

Epilogue

While writing this book, I often visited Ruth's bench at the Congressional Cemetery, and I brought flowers on her birthday and death date. In the Jewish tradition, I placed a stone on the bench next to the others that are always there. She might find it amusing that her bench is near the gravesite of J. Edgar Hoover, the man who unsuccessfully tried to prevent her employment as a typist at the Oakland Army Base (Hoover also lived in a row house just a few blocks from Ruth's home). The cemetery has other well-known residents, including John Philip Sousa and many early US congressmen and Supreme Court justices. The more recently departed have gotten creative with their unique and often humorous headstones. The cemetery is open to dog walkers (by membership) and hosts events such as "Yoga Mortis," the "Tombs and Tomes Book Club," and concerts in the chapel. A little free library now stands outside the chapel, just a few steps up the path from Ruth's bench. When the foliage gets too thick or invasive around the perimeter fence, the cemetery brings a herd of goats to "mow" it down for a few days. No doubt, Ruth would love that she has joined this colorful, eternal community.

Since I first learned of Ruth, she has been constantly on my mind, and in a sense she's always been with me. Reminders of her are everywhere, and not just her old belongings in my house. There are signposts Ruth left behind all over Capitol Hill: the Corner Store, the Northeast Neighborhood Library, Stanton Park, and, of course, her house on Third

Street, which I liked to pass by on my way to and from work. Once, while walking down a stairwell at the Library of Congress in the Jefferson Building, I spotted a cigarette butt. It had probably traveled in on someone's shoe from outside, but I couldn't help imagining Ruth smoking in that stairwell when such vices were not banned at the library.

During the time that I worked on this book, a few people asked me if I thought Ruth was a librarian hero. I don't quite know how to answer that question. She was not the president of the American Library Association, and she never headed a major library or library system. She was never famous. But the people who met her or worked with her could not forget her. Her efforts to build a library system in Vietnam were heroic, and her diligence in cataloging social science books for over twenty years was a tedious, herculean feat. Although Ruth never used the word "radical" to describe herself, I knew since I first heard about her that she was one. The more I researched her life, the more it became apparent. It is the most fitting word to describe how she approached her job, her mission, and her life's work, even if she never called attention to her beliefs or her politics. Radicals may not necessarily be lauded in history; because they can be impatient, difficult, outspoken, and infuriating, their lives don't always make for simple, heroic narratives. But radicals are the ones in the trenches, doing the grunt work and pushing the boulders uphill, despite the resistance from above.

I've thought about my grandfather Jack, a World War II veteran who liberated Rome (and captured my Italian grandmother, he used to joke) and then became the director of the Muskogee and Lubbock public libraries. I remember from my childhood his rants about battling the city council for more funding, although I barely understood what he was talking about. I've thought about my aunt Silvia, a cataloger for NASA's audiovisual collections, who has long served as a Democratic Party foot soldier in Houston and has chosen to spend her time, now that she is retired, teaching English to refugees. For years I've had long, rambling phone conversations with my mother, Alice, about her efforts

to stop the Oregon State Legislature from defunding and closing the Oregon State Library, her employer. In her retirement years, she has a part-time job at the reference desk at the Salem Public Library and volunteers at my nieces' school library in Oregon City. As she fully admits, "I just can't quit."

Document by document, book by book, and patron by patron, we are nudging along a nearly invisible revolution. We may be slowed, but we won't stop. We may be threatened, but we won't quit.

Near the end of the interview, Gail Schwartz asked Ruth her opinions on current politics. Ruth had thought that President Obama would not be reelected in 2012, a prediction that turned out to be wrong. Gail also asked her if she thought another Holocaust could happen. Ruth bluntly responded:

Yes. Unfortunately, yes. Again, it's less apt to happen now—we have more competition. There are other groups who also have problems. The competing minorities. But anti-Semitism is not dead. Sorry about that, but anyone who thinks it can't happen here, I have news for you. It can happen anywhere, anytime. But I would not bet there would not be another. Yep.¹

Of course, genocides have happened again in several places around the world. Until the presidential election of 2016, however, I wasn't sure if I completely agreed with Ruth about the possibility of it happening here. Soon after, while many of us were still in shock over the results, librarians sprang into action. They called attention to libraries' unique role during this time of increased racism, xenophobia, political violence, fake news, alternative facts, and post-truth. While we forge ahead through dark times, we can look to Ruth as an example for how to survive under new-wave fascism. The tenets of librarianship can guide us through assaults on the freedom to read and the right to accurate information.

It seems that Ruth saw herself as someone who was not necessarily always ambitious but just made the best of her situation. She summarized: “Looking back, I never did initiate that much—I just never let an opportunity slip. I was kind of Johnny-on-the-spot. And it was always sort of, what if it goes wrong? Well, so what. I just didn’t worry about results too much.”² In her stories in all their myriad forms, she seemed to be revealing her own maxims:

1. Read ferociously.
2. Read everyone who is forbidden.
3. Jump off the train if you don’t like its direction.
4. Wonder who will read your diary.
5. Hope that no one reads your diary.
6. Meet what comes.
7. Your life is a battle, your peace a victory.
8. Don’t tolerate mediocrity.
9. Life must be faced with a certain amount of realism.
10. Contribute your time, effort, and ability to stave off the course of madness.
11. Throw elaborate parties with punch named after yourself.
12. Fight bureaucracy with sheer will, perseverance, and hard politicking.
13. Get the most material to the most people.
14. There is nothing, nothing, nothing that can ever substitute for personal observation and creative thinking.
15. Sway the fools, and get the right thing done without offending the fools.
16. Call it collecting, not hoarding.
17. The stuff you hang on to for all these years will turn out to be of value to somebody.
18. Be future oriented.
19. Take the time to sit awhile.

I've thought a lot about what Ruth would think about all this: a book about her life, written by another librarian after she died. Surely she would be pleased that she had crafted her life stories so well that a younger person, me, would be mesmerized by their epic nature. She might be horrified, on the other hand, that an obsessive researcher would diligently uncover every scrap of paper left behind that had anything on it even tangentially related to her. I'd like to think that even though Ruth was a masterful storyteller who sometimes told white lies, there were also times in her life when she told uncomfortable truths that no one wants to hear, even today. I hope she would be happy to know that her epic life is now immortalized in its own book. And I hope that this book will find a place on a shelf next to others that have changed so many lives. That includes yours.