“Sticking to the Union is a vivid example of history ‘from the bottom up.’ With admirable sensitivity and skill, Sandy Polishuk allows Julia Ruuttila to share her remarkable story of struggle and resilience, triumph and tragedy, spanning more than eight decades. The result is an intriguing dialogue between memory and history.”

—Bruce Nelson, author of Workers on the Waterfront

“Sandy Polishuk deftly explores the challenges of history and memory in this fascinating oral history biography of Julia Ruuttila: consummate union, civil rights, and peace activist of the Pacific Northwest. Although haunted by failed relationships, poverty, McCarthyite persecution, and a frustrated writing career, Ruuttila embraced every waking moment of her eighty-four years to struggle for social and economic justice. The story of this extraordinary woman should inspire a new generation of activists.”

—Laurie Mercier, author of Anaconda: Labor, Community, and Culture in Montana’s Smelter City and Associate Professor of History, Washington State University, Vancouver.

“Sandy Polishuk offers two gifts: the biography of a fierce local activist whose life bears witness to the fact that ordinary people can effect social justice, and a scholar’s journey into the complicated workings of memory. Sticking to the Union is a fabulous oral history, Julia Ruuttila a compelling subject, and Sandy Polishuk, a thoughtful scholar who allows Ruuttila’s voice to drive the narrative, but who also probes the intersections of ego and memory to present the many truths of Ruuttila’s life story.”

—Mary Murphy, History Department, Montana State University
Palgrave Studies in Oral History

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by Sandy Polishuk, foreword by Amy Kesselman

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STICKING TO THE UNION
STICKING TO THE UNION

An Oral History of the Life and Times of Julia Ruuttila

Sandy Polishuk
For
Julia
and for Shane
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Oral history, it is often said, allows people to speak for themselves. By putting their experiences into words, so the argument goes, narrators are able to give account of their lives in ways that they choose. In large measure this is true, as Sandy Polishuk’s oral biography of labor journalist Julia Ruuttila ably demonstrates. In a series of interviews conducted by Polishuk in the 1980s and early 1990s, Ruuttila recounted a lifetime of activism in the Pacific Northwest, one that embraced many of the major social movements of the twentieth century, from labor organizing by the Industrial Workers of the World in the early years to a broad-based environmentalism at century’s end. High points of the narrative include Ruuttila’s participation in organizing the International Woodworkers of America in Oregon during the 1930s and her work within unions’ women’s auxiliaries to advance progressive labor goals.

Underneath the specifics of her story, Ruuttila presents herself as driven by a passion for justice, growing toward a broadly nonsectarian left politics, and uninterested in passing on the details of her personal life. Like many oral history narrators, she is the hero of her own story. Mostly, Polishuk allows Ruuttila to represent herself as she wished; Sticking to the Union is an authentic first-person account. But Polishuk also understands that oral history narratives don’t entirely speak for themselves, or more accurately, to be broadly accessible, they need the active intervention of an editor. So she has considerably edited the transcripts of Ruuttila’s interviews for coherence and flow, has provided important background information to establish context for Ruuttila’s stories, and, most importantly, has assessed Ruuttila’s account against the extant documentary record. This last point deserves a bit of comment.

Since the publication of Alessandro Portelli’s seminal essay “The Death of Luigi Trastulli: Memory and the Event,” historians have generally accepted this work’s central argument that what is factually inaccurate in an interview may nonetheless offer significant psychological truth. This is an important insight, but, contrary to Portelli’s own example, one that has led historians to sometimes rather naively assume that what a narrator says can be taken at face value and
that it does not need to be read against other available sources, both written and oral. Polishuk does not make this mistake. Talking with Ruuttila’s brother, she learned that her subject might have misrepresented elements of her personal history; checking this against the written record, Polishuk determined that this was indeed the case. Reading other accounts of public events about which Ruuttila spoke, Polishuk found that Ruuttila tended to overdramatize her own role. In all cases she handles these discrepancies in a manner that is respectful of both Ruuttila and the reader, scrupulously pointing them out and explaining them as best she can, while not muting Ruuttila’s own strong voice. In the end, Polishuk and Ruuttila demonstrate what is perhaps the most accurate of the truisms about oral history: that it is a fundamentally interpretive exercise.

Thus Sticking to the Union both contributes to our knowledge of twentieth-century social movements and demonstrates self-consciousness about the method of oral history. We are pleased to include it in Palgrave’s Studies in Oral History series, designed to bring oral history interviews out of the archives and into the hands of students, educators, scholars, and the reading public. Volumes in the series are deeply grounded in interviews and present them in ways that enable readers to appreciate more fully their historical significance and cultural meaning. The series also includes work that approaches oral history more theoretically, as a point of departure for an exploration of broad questions of cultural representation and production.

Linda Shopes
Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission

Bruce M. Stave
University of Connecticut
In 1966 a photograph in the local paper of Julia Ruuttila, age fifty-nine, being dragged along the street by police at an anti–Vietnam War demonstration piqued the interest of Sandy Polishuk, a young woman activist in Portland, Oregon. Polishuk's fascination deepened as she observed Ruuttila's leadership in the predominantly young, male-dominated left in the Portland community and learned more about Julia's history as a labor activist, journalist, and writer. The years Polishuk spent interviewing Ruuttila and researching her life have produced a rare glimpse into the life and consciousness of a woman whose activism encompassed a half century and benefited a wide variety of progressive social movements.

The collaboration between these two women was the interaction between two different generations of political activists, as Polishuk's feminist interest in the politics of personal life collided with Ruuttila's steadfast insistence that only her public life counted. Blanche Cook has pointed out that, to the generation that came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, “It has become clear that in history, no less than in life, our personal choices and the nature of our human relationships were and remain inseparable from our political, our public efforts.” Ruuttila didn’t see it that way. Her generation of activists saw only the public arena as the terrain of political struggle. Like other women activists of the 1930s and ‘40s, her struggle to be taken seriously in a male-dominated union movement led her to regard her personal life as at best irrelevant and at times an impediment to her political work. She often responded evasively and sometimes with irritation to Polishuk's probing about her relationships with men and with her son and her personal struggle to survive. Polishuk worked hard to make sense of the omissions and occasional disingenuousness in Ruuttila's stories, but we are still left with many questions about Ruuttila's private life.

In some important ways, however, Julia Ruuttila's political consciousness traversed generations. Because Ruuttila's activism spans such a long period of time, we can trace both the ways the ideas of later periods echoed those of earlier ones and the ways new ideas interacted with old ones to shape her perspective. The
critique of craft unionism she inherited from her father’s Wobbly politics, for example, made Ruuttila an easy convert to industrial unionism in the 1930s. She abandoned the Wobbly disdain for voting, however, to use electoral politics as a tool for mobilizing the power of working people. Her Wobbly roots made her feel less comfortable with what she called the “super-duper” discipline of the Communist Party than with the direct action and anti-authoritarianism of the radical movements of the 1960s. Like other radicals in the union movement, Ruuttila’s activism was affected by the Cold War and the McCarthy era. But despite occasional nostalgia for the “good old days,” Ruuttila remained active and remarkably open to various forms of protest. Perhaps because she never belonged to either the Communist or Socialist Parties and was used to functioning independently, she didn’t seem to lose her moorings as much as many other “old left” political activists did during the 1950s and 60s. While some veterans of the old left were alienated by the lack of organizational coherence and the countercultural elements of radicalism in the late 1960s, Ruuttila was intrigued and supportive.

The typewriter was Julia Ruuttila’s weapon of choice in what she saw as the war between labor and capital. She used it to write letters to the editor, to compose leaflets and petitions, and to tell labor’s side of the story in various labor newsletters and radical newspapers. Like the better-known woman journalists of the 1930s and 1940s studied by Paula Rabinowitz and Charlotte Nekola, Ruuttila used columns and news stories in left and labor publications to move beyond the limited scope traditionally allotted to women journalists. While Ruuttila was not part of the left literary world, centered primarily on the East Coast, her articles clearly reflected Tess Slesinger’s definition of the progressive writer’s task as the job of seeing the mess in which the plain people had been trapped, of interpreting it for them, of reflecting their own image so clearly and correctly that the plain people themselves would feel a part of life with a voice and a weapon and an ally and cease to think of themselves as helpless victims and alone.

Ruuttila’s typewriter, her companion until her death, was also a tool in her efforts to earn a living and, to the disapproval of some of her comrades in the movement, a means of self-expression that revealed her feelings about her life and the struggles in which she participated. She wrote countless poems and stories based on her experiences and worked sporadically on the “great proletarian novel.”

Ruuttila describes the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) as her first love and women’s auxiliaries as her religion. Barred from becoming a worker in the lumber industry by policies that discriminated against women, she devoted herself to building union auxiliaries. In addition to the auxiliary to the
IWA, she was active in the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union auxiliaries in Astoria and Portland, Oregon. Her memories bring to life the activities of the auxiliaries she participated in and illustrate their significance. As several historians have demonstrated, these organizations of workers’ wives in predominantly male industries played a crucial but underexamined role in the labor movement in the first half of the twentieth century. Most visible when they were providing critical support during strikes, lockouts, and sit-ins, auxiliaries made important contributions to their unions by building community, providing for material needs, sustaining morale, educating members about the importance of the union, and expanding the concerns of the union beyond the shop floor.5

Ruuttila understood clearly how crucial the women’s auxiliary was during the lockout of the IWA in 1937 and was proud of the resourcefulness and courage of auxiliary members. Whether they were sitting in at the local hospital to force doctors to fit workers’ wives for diaphragms, marching around the courthouse to get the county to grant welfare benefits to woodworkers’ families, or throwing a huge party when morale sagged, auxiliary members enabled the workers to hold out for eight and a half months and created an important source of support for each other. Ruuttila’s proud descriptions of auxiliary activities demonstrate that, as Ruth Milkman has pointed out, “women’s labor activism, much more than men’s, extended outside of the workplace and into the larger community.”6 Ruuttila’s stories also illustrate the ways that auxiliaries were sometimes pushed beyond the traditional service role by the presence of a few women radical members.7 In her discussion of the short-lived auxiliary of the Minneapolis Teamsters’ union, Marjorie Lasky speculates that auxiliaries that lasted longer might generate “a working-class ‘women’s culture,’ conducive to nurturing women’s independence.”8 The Woodworkers’ auxiliary that emerges from Ruuttila’s descriptions supports Lasky’s speculation. For the wives of woodworkers, the auxiliary was a haven; it nurtured their courage, enhanced their self confidence, and cemented ties among its members.

As Polishuk points out, Ruuttila’s memories are crafted stories, shaped not only by her experience but by the image she wanted to project. Sometimes differing sharply from the written record and memories of others, Ruuttila’s stories are interpretations of her life. The oral history emerges as a self-portrait—one that communicates Ruuttila’s view of herself and her relation to the world. Two salient features of this self-portrait were Ruuttila’s political and intellectual independence and her unflagging commitment to activism. Ruuttila presents herself as working with a wide variety of participants in the American left and fiercely resisting red baiting. She defined herself as an independent communist
and refused to adhere to the orthodoxies of the Communist Party, which she saw as autocratic and humorless, even while married to a party member. From organizing to free Ray Becker, an imprisoned member of the Industrial Workers of the World, to protesting against the Gulf War, or staging a sleep-in to protest rate increases by the local electric company, Ruuttila’s commitment to political activism lasted her lifetime, and she achieved her desire to die “as she lived—shouting the system down.”

Amy Kesselman
February 2003
Without Julia Ruuttila and her generous gifts of time, memory, and attention, this book would not have been possible. My debt to her is unmeasurable, as is my regret that she did not live to see the completion of our project.

The cooperation and tolerance of Julia’s family has been critical to this project. I am continually grateful to Shane Ruuttila for opening his home and his life to me, for his frankness and dedication to telling the truth—even when the material was painful or embarrassing—and his patience with my continuing requests and questions. Also to his wife, Betty Rose, and his sons, Jason and Ryan, for their kindness and generosity.

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My thanks to everyone who agreed to be interviewed. Though space considerations allowed me to use very few quotes from these interviews, the insight I gained into Julia and her causes was essential. A full list of interviewees appears in the sources section at the end of the book.

When a project continues for years, as this one did, the debts incurred are many. I am grateful to innumerable people, organizations, and institutions, including the following:

My friends and family who stood by me through the difficult birth of this project, who maintained their faith that I would finish after years of evidence indicating the contrary. Forgive me for not naming you all here, but the list has grown far too long.

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Shane Ruuttila, John R. Godman, and Dorreen Labby Carey for the use of photographs. Barbara Gundle for a photo shoot with Julia before her departure for Alaska.

Valerie Taylor and Miriam Kolkin Kelber for the loan of correspondence with Julia.

Librarians and archivists at many libraries and archives, including the Multnomah County Library, Portland State University, Reed College, Lewis & Clark College, University of Oregon Special Collections, University of Washington Libraries, Tamiment Library (New York University), Oregon State Archives, Multnomah County Records Department, Portland City Archives, and the Oregon State Bar. Also to the IWA (now the Woodworkers Division of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers) and Local 8 of the ILWU for access to their archives. Also the volunteers at the Family History Libraries, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in Portland. My special thanks to the staff at the Oregon Historical Society Library for their help over the years, especially to Susan Seyl, director of the Image Collection, and her staff, for assistance beyond the call of duty.

Amy Kesselman has been a supporter, reader, friend, and resource for me from the beginning. I thank her for her encouragement and faith in me and the material.
In the changing world of publishing, I feel especially lucky to have had competent, dedicated, and enthusiastic editors. My thanks to Bruce Stave and Linda Shopes for choosing my manuscript for the oral history series; to Deborah Gershenowitz, the history editor at Palgrave early in our process, for her tactful and skillful editing; and to Brendan O’Malley, my ultimate editor at Palgrave, for taking on the project. He and the production editor Erin Ivy shepherded me through the minutiae of publication with patience and kindness. I am especially grateful to Linda Shopes for her constant support, her unfailing confidence in me, her affection for Julia, and her ready words of encouragement throughout the long and sometimes difficult process of transforming my manuscript into a book.
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ABBREVIATIONS IN TEXT

ADC Aid to Dependent Children
AFL American Federation of Labor
AFSCME American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees
ASSK Astoria Finnish Socialist Club (Astorian Suomalainen Sosialisti Klubi)
CIA Central Intelligence Agency
CIO Committee for Industrial Organization, later Congress of Industrial Organizations
CLRC Coast Labor Relations Committee
CP Communist Party
CRDC Columbia River District Council
EEOC Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
FBI Federal Bureau of Investigation
FOIPA Freedom of Information/Privacy Acts
FRBC Free Ray Becker Committee
HUAC House Committee on Un-American Activities, popularly called the House Un-American Activities Committee
ILWU International Warehouse and Longshore Union
INS Immigration and Naturalization Service
IWA International Woodworkers of America
IWW Industrial Workers of the World
NAACP National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NIRA National Industrial Recovery Act
NLB National Labor Board
NLRB National Labor Relations Board
NWHP Northwest Women’s History Project
PP&L Pacific Power & Light Company
SNAP Society for New Action Politics
UMW United Mine Workers
WAA Workers Alliance of America
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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Cover photography by Alex Jessen, Oregon Historical Society OrHi 85712.
2. John Burwell Godman, Julia’s father, courtesy John R. Godman, p. 16.
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7. Harry Bridges (left) and Matt Meehan, Oregon Journal Collection, photo by Les T. Ordeman, Oregon Historical Society OrHi 85714, p. 166.
8. Julia taking notes for an article as longshoremen gather for the ILWU Bloody Thursday march commemorating the violence of the 1934 strike, Portland, 1972, Oregon Historical Society OrHi 86141, p. 194.
12. Ruuttila family photo (from left) Shane, Julia, Ryan, Betty, Jason, courtesy Shane Ruuttila, p. 228.
13. Julia at 80, just before moving to Anchorage, photo by Barbara Gundle, p. 230.
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Oh, you can’t scare me,
I’m sticking to the union.
I’m sticking to the union till the day I die. ©

“Union Maid”
Words and music by Woody Guthrie