

In My Mother's House



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著者:Kim Chernin

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In this twentieth anniversary edition of the feminist classic *In My Mother's House*, Kim Chernin tells the brave and ultimately triumphant story of Rose Chernin, Russian immigrant and passionate Old Left activist, and her daughter Kim, the narrator of this riveting memoir of conflict, confrontation, and reconciliation among four generations of Chernin women. My mother was a political activist who participated in the making of history. Her daughter is an introspective, poetic sort of person, the very type likely to be fascinated by this life that was larger-than-life. Yet it was the mother who suggested that the daughter undertake the task of telling the mother's story. And it was the daughter who worked for seven years to accomplish it. *In My Mother's House*, from its very first pages, steps out into a large social and historical terrain. This scope is achieved in large part by beginning the story with and concentrating much of it on my mother whose life began in a small Jewish shtetl in Russia and brought her into eventual leadership of the most radical social movement of the twentieth century. As I wrote, I became fascinated by the patterns of relationships between mothers and daughters over several generations, a narrative I could not possibly have developed as a younger writer, both because of the skills required and because I would still have been battling with my mother, trying to overcome the power of her influence. Years before I wrote *In My Mother's House* I had tried to tell the story of a young girl growing

up in a left-wing family during the '40s and '50s. It was a tale I had to tell first as fiction, full of evasions and disguise, before I could come to the fuller version of the story some ten years later. True stories keep on changing; the mother's stories are told by the daughter the way the daughter imagined having heard them from the mother as a child. How delicately the memoir tiptoes toward fiction, how especially so in a family of storytellers. Yet in the end my mother, speaking through me, and I, speaking to her, arrived at a truth, one so compelling to us both that in the years after *In My Mother's House* was published I noticed that my mother had begun to tell her stories in my way, the way I had written them, in the voice I had invented for her, which she now, in real life, had chosen to inhabit. Is this what she had in mind when she first asked her daughter to tell her story? If in one of my women's studies courses I had heard that I would get to work with Kim Chernin--that we would exchange e-mails and have lunches to discuss books and ideas and how stories unfold in our minds and onto the page--I wouldn't have believed it. Working on this anniversary edition of *In My Mother's House* has been a great honor, and a whole lot of fun.--A.S.

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