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At Home With Karl Marx

By Simon Sebag Montefiore

LOVE AND CAPITAL: Karl and Jenny Marx and the Birth of a Revolution

By Mary Gabriel

Illustrated. 707 pp. Little, Brown & Company. \$35.

"I first encountered the Marx family story in the back of a London magazine," Mary Gabriel writes in the opening line of her intimate account of Karl Marx and his family. It is not a reassuring start for the reader, particularly when the publisher promises a book that uncovers "the unyielding love that bound together a man and woman in the midst of history's whirlwind." Gabriel should try to have whoever came up with that one fired.

The history of Marx the man, father, husband and journalist is dramatic enough to require no overwriting, and indeed "Love and Capital" is a huge, often gripping book. It gives an entertaining and balanced portrait of Marx, Engels, their colorful milieu of exiles, freaks and revolutionaries, and the little-known Marx family, dominated by Karl's political obsession. It also details illicit love affairs, the deaths of children and financial struggles, all based on vast research and narrated with empathetic passion. At the same time, it is too long by 200 pages and often undermined by flagrantly purple throbings, minor mistakes and portentous overegging.

In the prologue we learn that London "signaled like a beacon in the black and roiling North Sea waters"; for us English pedants, the city stands on the Thames. One sentence ploddingly reads: "In rooms throughout England, men of vision were similarly hard at work." Marx is described as "a man-child," whose mind is "as hard and brilliant as a diamond." Emperor Napoleon III, a shrewd politician whose career may have ended in disaster but who managed to dominate France and to some extent Europe for 20 years, is said by Gabriel to have had "the placid face of a dimwit."

Gabriel, the author of a biography of Victoria Woodhull, argues that Marx's private life is especially relevant now, because in 2008 "as I moved from research to writing, belief in the infallibility" of capitalism "began to waver," making Marx's analysis seem "more prescient and compelling." But this is surely an argument for a new work on Marxism, not on his private life. No one should disagree with Plutarch's view that personality matters in history, but Gabriel writes in her introduction that without the women in Marx's life, "there would have been no Karl Marx, and without Karl Marx the world would not be as we know it." Is that really true? Did the Dickensian facts of Marx's family life, no matter how delicious, change the world?

In fact, "Love and Capital" is enjoyable not so much because of any brisk analysis of Marxist theory that it provides or its endless catalog of political feuding, but because of the details of family life and family politics that Gabriel offers up — her vivid portrait of a struggling, obsessional bohemian intellectual in the capitals of mid-19th-century Europe.

Gabriel's heroine is certainly Marx's wife, a beautiful aristocrat. As the author puts it: "Jenny von Westphalen was the most desirable young woman in Trier," so well connected that her brother later became Prussian interior minister even while Marx was planning the downfall of the reactionary kingdoms of Europe.

Jenny remains her own person as she copes with the mountainous selfishness and self-regard of her husband. When they have sex before they actually marry, she writes to him: "I can feel no regret. When I shut my eyes very tightly, I can see your blessed smiling eyes. . . . Oh Karl . . . I am happy and overjoyed. . . . Each happy hour I lived through again." Marx may have been brooding, wild, intolerant and implacable in his political feuds, treating enemies with contempt, but as Gabriel describes him, he also loved dancing, luxury and gossip, and was attractive to women and men alike. Even when he was immersed in the interminable arcane economics of Marxism, he managed to maintain a quality of wisdom and modernity: he wisely commented that "children must bring up their parents," and he valued Christianity — that opium of the people — because it taught adults to love children.

Jenny always supported him: "Do not suppose that I am bowed down by these petty sufferings. . . . I am among the happiest and most favored few in that my beloved husband, the mainstay of my life, is still at my side." And so we follow the couple from Cologne to Paris to Brussels, back and forth until they find their final home in the attics of London and then immortal rest in Highgate Cemetery.

The marriage may have been happy and passionate, but it was cursed by the tragedies of infant mortality, financial despair and Marx's infidelities. One of them was nonsexual: it was with Marx's intellectual partner, the wealthy, irrepressibly promiscuous bon viveur, Friedrich Engels, who paid Marx a salary from the profits of his capitalist factories. Here is one of Gabriel's typical descriptions: "His clear blue eyes sparkled at the prospect of adventure — whether it be revolutionary or, perhaps even better, sexual." There is a priceless moment reminiscent of the recent Dominique Strauss-Kahn episode, when a fellow leftist, Moses Hess, accuses the womanizer Engels of raping his mistress, Sibylle: "If, by the by, the jackass should persist in his preposterous lie about rape, I can provide him with enough . . . details to send him reeling," Engels said. "Her rage with me is unrequited love."

Between Marx's lovers and his work, Jenny's life was never easy: "While she pleaded with his family for assistance," Gabriel writes, "he was having sex with Lenchen on Dean Street." (At exactly the same time? How does she know where?) Lenchen was the family's companion and housekeeper, Helene Demuth, with whom Marx fathered a child. Or as the author explains unnecessarily: "It isn't known

whether this was the first or the last time the two had intercourse.” Why this either-or? Surely it may have been the second or the 20th time — and, at the risk of challenging Gabriel’s eerily omniscient sexual-Marxist research, things worth doing once are often worth doing again. Either way, Lenchen gave birth to a son, Freddy. Engels pretended to be the father of the boy, who became one of the secrets of Marx’s biography: Stalin himself ordered it buried in the archives.

Gabriel’s story becomes heartbreaking with the deaths of four of the Marx children: when Franzisca, age 1, died, they lacked the money to buy a coffin. “Our three living children lay down by us, and we all wept for the little angel whose livid, lifeless body was in the next room,” Jenny wrote. When a son, Musch, died, Marx shouted, “You cannot give me back my boy,” and he told Engels, “I’ve already had my share of bad luck, but only now do I know what real unhappiness is. I feel -broken down.” His only consolation? “The hope that there is still something sensible for us to do together in the world.”

When Jenny died in 1881 and Karl in 1883, their surviving children, Tussy and Laura, and the men in their lives, became the leaders of the movement, especially after Engels left them a significant portion of his \$4.8 million estate. But it’s hard not to feel that somehow Karl’s obsessive mission destroyed those who came after: both daughters committed suicide, Tussy in 1897, driven to it by a callous partner; Laura in 1911, in a death pact with her -husband.

There is a key moment in 1910 when a Russian couple bicycle over to visit Laura when she is living in France. They are Lenin and his wife, Krupskaya, who mused, “Here I am with Marx’s daughter!” Yet the only one of the Marxes still alive to see Lenin and his Marxist Bolsheviks seize Russia was Karl’s secret illegitimate son, Freddy.

Simon Sebag Montefiore is the author of several books, including “Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar” and “Jerusalem: The Biography,” which will be published in the United States next month.