

Ernestine Rose was an abolitionist, feminist and atheist who gave many speeches about her beliefs and is even hailed as “Queen of the Platform” by many. As a polish immigrant and an atheist she faced plenty of controversy yet still pioneered the idea of equal rights for all, regardless of class, religion, race, sex, skin color, or birthplace. Her oratory skills were influential to the Women’s Rights Movement.

On January 13, 1810, Ernestine Louise Potowska was born in Piotrków Trybunalski, Duchy of Warsaw. Rabbi Potowski, her father, made the unusual choice to teach her to read Hebrew and study the Torah, even though that’s traditionally forbidden for Jewish girls. At a young age Ernestine started questioning religion, but her father told her “A young girl does not want to understand the object of her creed, but to accept and believe it.” which she considers her turning point towards becoming a feminist.

At age 15 Ernestine’s mother, a daughter of a wealthy businessman, passed away and left her daughter all her money. Soon after, her father betrothed her without consent to a Jewish friend of his, promising him he would receive his daughter’s inheritance even if she did not marry him. Ernestine was rightfully furious when she found out, so she hired a sled and traveled sixty miles to the secular civil court to fight her case, a highly unusual move. The courts ruled in her favor and freed her from her betrothal, allowing her to obtain her full inheritance. But when Ernestine Potowski returned home she found in horror that her father had remarried to a sixteen year old girl. Deciding that she could no longer live with her father, she left for Berlin and put a name to her feelings about religion; atheism.

After two years in Berlin she moved to Paris and witnessed the 1830 french revolution. Inspired, she moved to London, England and met

Robert Owen, a radical and a fellow human's rights activist. Owen, recognizing Ernestine's intelligence, invited her to speak in a large hall for radical speakers. The audience was so impressed with her speaking skills that her appearances soon became regular.

During one of her speaking engagements Ernestine met William Ella Rose, a silversmith who supported worker's liberation, women's equality and free thought. The two fell in love and got married by hiring a notary to witness them sign a contract they wrote in 1836 so Ernestine didn't face as many legal disadvantages. The Roses moved to New York City not long after their marriage and Ernestine Rose continued speaking publicly there.

Her outsider view as an immigrant to the US was valued by audiences, and Ernestine was the only woman who spoke publicly about the free thought movement. She attended many conferences and conventions about Women's rights and atheism and gave rousing speeches at many of them. "The Queen of the Platform" was even elected president of the National Women's Rights Convention of October, 1854, despite objections about her atheism.

Ernestine continued speaking and writing her thoughts when she and William moved back to England a few years after the civil war since Women's rights advocates were sharply divided over the question of race. Rose died ten years after her husband, on August fourth, 1892, at the age of 82 in Brighton, England. Unfortunately, she was written out of history due to being an immigrant, atheist and woman, and was forgotten by many.

Ernestine's speeches were influential to the Women's Rights Movement and her many rousing speeches helped inspire so many people. She was a true pioneer to both the Free Thought Movement and the Women's Rights Movement. Rose's oratory skills and confidence in her beliefs were really impressive for a woman of her time.