## A Course on Jewish Women Writers

# A READER

Course by:
Urszula (Ula) Chowaniec
0790585062
urszula.chowaniec@paideiafolkhogskola.se

**Course:**
**https://jewishwomenswriting.weebly.com/#**

### What is it about?

This course aims at presenting and discussing the works of extraordinary Jewish writers, thinkers, philosophers and activists. Among authors the course wishes to engage with are: Kadia Molodowski, Khana Levin, Anna Margolin, Debora Vogel, Rachel, Leah Goldberg, Zelda, Else Lasker Schuler, Agi Mishol, Irena Klepfisz, Adrienne Rich, as well as Irit Amiel, Rukhl Fishman and others.

They are writers active both before and after WWII and from Europe, Israel and America as well as writing originally in Yiddish, Hebrew or English, or other languages (like Russian and Polish).

**Language(s):** All classes will be held in English and the reading will be preliminary in English and (if available) in Swedish (as well as in the original language).

**Aims:**
Among the aims of the course is to learn about Jewish women's literary heritage and to enjoy discussion about literature in various contexts, so apart from taking a role of the literary critics and informed readers, who will often use the feminist perspective, we will - at times - need to be historians, trying to understand ideological contexts of the works, at times – we will be the religious scholars, seeking the doctrinal contexts of the texts, or - at times - political commentators, using also the thought of philosophers like Hannah Arendt or Susan Sontag.

Among the main key concepts that are relevant to all the sessions are: women's history and Jewish history (herstories), the Jewish women's voices in the 20th-century literature, women's Jewish literature from various part of the world, the intertwinement of politics and private life, happiness and struggle through songs, poetry, short stories, novels and intellectual debates.

**Ultimately,** the main aims of the course are:

- to present selected women writers with background of historical contexts, intellectual milieu, personal circumstance and the most contemporary receptions;
- to enjoy literary discussion;
- and to analyse the works from the present perspective and to evaluate its relevance to the contemporary readers.

**Teacher:**
Urszula (Ula) Chowaniec, Ph.D. is a professor (dr hab.) at the Andrzej Frycz-Modrzewski Cracow Academy in Poland and the Research Fellow at University College London. An Amos Oz Fellow at Paideia (2019-2020). She is an author of a monograph *Melancholic Migrating Bodies in Contemporary Women's Writing* (2015) and In *Search for a Woman: Early Novels of Irena Krzywicka*, Kraków 2007. She also edited and contributed to *Women's Voices and Feminism in Polish Cultural Memory* (2012), *Mapping Experience on Polish and Russian Women's Writing* (2010), *Masquerade and Femininity. Essays on Polish and Russian Women Writers* (2008).
She teaches among other course: Cotemporary Polish Women's Writing; Gender and Body Politics in Literature and Film (Eastern-European Perspectives); Eastern Europe Through the Literary Nobel Prize Winners. She lives in Stockholm. An academic site of Ula Chowaniec: https://cudzoziemki.weebly.com

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# INTRODUCTION: **Women's History and Heritage. Searching for Continuity.**

## 1. QUEER EXPECTATIONS. A GENEALOGY OF JEWISH WOMEN'S POETRY by ZOHAR WEIMAN-KELMAN (SUNY, State University of New York Press, 2018). Introduction: xxi – xxiv.

This project began in West Jerusalem, when my love of Hebrew women's poetry became my official subject of study at Hebrew University. It was as part of that all-Hebrew and overwhelmingly male curriculum that I was exposed to Yiddish women's poetry as well. In Imahot meyasdot, aḥayot ḥorgot (Founding Mothers, Stepsisters) (1991), one of the first books on Hebrew women's poetry, Dan Miron rejects the idea that Hebrew poetry was inhospitable to women's writing, citing the glorious past of Yiddish women writing at the same time.20 While my political education taught me better than to take the success of one part of a minority as a refutation of the struggles of others from that same minority (in this case, Jewish women), I was stunned by what this comparison revealed: that women wrote poetry in Yiddish. My Israeli education taught me next to nothing of modern Yiddish literature, and I had certainly never heard of women writing modernist poetry in Yiddish. This erasure was not accidental; rather, it was very much tied to the association of Yiddish with women (as mama loshn/ mother-tongue, not as literary tongue) and with the Diaspora/goles (to be negated). What I encountered in my studies was not only Yiddish as a language of Jewish diaspora, but also a different, Diasporic Hebrew. Through nineteenth-century Hebrew literature I realized how deeply anchored the language had been in Diasporic life and literature, long before it was naturalized and nationalized. The fact that Hebrew was also being written by Jews outside of Europe was not part of the curriculum in Israel, nor was Jewish creation in Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, or any non-European vernacular. Still, my two discoveries, of Hebrew as a language of Jewish diaspora and of Yiddish as a language of modern Jewish culture, both deeply unsettled how I understood the history that led to the present I was living in, a present I was struggling with. It was 2001, a moment of extreme violence in Israel/Palestine, and especially in Jerusalem. This is not the place to recount how quickly everything deteriorated over those first years of the Second Intifada, or to trace my own process of disillusionment. Rather, I want to high- light how in those rather desperate times, discovering a new Jewish history was the one thing that gave me hope, by proving to me that the reality I lived in was but one option the past had held

for the Jewish future. Today, when Yiddish can no longer be considered a competitor for the Jewish language, and Hebrew reigns as the language of Jewish nationhood, I choose to go back to moments when neither of these realities had come to be. I connect to all those possibilities past and recognize the existence of new possibilities for my present, and even for my still unforeseen future.

When Bat-Miriam began writing in the 1920s, the future, which is our present, was anything but expected. The interwar period was a time of past potentiality for the future in/of Jewish literature, culture and life, for men and women alike. At the time both Hebrew, the language Bat-Miriam adopted, and Yiddish, her mother tongue, were still nascent modern secular literary vehicles, emerging from a long past of largely religious textual orientation; these years of Jewish history were rich with possibility. Linguistically and culturally, Jewish writers could choose between Jewish languages such as Yiddish, Hebrew, or Ladino, and local languages such as Polish, Russian, Arabic, or English, and even had the ability to inhabit multiple positions at once, or move fluidly among them.21 No writer could anticipate the effect of her linguistic choices in relation to how Jewish literary history would evolve, yet these choices proved critical for the lives of writers and for the course of Jewish literary history. As Dan Miron writes, the choice of language had momentous implications, "for the choice of language amounted to a choice of a cultural Jewish future."22 But the choice of a future was deeply embedded in the choice of a past as well, as Miron suggests: "In nothing did the new literatures convey their sense of troubled awareness of their newness more than in this need to choose and justify the selection, its choice of a past or pasts."23

As much as men and women shared uncertainty about the future, the available pasts to choose from were significantly different for women.24 Most significantly, women were largely denied access to the sacred tongue, Hebrew, and to religious textual heritage in that language.25 The religious past of Jewish letters meant there was hardly a long or continuous tradition of women writing in Jewish languages. Moreover, because women had limited access to the religious texts, they were also less likely to produce modern literature. While Jewish men could repurpose the Hebrew of the Bible and the Talmud to create a new secular literature, women came to writing Hebrew and Yiddish without the cultural and linguistic inheritance that traditional male education afforded.26 Even outside the realm of Jewish tradition, women had to contend with a historical disadvantage, for they were writing without an acknowledged tradition of women writing before them, a predicament feminist literary criticism names as one of the fundamental challenges for women's writing.27 In terms of "women's history," the problem was first the fact that it was less likely for women to come to writing, and even when

they did, their texts were less likely to be saved, circulated, and passed down. The force of these dynamics left women outside of history and without access to history. Indeed, the "newness" Miron invokes as conditioning the turn to the past was particularly acute for women, for without a past, what could women's writing-future be?

While Jewish women were recognized as readers of Yiddish literature, they were not meant to be producing it.28 Their access to Hebrew was even more limited; the few who were taught Hebrew being the exception rather than the rule, an exception very much dependent on the disposition of unique fathers rather than the product of a cultural norm.29 Jewish women thus faced not only a lack of access to the production of a textual past and a lack of access to women's history, but also a one-track future that would perpetuate their present marginalization. Therefore, for women, to choose a "cultural Jewish future" depended not only on challenging past and present norms but entailed a struggle against a particular form of future, by gaining access to a past. Looking backward worked simultaneously against women's past erasure and against their future imperative of reproduction.

Despite or possibly due to Jewish women's historical disadvantage, they were deemed an essential part of the Jewish future, as agents of reproduction producing future Jewish (male) scholars (and later, Jewish soldiers).30 Whereas men metaphorically birthed texts, Jewish women were meant to be birthing babies, not writing. Discussing these conditions, I do not mean to evoke an essentialized notion of "womanhood" as stable and unchanging across history. On the contrary, I think of gender, through Judith Butler, as an "identity tenuously constituted in time,"31 and argue that in order to understand women's history (and lack thereof), we must account for the way gender is socially constructed in any given time, and what role that allowed women in society, and consequently in history. Women's childbearing capacities have been perhaps the most deciding factor in women's social positioning, linking them to the (re)production of the future, while limiting their role in the present. It is my contention throughout this book that Jewish women writers have had to undo the imperative of reproduction, as well as the normative history structured by that imperative, in order to become writers.

This undoing demands not only reclaiming and inventing histories, but also generating alternative modes of queer history and temporality alike. If "the modern sense of linear temporality with the celebrated logocentrism of Western thought" assumes "that history is a chronological development through linear time," 32 it also uses the present outcome to justify this development, "selecting past material so as to identify a tradition leading to the present."33 This, according to Jewish historian David Myers, is historicism's success, and has come to

dominate our way of thinking about the past as a justification of our present. 34 The manner in which we have been conditioned to place the single event in context and then link it to a chain of other contextually bound events thus constructs historical narratives that appear to be both natural and inevitable, thereby erasing the very act of construction. Queer theory, on the other hand, is invested in exposing the act of construction of the very ideas of "natural" and "inevitable," from the individual level of gender (questioning the very category of "woman"), all the way through to society at large, including our understanding of history, and of time itself. Bringing together gender and temporality, queer histories undermine the heteronormative dictates structuring time as consecutive, progressive, and reproductive teleology.

Jewish lesbian literature serves as a leading model for this mode of intervention: when the radical lesbian movement emerged in the 1970s, it had to (re)create a lesbian history, for there were very few forerunners to be found. At the same time, this movement rejected heteronormative reproduction (or at least demanded alternatives modes of reproduction). Unable or unwilling to be measured by the sons they produced (or did not produce), the Jewish lesbian poets of the 1970s challenged the role relegated to them by finding their hemshekh, their continuity, not in the children to come, but through the women who came before them. As a result, this literature constructed continuity by producing a past rather than a future, offering a model of queer history. Indeed, this ties together my approach to women's writing and to Yiddish writing as bound by the challenges of history, for reaching the history of Yiddish, in my personal experience and in the experience of so many others, entailed overcoming our own historical disadvantage; it meant uncovering a history very much repressed by the Israeli literary establishment where I received my early training, and by the American Jewish establishment as well. It was a past that had to be forgotten,35 a past without a future. But even this lack of future has a past, connecting not just to the current state of Yiddish, but to the entire (short) history of modern Jewish literature, in relation to the language politics, policy, and poetics of Yiddish and Hebrew alike, for neither language represents uninterrupted continuity.

Notes:

21. See the chapter "Multilingualism" in Benjamin Harshav's The Polyphony
of Jewish Culture (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 23–40. For a reading of Jewish multilingualism through the lens of Jews in Palestine see Liora Halprin, Babel in Zion: Jews, Nationalism, and Language Diversity in Palestine, 1920–1948 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). On the case of Jews writing in Arabic see Ammiel Alcalay's After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Gil Hochberg, In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of Separatist Imagination (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Lital Levy, Poetic Trespass: Writing between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel and Palestine (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014). For a study of Ladino and Yiddish press see Sarah Abrevaya Stein, Making Jews Modern: The Yiddish and Ladino Press in the Russian and Ottoman Empires

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), and for a study of Sephardic poetry see Monique Balbuena, Homeless Tongues: Poetry and Languages of the Sephardic Diaspora (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).
22. Dan Miron, From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 38.
23. Ibid.,191.
24. Much important feminist work has been done to consider gender as a factor in Jewish history. See, for example, Paula Hyman, Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representations of Women (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), and Marion A. Kaplan and Deborah Dash Moore, Gender and Jewish History (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).
25. For an extensive account of Jewish women's education, see Iris Parush, Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2004).
26. Over the past twenty years there has been an emergence of critical works (and specifically anthologies) that have illuminated the history of women's writing in Hebrew and Yiddish. My own critical introduction was largely through Sokoloff, Lerner, and Norich, eds., Gender and Text. See also Parush, Reading Jewish Women; Judith R. Baskin, ed., Women of the Word: Jewish Women and Jewish Writing (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994); Carole Bailin, To Reveal Our Hearts: Jewish Women Writers in Tsarist Russia (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2000); Zierler, And Rachel Stole the Idols; Tova Cohen and Shmuel Feiner, Kol almah ivriyah: Kitvey nashim maskiliot bame'ah hat'sha'- esreh (Tel-Aviv: Hakibuts Hame'uḥ ad, 2006); and Tova Cohen, "Portrait of the 'Maskilah' as a Young Woman," Nashim 15 (2008): 9–29.
27. See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).
28. Recent research has revealed notable exceptions. See Chava Turniansky's work on Glikl of Hameln and on women in Old Yiddish literature and the work of Chava Weissler and Devra Kay on women's early modern prayer in Yiddish. Still, the existence of these texts did not necessarily offer women a continuous history to rely on, as they were not consistently preserved and transmitted.
29. For example, the case of Dvora Baron. See Sheila Jelen, Intimations of Difference: Dvora Baron in the Modern Hebrew Renaissance (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007).
30. If the Biblical imperative to "be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it" (Genesis 1:28) was originally directed at men and women alike, over time it ap- plied to, and impacted, men and women differently. For an historical discussion see the chapter "Be Fruitful and Multiply," in Ronit Irshai, Fertility and Jewish Law: Feminist Perspectives on Orthodox Responsa Literature, trans. Joel A. Linsider (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012), 25–52, as well as Rochelle L. Millen, Women, Birth, and Death in Jewish Law and Practice (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2004).
31. Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1999), 179.
32. Brook Thomas, The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 33.
33. Ibid.,41.
34. David Myers, Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German- Jewish Thought (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 5. Myers's model is linked to Eric Hobsbawm's "invented traditions," which "so far as possible, use history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion." "Introduction: Inventing Tradition," in The Invention of Tradition, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 12.
35. To echo the powerful title of Yael Chaver's book What Must Be Forgotten: The Survival of Yiddish in Zionist Palestine (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004).

## 2. RABBINIC LITERATURE AND WOMEN'S READING (JUDITH, A WIFE OF RABBI HIYYA CASE).

### A. Yevamot 65b

Search Sefaria

Yevamot 65b
*The William Davidson Talmud*

AX

- יהודה וחזקיה תאומים היו אחד נגמרה צורתו לסוף תשעה ואחד נגמרה צורתו לתחלת שבעה יהודית דביתהו דר' חייא הוה לה צער לידה שנאי מנא ואתיא לקמיה דר' חייא ואמרה אתתא מפקדא אפריה ורביה אמר לה לא אזלא אשתיא סמא דעקרתא

  The Gemara relates that Rabbi Ḥiyya's sons, **Yehuda and Ḥizkiyya, were twins,** but **one** of them **was fully developed after nine** months of pregnancy **and one was fully developed at the beginning of the seventh** month, and they were born two months apart. **Yehudit, the wife of Rabbi Ḥiyya, had** acute **birthing pain** from these unusual deliveries. She **changed her clothes** to prevent Rabbi Ḥiyya from recognizing her **and came before Rabbi Ḥiyya** to ask him a halakhic question. **She said: Is a woman commanded** to be **fruitful and multiply? He said to her: No. She went and drank an infertility potion.**

- לסוף איגלאי מילתא אמר לה איכו ילדת לי חדא כרסא אחריתא דאמר מר יהודה וחזקיה אחי פזי וטוי

  **Eventually the matter was revealed,** and Rabbi Ḥiyya found out about what Yehudit had done. **He said to her: If only you had given birth to one more belly for me,** i.e., another set of twins. **As the Master said: Yehuda and Ḥizkiyya** were twin **brothers** and became prominent Torah scholars, and **Pazi and Tavi,** Rabbi Ḥiyya's daughters,

Source: https://www.sefaria.org/Yevamot.65b.17?lang=bi

B. Ula Chowaniec: Tikkun by Judith, the Wife of R. Hiyya! Or: about (un)Desired Motherhood, Freedom(s) and Right for Individual Choice.

(Text is available on the course website:
https://cudzoziemki.weebly.com/jewish-womens-writing.html )
and also distributed in a separate handout

## 3. Dvora Baron “the first female to write in Modern Hebrew”, and looking for a reason why a goat should be a Symbol of Jewish Women’s Writing?

About Dvora Baron:
https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/baron-devorah

“We decided to meet at the photographer very early in the morning, an hour before the "grandfather" had to leave for Warsaw.
Not everyone showed up on time. Some, I don't remember who they were, were late and were left out. But we made a gentlemanly gesture toward the one "lady" in our midst and persuaded the photographer to photograph her separately and put her into the group photograph. We left a place reserved for that purpose. We did it out of love and care for our colleague, the writer Dvora Baron, who by then had already acquired a place of honor in our literature. By the way, she also had a lot of personal charm, and we all respected her for her knowledge, of religious sources as well” (Zrubavel, "With Mendele Moykher Sforim," in Leaves of Life [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Perets Press, 1960), 228-232. Reprinted in The Mendele Book [Yiddish], 427, and excerpted in Govrin, The First Half , 77).

FROM:

Seidman, Naomi. *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish.* Berkeley: University of California Press, c1997
1997. https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft7z09p171;brand=ucpress (p. 93-96)

# In the Beginning

On the beginning of the new rebbetzin's life in Zhuzhikovka, the locals say:

She, the rebbetzin, was brought here a few years ago from some distant city in Poland.

There, in that city, the Polish one, her parents had a house made of polished stone, which was built like a kind of palace, with balconies and columns, and it was tall—ten Polish cubits high. They also had a garden to stroll in beside their house, and among the trees of this garden were flower beds and fountains, in which water rose up and spurted on its own, like the waters that flowed from the rock Moses smote. Was it any wonder, then, that when the rebbetzin arrived in Zhuzhikovka and took one look at the ruin of the community house and its desolate yard, she stopped in front of the door and decided that she wasn't going in?

She did go into the house, though, later on. She took off her hat, revealing a golden wig, a tumble of curls—and entered.

But after that, at night, when the welcoming reception had come to an end and the guests had gone off to their own houses, she sank in her city clothes onto the naked bench in the community hall and cried bitterly, while he, her young husband in his silk caftan, his rabbinic sash wound around his hips, stood beside her—at a loss.

This whole story should begin differently, in a more appropriate version—and here it is:

When the new rabbi was about to arrive and ascend to the rabbinic seat, the community president ordered that the streets be swept and the synagogue whitewashed just as if it were Passover or the High Holy Days. And since the guest was due to arrive at the station on Friday afternoon, the shtetl folk changed their usual practice and made sure to heat the bathhouse on Thursday before sundown.

That night every stove and oven in every house was stoked. And the women cooked and baked and shampooed their children's hair and made sure to darn their tattered clothing, so that no shame would come upon the community as they waited at the station to greet the newcomer.

Early the next morning, just as the sun emerged from behind the synagogue roof, the entire community set out with its women and children, fanning out along the paths that led to the train station.

It certainly was a sight, this crowd of Jews in their colorful rags, threading their way across the wide fields at such an early hour. The farmer women, crouching over their vegetable beds, straightened up in amazement, shielding their eyes with their hands to stare long and hard after this motley crew.

When the crowd arrived at the village of Kaminka, not without some trepidation they skirted the pasture, where the dogs roamed as freely as the cattle. There was still a stubble field to cross after that, with the overgrown thorns scratching their legs, especially those who were barefoot.



But here, at last, appeared the station, a garish clapboard building with its windows sealed shut and its dusty copper basin by the entrance, the corroded dipper hanging from a chain over it. A bell rang, wheels clattered and roared, and two men, pillars of the community, came pushing through the crowd toward the rumbling train that had come to a halt, the new woolen sleeves glinting with strange innocence on their old Sabbath caftans—and they presented the young rabbi with his writ of appointment.

Yes, it's true, all those men had new sleeves sewn into their caftans, but these new sleeves only made the drabness of their threadbare outfits stand out more starkly, and the young rebbetzin, leaning with charming urbanity on her parasol, rubbed her eyes as if in shock, scarcely able to believe what she was seeing.

But now a trumpet blast shook the air. And then a drumbeat and a fife were heard, and the procession moved: the young rabbi in his silk caftan at its center, with the congregation leaders at his right and left, and around them the rabble, merry shouts, and a cloud of dust, and inside the carriage that lumbered behind—the rebbetzin, suede gloves on her hands, the ostrich feather in her hat nodding to the rhythm of the swaying carriage.

Along the roadside: groves of trees, haystacks at the edges of fields, flocks of sheep with their dogs herding them, and before the rebbetzin's eyes finally appeared the shtetl, with its

poor huddled houses propped up on their poles, the forsaken wooden hoist suspended over the mouth of the well, and the windmill with its sluggish arms sagging listlessly by the mountainous garbage dump.

From here, atop the straw seat inside the carriage, it was also impossible not to notice the narrow wooden racks attached to the cornices and suspended from the beams of every house, and the blocks of cheese drying on them were so perfectly triangular that it was hard to believe that they had been made by hand and not some sort of machine.

And soon enough the "community house" itself came into view, a small building propped up, like the others, on poles, and on the heap of garbage in the yard—would you believe?—stood a milk goat, a white goat with innocent eyes, who, noticing the carriage stop beside the house, approached and grabbed a mouthful of straw from the underside of the rebbetzin's seat, and then stood and chewed it with goatish seriousness.

And now is when the story they tell about the rebbetzin refusing to enter the community house took place.

The old woman, Sarah Riva, who had been hired as a housekeeper even before the new owners arrived, afterward described in detail how she, the rebbetzin, threw herself down in all her finery on the community bench and sobbed, while he, her rabbi husband, dressed in silk, paced the room—in consternation.

When it came to the point where she, the rebbetzin, raising her head and looking at him through a flood of tears, mentioned that strange creature, the goat—he could no longer hold back his laughter, pausing for a minute at the bench to stand beside her.



"Well, the truth is that you're just an inexperienced little goat yourself," he said.

Long and perplexing days followed, late-summer days in a remote Lithuanian shtetl. The silk-embroidered tablecloths, which were taken out of the bridal chest every once in a while, only heightened the poverty of the room when they were spread out over the tables. The curtains turned out to be much too wide and long for the windows, and the rebbetzin, after unsuccessfully trying a few times to make them fit, was forced to return them to the chest.

Nevertheless, these were bright summer days, and in the morning, when she opened the shutters, the radiant sunshine that flooded everything amazed her. And if on one side it illuminated only the dusty, gloomy alley, with its unpainted houses, on the other side the eye was transfixed by the meadow, a wide green meadow, over which stretched a sky at least as deep and blue as the city sky back in Poland.

This was a bustling hour in the alley and around it. At the well, the water carriers came and went with their buckets. Women gave the goats their morning milking by their front doors and little boys, with fringed garments over their short pants, streamed with their books to the cheders.

Very soon, from the end of the alley, their voices rang out and continued throughout the day, voices sweeter and clearer than any she, the rebbetzin, had ever heard.

The young rabbi, noticing how she stood listening to those voices, once asked her whether she had seen the charity boxes in these poor houses yet. And, indeed, in the very same spot where the racks for the cheese were attached to the outside of

the houses could be found, on the other side of the wall inside nearly every house, a whole shelf full of tin cans, with the acronyms of all the yeshivas in the world inscribed on their rounded sides. Precisely how coins were deposited into these cans was captured, to the consternation of the locals, by a roving photographer who came through here once on a Friday afternoon.

He, the stranger, standing at the threshold of his inn as the sun was setting, was fascinated to see the landlady take some copper coins out of a special pouch and arrange them on the tabletop, from which she had folded the tablecloth back for that purpose. The house had been straightened up and scrubbed. At the head of the table, under a satin Sabbath cloth, lay two loaves of challah while across from them, at the other end of the table, the candles stood ready in their candlesticks for lighting, and she, the woman, sweeping the coins into her hand and raising her youngest child in her arms toward the charity boxes, was handing him the coins to toss into the slots, when now, suddenly, turning her head, she caught sight of the "case" in the visitor's hands and saw what he was doing to her and to her son, and she collapsed onto the bench before her and burst into tears.

Yes, these Zhuzhikovkans were a strange bunch—the rebbetzin shook her head as she listened to the stories people told her, though her face no longer darkened to hear these things as in the beginning.

She was peaceful and content even after that, when the autumn came, and the mud closed in on the shtetl from every side.

Now the meadow lay yellowish and withering on the other



side of the windows, while the goats wandered up and down the alley with sagging bellies and sparse coats, bleating pitifully. How terrifying was the sight of the shadowy shops, with their flimsy signs hanging by a thread, and the barrels of annihilated and frozen Dutch herring, from whose round, wide-open eyes, despair itself now peered out.

Beside the well in the market square, in the middle of the day, the carriage drivers could be seen trudging along, sodden, behind their unharnessed horses, and limply pulling the slippery water hoist.

Desolate lay the roads of the town, desolate.

In the early mornings, the women no longer went outside to lay out wedges of cheese to dry, and if a woman appeared on the expanse of mud, it was some courageous mother slogging along, in men's boots, carrying her children to their cheder.

These were hard, hard days in the remote shtetl.

The young rebbetzin, if she heard the goat bleating, would go out in her plush coat and tenderly offer her a little straw from the dilapidated roof.

At night the wind blew, wrestling with the roof and ripping off the new patches of thatched straw. Far away, somewhere outside the town, dogs barked and their brethren on the gentile street responded with long wails. And the young rebbetzin, waking from sleep with fragments of dreams still caught between her eyelids—distant dreams with the afterimage of city lights—would gaze out into the darkness of her poor home, frightened and amazed at what she would see when she awoke, though she was no longer as despondent as in the early days. For together with the howl of the wind outside the windows she could also hear the voice of the rabbi, who sat at the table

by lamplight, reading, chanting, and singing. And if sometimes a tear rolled down her face, it was only a consoling tear, brought forth by the sound of the mournful singing.

Once, on a night like this, the rabbi sat at the head of the table, rehearsing aloud the sermon he would be giving on the weekly Torah portion, the chapter "And Jacob left." He spun and wove together the various themes with ease, illuminating each of them in the refined light of his mind, pronouncing every word, as usual, as clearly and distinctly as if he were counting coins. This happened at the beginning of the month of Kislev, perhaps the most forbidding season of the year. The rain, which poured all day and all night, had flooded even the last of the dry footpaths alongside the roads and fields. There was no more bread to be had in the shtetl—and the young rabbi, sitting at his desk, delved ever more deeply into Jacob's leave-taking of Beersheba, how the sun had set upon him as he made his way through a field, and how, as he lay lonesome and lost, a stone for his pillow, on that very first night of exile God showed him the marvelous ladder, the one whose feet stood on the ground and whose head reached to the very heavens.

"Behold, I am with you, and shall keep you," the rabbi sang God's promise, weaving together more and more strands of the tapestry of his sermon, strengthening it from time to time with further prooftexts from various places.

For while the verses of the Torah portion served him as the foundation and building blocks, the words of the Prophets and later Writings were the mortar and ornamental detail.

Thus, for example, when he reached the place where it was recounted how Jacob met our Mother Rachel and how he rolled the heavy boulder from the well, he brought in the verse from



the Songs of Songs, that "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it."

By and by he came, also, to the passage of Rachel's longing for children, and from that to how the Lord remembered her, listening to her and granting her a son:

"Enlarge the place of your tent, for you shall break forth out on the right hand and on the left," the rabbi rose from his seat and paced the length of the room, trilling his words in a mournful and tender tone—so mournful and tender that the rebbetzin on the other side of the partition couldn't stop herself from standing up and holding her arms out toward the room.

Is there any need to describe the things that passed between those two in the still of the night, in the raging heart of autumn? In any case there's no way of knowing all the details, since the old housekeeper had set up her bed that night in the kitchen, at the far end of the other room. What is clear is that the rabbi, who was now standing beside his wife, no longer called her "little fool" or referred to her as an inexperienced young goat, as he once had. He just soothed her with kind words, hinting to her about the child that she too would soon embrace, like the matriarch Rachel in her day, and he stayed with her until she had calmed down.

Autumn in the shtetl was meanwhile coming to an end and in its place came winter, white, aggressive, and brilliant, and changed everything all at once.

In the weekly Torah portions, though, the story continued to be as parched, summery, and wearisome as before.

Pharaoh still saw in his dream the cows on the banks of the Nile. In the Land of Canaan there was famine, bread could not

be found anywhere and starvation lay heavy and oppressive, while here in Zhuzhikovka the snow fell and covered the fields and roads, and the rebbetzin, when she found a windowpane free of frost, gazed serenely at the winter sleighs that slid along toward the shtetl, laden with an abundance of food.

Birch wood, brought straight from the forest, caught fire at the entrance to the stove as soon as it was lit, without any kindling or additional help. At daybreak, the smoke rose from the chimneys toward the sky in a straight line, unwavering. American potatoes, substantial and heavy, were peeled, breaking into floury, appetizing fissures as soon as they came to a boil, and over the well at the end of the alley the hoist with its bucket squeaked powerfully and diligently.

Days of plenty had come to the town and among those who came to the market square were Jews from the far reaches of the surrounding country, able-bodied villagers wearing farmers' hoods, and when they swung their heavy fur coats with their thick collars, they gave off an aroma foreign to the town air, the smoky scent of resin ovens and the pine forests that stretched to the Polesian marshes and beyond.

One of these villagers, who came for his first visit to the new rabbi, brought, in addition to a bag of chickpeas, a large fatted goose with white feathers, who, as soon as the housekeeper loosened the rope around his legs, immediately stuck his neck into the chicken coop and gobbled up the hen's feed with the calm self-assurance common only among those fat creatures who have no concern for anyone else's property.

"Serve him up with those," the man gestured with the tip of his whip toward the sack of chickpeas.

Although old Sarah Riva had decided that these peas should



be set aside for some other time—a time of celebration and "Mazel tov"—she nodded good-naturedly. And later that evening the rebbetzin, as she sat by the lamp and passed her hand over those chickpeas, cool and smooth, felt a shiver run through her, sweeter than any she had ever felt.

Within the next few weeks lambs, tender and newly weaned, also began to arrive from the surrounding farms, and the first of the dairy products.

The cheese, which was brought in capacious earthen farm jugs, was sometimes covered with a fine layer of frost that crackled lightly when it was removed. In order to knead it into rounds, first the cheese had to be brought close to the oven to soften and thaw, and then a special fragrance would suffuse the house, signaling the approach of spring.

Easily, as on a winter's sleigh, the days now slid by. Among those who arrived at the railroad station, finally, were the emissaries from the yeshivas, men with noble beards dressed in rabbinic caftans, who, with their special hammers, without a speck of rust, pulled the charity boxes off the wall with amazing efficiency, and as they arranged the coins in rows on the table, the narrow rectangle where the cans had been nailed stood pale and waiting, as if ashamed of its nakedness.

And in the weekly Torah portion, meanwhile, Pharaoh's stubbornness and his refusal to let the Israelites go out of Egypt ended. The plagues came—incessant, harsh, and surprisingly inventive.

After the three days of darkness came the final blow, the decisive one—the plague of the firstborn. And the rout was complete:

Moses and Aaron were called to Pharaoh in the middle of the night, and the Israelites were compelled to leave in a frenzy, even before their dough had risen.

As they camped for a moment on the verge of freedom, before Baal-Zephon, another unpleasant little incident intervened:

The Israelites lifted their eyes and behold—Egypt was riding in pursuit. But salvation came in the blink of an eye: the waters were split and the sea became dry ground before those being pursued, and the finest of Pharaoh's horsemen were hurled into the deep, and the Israelites walked out with their heads held high.

It was the Sabbath when the Song of the Sea was read in the shtetl. On the windowpanes of the synagogue the ice had melted in the course of the service, and the rays of sunlight streaming through them fell across the wooden lions that crouched like two kindly steers at the top of the Holy Ark, beside the velvet curtain.

The Song of Deborah was also read:

They that are delivered from the noise of archers in the places of drawing water, there shall they rehearse the righteous acts of the Lord. They fought from heaven, the stars in their courses fought against Sisera, and during lunch, when the door was opened so that crumbs could be thrown to the birds, the sound of their chirping burst into the house and spread a new spirit all around, the breath of spring, which although it tarried, speedily would come.

The approach of spring was also soon prophesied by the new wooden vessels that were brought from the villages to be sold.

The beets were brought up from the cellar. The women, in



their clean cotton aprons, came with the first of their questions about the laws of Passover and, while the rabbi sat at the head of the table, looking into his book, the women couldn't take their eyes off the rebbetzin, who now—she had slimmed down after the birth and looked even taller—had become so beautiful. Once, on a day like this, the rebbetzin went out to the front yard, a thin sanded board in her hand.

Outside the roofs dripped merrily. Behind the garden gates the newborn chicks clucked musically, with clear, abrupt cries—like spring, and the rebbetzin, lifting the board high, marked the place on the wall for the rack where the cheese wedges would dry in the summer, and she hammered in the nails with her own hand.

The sound of the hammer woke the newborn, who was lying in her cradle, and she let out a kind of coo, which sounded very much like the murmur of the spring waters rushing down the foot of the nearby slope. The rebbetzin, when the sound reached her, hurried back to the community room, went over to the cradle and looked down at the baby, and a smile appeared on her lips that slowly illuminated her entire face—that smile was the very first thing that each of us children of the rabbi of Zhuzhikovka saw the moment we emerged into the light of day.

Rukhl Fishman
Biographical notes:
https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/ft6k4004mw/
From Oral History Project: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHkxBCgBdqg

## מײַן ווילדע ציג

א

כ׳האָב ליב
אַז דו שפּרינגסט פֿון מיר אַוועק.
אַ הייב, אַ שטורצע
מיט די הינטערשטע פֿיס.
אַ שפּרונג און אַ גאַלאָפּ.
און די גאַנצע וועלט
איז אַ גרינע לאָנקע.
אַ בלויער הימל –
דער גאַנצער אמת.
און שיין
און שיין
דאָס ווײַסע קעפּל דײַנס
וואָס שאָקלט אויף יאָ
און אַנטלויפֿט אויף ניין.

כ׳האָב אַזוי ליב
אַז דו שפּרינגסט פֿון מיר
אַוועק.
איך שטיי בײַם פּלויט
און קוק דיר נאָך
מיט בלומען אין מײַן פֿויסט.
עס יאָגט
אַ וועלט, אָן אין־סופֿיק
גרינע לאָנקע. עס בריקעט
אָן אמת אַ בלויער.

## MY WILD SHE-GOAT

1

I love it
when you bound away from me
bucking, kicking
with your hind legs.
Bounding, galloping.
And the whole world
is a green meadow
a blue sky
the whole truth
and beautiful
beautiful
your white head
nodding *Yes!*
as you run off *No!*

I love it so
when you bound
away from me.
I stand by the fence
watching you
with flowers in my fist.
A world
running free
boundless green meadow,
blue truth
kicking.

R. Fishman, 1976.

## 4. Anna Margolin: Is There a Feminist Translation?

**מאַריס תּפֿילה**

גאָט, הכנעהדיק און שטום זייַנען די וועגן.
דורכן פֿייַער פֿון זינד און פֿון טרערן
פֿירן צו דיר אַלע וועגן.

איך האָב פֿון ליבע געבויט דיר אַ נעסט
און פֿון שטילקייט אַ טעמפּל.

איך בין דייַן היטערין , דינסט און געליבטע,
און דייַן פּנים האָב איך קיין מאָל ניט געזען.

און איך ליג אויפֿן ראַנד פֿון דער וועלט,
און דו גייסט פֿינצטער דורך מיר ווי די שעה פֿון טויט,
גייסט ווי אַ ברייטע בליצנדיקע שווערד.[10]

**Mary's Prayer**
God, humble and mute are these ways.
Through the fire of sin and of tears
All ways lead to you.

I have built you a nest out of love
And out of silence, a temple.

I am your protector, servant, and beloved,
And I have never seen your face.

And I lie on the rim of the world,
And you pass through me, dark as the hour of death.
Pass like a broad,  flashing sword.

(by Kathryn Hellerstein)

**Discussed text:**
Translating as a Feminist: Reconceiving Anna Margolin Author(s): Kathryn Hellerstein Source: Prooftexts , Vol. 20, No. 1-2, Reading through the Lens of Gender (Winter/Spring 2000), pp. 191-208. Published by: Indiana University Press

## 5. BUND. Is there a Jewish Secular Tradition? Is there tradition of Bund in contemporary writings? (Irena Klepfisz)

### Irena Klepfisz:

Irena Klepfisz has been active in feminist, lesbian, Jewish secular and peace organizations. She began publishing her poetry in 1971 and soon focused her research on Yiddish women writers (e.g. Kadya Molodovsky and Fradl Shtok). She co-founded the feminist literary magazine Conditions and served as the Yiddish editor of the Jewish feminist magazine Bridges. She also co-edited The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Woman's Anthology. She is the author of A Few Words in the Mother Tongue (Poetry) and Dreams of an Insomniac (Essays). While teaching Jewish Women's Studies at Barnard College, Klepfisz also taught for ten years at a maximum-security women's prison. She received a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in poetry and was recently awarded the prestigious Adrienne Cooper Dreaming in Yiddish Award 2016.

Gabi von Seltmann"s projects: https://gabivonseltmann.com/portfolio/basher-poem-by-irena-klepfisz/

*Dreams of An Insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches and Diatribes (1990)*

"All my life I defined myself as a secular Jew. I was raised and taught to think about myself in relationship to Jewishness"

"On closer inspection, however, my upbringing was full of contradictions. Born in 1941 in occupied Poland, I came to the United States at the age of eight….. I was learning Jewish language which was uprooted"

"So perhaps this Yiddish of mine, this fragmentary language, this echo of a European era and culture in which I never lived and about which I have only heard second-hand like a family story, this mame-loshn might prove worth salvaging and sheltering…. "

Di rayze aheym/ The journey home

(Der fentster/ the window)

She looks out the window.
All is present.
The shadows of the past
fall elsewhere.

This is the wilderness
she thinks.

And our tongues have become
dry      the wilderness has
dried out our tongues      and
we forgotten speech.

She looks out the window.
All is present.

### Ula Chowaniec: Bund and Women's Writing?

(Text is available on the course website:
https://cudzoziemki.weebly.com/jewish-womens-writing.html )
and also distributed in a separate handout

## 6. Revolutionary poet: Khana Levin

Biography: https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Levin_Khane

Gennady Estraikh**’s Khana Levin's** Verdict to **Free Love**.

GENNADY ESTRAIKH

# Khana Levin's Verdict to Free Love

Feiga Hofshtein recalled the following scene that took place soon after her marrying the Yiddish poet David Hofshtein:

> On a day off [in the early 1920s], in a Moscow tram-car, Hofshtein and I met with Moyshe Litvakov [the editor of the central Soviet Yiddish daily *Der Emes* (Truth) and, generally, watchdog of the Soviet Yiddish cultural world]. He looked at us for a while and asked:
> – According to the laws of Moses?
> – According to the laws of Merezhin – Hofshtein answered with a smile.[1]

They were speaking about the kind of marriage the young couple had chosen – the traditional one or the Soviet-style civil registration. Hofshtein humorously associated the Soviet style with Abraham Merezhin, who together with Litvakov played a central role in the Jewish Sections of the Communist party. Of course, Merezhin only epitomised the new lifestyle and directly had nothing to do with the first Soviet family code. Issued in 1918, it substituted civil for religious marriage and established one of the central institutions of Soviet society: the ZAGS, or Offices for Registration of Civil Acts, which became responsible for registration of births, deaths, marriages, divorces, paternity, and name-changes. The new code mirrored the new regime's idea of marriage as a union between equal partners, though in reality Soviet society would always have less scope for women than for men.[2]

Initially, however, the most iconoclastic part of the Bolshevik and, generally, radical cadre preferred to reject completely the institution of marriage, seeing in revolution also sexual liberation. Some of the Bolsheviks subscribed to the 'glass of water' theory, attributed to Alexandra Kollontai's attempts to desacralise erotic love. Kollontai, the founder of the Communist Party's *Zhenotdel* (Women's Department), argued that

> The sexual act must be seen not as something shameful and sinful but as something which is natural as the other needs of a healthy organism, such as hunger and thirst [...]. As communist morality is concerned for the health of the population, it also criticizes sexual restraint.[3]

"*Tog af arbet iz un nakht af hulyen* [...] / *Ven s'tsezingt zikh nakht un libe / meg farbrent vern di gantse velt*!.." ("Day for work and night for revel [...] / When night and love sing their songs / the whole world may go to hell!") – wrote the

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[1] F. Hofshtein: *Mit libe un veytik*, Tel Aviv: Reshafim, 1985, p. 9.

[2] W.Z. Goldman: "Working-class Women and the 'Withering Away' of the Family. Popular Responses to Family Policy", in: *Russia in the Era of NEP. Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture*, ed. by S. Fitzpatrick, A. Rabinowitch and R. Stites, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, p. 126.

[3] *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, trans. by Alix Holt, Westport: Alison and Busby, 1977, p. 229.

Minsk Yiddish poet Zelig Akselrod, who was often criticised for imitating the epicureanism of the Russian poet Sergei Esenin.[4] Indeed, young male urbanites interpreted Kollontai's statements as a licence for promiscuity. The post-war surplus of single women with little marital prospects exacerbated the situation. The gender imbalance was so significant that some rabbis in Lithuania even advocated reintroduction of polygamy by repealing the millennium-old anathema of Rabbi Gershom.[5]

The great dislocations unleashed by the war and revolution brought hundreds of thousands of provincials, including former *shtetl* dwellers, to Moscow and other industrial and cultural centres. Cramped dorms, populated by students and young workers, formed an environment which did not welcome stable family relations. In the late 1920s, less than half of female students dreamt of marriage and a quarter of them advocated free love.[6] Theodore Dreiser, who visited the Soviet Union in 1927, wrote in his travelogue: "Divorce in Russia to-day is just as free as marriage – even freer, because a registered marriage requires at least the presence of both contracting parties." Indeed, in 1926 the new Soviet family code introduced a simplified divorce procedure. Simplified in the sense that "spouses no longer had to go to court for a contested divorce but could simply pop into their local registry office (ZAGS) and fill out a form. If one spouse was not present, when the other registered the divorce, he or she would be informed by postcard."[7] Freedom to divorce was seen, therefore, as an essential constituent of the individual's freedom.

As for birth control, Dreiser noted:

> A workingwoman who becomes pregnant may have a free abortion just as she can have free medical treatment of any kind in the clinic of the place of her work. I understand though that there is supposed to be some good reason given by the woman for making such a request of the physician in charge [...]. I also understand that this is usually only a formality [...].[8]

For all that, the 'glass of water' theory represented only one of the extremes on the Bolsheviks' scale of sexual pluralism. A counter-position was advanced by those Bolsheviks who saw sublimation of sexual desire as part of the lifestyle appropriate for committed soldiers of the revolution.[9] Advocacy of 'free love' and 'puritanism' coexisted in early Soviet society, similar in many ways to the

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[4] Z. Akselrod: "Tog af arbet iz un nakht af hulyen", in: *Di royte velt* 3 (1926), p. 36. For his critique, see e.g., E. Rosenthal-Shneiderman: *Oyf vegn un umvegn*, Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1982, vol. 3, pp. 199–202.

[5] M. Glazerman: "Litvishe rabonim viln derloybn tsu hobn etlekhe vayber", in: *Forverts* 6 (Sept. 1923), p. 4.

[6] V.P. Buldakov: "Massy i kul'tura: vospitanie i obrazovanie", in: *Rossiia nepovskaia*, ed. by S.A. Pavliuchenkov *et al.*, Moscow: Mysl', 2002, pp. 237–238.

[7] Goldman: *Working-class Women*, p. 130.

[8] T. Dreiser: *Dreiser Looks at Russia*, New York: H. Liveright, 1928, pp. 163–164.

[9] O. Matich: "Remaking the Bed. Utopia in Daily Life", in: *Laboratory of Dreams. The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment*, ed. by J.E. Bowlt and O. Matich, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996, pp. 64–65; V. Oxen: *Rußland in seinen Frauenschicksalen. Von den Anfängen der Kiewer Rus bis in die Zeiten der Postperestroika*, Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 1999, p. 406; G. Carleton: *Sexual Revolution in Bolshevik Russia*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005, pp. 71–72.

sexuality-related doctrines in Zionist circles.[10] In addition, the provincial environment remained conservative and was not ready to condone avant-garde models of relationships.

Various forms of sexual behaviour find a place in Peretz Hirschbein's novel *Royte felder* (Red Fields), based on the American Yiddish writer's experience of living in Crimean Jewish colonies in 1928 and 1929.[11] One of Hirschbein's protagonists, Lana, who is a committed builder of a Soviet Jewish village in the Crimea, dispatches her younger sister Beyla to Moscow following the latter's premarital relationship and pregnancy, because in the village she would be regarded as a tainted woman. Although Lana reassures her sister that her premarital relationship is normal for contemporary society ("You live in a different time. There is no reason to be upset. A woman has the same rights as a man. And if a woman wants to have a child, she can do it – with whom she wants it and when she wants it."), she personally rejects extreme forms of sexual liberation. Lana is shocked when she comes to Moscow and hears about Beyla's relations with her boyfriend:

> He comes from time to time to sleep with me... Why are you smiling?
> I know that you still love him.
> No, I don't love him. Love is not very much celebrated here. A man wants to have a woman, and he has her!
> Only to spend a night...
> Of course, only to spend a night.
> And if a woman wants to have a man to spend a night with?
> She gets it too. There is not much fuss if something comes out of it. The woman goes to hospital and gets rid of it.[12]

Lana is not in the mood to condone this hedonistic lifestyle, contending that "the revolution will distance itself from the ugly hoax that love is a bourgeois notion".[13] In fact, she echoes Kollontai's argument that romantic, "winged Eros" had to replace the physiologically-driven relations of the wartime, when there "was neither time nor a surplus of inner strength for love's 'joys and pains'".[14] A counter-reaction to free love became stronger in the late 1920s, when Hirschbein stages the above conversation between the two sisters. In Soviet Yiddish literature, such a protest was associated with the name of the Kharkiv poet Khana Levin, whose name is so forgotten that it does not appear even in feminist works on Yiddish literature.[15]

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[10] D. Biale: *Eros and the Jews. From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America*, New York: Basic Books, 1992, p. 107.

[11] P. Hirschbein: *Royte felder*, New York, NY: Basic Books, 1935. See also G. Estraikh: "From 'Green Fields' to 'Red Fields'. Peretz Hirschbein's Soviet Sojourn, 1928–1929", in: *Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe* 1 (2006), pp. 60–81.

[12] Hirschbein: *Royte felder*, p. 664. For the contemporary situation among young Soviet urbanites, see S. Fitzpatrick: *The Cultural Front. Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992, pp. 65–90.

[13] Hirschbein: *Royte felder*, p. 666.

[14] Holt: *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, p. 277.

[15] Somewhat luckier are the legacies of two other Soviet Yiddish female writers: Rokhl Brokhes (1880–1942), whose life and oeuvre is discussed in E. Raicus: "Women's Voices in the Stories of Yiddish Writer Rokhl Brokhes", in: *From Memory to Transformation. Jewish Women's*

Levin (1900–1969) was born in Ekaterinoslav (now Dnepropetrivsk, Ukraine) in a family of an undertaker. She was educated at a school for poor children and worked as seamstress and a sales assistant. Her first poems she wrote in Russian, but under the influence of the trend-setting Yiddish poet Leib Naidus, who in 1915 lived in Ekaterinoslav as a refugee of World War I, she switched to Yiddish. (Naidus influenced also Peretz Markish, whose meteoric poetic career began in Ekaterinoslav.)[16] Yet Kharkiv rather than Ekaterinoslav became the city where Levin spent almost her whole life, excluding the years when she served in the Red Army during the Civil War, studied in Moscow, and lived as an evacuee in the town of Buzuluk during World War II.

In 1917 she made her literary debut in the Kharkiv-based almanac *Kunst-ring* (Art Circle), produced by the upstart publisher Kalman Zingman.[17] From the mid-1920s, Kharkiv, then the capital of Ukraine, became a major centre of Soviet Yiddish publishing, and Levin worked at editorial offices of local periodicals. She was hailed as virtually the first female poetic voice in Soviet Yiddish literature, her poems frequently appeared in newspapers and journals. Her first book, *Tsushtayer* (Contribution), came out in 1929 and immediately became a literary sensation, though a short-lived one. Her later publications – written mainly for children, in Yiddish and Ukrainian – attracted little attention, though some of her poems were reprinted abroad, for instance in the highbrow Warsaw literary weekly *Literarishe Bleter* (Literary Pages). In the 1960s she contributed from time to time to the Moscow journal *Sovetish Heymland* (Soviet Homeland), but did not play any significant role in post-Stalinist Yiddish literary life.

Levin's collection *Tsushtayer* was discussed by foreign and Soviet critics, who interpreted it as a sign that morality began to recover after a period of brutish private and public life. The American Yiddish poet and critic A. Almi praised it as "more than just a literary work"; rather, it was regarded as an important insight in Soviet women's life, especially as it was a topic concurrently and widely discussed in the Soviet press.[18] Yekhezkel Dobrushin, the Soviet master critic, also praised Levin's book, though he did not want to see it as a call "back to the traditional family life".[19]

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*Voices*, ed. by S. Silberstein Swartz and M. Wolfe, Toronto: Second Story Press, 1998; and Shira Gorshman (1906–2001), whose stories appear in the anthologies of *Found Treasures. Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*, ed. by F. Forman *et al.*, Toronto: Second Story Press, 1994; and *Beautiful as the Moon, Radiant as the Stars. Jewish Women in Yiddish Stories*, ed. by S. Bark, New York: Warner Books, 2003.

[16] A. Kahan: "Mayn ershte bagegenish mitn dikhter", in: *Sovetish Heymland* 12 (1975), p. 40; A. Yerusalimski: "Zayn horepashner yikhes", *Ibid.*, p. 45; M. Kvietkauskas: "Leib Naidus", in: *Writers in Yiddish*, ed. by J. Sherman, Farmington Hills, MI: Thompson Gale, 2007, pp. 211–218.

[17] See G. Estraikh: "Utopias and Cities of Kalman Zingman, an Uprooted Yiddishist Dreamer", in: *East European Jewish Affairs* 33.1 (2006), pp. 31–42.

[18] A. Almi: "Yidishe dikhterin fun Rusland shildert in lider di leydn fun dortiker froy", in: *Forverts* 11 (Aug. 1929), Literary department; see also R. Abramovitch: "Bavuste rusishe komunistke baklogt zikh oyf der itstiker lage fun froyen, oyf shikres un oysgelasnhayt", in: *Forverts* 17 (Jun. 1929), pp. 7–8.

[19] Y. Dobrushin: *In iberboy*, Moscow: Der Emes, 1932, pp. 77–87.

In her 1927 poem "Simply",[20] included in the collection *Tsushtayer*, Levin argues that she is happy to be an independent, an active builder of Communist society, and even a soldier if the country needs to be defended, but she cannot understand

*Iz far vos zhe kumt es*
*un vi azoy gor kumt es,*
*az froyen-layb – a hekdesh*
*af durkhshlepn a nakht?*

How does it happen
And why should it happen
That female body [is now] a dosshouse
To while away a night?

The poem "Woman" that opens Levin's collection *Tsushtayer* (p. 7–9) is a lament against abortions as by-products of free-love relationships.

*Ongeshlaydert froyen af di tishn.*
*Fardreyte kni tserayst a fremde hant.*
*Emervayz men trogt af shvartse mistn*
*Shtiker kinder-leyb un froyen-shrek un shand…*
[…]
*Es tor azoy nit zayn,*
*Es tor azoy nit kumen,*
*Az muter-leyb zol zayn a trune farn kind!..*
[…]
*Kh'bin ufgerufn zayn fun helstn dor a mame,*
*Un bashert iz mir – im palmesn in boykh.*

Women are thrown about on the tables.
A stranger's hand moves apart their bent knees.
People bring to rubbish dumps pailfuls
Of pieces of kids' bodies, and women's horror and shame…
[…]
It shouldn't happen,
It shouldn't occur,
That mother's body ends up being a coffin for her child!..
[…]
My calling is to mother a joyful generation,
But I'm fated to dissect it in my womb.

Levin asks – in her poem "Simply" – not to deem as *meshchanstvo* (a petty-bourgeois outlook) her unwillingness to pander to the young male urbanites' tendency to detach sex from romantic feelings and reduce it to intercourse.[21] It echoes Dreiser's description: "Communists are inclined to consider moral scruples in such matters as bourgeois and un-Marxian, and an old-fashioned girl is likely to be reminded that she is 'bourgeois' by a suitor whose advances she rejects."[22]

[20] K. Levin: "Prost", in: *Di royte velt* 10–11 (1927), p. 130; see also K. Levin: *Tsushtayer*, Kharkiv: Melukhe-Farlag, 1929, pp. 11–12.
[21] Cf. Carleton: *Sexual Revolution in Bolshevik Russia*, p. 30.
[22] Dreiser: *Dreiser Looks at Russia*, pp. 161–162.

*Kon zayn, s'iz deresn shoyn zingen*
*Fun levone un fun royzn,*
*Nor tsi emes take iz shendlekh shoyn azoy –*
*Zukhn eynem nor fun hundert un fun toyznt,*
*Zukhn eynem nor*
*Un eynems zayn a froy?*

You might be bored with singing
Of the moon and the roses,
But is it really so harmful
To look for only one among hundreds and thousands,
To look for only one
And to be his wife?

In 1930, the New York critic Shmuel Niger praised Levin for writing bucolic and folklore-like poetry, which, he maintained, stood up against the backdrop of ideological works written by proletarian literati.[23] In reality, Levin belonged to the militant proletarian camp. In December 1928 she – together with such literary lions as Itsik Fefer and David Hofshtein – was among the few founding members of the Yiddish section at the All-Ukrainian Association of Proletarian Writers. Moreover, the struggle against 'nihilist dissoluteness' was put on the agenda of proletarian writers.[24] The party and its Young Communist League fought against prostitution, which was widespread in Soviet cities. Fefer, who was of the same age as Levin, was upset that his neighbour, a young woman, walked the streets. He was not sure, however, whether he should blame such girls, or whether it was society's, hence also his, fault. Fefer admitted that he also was attracted to girls who walked with an affected delicacy and had long braids and inviting eyes. Yet he summed up that "*nit azoyne hob ikh lib*" – (they are not the type that I love).[25]

The type acceptable for such people as Fefer emerges in the untitled poem of Levin's collection (pp. 14–15), suggesting two roles for Soviet women – the daytime role of a comrade and the night-time role of a romantic sex partner. "*Fun ale mener bin ikh menersher batog*" (By day, of all the males I am the malest). She walks in a hurry, like men do. Her shoes have no heels. She smokes, though she knows that the cigarette "*orem makht azoy / di vinklen fun mayn moyl*" (makes worse / the wrinkles around my mouth). More importantly, however, the cigarette makes her different from women of her mother's generation, who still cover their heads. But when the day is over, Levin wants to be different. In the evening, when there is no need to play to the gallery, she wants to hear from her beloved man: "I'm yours!"

*Fun shvern menerishn tog*
*Kh'bin mid azoy.*
*Di nakht iz heys*
*Un fintster iz di nakht,*
*Un ikh bin dokh a froy.*

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23 S. Niger: "In der sovetish-yidisher literatur", in: *Tsukunft* 35.2 (1930), p. 106.

24 E. Dobrenko: *Formovka sovetskogo pisatelia. Sotsial'nye i esteticheskie istoki sovetskoi literaturnoi kul'tury*, St Petersburg: Akademicheskii Proekt, 1999, pp. 54–55.

25 I. Fefer: *Geklibene lider*, Kiev: Melukhe-Farlag, 1929, pp. 284–291.

After a difficult masculine day
I am so tired.
The night is hot
The night is dark,
And I am still a woman.

Torn between being a good mother or a communist, Levin's heroine is sometimes even ashamed to look in the eyes of Lenin (p. 19):

*Haynt Lenins bild kh'hob umgekert tsum vant.*
*Ikh bin tsebrokhn un geboygn…*
*Vayberish hob ikh mikh haynt tseveynt:*
*– Vi zol ikh kukn glaykh im in di oygn?*
[…]
*Hob ikh lib mayn kind,*
*Nor shver iz mir di vig…*

Today I turned to the wall Lenin's portrait.
I am broken and bent…
I was crying today like a woman:
– How can I look straight in his eyes?
[…]
I love my child,
But the cradle is my burden…

From her poem "A Letter" (pp. 21–22) we find out that it is not the only problem that she has with Lenin's portraits. A busy Soviet woman, she sees her daughter only on Sunday. She is particularly overworked on the eve of religious holidays, when she takes part in anti-religious campaigns. At the same time, she understands that her child's gentile nurse is a church-goer and she takes the girl with her. Moreover, the girl is already familiar with some basic Christian Orthodox rituals.

*Lenins bild, ven kind nokh,*
*Mayn tokhter kh'hob gebrakht.*
*Zogt mayn tokhter: s'iz ir zun,*
*Un leygt af dem a tseylem,*
*Af Leninen a tseylem*
*Yede af der nakht…*

Lenin's portrait, in which he is still a child,
I brought for my daughter.
My daughter is saying: it's her son,
And she makes the sign of the cross,
She crosses Lenin
The last thing every evening…

The beginning of 1929 saw anti-religious campaigns in the Soviet Union, triggered by the decision of the party's Central Committee to leave little leeway for Jewish religious life. In April 1929, a decree tightened the state's control over all religious organisations and clergymen, forbidding them to conduct any financial, charitable, and educational activities.[26] In general, the whole political climate had

[26] E. G. Gimpel'son: *NEP i sovetskaia politicheskaia sistema, 20-e gody*, Moscow: Institut russkoi istorii, 2000, p. 279.

radically changed in 1929, the year of the 'Great Break' (*velikii perelom*), as it was called in Soviet Newspeak following Stalin's speech on the twelfth anniversary of the revolution. The doctrine of a 'great break' in industry and in agriculture marked the beginning of Stalin's autocracy, which brought consequences to virtually all sides of Soviet life, including the situation with women's liberalisation and sexual equality.

In 1930, the *Zhenotdel* (Women's Department) was closed, deemed as having fulfilled its purpose. It is no coincidence that the same year saw the liquidation of the Jewish Sections of the Communist Party. Before 1917, the Bolsheviks were always reluctant to tolerate in their ranks separate cohorts, such as women's or Jewish. After the revolution, however, they had to face the reality of dealing with a society ridded of such 'legacies of capitalism' as ethnic and gender inequalities, hence the need to target every peculiar stratum by a separate means. Judging by the conspicuous absence of Soviet periodicals for Yiddish-speaking women, a combination of women's and Jewish issues was apparently deemed as too heretical. In 1930, the regime believed that the mission of both women's and Jewish agitprop substructures had been accomplished.

In the 1930s, free love disappeared from Soviet discourse. A stable family began to be seen as a basis for a stable society. Women were once again responsible for hearth and home, though they also had extra-domestic functions. A *femina sovietica* was supposed to be loyal to her partner, provided he did not hamper her citizen's commitments and activities. In his 1932 documentary story *Comrade Bronya*, David Bergelson, the foremost Soviet Yiddish writer, summed up the results of Soviet Women Building conducted in the 1920s:

> Apart from its taste, each historical class dictates to the surrounding [population] the meaning of beauty of its type of women. While the ruling classes of feudal and capitalist societies tended to borrow the women cult from the ancient Greek or Roman cultures, the working class does not need such a cult; it creates its own [standards].[27]

Levin's poetry is one of the early attempts to create such standards.

[27] D. Bergelson: "Khaverte Bronye", in: *Shtern* 2 (1933), p. 12.

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