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Review: A Manifesto, a Genealogy, a Cause

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# A MANIFESTO, A GENEALOGY, A CAUSE

## FOUND TREASURES—STORIES BY YIDDISH WOMEN WRITERS

edited by Frieda Forman, Ethel Raicus, Sarah Silberstein Swartz and Margie Wolfe  
Introduction by Irena Klepfisz

1994, Second Story Press, 720 Bathurst Street, Ste 301, Toronto, Ontario M5S 2R4.<sup>1</sup>

reviewed by Elana Dykewomon

The publication of *Found Treasures*—a deep, multilayered collection of both good and great literature—is an occasion for wonder, celebration, consternation and investigation. It contains so much information traveling in so many different directions that I want to say *Found Treasures* is more than a book—but what is more than a book to Jews? If anything is, this collection is it—it presents women writers with a heritage we believed didn't exist; it gives all women a birthright we were told had been lost eons ago. As well as wonderful writing, *Found Treasures* is a manifesto, a genealogy, a cause. Its appearance is a “great event” in the entire body of Jewish literature—if we assign it its rightful place now, it will change the canon.

There are at least five different ways to approach *Found Treasures*, starting with the stories—their groupings, individual concerns and repeated themes, their various depths and resonances. Then there are the framing questions about women and Yiddish literature which Irena Klepfisz articulates so skillfully in her introduction, “Queens of Contradiction—A Feminist Introduction to Yiddish Women Writers.” The nature of Yiddish itself needs to be considered in this context, as in the phrase “Yiddish is a dead language,” as well as the political implications of attempts to extinguish Yiddish (by both Jews and non-Jews). And there is the question of audience: what's asked of us by this collection; are we prepared to be asked anything more than consuming this work as an artifact of Ashkenazi culture?

But let's start with how the anthology came to be and the problem of its title, which gives us entry to many of these questions: where and why are the bodies hidden? Frieda Forman, one of the organizers of the women's Yiddish study group that produced *Found Treasures*, said in a recent interview, “The title of the anthology is a little misleading ... Though the stories *are* treasures, they weren't found by chance. We've had to dig deliberately for them, to unearth them.”<sup>2</sup>

These stories were not “throw aways”—they were placed somewhere carefully. Sometimes the people putting them into folders, storing them, had no idea that it might be the last time these written words would be seen by someone who could understand them. Perhaps the women who left their papers hoped that future scholars would come to know their lives. Perhaps the men who published magazines thought no one would bother with these works—that printing a few stories, a dozen poems, made them good guys, their granddaughters wouldn't start arguments with them at dinner, women would come to their offices and ask for advice, so what did it cost them to be nice?

How could they imagine cadres of women with shovels digging through the archives? Or, as it really happens, some solitary woman taking the search upon herself, standing at the card index, reading through every handwritten card on which a librarian—also a woman—has recorded maybe a little more information than just the source's title and location. The woman (maybe by now they are three or four, usually

not together, sometimes corresponding) does this for months or years, carefully collecting copies, going to senior citizen centers and people's homes to follow up leads. The researchers bring their pages back to their study groups and they agree to do the labor-intensive, painstaking work of translation. Consider how difficult it is just to explain the meanings of common Yiddish expressions—*nudnik*, *mentsh*, *plotz*.<sup>3</sup>

In this particular Jewish women's study group in Toronto some were Canadian born while others had come to Canada as children, some were Holocaust survivors or the children of survivors. Yiddish was the *mame-loshn* of a few while others came to Yiddish as adults, some had spoken it at home but never studied it, some learned it as children in Yiddish schools or later in university courses. All of them had to learn how to speak Yiddish with each other, how to communicate, how to read and evaluate the new materials. Eventually Frieda Forman, Ethel Raicus, Sarah Silberstein Swartz and Margie Wolfe, "diverse in age, background politics, feminist commitment,"<sup>4</sup> became the editors of *Found Treasures*.

All in order to unearth these 24 stories. Which begs the questions: who buried them? Why? How can the work of so many women be purged from consciousness so quickly?

Frieda Forman discovered over 300 Yiddish women writers in documents from 1927 to 1986. From the 1950's on, many anthologies of Yiddish poems and stories as well as many critical investigations of Yiddish literature have been published in English. But when it came time to write the histories, make the anthologies, create the canon, most of the women vanished as if they'd never published a word.<sup>5</sup>

Irena Klepfisz points out in her Introduction to this anthology that although a 390-page anthology of the works of approximately 70 Yiddish "poetesses" was published in 1928, only a handful of these poems have ever found their way into English translation. There is no English-language collection of Yiddish women poets, and only two or three have had a volume of poetry published in English. There are only four translations into En-

glish of a Yiddish woman writer's complete prose book: the 17th-century memoirs of *Glückel of Hameln*, Bella Chagall's *Burning Lights* (or *First Encounter*, depending on translation) (New York), Esther Kreitman's *Deborah* (London) and Chava Rosenfarb's *The Tree of Life* (Melbourne) (pp. 23-24).

At best, we can assume that the omission of women was "unconscious"—that it was part of a masculine world view that refuses to attribute any *lasting* importance to a woman's version of life. A woman's story may be sufficiently well-

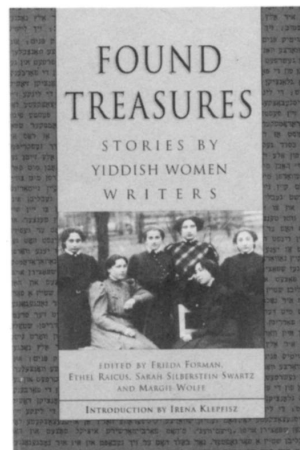
written for journal publication, but to exemplify the struggles of a people, it must be universal, and the realm of "the universal" is considered to be male. Relationships between women, concerns about children and the home, are viewed as "special interest writing."

But while most of the stories in *Found Treasures* are woman-focused (that is, women and their relationships occupy the foreground), Yiddish women writers have written many stories with male protagonists. The translators had over 200 stories

to choose from in making this collection.<sup>6</sup> According to Frieda Forman some stories were rejected "because the main characters were men rather than women."<sup>7</sup> And many of the women in *Found Treasures* wrote about politics, diaspora and justice. So we have to assume that the past erasure of women's work wasn't "simply" because as a group they wrote about "women's concerns." It had to be, at least in part, because they were *women*.

As Irena Klepfisz explicates in her Introduction, Yiddish, "the mother tongue," has been considered a "women's" language as long as that construction was useful to those in power as a means of consolidating both their class and gender privileges. "Early (male) Hasidic attitudes to Yiddish demonstrate what feminists have found in other western cultures: women's perspectives and contributions are deemed inferior or insignificant until men decide otherwise, legitimize them through defeminization and claim them as their own" (pp. 29-30).

She goes on to pose the problem faced by those who claimed Yiddish as a political act, the



Yiddishists who wanted “to gain for it the respect and prestige that Hebrew enjoyed, [who] wanted to ‘legitimize’ Yiddish as a medium of secular artistic, moral and intellectual expression. To do so they needed to defeminize it, to dissociate it from its recent ‘degenerate’ history and its older demeaning connection with women and illiterates” (p. 34). But these political Yiddishists had an expressed commitment to women’s participation in class struggle, in allowing them comrade status.

Excerpts from Miriam Raskin’s novel *Zlatke* give us a glimpse of what was going on among Bundist men: “[Zavl] had often thought of their future together. During such contemplative moments, he would see himself and Zlatke sitting at the table eating a supper which she had prepared. Zlatke, happy and cheerful, wearing a white apron, presiding over their domesticity. Their family would grow, children would come. All the while they’d remain dedicated fighters in the movement; one thing had nothing to do with the other” (p. 113).

While male Bundists carried on this familiar fantasy of woman as both partner and servant, male Yiddish writers of the “classical period”<sup>8</sup> provided the structure for “defeminizing” Yiddish. Sholom Aleichem dubbed himself the heir (at 29) to Mendele Mokher Sforim (at 52) by calling himself Mendele’s “grandson.” “By making literature in *mame-loshn* patrilineal rather than matrilineal, Sholom Aleichem instantly created a male Yiddish literary dynasty which mirrored the rabbinical scholarly dynasties whose legitimacy and fame were rooted in Hebrew” (p. 37).

Most English readers, certainly most Jewish readers, will be familiar with the name Sholom Aleichem, even if only through “Fiddler on the Roof,” the musical based on his stories. If they’ve actually read Sholom Aleichem, then they’re likely familiar as well with I.L. Peretz, Mendele Mokher Sforim and I.B. Singer. These names form the portal of entry into Yiddish lit-

erature. The Yiddish writings of these men are widely available in English translations—once I found a copy of Mendele’s *The Travels and Adventures of Benjamin the Third* in a bookstore in Willits, California—a very Christian, very white, wide spot in the road.

But how about the writers: Sarah Hamer-Jacklyn, Esther Singer Kreitman, Rokhl Brokhes, Dora Schulner, Fradel Shtok, Miriam Raskin, Ida Maze, Shira Gorshman, Malka Lee, Yente Serdatzky, Celia Dropkin, Rachel Korn, Lili Berger, Blume Lempel, Chava Rosenfarb, Kadia Molodowsky, Chava Slucka-Kestin, Rikudah Potash?

Probably you scanned that list, saw maybe one or two familiar names, and thought, I get your point, the women have been overlooked. Go back and read the list out loud. Slowly. Three times, five. These are the names of your own lost inheritance, of your silent aunts, of the writers whose stories should have occupied your adolescent imaginations when stories gave

you keys to identity, rebellion, connection, community, values. You should have been given a volume of Kadia Molodowsky’s poetry on your thirteenth birthday, you should have encountered Sarah Hamer-Jacklyn’s *shtetl* stories whenever you read about Eastern Europe, and have had to write papers on Chava Rosenfarb’s moral universe in school.

Recently, having reentered academia, I’ve been impressed with how important the role of repetition is in defining what gets remembered. Writers

talk in the language of writers—who’s new, who’s hot, who’s hip, who’s classic. Nothing is a classic unless you feel its meaning stamped into your veins, unless it’s part of the way you look at the world.

That’s why it’s so important to learn the names of the writers in *Found Treasures* and not just to learn them, but to talk about them, to discover the handful of their translated po-



Sarah Hamer-Jacklyn, 1940s

ems and stories. For when a group of people has been denied, and that act of denial is even subliminally recognizable, those in the denying group (whether or not they have actively participated) become extremely anxious when the denied begin to reemerge. Oppressors fear the oppressed, they fear some kind of retribution for what they've done. Almost all of us have participated, at least passively or by acts of omission, in restricting access to others—to material wealth or literary discourse or political power or simply the space to say “we're pissed off.” Even those of us who have worked hard and long for women's recognition know that there have been moments when we've allowed acts of omission to go unchallenged. When the passed-over shout “wait a minute!” we tend to get defensive, sometimes deviously so. There are a hundred and one tricks for re-silencing those whom we do not wish to hear, or whose presence makes us uncomfortable in some way, not least among them: *oh that old thing, how boring, how strident, how outdated.*

Yiddish, that old country language, isn't it dead yet? Women, those tired complainers, are they still trying to claim the spotlight when so many more pressing issues exist?

*Sarah Hamer-Jacklyn, Esther Singer Kreitman, Rokhl Brokhes, Dora Schulner, Fradel Shtok, Miriam Raskin, Ida Maze, Shira Gorshman, Malka Lee, Yente Serdatzky, Celia Dropkin, Rachel Korn, Lili Berger, Blume Lempel, Chava Rosenfarb, Kadia Molodowsky, Chava Slucka-Kestin, Rikudah Potash.*

Before I talk about some of their individual stories, I'm going to shift the emphasis for a minute—from Yiddish *women* writers to *Yiddish* women writers. Why should we be concerned with *Yiddish* writing? Isn't it, after all, a small, little-used room down a dimly lit corridor in the mansion of world literature? If Yiddish vanishes, surely Sholom Aleichem will disappear along with Yente Serdatzky, and it will be moot to argue about defeminization. But English isn't vanishing, and those who are remembered will be the ones considered important enough to translate. *If Yiddish disappears.*

But if Yiddish has disappeared, where has it gone? Not only plants and animals have become extinct in the 20th century, so have an alarming number of languages. The disappearance of a language is usually preceded by those

who tell us the language is dying—wait, no pulse, yup, the language is dead! Is it part of the plan of genocide to say that a language is gone? I grew up in U.S. in the 50s and 60s where I learned there were no more “Indians,” not really, oh maybe Buffy St. Marie, but they're so rare you'll never meet one. In 1968, when I saw documentaries of policemen clubbing Native Americans in Seattle I was shocked—this is happening now, not three hundred years ago. Native American peoples live everywhere in the Americas. And many Native American languages still exist, despite the policy of brutally separating children from their families and insisting they speak only in English.<sup>9</sup> Now, today, someone is telling you someone else doesn't exist, their struggle is unimportant, their language is gone, something only qualified university accredited professionals can study. Someone standing outside the room in which you read this.

The case of Yiddish is interesting because it was pronounced dead not only by North America, but by Israel. Israel has an official policy: no Yiddish. None of that old country stuff, that jargon, that guttural Germanic sound. We're not going to sit at the U.N. and speak Yiddish, god forbid. The Diaspora was the metaphoric Tower of Babel for Jews: the Jews of Israel turned up speaking Ladino, Aramaic, Arab and Spanish dialects as well as Yiddish and all the languages of the countries of our dispersion. By making Hebrew the official language of Israel, the Israeli government tries to remake Jews into their Biblical image. The Diaspora is over, Israel says, it gave you nothing, it robbed you of your semitic sensibilities, Yiddish was among the languages you spoke when you were passively ghettoized and oppressed, leave it behind.

Oh, says the state, it's alright if a few grandmothers can't quite get the habit of Hebrew. The state allows for the eccentricities of old women, for their stubborn holding on to how it was. Only much later does the state realize how subversive old women are, how they whisper stories in the ears of the next generation when that generation has grown up and is looking for its ancestors.<sup>10</sup>

I meet women all the time who know at least a little Yiddish—a phrase or a line—who study, go to classes, take private lessons, find other women who remember. Interestingly

enough, much of the women's poetry that *does* appear in Yiddish anthologies was translated by women poets—did you know that Adrienne Rich, Jean Valentine, Miriam Waddington and Carolyn Kizer know enough Yiddish to translate poetry? I have a friend who grew up with Yiddish as her first language in a Yiddish speaking household. Her family are Satmar Hasidim—they speak Yiddish because they refuse to be assimilated. My friend points out that Yiddish is still the living and primary language of a hundred thousand Jews with a rich oral tradition, of women who go to the grocery and the laundromat, who yell after their children in the street.

Yiddish lies on the palm of the world like the white fluff of weeds. Blow it off, it disperses. How can the language that was “the language of the people” disappear if the people themselves are still here, at least some of them? If the language is blown away, won't it take root again? If it takes root and is changed won't we still recognize it, find ourselves in its new shapes? Metaphors are nice but they don't hold up to genocide, the elimination of species, the destruction of peoples and their cultures. Yiddish has certainly been changed forever by the Holocaust's elimination of over half its speakers (in 1939, 11 million Jews, 65-70% of the world Jewish population, spoke Yiddish<sup>11</sup>) and the massive assimilation of much of the rest. But it's not dead yet.

Language is political, it is the symbol for itself: the power to communicate, the power to define what constitutes the self of individuals and nations. Language carries the stories of a people—our sense of ancestry. David G. Roskies, in his essay “The Story's the Thing,”<sup>12</sup> maintains that one of Yiddish's functions was to keep the stories—the oral traditions—of Jews alive as Jews dispersed throughout the world. In the bundle of their possessions was Yiddish itself, and it held their moral and cultural histories. Now the situation is reversed—interest in “the stories” is part of what's keeping Yiddish alive.

My physical therapist, for instance, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, has a passionate interest in Jewish culture. She's been taking Yiddish lessons in a local adult education program, relearning a language she was familiar with in her childhood. She told me her mother

has begun to lose cognitive orientation, no longer remembering relatives or yesterday's conversations. One day she asked her mother if they could speak in Yiddish, so she could practice what she was learning in class. She discovered her mother remembered Aunt S. when they spoke in Yiddish instead of English, was still quite clear when asked about recent events using her first language. My physical therapist said she didn't really know why she was taking Yiddish when she started, but now she knows at least one reason: to be able to talk to her mother again.

This story, although it has interesting neurolinguistic implications, is meant here as metaphor. For those of us who are Ashkenazi,<sup>13</sup> the language of our mothers and grandmothers, of our home, the language of lullabies and endearment, the language of a passionate politics is being called dead while we are still alive, still remember it, and yes, while many of us can still speak it.<sup>14</sup> We need to be able to speak to our mothers again. There is a clear grass-roots resurgence of interest in Yiddish—the women who translated *Found Treasures* came together, after all, from diverse backgrounds in order to expand and use their knowledge of Yiddish. Four of the women anthologized in *Found Treasures* are still alive.

It is up to each of us to understand and resist erasure. Is this too political an exhortation for a book review? But *Found Treasures* is so intensely political, even at its most personal. One of the stories I find emblematic of the convergence of personal and political is Celia Dropkin's “A Dancer.” In it, at the onset of adolescence, Gysia awakens to “a melody within herself singing to the rhythm of her body.” She sees a ballet in Warsaw and longs to be a dancer, but gets married to the man who sees her dance at her sister's wedding. He goes to America first, she follows, and her body becomes a sturdy vehicle for working and bearing children. “Though she lived in a world of house, husband and children, her heart would sometimes beat strangely when she saw people dancing; would beat as if in premonition, as if trying to recall something ... something dear to her.”

But Gysia has dreams, night dreams which she doesn't remember, of dancing with the ease and grace of a bird flying. The obituary of a famous dancer brings her dream to conscious-

ness, a consciousness in which only her knowledge of herself as a great dancer remains. Something has cursed her so she can no longer dance as she knows she should be able to. Eventually she “entered the sanatorium,” emaciated and unspeaking, floating “with a benign smile on her parched lips.”



Kadia Molodowsky, Ida Maze, Rachel Korn

In their introduction to this story,<sup>15</sup> the editors mark its importance as “a rare moment in Yiddish fiction” because of the “articulation of the protagonist’s affection for and consciousness of her own body.” Dropkin’s graphic representation of Gysia’s body *is* in some ways markedly different from the ways in which other authors deal with the flesh in *Found Treasures*—in particular how the young Gysia admires her physical maturation and abilities—yet her body quickly becomes the site of metaphor, in much the same way that the bodies of other protagonists become metaphorical sites for exploration of women’s oppression.

But “The Dancer” can also be understood as embodying the entire predicament of Yiddish women writers. Many of the authors in this book went through long silent periods, often after promising starts in their late teens and early twenties. Yente Serdatzky stopped writing for twenty-seven years after a conflict about an honorarium with the Yiddish daily *Der forverts*. Shira Gorshman, who wrote “Unspo-

ken Hearts” (a moving, complex story about a mother and her politically active daughter attempting a reconciliation after several decades, which gets interrupted by war and never finished), began writing in her childhood but abandoned it until 1938. Her first collection of short stories, *33 Short Stories*, did not appear

until 1961 when she was 55.<sup>16</sup> Fradel Shtok, one of the few writers whose translated poetry was anthologized in more than one English collection, withdrew into a depression after her attempt at a novel in English drew bad reviews in 1927, and died in a mental hospital sometime in the ’30s.<sup>17</sup> Celia Dropkin only had one volume of her poetry published during her lifetime, although her biographical note in *Found Treasures* states she: “pioneered eroticism in Yiddish poetry. She is considered one of the most talented Yiddish writers and is acknowledged for her poetic

rhythms and intensity of feeling.”<sup>18</sup>

As Klepfisz points out in her Introduction, “an astonishing number of these stories revolve around unexpressed feelings, thoughts and secrets” (p. 55). Male Yiddish literature is often framed by the device of a conversation between two men,<sup>19</sup> but the women’s stories in *Found Treasures* are spoken into silence, messages stuck in bottles that have finally reached us. Looked at in this light, their very appearance echoes the themes of the miraculous and magic realism found in Yiddish folktale.

The choice of stories necessarily reflects the editors’ concerns—as Frieda Forman stated, they deliberately chose central women characters. The editors “asked the question, ‘How much does this story show of the lives of women that hasn’t been revealed before?’” and “also wanted pieces that speak to a modern sensibility.”<sup>20</sup> Most of the stories deal with the complexities of relationships between women. Daughters deal with their mothers in ten stories and mothers come to terms with their children in another six. Ten pieces in this

collection address problems of gender inequity, thirteen grapple with issues of abandonment. But only two of the stories have familiar “wedding scenes” (from a woman’s point of view), and in the few that are directly concerned with the various consequences of heterosexual relationships, men are background figures, although fathers’ feelings for their daughters (both positive and negative) are important in five. Since we don’t have any other Yiddish women’s fiction anthologies in translation available, it’s impossible to say whether these approaches are typical.

Themes we might expect to find in Jewish writing over the span of this century come up frequently—leaving home and homeland, embarking on a quest, personal relationships to political movements, questions of trust and betrayal, bearing witness to the lives and places destroyed in the Holocaust. Only one rabbi (foolish and misogynistic) and one wise man (both in “My Mother’s Dream”) show up, and there’s little that refers back to either folktale or religious/Biblical concerns. Even stories with traditional characters give us startling new images, as in “My Mother’s Dream” which begins the collection on a compelling note. Some clearly come from the Orthodox separation of the sexes—stories like “The Zogerin,” a

story of breathtaking bitterness, about the woman who interprets religious services to other women in the temple behind the women’s partition, the one who prays on their behalf.<sup>21</sup> Others, like “Correspondents,” the only story which deals with lesbianism more or less directly<sup>22</sup> (if depressingly), are probably anomalies. The most contemporary stories come from Israel and open up a whole new perspective—Rikudah Potash, writing in Yiddish about the Kurdish and Yemenite Jewish women of Jerusalem. Potash’s “Jazal the Purim Player,” about an old woman who chose solitude after her husband the butcher died, overseen acting out the role of Queen Ester with her broom, and “Prikhah’s Complaint to God,” about an illiterate woman who wants to



Esther Singer Kreitman

go into the fruit business, are narrative gems.

The work in *Found Treasures* stands in contrast to so much of contemporary women’s fiction in English (Jewish or not), which deals with the intimate struggles of couples—again, this may reflect the editors’ feminist vision. But the stories considered as a group show women focused on their place in the sphere of events—they are stories of “becoming” where women struggle for identity and engage the world directly.

“Edgia’s Revenge” by Chava Rosenfarb takes that struggle to heart. Closer in length and narrative complexity to a novella than to a short story, “Edgia’s Revenge” is among the most memorable and compelling narratives I have ever read. I can’t tell you Chava Rosenfarb’s work is classic if you’ve never heard of her, if your friends have never heard of her, if no school you ever went to or thought about going to taught her work.

But I want to. “Edgia’s Revenge” is a complicated, sophisticated, thoughtful and difficult tale. It’s the story of a relationship between guard and prisoner, the narrator, Rella, who was a *capo*<sup>23</sup> in Auschwitz and the only woman whose life she saved in a moment of compassion, as they become tangled in each other’s lives in post-war Montreal.

The narrator, confessing her soul to an invisible other—perhaps to no other at all—tells her story in a long flashback as she prepares herself to commit suicide. Rosenfarb explores what it means to be both victim and perpetrator of violent genocide, the nature of women’s friendship, the ways in which women subordinate themselves to men and how others perceive them as a result of that subordination, the motivations of a criminal confessing her crimes. She investigates, among many themes, the issues of a survivor’s guilt, the meaning of ethical relativism, the ways in which devotion to causes can warp personalities and various forms of gender inequity. All of these strands are tightly wrapped around the interactions of women protagonists—women whose attraction to and repulsion from each other forms



the core of the story. You may not realize how rarely you read this in Jewish literature but when you do it strikes you. Strikes you odd at first—that women should be engaged in this psychic space which has little to do with being homemakers, lovers or mothers.

Rosenfarb takes a character who's been cast out of the ordinary sphere of moral law by the Holocaust and the particular way in which she survived. Rella hangs on to Edgia as symbolic of her essential goodness, but when Edgia finally rejects Rella (and all those who would put themselves above her by virtue of having "saved" her), Rella finds her way back to a sense of humanity by contemplating death—where she will once again "take the hand of my little sister Maniusha" (p. 310). In the course of this, Rosenfarb appears to be investigating the problem of god—that god-who-could-allow-the-camps. Edgia engages in a discourse on the meaning of Christ figures (those who are perceived to suffer for the sins of others), and within this discourse it's possible to make out an argument that Rosenfarb is having with Dostoevsky, among others, on the resolution of human isolation and evil into the embracing oneness of that *he* (whether god or Jesus) who suffers for us all.<sup>24</sup> Edgia's husband complains "When I ask her what she's dreaming about, she answers that she is dreaming of a time when all the world's Jesuses will climb down from their crosses, become astronauts, and move to other planets. Because here on earth they don't fit in properly, and they do great harm without meaning to, and for this reason they are idolized" (p. 287).

Edgia clearly imagines herself as the cross, which has to bear the one who claims to save her but is, in reality, her oppressor. While contemplating Christ isn't exactly a *Jewish* theme, dealing with guilt and judgment certainly is—and it's easy to understand how the imposing cross on Mt. Royale in Montreal inspired this way of approaching the problem of what, in the end, makes us human, what connects us to other human beings. Rosenfarb appears to make a subtle indictment of the religious values of pre-modernist literature, while mocking those who chase after "modern" culture, whom she sees trying to fill a spiritual void without self-knowledge. She discloses a stunning depth of pain when she writes, "I remove the lying inscription above the entrance to Auschwitz, *Arbeit macht*

*frei*, work makes you free, and replace it with another, 'death makes you free'" (p. 310).

"Edgia's Revenge" could well be the subject of a book-length literary examination (or two). I hope women will give this work the consideration it deserves—in community discussion groups as well as in academic settings.

Rosenfarb is currently living—and writing—in Montreal. In addition to her one work that's been translated into English, *The Tree of Life*, Chava Rosenfarb has published six other books of poetry and fiction in Yiddish (the most recent in 1992) and has garnered numerous awards. Since I doubt I will ever become a fluent Yiddish reader, I have to depend on those who are to translate them.<sup>25</sup>

I hope *Found Treasures—Stories by Yiddish Women Writers* will prove there's an English reading audience for this work and that more publishers will commission translations. All the work these writers, Frieda Forman, Ethel Raicus, Sarah Silberstein Swartz, Margie Wolfe, the various translators and Irena Klepfisz have done must not get buried again.

Now I often open *Found Treasures* again just to look at the four pages of photographs of these writers. My longing for them is so great I half expect them to speak. Knowing the lives, poems and stories of these women has become crucial to my own identity as a Jew. *This* is my family album. *Found Treasures* does nothing less than reconstruct our understanding of modern Jewish history and literature. So go buy it already, and read.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> My thanks and appreciation to Irena Klepfisz and Ruth Rischin, whose discussions and encouragement helped me through the process of this review.

<sup>2</sup> *Sojourner*, February 1995, Vol. 20, No. 6, "The Prospect of Continuity is Joyful to Me," interview by Ellen Rifkin. Technically, "found art" is made from some castoff object which acquires its artistic importance by the act of juxtaposition, not because of its inherent substance.

<sup>3</sup> Leo Rosten, for instance, in the *Joys of Yiddish*, describes being puzzled by the phrase "America gonif" (*gonif* means thief), and coming to interpret it positively as "a declaration of possibilities beyond belief." I don't agree. I think those immigrants who said "America gonif" meant that America stole their children, or crushed their idealist youth in sweatshops, or made individualism a cult that un-

dermined the collective experience of Judaism.

<sup>4</sup> This information is from the Preface. Frieda Forman's interview in *Sojourner* indicates that the four editors of *Found Treasures* are among "fifteen or seventeen" women in the Yiddish study group.

<sup>5</sup> For the data on this, see "Di mames, dos loshn! The Mothers, The Language: Feminism, *Yidish-kayt*, and the Politics of Memory," Irena Klepfisz, in *Bridges*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 17-18.

<sup>6</sup> Stop here for a minute and consider all those stories waiting.

<sup>7</sup> "Retrieving the lost world of our foremothers," *The Jerusalem Post*, Friday, January 20, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Starting with Mendele Mokher Sforim writing from the middle of the 19th c. on.

<sup>9</sup> In contrasting Native Americans and Jews I am not claiming that "they are the same." What I am trying to do is show that among the weapons of genocide is the destruction of language, and that there are parallels that can illuminate the ways in which this weapon is used.

<sup>10</sup> I'm advised that the North American and European Yiddish revival, to which *Bridges* makes a considerable contribution, is beginning to cause an Israeli change of heart.

<sup>11</sup> Emanuel S. Goldsmith, *Architects of Yiddishism in the Beginning of the 20th Century—A Study in Jewish Cultural History*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press: Cranbury, NJ, 1976.

<sup>12</sup> In *What Is Jewish Literature?*, Hana Wirth Neshet, ed., The Jewish Publication Society: Philadelphia, PA, 1994.

<sup>13</sup> That Yiddish was the universal language of pre-Holocaust Ashkenazi Jews is a generalization. *Bridges* editor Shlomit Segal pointed out to me that beginning in the 18th century with the *Haskala* (the Jewish Enlightenment), many Ashkenazi Jews abandoned or minimized the use of Yiddish in favor of their national languages or dialects of those languages. That is, the process of assimilation-in-the-name-of-progress, which I tend to identify with early 20th century North America, was already well under way in Europe.

<sup>14</sup> No, I can't. My inability to speak Yiddish made me hesitant to take on this review until Irena Klepfisz reminded me, "that's why the book is in English. It's for you."

<sup>15</sup> All the stories begin with a paragraph explaining the context of the story and sometimes a brief interpretation. Some of these paragraphs state the obvious, others condense too much in a small space. Some readers may find these useful, others may find them annoying. They do contribute to the political atmosphere of the book as a whole—the transla-

tors' knowledge that they're giving us something momentous in this collection, and we need guideposts in order to find our way.

<sup>16</sup> "A female perspective on *shtetl*, kibbutz life," by Sue Fishkoff. *The Jerusalem Post*, Friday, January 20, 1995.

<sup>17</sup> Irena Klepfisz wrote a poem, "Fradel Shtok," on Shtok's fate and the difficulty of moving between languages, which is one of my personal favorites. It's included in her book *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue, Poems Selected and New (1971-1990)*, The Eighth Mountain Press: Portland, OR.

<sup>18</sup> But Sol Liptzin, writing on Celia Dropkin in *The Maturing of Yiddish Literature* (Jonathen David Publishers, NY: 1970) wrote, "She compressed in rhymed quatrains uncomplicated experiences: the submission of a wife to a beloved husband, the happiness of a mother, the blessedness of living without pain or guilt." Some of her poems in *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry* had lines like: "There's no room left inside me/for myself/ and my soul lies like a dog at your feet/ growing fainter and fainter" and "I'd like to see you/dead" (both called "Poem" and both translated by Adrienne Rich). Among the necessities of having authors' full texts available in English is not having to rely on men like Liptzin to tell us what women were writing about.

<sup>19</sup> See Ruth R. Wisse, "Two Jews Talking: A View of Modern Yiddish Literature," *What Is Jewish Literature?*, Hana Wirth Neshet, ed. To have considered this device representative of Yiddish literature as a whole without considering fiction by women appears to be typical of the institutionalized sexism in Yiddish literary criticism.

<sup>20</sup> From Forman's interview in *Sojourner*, February 1995, Vol. 20, No. 6.

<sup>21</sup> The *zogerin* is a character I've never seen written about besides in this story.

<sup>22</sup> Although who knows how many lost lesbian stories there are? There were many lesbians among the "New Women" of the Progressive Era (1900-WW1). My own grandmother pasted photographs over those pages in her diary which appear to chronicle a girlhood crush.

<sup>23</sup> A prisoner enlisted to be the prisoners' police.

<sup>24</sup> You don't have to know Dostoevsky to appreciate the moral complexity of Rosenfarb's characters, but knowing her engagement with a literary tradition of grappling with god adds another dimension to the work.

<sup>25</sup> Although translators' aren't named for each story, it's interesting to note that Chava Rosenfarb's daughter, a noted Yiddish translator, translated "Edgia's Revenge."