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JEWISH FEMINISM 1913: YENTE SERDATZKY'S "CONFESSION"

Translated and introduced by Irena Klepfisz

The writer

Yente Serdatzky was born on September 15, 1877 in Aleksat near Kovne, Lithuania. Her father, Yehoash Raybman, a scholar and used furniture dealer, gave his daughters a basic Jewish education. Yente attended a kheder for girls where she was taught by yeshive boys and at the age of 13 she was apprenticed to a seamstress. Afterwards she worked in a spice shop in Kovne and later ran her own store. During this time she read Russian, German and Hebrew literature. She began to write in 1905, when she was already the mother of two. She moved to Warsaw and published her first story "Mirl" in the Yiddish daily *Der veg* (*The way*). When I. L. Peretz became its editor, he accepted a second story and encouraged her to continue writing. Serdatzky emigrated to the States in 1907, first settling in Chicago and then moving to New York where she ran a soup kitchen. She continued publishing skits, stories, tales, one-acters and dramatic pictures in a variety of journals and magazines among them Avrom Reisen's *Dos naye land* (*The new land*) and eventually became a regular contributor to *Der forverts* (*The Jewish Daily Forward*). Her *Geklibene shriftn* (*Collected writings*) appeared in 1913 and included short fiction, children's stories, and one-act dialogues.

In 1922, after an argument over an honorarium, Serdatzky left *Der forverts*. She stopped writing and withdrew from Yiddish literary circles. During a long period of silence, she supported herself by renting furnished rooms. She resumed writing in 1949 and over the next 6 years published more than 30 stories in the *Nu york vokhnblat* (*New York weekly page*). She died on May 1, 1962.

Male critics appreciated Serdatzky's talent, but were ambivalent about her feminism. Zalmen Reisen, for example, noted rather patronizingly that Serdatzky's fiction concentrated on "the quiet tragedies of woman, her longing for love, her loneliness..." And the poet Yankev Glatshayn, who agreed with critical opinions that considered Serdatzky "the most talented woman fiction writer" of her generation, indirectly dismissed her feminist perspective by insisting she was an "angry writer whose quarrel was mostly with herself."

— Drawn from the biography in *Leksikon fun yidisher literatur, prese un filologi* (*Lexicon of Yiddish literature, press and philology*)

The story

"Vide" (*Confession*) appeared in Serdatzky's *Geklibene shriftn*. Set in the "old country" and in the States, it takes place before and after the failed 1905 Russian revolution and provides an explicitly feminist critique of radical and progressive movements. Serdatzky exposed the revolutionary rhetoric of male political activists and intellectuals and scrupulously measured the difference between theory and practice: even within a progressive context, women's needs were not being met because women were valued only as wives and mothers.

Though the main character, Mary Rubin, presents her story within an awkward frame and sometimes with melodrama, her despair is appropriate to the circumstances, a reflection of Serdatzky's intelligence and passion. All the fine speeches and political platforms did not change the material conditions of women, even among progressives and activists. At the turn of the century Jewish women — including those devoted to political causes — were castaways either because their husbands abandoned them or because they remained unmarried or because their bosses exploited and sexually abused them. Mary Rubin's fears that many of her girlfriends might turn to the streets for economic survival were rooted in reality: "In 1912, 19 percent of the prostitutes in one major New York reformatory were Jewish."¹

But the picture in "Vide" is not totally grim. Mary reveals that since her illness she has been supported by one rich woman and twenty "acquaintances" i.e., working-class girlfriends. She draws no comfort, however, from the support of

this loyal community, nor from the commitment and sisterhood expressed by the nameless narrator-writer. Apparently Serdatzky herself could not imagine a woman being content outside of marriage and family.

The Yiddish text and the translation

Yiddish orthography was not standardized until the late 1920s by YIVO Institute of Jewish Research, long after Serdatzky's *Geklibene shriftn* appeared. Because many new students of Yiddish have expressed a desire to read Yiddish women writers in the original, I wanted the story to be immediately accessible even to beginners and modernized its spelling. But Serdatzky's language and the conspicuous German component have not been altered and the text remains exactly as Serdatzky wrote it. Dovid Rogow and Lorin Sklamberg of YIVO were very generous in typesetting and helping to proofread the final galleys. Roberta Newman, also of YIVO, helped in finding the appropriate visual material. Advocates of Yiddish are indebted to Clare Kinberg of the Bridges collective for first suggesting that the Yiddish be published with the translation.

Two difficulties in the translation: It was impossible to show Serdatzky's use of English words (country, bar, ball, operations). Sometimes these appear in quotation marks indicating Serdatzky's awareness of the mingling of the two languages. At other times English words are simply incorporated into the sentence.

More problematic is the lack of specificity of the political setting. Mary Rubin never identifies which political groups or movements she was criticizing (socialists, anarchists, communists — or all of them). The word *bavegung* (movement) appears without elaboration as does *khaverte(s)* which means either "girlfriend" or "comrade" (female). Though Serdatzky's biography does not link her with any political party, Mary's reference to her hometown's *birzhe* — "a sort of street labor market where workers in certain trades gathered hoping to find employment"² — points to the Jewish Labor Bund since most (but not all) *birzhes* were Bund dominated. Also Mary's frequent use of the word *bakante* (acquaintance) in reference to the two young men and girlfriends is interesting because *bakante* served as the Bund's password for identifying members.³ Secrecy was necessary in Europe, but certainly not in the States, so it's unlikely that Mary would

use this term in reference to Bund members here. Still, she is oddly reticent throughout the story about *di radikale partay* (radical party) which she joined. Perhaps Serdatzky feared even greater hostility if her work implicated a specific political group.

I received assistance with the translation from the Yiddish poet Bella Schaecter-Gottesman and Prof. Mordekhai Schaecter, both of whom patiently helped untangle knots. I am especially indebted to Rena Fisher who located a copy of of Serdatzky's *Geklibene shriftn*.

NOTES

1. Sydney Stahl Weinberg, *The World of Our Mothers: Lives of Jewish Immigrant Women* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988) p. 92. This history and Irving Howe's *The World of Our Fathers* have extended sections on the special difficulties experienced by Jewish immigrant women.
2. Henry J. Tobias, *The Jewish Bund in Russia: From Its Origins to 1905* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), p. 101.
3. The use of *bakante* is explained in the chapter "Tkh ver a 'bakanter'" (I become an acquaintance) in L. Berman's memoir *In loyf fun yorn: zikhroynes fun a yidishn arbeter* (The passage of years: memoirs of a Jewish worker [New York: Farlag "Undzer tsayt", 1945], pp. 104-108). Use of the codeword was further corroborated by Prof. Mordekhai Schaecter and life-long Bund member Chaim ("Bolek") Ellenbogen.