'Hannah Arendt: A Life in Dark Times' an intriguing look at the acclaimed public intellectual

September 13, 2015 12:00 AM

By Glenn Altschuler

In the 1950s, Hannah Arendt, a refugee from Nazi Germany, was a highly acclaimed public intellectual. Critics praised her book “The Origins of Totalitarianism” (1951) as an extraordinarily incisive and influential account of the conflict between civilization and barbarism in the 20th century. In 1961, Ms. Arendt covered the war crimes trial of Nazi SS Officer Adolf Eichmann for The New Yorker. Two years later, the publication of “Eichmann in Jerusalem” created a firestorm. Many readers were infuriated by Arendt’s claim that Eichmann was a “terribly and terrifyingly normal” bureaucrat, a shallow, stammering embodiment of “the banality of evil,” who, except for ordinary diligence in seeking personal advancement, “had no motives at all.”

They found offensive her assertion that Jewish leaders were complicit in sending their fellow Jews to concentration camps. And they lamented — or lashed out — at what they characterized as Jewish self-hatred. Ms. Arendt’s friend Karl Jaspers never ceased to appreciate her unconventional ideas. But even he felt she had “reached a point where many people no longer understand you.”

In this concise biography, Anne C. Heller, a former executive editor at Conde Nast Publications and the author of “Ayn Rand and the World She Made,” tries to understand the erudite and elusive Arendt. It is a difficult task. Among the mysteries surrounding Arendt are: her decision in 1948 to stop identifying herself as a Zionist; her antipathy to Israel; her declaration that she would defend herself as a Jew “when attacked as a Jew” but otherwise regard her Jewishness as “one of the indisputable factual data” of her life which did not matter to her “in the least”; and her passionate love affair with the eminent philosopher Martin Heidegger, an anti-Semite and a Nazi collaborator.

Although Ms. Heller does not solve these mysteries, she does provide a sympathetic account of Arendt’s lifelong quest to explain “the kinds of thinking, judging and acting conscious people must partake in to...
be members in good standing of a diverse and moral human race.”

Arendt believed that the modern world was marked by loneliness and the terrible and desperate feeling of “not belonging to the world.” And by a search for scapegoats. The best way to transform these dangerous tendencies into strengths, especially for Jews, Arendt suggested, was to become a “pariah,” a person who will not “pay any price” to assimilate or gain the approval of others. “All vaunted Jewish qualities, the Jewish heart, humanity, humor, disinterested intelligence,” she wrote, “are pariah qualities.” Jewish shortcomings, including inferiority complexes, political apathy, and “money-grubbing,” are the characteristics of upstarts. Arendt insisted that the only escape from the “disgrace” of being a Jew was “to fight for the honor of the Jewish people as a whole.”

When a Hebrew edition of “Eichmann in Jerusalem” was published in 1966, Arendt declared that “the war between me and the Jews is over” — and she arranged a visit to Israel. She continued to write and to teach at the New School for Social Research in New York City until her death on Dec. 4, 1975.

The eulogy of Arendt’s friend Hans Jonas, Ms. Heller implies, effectively and elegantly captured her complex character: “Here was an intensity, an inner direction, an instinct for quality, a groping for essence, a probing for depth, which cast a magic about her.” After she examined a problem, Mr. Jonas added, it “looked different.” Although Arendt did not believe that “truth is to be had for these days,” she tried, incessantly, to find “the face of it which the present condition happens to turn toward us. Even her errors were more worthwhile than the verities of lesser minds.”

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