broader historical context was very relevant as well. The 1920s and 1930s turned out to be extremely difficult times for both feminist and pacifist groups. A certain backlash situation, due to frostier political climates, evolved. Many European countries witnessed an atmosphere of growing reactionary and fascist tendencies, which threatened to undermine women’s newly gained economic and political freedoms. Newly acquired liberties became clipped while feminist-pacifist agendas stagnated, and increasing militarization, also of female citizens, was deplored by pacifists, feminists, and ex-suffragists alike.

