

## A life of ideas: Remembering Susan Sontag

by Avishay Artsy



At one point in American life, the mere mention of Susan Sontag's name was a way of suggesting intellectual grandiosity. Everyone in the 1960s and '70s seemed to have an opinion about Sontag's ideas, whether from her essay "Notes on Camp," or her books, notably "On Photography" or "Illness as Metaphor." She wrote provocatively about war, terrorism, photography and disease, and came to represent a fearless curiosity as well as high-minded pretension.

Sontag's endless passion for debate comes across in the new HBO documentary "Regarding Susan Sontag," which premieres Dec. 8.

The writer and cultural critic was heralded for breaking barriers for women in a field dominated by men, but her closest friends acknowledge her arrogance and selfishness. She was a lightning rod for criticism and seemed to bask in the notoriety her work received. The film portrays her as a complex individual, in search of fame, never shy before cameras, yet nevertheless feeling, particularly at the end of her life, that she hadn't accomplished enough.

Director Nancy Kates discovered Sontag in 1982, during Kates' sophomore year of college, when "The Susan Sontag Reader" was published. "She was one of those people that you just had to know about if you were smart and curious," Kates said in an interview. "I really didn't know anything about her then, but I was probably looking for some sort of intellectual role model, as a young woman. And I think there were thousands of women in my generation, and maybe people a few years older than me, that saw her that way."

Sontag, who died at age 71 in 2004, was born Susan Rosenblatt in New York. Her father was a fur trader who died of tuberculosis in China when Susan was 5 years old. Seven years later, her mother moved the family to Tucson, Ariz. and married U.S. Army Capt. Nathan Sontag.

"We were delighted to have a change in name," Susan's sister, Judith Sontag Cohen, recalls in the film. "We were so clearly identified as being Jewish with a name like Rosenblatt that my sister, who was older and I guess an easier target, did get hit in the head and called names."

Sontag was not raised in a religious household, yet she identified as Jewish, and in one essay, wrote, "I feel as a Jew a special responsibility to side with the oppressed and the weak." While she did not speak extensively about Israel, she made a documentary about Israel that was filmed between the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War.

In an interview used in the film, Sontag recounts being 12 and finding a book of Holocaust photographs in a bookstore. "I opened this book, and I thought I was going to faint. I was so upset, I immediately closed the book. I was trembling. And then I opened it again. And I knew what I was seeing. I knew the Nazis had killed a lot of Jews. I knew that I was Jewish, but I didn't know it meant what I saw," she said.

That experience shaped Sontag's perception of war, Kates said. "I think it shaped her because of ethics, and I think it shaped some of her work. At the very end of her life, she wrote a book about war and photography, and the images of war and torture."

From Tucson, the family moved to the San Fernando Valley, and Sontag would buy (or sometimes steal) books from the Pickwick Bookshop on Hollywood Boulevard, seeking refuge in the novels of Marcel Proust and André Gide. In the autobiographical essay "Pilgrimage," she wrote, "I had to acquire them. See them

in rows along the wall of my tiny bedroom. My household deities. My spaceships.”

Sontag graduated from North Hollywood High School at 15 and went to UC Berkeley in 1948. There she discovered a swinging homosexual nightlife scene, and began exploring lesbian relationships. But then, at 17, she transferred to the University of Chicago and fell in love with a sociology teacher, Philip Rieff. Their courtship lasted 10 days; their marriage lasted eight years. They had a son, David, when Sontag was just 19 years old.

“I hated being a child,” Sontag says in the film, in explaining her early marriage and motherhood. “I couldn’t do what I wanted to do. I wanted to stay up all night. I wanted to see the world. I wanted to talk to people. I wanted to meet people who were interested in what I was interested in.”

She received a fellowship to study philosophy at Oxford, and then moved to Paris to live with Harriet Sohmers Zwerling, her lover from Berkeley, and party with bohemian literary expats. She divorced her husband and left their child with him. “I think the film really speaks to women on that issue,” Kates said. “Some of them find it abhorrent that she left her kid and ran away for over a year. And other people see her as this figure of freedom. Because she managed to do things that men could do but women just couldn’t do in that time.”

“She [was] somebody who was constantly being reborn,” Yale University professor Alice Kaplan says in the film. “She was constantly discovering things and being a new person, and that’s her essential avant-garde-ism. You can either suspect it or really, really admire it. I see Paris as getting her out of her marriage.”

The film follows Sontag’s intellectual progression through seminal works that turned the nation’s attention to a wide range of topics, from photography and its impact on memory, to the horrors of the Vietnam War, to reframing the AIDS crisis and the stigma of illness. Sontag’s literary output also included fiction, beginning with the experimental novels “The Benefactor” in 1963 and “Death Kit” in 1967. Her 1992 novel, “The Volcano Lover,” achieved popular success, and her final novel, “In America,” came in 1999. The film ends with Sontag’s own struggle with cancer and her attempt to come to terms with her mortality. It also delves into her personal life, notably her many intimate relationships with women and yet her refusal to come out of the closet, which upset many lesbians who looked to her as a role model. It also upset the women who sought her recognition as a partner and never received it.

One of Sontag's many former lovers interviewed in the film is Eva Kollisch, a German literature professor, who describes instances when Sontag ignored or abandoned her at social events. "She was never able to know what goes on in another person," Kollisch said. "I mean, the sensitivity that we exercise in everyday life all the time, like, 'What are you thinking? What are you feeling? Where are you in this?' Susan was not a sensitive person."

The film shows the many, often conflicting, sides of Sontag's personality, and the viewer is left feeling admiration for her as a cultural critic, but frustration with her as a person.

"No one, if you put them under the lens of biography or biographical documentary, is going to necessarily come out looking terrific, which is reality," Kates said. "And she had a lot of things about her that were challenging. There was something sweet about how much people loved her, in spite of how difficult she could be."

*"Regarding Susan Sontag" debuts Dec. 8 on HBO.*

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