

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 verni 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

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

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: *Rossia 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

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. Estraiikh: "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 Dnepropetrovsk, 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 *Literarische 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

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. Yerusalmiski: "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. Estraiikh: "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 schildert 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 oysgelashayt", 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-leyb – a hekdesht
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 shoy'n zingen
 Fun levone un fun royzn,
 Nor tsi emes take iz shendlekh shoy'n 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 moy!*" (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.*

· 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 geboynn...
 Vayberish hob ikh mikh haynt tseveynt:
 – Vi zol ikh kukn glaykh im in di oynn?
 [...]
 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

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

²⁴ E. Dobrenko: *Formovka sovetskogo pisatel'ia. 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.

²⁶ E. G. Gimpel'son: *NEP i sovetskaiia politicheskaiia sistema, 20-e gody*, Moscow: Institut ruskoj 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 riddled 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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