

Culture and Radical Politics: Yiddish Women Writers, 1890–1940*

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Contemporary historians of East European Jewish immigration have noted that the cultural life brought to America was transformed within the first two decades of the twentieth century. However, neither in the past nor in the present have scholars paid sufficient attention to the variety of cultural changes. For example, historians have not explored deeply enough the diverse patterns of the new American Jewish culture; certainly they have not considered the extent to which changing Jewish cultural forms were an expression of class and gender. This study of the lives and works of East European immigrant Yiddish women writers confronts these issues of diversity, class difference, and especially gender as providing different developments in the new American Jewish society.

During the last few years, I have collected information dealing with the lives of about fifty Yiddish women writers (Appendix I) whose extensive literary works appeared in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century and who have been ignored by historians.¹ These fifty writers shared certain common characteristics and may be therefore classified as a group by the social historian, although they never considered themselves to be a distinct female group of Yiddish writers in America.

What does a simple prosopographic portrait reveal about these writers? First, they were all women who came from the poorer classes of East European Jewry. A few were daughters of impoverished merchant families; others were raised in an artisan environment; but most came from the proletarianized Jewish classes of recently industrialized Russian-Poland and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Their parents, particularly their mothers, were almost illiterate. Few received advanced formal education either in Eastern Europe or in America. Yet in America they became writers – journalists, poets, short story writers and novelists – and represent a

* The author acknowledges the kind assistance of Hillel Kempinski of the Jewish Labor Bund Archives and Dina Abramowicz of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

1 A major portion of the biographic information can be found in *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur* (New York: 1956–1968); Zalman Reisen, *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese un filologye* (Vilna: 1927–29); Ezra Korman, *Yidishe dikhterins* (Chicago: 1928); Shmuel Roszinski, *Di froy in der yidishe poezie* (Buenos Aires: 1966) and Ber Green, “Yidishe dikhterin,” *Yidishe kultur*, December, 1973; January, 1974; March, 1974 and April-May, 1974.

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first generation of Jewish women, immigrant and poor, who interpreted their own lives in their own language.

Emigrating mainly in the years between 1905 and 1920 and settling in large urban centers (New York, Chicago and Los Angeles), they wrote exclusively in Yiddish for audiences who still communicated primarily in *mameloshn*. Only a few individuals, like Fradel Stock, Anna Rappaport and Hinde Zaretsky, experimented with English, but failed to make the linguistic transition. All of the fifty women writers appeared in those Yiddish newspaper and literary journals which both advocated radical political ideologies and which espoused some form of secular Jewish life in America. The Jewish anarchist, socialist, Yiddish literary avant garde and later in the 1920's and 1930's, the Jewish Communist presses regularly accepted the literary work of women, although much of this literature did not deal directly with contemporary political subjects. These literary productions dealt more with female, Jewish, and working class identity and with adjustment to immigrant life.

Consequently, along with their male counterparts, these women writers were spokeswomen for a politically radical Jewish subculture which existed within the general American Jewish society but at the same time possessed its own outlook and its own political, social and cultural institutions. This Jewish subculture, consisting mainly of needle trades workers, small businesspeople, clerks, students, teachers and artists, expressed one form of secular Jewish existence in America. These people were known as the *vettlikhe yidn* (secular Jews), the *radikaln* of the Jewish Left. They rejected Orthodox Judaism with its rituals and rabbinical leadership, and in its place accepted a Jewish identity, termed *yiddishkeit*, which was committed to the preservation of the Yiddish language, the celebration of historic Jewish holidays, and the cultivation of Jewish loyalties. Their *yiddishkeit* also included a special devotion to the Jewish working class, the international working class and America, their adopted home. Their ideology posited a belief in the possible creation of a distinct Jewish society as part of a culturally pluralistic society in America. They wanted to be American without assimilating; they wished to express politically radical ideals, especially in matters social and economic; and they hoped to remain linguistically Yiddish speakers and cultural Jews.

In the ideological paradigm of the *vettlikhe radikaln* (secular radicals) these diverse goals and loyalties did not seem contradictory. Rather, with these purposes in mind this Jewish subculture created Jewish radical political parties (the Anarchists, the socialist Verband, the Communist International Workers Order, the Zionist-socialist Poale Zion) which in turn maintained Yiddish newspa-

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pers (*Tsukunft, Frayhayt, Fraye arbeter shtime*), Yiddish literary journals (*Brikn, Signal, Hamer*), literary-political discussion groups, choruses, mutual insurance groups, drama clubs, recreational camps and children's Yiddish schools and summer camps. It was an immigrant's society and an immigrant's dream that attracted thousands of people, at its center and at its margins, for several decades from the end of the nineteenth century until at least the fourth decade of the twentieth century. Women were an active force in creating and maintaining its institutions and Yiddish women writers were the visible and vocal representatives of their gender.

Yet these same women writers, although an important group, were also isolated from men and from each other. Their participation in the radical Yiddishist culture was not the same as male participation. Although members of the same anarchist, socialist or Communist parties and contributors to the same newspapers and journals, women writers functioned differently than men within the institutional structure of Jewish radical society. The hundreds of volumes of their fiction and non-fiction remain a distinct body of literature which documents, articulates and serves as a guide for understanding the perceptions of an entire generation of immigrant women who came of age in the United States before the second World War.

Had the fifty immigrant writers under discussion remained in Europe, they might have had some opportunity for educational and literary development since East European Jewish society was becoming increasingly secularized at the turn of the century. Girls attended *gymnasium*, some even took higher degrees at the university.² We must keep in mind that a vital Yiddish literature was also developing in twentieth century Europe not only in America. Yet as late as the 1930s, only a few exceptional women, like Kadia Molodowsky in Warsaw and Devorah Fogel in Lemberg, had attained any literary reputation of consequence.³

2 Celia S. Heller, *On the Edge of Destruction: Jews of Poland Between the Two World Wars* (New York: 1977), pp. 211-247.

3 Biographical information on Kadia Molodowsky (1896-1975) can be found in her serialized autobiography "*Mayn elter zeydes yerushe*" (My Great Grandfather's Inheritance), *Sviva*, March 1965-April 1974, and in the Kadia Molodowsky Papers at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. For Devorah Fogel (1903-1943) see Melech Ravitch, *Mayn Leksikon* (Montreal: 1945), pp. 188-190; Ephraim Roytman, "Di amolike Dvorah Fogel," *Israel shtime*, May 7, 1975 and I. B. Singer, "A Polish Franz Kafka," *New York Times Book Review*, July 9, 1978 who in discussing the writer Bruno Schulz mentions "Schulz wrote a number of his stories as letters to a woman friend, Dr. Deborah Vogel, who lived

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In America, on the other hand, a much larger number of Jewish women made their mark artistically or intellectually, albeit sometimes in a more circumscribed manner. The emergence of women as writers was part of the blending of old and new social and intellectual forces at work in American Jewish life, which provided a favorable climate for the acceptance of a female intelligentsia. Some of the Jewish women immigrants had already participated in cultural activities in Eastern Europe in the 1890's. This was especially true among the socialist, the Zionist-socialist and the anarchist immigrants. In addition, immigrant society in America was in need of interpreters of its new experiences, and intellectuals and critics, with little formal education but with insight into the contemporary scene, were perceived as authentic spokesmen. There was an enormous growth of Yiddish publications and talented and persevering women, without academic credentials, like men in similar circumstances, were encouraged to express their views in print.

Furthermore, during the Progressive era the American ideas of female emancipation reinforced existing radical Jewish attitudes toward female intellectuality and competence. But most important of all, theoretical ideas of equality were concretized by the behavior of Jewish women, particularly working women, who belied all contemporary stereotypes of immigrant women as passive victims of industrial American society. In the period between 1909, the year of the famous shirtwaist makers' strike, and the 1920's, when Jewish women workers and trade unionists helped organize the garment industry unions, Jewish immigrant women were militant and tenacious. Therefore those women who spoke on their behalf directly or indirectly received a hearing.

Under what circumstances did East European Jewish women become Yiddish writers? All that we have is scanty information in Yiddish biographical lexicons, rare autobiographies, and several oral history interviews.⁴ From these sources, it appears that most of the immigrant Yiddish women writers began to write before they left Europe for America.

in Lvov and wrote poetry in Yiddish. I knew Deborah Vogel and I also read her poems. In the Yiddish Writers' Club she was thought of as a brainy poet – an intellectual writer in contrast to one who writes with the 'heart.' I don't remember her poems now, and I wouldn't be able to say what their value was. I only recall that the more conservative poets mocked and mimicked her obscure style."

4 For autobiographical information see Rachel Holtman, *Mayn lebns-veg* (New York: 1948); Malke Lee, *Durkh kinderishe oygn* (Buenos Aires: 1958) and Molodowsky, "Mayn elter zeydes yerushe," *op. cit.* In August, 1978 this author interviewed the poets Rachele Veprinski, Rosa Gutman, Esther Shumiatcher, Reyzel Zychlinski and Hinde Zaretsky and the literary critics Meyer Stiker and Ber Green in New York City.

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Most of the fifty writers were born in small towns in Eastern Europe in the late 1880's and 1890's into Orthodox Jewish households. Their fathers often worked at a trade or were poor merchants and devoted part of their time to Talmudic scholarship. Their mothers were barely literate. Tending house, the women uttered prayers, the *tehines*, written especially for women, and used by women in the privacy of their homes to ask God for personal, family and community happiness.⁵ Orthodox Judaism as practiced in Eastern Europe severely circumscribed the role of women in public worship and in communal affairs, although women were permitted and even encouraged to practice a trade outside the home. Many women, in fact, supported the household while their husbands devoted their lives to religious study.⁶

The women born in the last decades of the nineteenth century were the first generation of East European Jewish women to receive a formal secular education.⁷ Several of the writers began their literary careers as children, encouraged by teachers in the Yiddish *folk shules*, the state Russian schools of the Pale of Settlement or by Hebrew tutors. For example, Zelda Knizshnik, one of the earliest Yiddish woman poets, who was born in 1869 near Vilna, wrote her first poem in Hebrew at the age of nine; her first Yiddish poem was published in 1900 in a Cracow literary journal, *Der yid*. Married at a young age, she was unable to pursue a literary career because of poverty and domestic responsibilities, but she began to write again in her later years. Her poems were personal laments upon her sad and lonely fate:

My husband is in America
A son is in Baku;
Another son is in Africa,
A daughter—God, I wish I knew!

Sent away, my little bird,
Exiled from her tree,
And I too wander, drift and dream
Where, where is my home?

A mother's heart is everywhere,
The soul fragments and tears—
I have, oh, so many homes
But rest I do not have.⁸

5 Interview with Hinde Zaretsky.

6 Charlotte Baum, "What Made Yetta Work? The Economic Role of Eastern European Jewish Women in the Family," *Response*, 18 (Summer, 1973), 32-38.

7 Heller, *op. cit.*

8 Korman, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-58. Unless otherwise noted, the translations are by the author.

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Even though girls were sent to school, parents quite often disapproved if the young writers took their literary interests too seriously. At times parents regarded writing itself to be an irreligious act. For instance, Malke Lee, one of the few Yiddish poets to write an autobiography, recalled with intense bitterness that her father, a pious man, secretly burned her entire portfolio of poetry in the family oven because he believed it was against God's will that a girl write.⁹ The same attitude is found in the reminiscences of Hinde Zaretsky. In an interview, she described how at the age of six or seven she was awarded a special candy at a Russian school for making a clever verbal play on the Russian word *tchelovyek* (human being). Dividing the word into two, Hinde recalled she created "*tzelyi vyek*, the whole world. It was my first intuitive experience with imaginative writing." Her parents were proud of her achievement but her grandmother disapproved:

When my bobe heard that I had written *tzelyi vyek*, the whole world, she came over and slapped me. She was my first critic. 'Why did you slap her when she was awarded a candy by the teacher,' my mother asked her. *Bobe* said, 'I will not be a partner with God. The world was created by Him and not by Hinde.'

But her grandmother's slap did not stop Zaretsky. "When I came to America I carried a notebook . . . wide . . . and long. With rhymed verses and small poems, inspired by, I do not know myself. The customs official took it from me. I cried, but nothing could be done. He thought I wrote revolutionary things. And I wasn't yet sixteen."¹⁰

Unlike Zaretsky, a considerable number of the women writers became radicals in Eastern Europe and their writing was part of a more extensive political consciousness. Often the initial step toward political radicalism came with the rejection of traditional Orthodox Jewish values. Many of these writers, while still quite young, were repelled by standards set for female behavior. Lilly Bes recalled in an angry poem:

Within me has burst my grandmother's sense of modesty
Revolt burns in me like effervescent wine.
Let good folk curse and hate me,
I can no longer be otherwise.¹¹

In their adolescent years in Europe, several writers either joined illegal radical Jewish political organizations or had a relative who belonged. These political groups were particularly important for

9 Malke Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

10 Interview with Hinde Zaretsky.

11 Lily Bes, "*Fun eygene vegn*," *Frayhayt*, January 20, 1929.

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those young women who did not receive a secondary education, the group providing the place of the school. Furthermore, at the turn of the century, European Jewish radicals lauded women as fellow workers and as fellow intellectuals, in contrast to the manner in which they were regarded by the Orthodox male leadership. The Bund hymn, the *Shvue* (Oath), which was intoned at every mass meeting and at strikes and demonstrations, called upon "*Briders un shvester fun arbet un noyt* ("Brothers and sisters, united in work and in need"). Within the Bund, there were special worker-education groups, where women without much education were given positions of importance. Women were appointed to executive committees, acted as union organizers, prepared propaganda leaflets and disseminated revolutionary literature.¹²

At the turn of the century, the women in the Bund did not attempt to organize separate socialist women's groups. Feminism, as an ideology, was considered to be bourgeois, serving the ambitions of middle class women. As workers, these women identified primarily with the Jewish proletariat, although they were aware of the special problems of women workers, such as unequal pay, work related health problems, and double work at home and in the factory. It was not until the 1920's, when the Bund became a legal party in Poland, that women's organizations were founded.¹³

Nevertheless Jewish women in radical groups felt they had broken tradition and were acting outside the female roles assigned them in Jewish society. The poets expressed these feelings. For instance, Kadia Molodowsky, poet, essayist and editor of literary-political journals in the United States from the late 1930's until the early 1970's, described her estrangement from traditional Jewish life in her famous poem "*Froyen lider*," written in Poland around 1919. Ambivalently, she expressed her sense of alienation which combined with feelings of strong ties to the women in her family. Adrienne Rich, the American poet and Molodowsky's translator, noted that the poem voiced the difficulty of escaping old models of womanhood and the need to find new concepts of self.

The faces of women long dead, of our family,
come back in the night, come in dreams to me saying,
We have kept our blood pure through long generations,

12 For women in the Bund see Anna Rosenthal, "*Di froyen geshtaltn in Bund*," *Unzer tsayt*, III-IV (November-December, 1947), 30-31 and Harriet Kram, "Jewish Women in Russian Revolutionary Movements" (MA thesis, Hunter College, The City University of New York); Mordechai V. Bernstein, "*Di brider un shvester—zeyer yikhes un vi alt zey zenen*," *Foroys* (June, 1963), 11-12.

13 Interview with Dina Blond, one of the leading women in the Bund, December, 1978.

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we brought it to you like a sacred wine
from the kosher cellars of our hearts.

And one of them whispers:
I remained deserted, when my two rosy apples
still hung on the tree
and I gritted away the long nights of waking between my white
teeth.

I will go meet the grandmothers, saying:
Your sighs were the whips that lashed me
and drove my young life to the threshold
to escape from your kosher beds.
But wherever the street grows dark you pursue me -
wherever a shadow falls.

Your whimperings race like the autumn wind past me,
and your words are the silken cord
still binding my thoughts.
My life is a page ripped out of a holy book
and part of the first line is missing.¹⁴

East European radicalism made a powerful impact upon those young Yiddish women writers who participated in these movements and gave their lives direction. In extreme instances, women who were trained in the underground Bund engaged in illegal revolutionary activities and were forced to emigrate to the United States in order to escape police arrest. Among these were Esther Luria, Shifre Weiss, Eda Glasser, and Rachel Holtman.

Esther Luria is particularly fascinating, since her life reflects a type of Jewish woman revolutionary transplanted from Eastern Europe to the United States. Little is known about her life, or her disappearance and possible death. Born in Warsaw in 1877, she was one of very few Jewish women not only to complete a gymnasium education but also to graduate from the University of Bern, Switzerland, with a Doctor of Humanistic Studies degree in 1903. In Bern she joined the socialist movement but returned to Russia to help fellow Jews as a member of the Bund. Involved in revolutionary activities in Warsaw, she was arrested several times and was sent to Siberia, in 1906, from where she escaped in 1912 and fled to New York City.¹⁵

Luria discovered that the socialist movement in America was very different than in Europe. Socialists in America were permitted to establish legal parties and a free press and had access to public

14 Kadia Molodowsky, "Froyen lider," translated by Adrienne Rich, in Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry* (New York: 1969), p. 284; *The Other Voice: Twentieth Century Women's Poetry in Translation* (New York: 1976).

15 *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, vol. V, p. 30.

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gatherings. Socialism was not an underground movement whose members were sent into exile for inciting revolution. In fact, American socialists were part of the general reform movement of the Progressive Era and often encouraged alliances and support of middle class reformers. This was especially true for women's issues. In Eastern Europe, where no one voted, socialists isolated their party from liberals and feminists. In the United States, on the other hand, where only men voted, socialists supported liberal and some feminist causes. At the height of the American suffrage movement, between 1914 and 1920, Jewish socialists, especially in New York, made a special point of supporting women's suffrage and the socialist Yiddish press frequently published articles on working women and the vote.

Esther Luria tried to earn a living by writing for the Yiddish socialist press in New York: the *Jewish Daily Forward*, *Tsukunft*, and *Glaykhhayt* (the Yiddish edition of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union paper *Justice*). Her articles about Jewish salon women in Germany, the poet Emma Lazarus and the sociologist Martha Wolfenstein were meant to impress her working class readership with the fact that women, even Jewish women, had made important contributions to society outside the home.¹⁶

After 1920 and the passage of the nineteenth amendment, Luria's articles appeared with less frequency. She then tried to support herself by lecturing on general socialist topics, but there was no interest in her views that did not pertain to women's issues. Unmarried and without family, she "lived in terrible poverty and died alone in the Bronx, New York." Even the *Leksikon* records her death as "192?"

At the turn of the century and well into the second and even third decades of the twentieth century Yiddish women writers were considered by literary critics to be rare phenomena or as Molodowsky noted sarcastically, "gentle, often exotic flowers of the literary garden."¹⁷ Editors of Yiddish newspapers and journals, especially the anarchist and socialist press, were eager to publish the work of women poets and short story writers. Women's literature was both

16 "Berimte yidishe salon froyen," *Tsukunft*, XIX, 2 (February, 1914), 189-195; "Berimte yidishe froyen in America un England," *ibid.*, XX, 9 (September, 1915), 835-838; "Emma Lazarus," *ibid.*, XXI, 9 (September, 1916), 792-797; "Martha Wolfenstein," *ibid.*, XXII, 4 (April, 1917), 233-234. For Jewish socialist support of women suffrage in New York, see Norma Fain Pratt, *Morris Hillquit* (Westport, Conn.: 1979), pp. 70-71.

17 Kadia Molodowsky, "A por verter vegn froyen dikhterin," *Signal* (July, 1936), 36.

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a symbol of modernity and a way of increasing circulation. Women wrote about women, a subject which seemed to sell papers. There were also editors and literary critics who were concerned with the quality of the emerging American Yiddish literature and who felt that women might make a special contribution to this genre and therefore encouraged female writers. Among this latter group we should note the literary editor and socialist Abraham Reisen, the anarchist editor of the *Fraye arbeter shtime* Sh. Yanovsky, and the poet and literary critic A. Glanz.

The place of women in Yiddish literature was rarely discussed, however, during this period. An article by A. Glanz that appeared on October 30, 1915 in *Fraye arbeter shtime* called "*Kultur un di froy*" (culture and the woman), was one of the very few on the subject. Glanz lamented the fact that culture had become stagnant because it was a lopsided product of male creativity; Yiddish culture had therefore become impotent. "Women are not in our culture, neither her individuality nor her personality." Women had a "new power, a new element" which, if introduced into literature, would also liberate the male and revitalize male originality. Men suffer from egoism and from blind selfish individualism; they think only of themselves. Women were the opposite of men:

By nature women are not egoistical. By nature women are bound organically to other lives. Out of her body new life comes. Another kind of knowing exists for her. She has a second dimension and understands nature. She is a mother in the deepest sense of the word. Men are ephemeral, women are concrete.

Therefore, "if these female characteristics are introduced into our literature a true revolution would result."¹⁸

The revolution Glanz envisioned was, however, slow to arrive. In fact, most of the literary careers of young women writers, although received with some initial enthusiasm, really never matured. This was especially true for the writers of the period before the 1920's but to some extent later as well. The lives of two poets, Anna Rappaport and Fradel Stock, and one short story writer, Yente Serdatzky, are typical of women writers of this period.

Anna Rappaport has been called "the first woman social poet" by the literary historian Nahum Minkoff. Born in 1876, she emigrated to the United States from Kaunas at the age of twenty. Her father had been a famous rabbi in Kaunas and her brother was studying for a medical degree at Columbia University. Anna went to work in a sweatshop and, after experiencing a personal sense of outrage because of conditions, she became a socialist. In 1893, a

18 A. Glanz, "*Kultur un di froy*," *Fraye arbeter shtime*, October 30, 1915.

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year of depression and unemployment when male poets like Morris Rosenfeld and David Edelstadt were already well known for their social protest poetry which expressed their responses to immigrant American life, Rappaport made her literary debut in the Yiddish socialist newspaper *Di arbeter tsaytung*. Her first poem, “*A bild fun hungers noyt in 1893*,” (A picture of the hardship of hunger in 1893) was of this genre, describing the unemployment problems of Jewish women in New York City. Other poems followed, portraying the conditions of women in the factories and preaching a new world order through socialism. All her poems describe the painful plight of immigrant Jewish women, especially their attempts to control their own lives in the face of terrifying social realities. One of her most interesting poems, “*Eyn lebnsbild*” (picture of life) relates how mother-love becomes corrupted in an industrial society, with opportunism leading to the destruction of the daughter. The mother convinces the daughter to marry a man the girl does not admire. “You will be free of the machine and you will grow to love him,” advises mother. But the marriage ends in failure. The daughter explains her difficulties in the last stanza. The Yiddish style is intentionally simple, childlike and almost captures the mood of a folksong:

Noch nit genug vos kayne ru
Hob ikh fun kind un hoys
Tsaylt er mir yede penny tsu
un tsaylt mir tsores oys.

(It is not enough I have no rest/from child and house/He counts out the pennies/and counts out trouble too).¹⁹

Rappaport ceased to write in Yiddish after 1919. For a time she wrote a comic column for the socialist English New York *Call* but at this point she disappeared from the literary horizon.²⁰

Fradel Stock did not write in the area of social realism. Although her poetry appeared in the anarchist *Fraye arbeter shtime*, she wrote sonnets and lyric poems which explored the institution of marriage and the relationships between men and women. Exotic, erotic, turbulent and audacious, her poetry challenged the passivity of women in love relationships. Courtship was central to her poems but women playfully dominated the interactions.

A young man like you, and shy
Come here. I'll coddle you like a child.

19 Nahum Minkoff, *Pionirm fun yidishe poezie in America* (New York: 1956), vol. III, pp. 57-80. “*Eyn lebnsbild*” is quoted on p. 68.

20 Anna Rappaport, “Flashlights,” *New York Call*, September 12, 1915; September 19, 1915; September 20, 1915; October 10, 1915 and December 19, 1915.

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Why are you shy? Such a young man afraid of sin?
Come on, you can hide your face in my hair.²¹

Beautiful, young and witty, Stock became a popular figure in the literary cafes of the Lower East Side frequented by the Jewish intelligentsia. Both women and men admired her poetry and her romantic appearance.²² In 1916 she began to publish short stories in the *Jewish Daily Forward* and in the new daily *Der tog*. In fact, the great demand for short stories in the growing Yiddish press provided opportunities for several other Yiddish women writers, whose stories about women in the shtetl and in contemporary modern America began to appear regularly after 1915–1916, such as Rachel Luria, Sarah Smith, and Miriam Karpilove.²³ But Stock was most admired, and a collection of short stories *Ertseylungen* was published in 1919.²⁴ Many of the stories were subtle psychological studies of ordinary people caught in the anguish of a culture in rapid transition. Unfortunately the reviews were unsympathetic, her severest critic being Glanz in *Der tog* on December 7, 1919. Glanz expressed the deepest disappointment in his unfulfilled expectations of women writers, and intimated that Stock was really a minor poet. An apocryphal story circulated in the literary cafes that upon reading the Glanz review Stock went to the editorial offices of *Der tog* and slapped her critic. But it is a fact that after her poor reception Stock stopped writing in Yiddish. Her first and only novel in English, *For Musicians Only*, appeared in 1927. It was poorly written and not well received by American literary critics. Sometime in the late 1920's Stock was institutionalized for mental illness.²⁵

The fate of Yente Serdatzky, also a writer of short stories whose earliest work was published before the 1920's, was considerably different in that she remained a Yiddish writer despite adverse criticism and long periods of unproductiveness. In 1969, Sh. Tennenbaum, an essayist and short story writer, wrote a laudatory essay about Serdatzky called "Queen of Union Square." He portrayed

21 Fradel Stock, "Sonnet," *Di naye heym* (New York: 1914), p. 5.

22 Interview with Rashelle Veprinski.

23 Miriam Karpilove, "Dos leben fun a meyd," *Yidishe arbeter velt*, June 30, 1916; Rachel Luria, "Di groyse kraft," *Der tog*, June 13, 1919; Sarah Smith, "Der man vil hershn" July 23, 1916.

24 Stock, *Ertseylungen* (New York: 1919).

25 A. Glanz, "Temperment," *Der tog*, December 7, 1919; M. Olgin, "Pesimizim," *Di naye velt*, January 9, 1920; Melech Ravitch, "Gezamelte ertseylungen," *Khoydish bibliografikal zhurnal*, 1923; Dovid Zeydenfeld, "A marionetn-molern," *Rehensons*, 1920; interview with Meyer Stiker. Jacob Glatstein, "Tsu der biografie fun a dikhterin," *Der tog*, September 19, 1965.

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her as cantankerous, articulate, intelligent and still politically radical as she reigned in the proletarian public park of Union Square in the 1960's.²⁶

Serdatsky was born in the shtetl of Alexat near Kaunas in 1879. Her father was a furniture dealer and Talmudic scholar who provided his daughter with an education which included a knowledge of Yiddish, German, Russian and Hebrew. Their home was a central meeting place for young Yiddish poets, and Abraham Reisen was a frequent visitor. Before 1905 Serdatsky married, gave birth to two children and was the proprietress of a small grocery store in Alexat. The revolution of 1905 stirred her literary imagination and was also her reason for moving to Warsaw. Her first short story "Mir!" was published in Warsaw in the journal *Veg* (1905), whose editor was the famous writer I. L. Peretz. In 1907 she emigrated to New York, where she became a well known writer, especially for the *Fraye arbeter shtime*. Her stories portrayed the fate of revolutionary Jewish women in the American environment. Isolated, left without ideals, often having sacrificed family life for the revolution, these women experienced mental depression, poverty and lonely deaths. The stories written in the 1908-1920 period reflect an unwillingness by the author to adjust to American life. Her central theme remained one of relentless estrangement. Critics abounded; she was excoriated for the thinness of her plots, the sameness of her characters and, as in the case of Fradel Stock, male critics expressed their disappointment in the long-awaited Yiddish women writers. In the 1920's she stopped writing and returned to shopkeeping only to reappear as an author in the 1940's.²⁷

Although mass East European immigration to America ceased in the mid 1920's, with the official termination of an open United States immigration policy, Jewish immigrants did not all become "Americanized" at this time. Nor was Jewish social mobility into the middle class a uniform phenomenon that came with this Americanization process. It is certainly a fact that Yiddish cultural institutions, along with their radical political ideologies, survived the decline of Jewish immigrants, withstood the Red Scare, and even survived the internecine warfare between the Jewish socialists and the Jewish Communists after the Bolshevik revolution. In fact this was the very period when the Jewish Left (now separated and identified as Communists socialists and Zionists and politically un-

26 Sh. Tennenbaum, *Geshtaltn bayn shrayb-tish* (New York: 1969), pp. 47-51.

27 Reisen, *Leksikon*, vol. II, pp. 684-685; Zalme Zylberweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, (Warsaw: 1934) vol. II, pp. 1524-1525.

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affiliated cultural Yiddishists), created more structured cultural institutions. More fervently than ever, the Left defended its right to a Jewish existence in America within a radical Yiddish culture.

The twenties witnessed also the emergence of large numbers of women writers whose work appeared with greater regularity in the Yiddish press and in anthologies and whose individual writings were no longer regarded as extraordinary events. These women writers fell into two major categories: the Yiddishist writers, many experimenting with avant garde techniques, who were not formal members of a particular political party (for example, Anna Margolin and Celia Dropkin); and a group of mainly Communist writers whose literary work was motivated by the propaganda needs of the Party and by the new ideals of writing a Yiddish proletarian literature.

We must also realize that at this time a Yiddish writer considered herself to be a "radical" intellectual, that is, a person who combined the quest for social justice with the search for personal authenticity, whether she actually belonged to a specific political group or not. She wrote for an audience of other intellectuals, primarily from the Jewish working class, although there were loyal Yiddishists whose economic circumstances would certainly have excluded them from this category. Occasionally, women writers, like some male writers, prided themselves on being "worker-poets," remaining in the factory and participating in trade union activities, but this was rare. Only a few women actually did manual labor for a living. Writing was one way of escaping the factory, without abandoning the ideals of working class solidarity.²⁸

However, the increase in women writers during the 1920's is not an accurate indication of the extent of their integration into radical politics and society. Despite their intense dedication, most women encountered difficulties in being accepted as equals by the Jewish male intelligentsia. Yiddish speaking radicals treated women with ambivalence. While women's work appeared in socialist, Communist and anarchist papers, not one woman was permanently employed on a radical paper as part of the editorial staff. And when articles were accepted, it was almost never about general political or economic matters but about "women's issues." If men found it difficult to earn a living by writing, women found it impossible.

Generally, women writers married and had children. The common pattern was for women to write before marriage and after

28 Two poets who regarded themselves as "workers" were Sara Barkan and Rashelle Veprinski. Ber Green, "Yidishe dikhterin," *Yidishe kultur*, December, 1973, 33; *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, vol. III, p. 491 and interview.

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widowhood. Intellectual isolation was something very real for them. There was little comradeship among women writers, in sharp contrast to the long term friendships and the intimate groups created by male writers. Women were only marginally tolerated in these circles. One had to be a wife, a sister, or a lover to gain admission into the inner sanctum of literary society where one could then share common intellectual and political interests. Many women writers did of course marry men who were active in Jewish Left political and literary circles, but the husbands were usually more famous than their wives and in some instances the wives depended upon their husband's position for their own publication. For example, Rachel Holtman married and later divorced Moishe Holtman, an editor of the Community daily *Frayhayt*. During their marriage she edited the Sunday woman's page, but apparently lost the position when their marriage was dissolved.²⁹

Immigrant Jewish women intellectuals did not make demands when they were excluded from the centers of power, nor did they organize a radical feminist movement. There were many reasons for this which were rooted in the structure of immigrant American society. Their isolation and reliance upon males, as mentioned earlier, was one factor. Also, traditionally Jewish men had been *the* intellectuals and, despite the late nineteenth century ideals of equality, echoes of earlier views could still be heard in radical circles. Cultural asymmetry was prevalent and this meant that male, as opposed to female, activities were always recognized as having greater importance, authority and value, even when females were engaged in the same activities. There were other factors as well. In the twenties Jewish cultural life was undergoing transformation toward Americanization, and the Yiddishists were beleaguered. Many Yiddish women writers supplemented their income by teaching the children of socialist and Communist parents in the Yiddish *folk* schools in the afternoon following the public school program. These women focused their energies on keeping the next generation from defecting culturally. Championing Yiddish and contending with children might have contributed to their non-contentiousness relative to their own position as women.

In general radical Jews did not feel secure in their newfound homeland in the 1920's. Political radicalism itself was under attack from the American government during the Red Scare. The radical movement was split into warring factions, and there was the added fear of anti-Semitism. These problems, faced by women as well as men, exacted a certain measure of solidarity.

²⁹ Holtman, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-100.

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Nevertheless, most women believed themselves emancipated and on an approximately equal basis with men in America. In contrast to the position of their grandmothers and mothers, they were breadwinners, voters, “legal” revolutionaries, and culture workers. No one seemed to notice that in the 1920’s separate women’s auxiliaries institutionalized the separate function of the sexes in both socialist and Communist organizations. It became accepted that men did the political work and women did the social and cultural work – although individual men and women transcended the barrier.

Individually, there were women writers who were dissatisfied with this state of affairs. New themes and experimental forms were introduced into Yiddish literature by both male and female writers. Some women writers, encouraged to express themselves openly, described their intimate feelings as women and their criticism of traditional Jewish values. Anna Margolin and Celia Dropkin typify the intensely personal and iconoclastic tone of the twenties, when they wrote about life’s disappointments, ambivalent feelings, their sexual interest and their hostility to conventional behavior and clichéd emotions. Both appeared often in the socialist *Tsukunft*, the anarchist *Fraye arbeter shtime* and in the new literary journal *Inzikh*.

Margolin’s life was unconventional. She had lovers, was twice married, and left an infant son in the permanent care of its father.³⁰ Her sharp wit and intellectual acumen antagonized many of her male contemporaries and made it difficult for her to earn a living as a writer; they rejected her aggressive, self-confident behavior. It is particularly interesting that in her only book of collected poems, *Lider* (1929), Margolin chose as her first selection a poem entitled “*Ich bin geven amol a yingele*” (I once was a little boy) and as her second selection “*Muter erd*” (Mother Earth).³¹ Like other women of her generation who could not accept social disdain even when they were unconventional, she eventually grew to pity herself. She wrote her own epitaph, a lament for a wasted life:

She with the cold marble breast
and with the slender illuminating hands,
She dissipated her life
on rubbish, on nothing.

30 Reuben Iceland, *Fun unzer friling* (Miami Beach, Florida: 1954), pp. 129–172.

31 Anna Margolin, *Lider* (New York: 1929), pp. 5–6; Adrienne Cooper Gordon, “Myths of the Woman as Artist: A Study of Anna Margolin,” paper presented at the YIVO Institute of Jewish Research Annual Conference, November 11–14, 1979.

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Perhaps she wanted it so, perhaps lusted after
unhappiness, desired seven knives of pain,
And poured life's holy wine
on rubbish, on nothing.

Now she lies broken
the ravaged spirit has abandoned the cage.
Passers by, have pity and be silent.
Say nothing.³²

Celia Dropkin's life was more conventional. She married, reared five children and kept house while, as her daughter said, "she worked on pieces of noodle paper, on scratch paper, on total chaos, on figuring out time. . . ."³³ Dropkin accepted the traditional role of women but in her poetry she expressed the ambivalence of anticipating freedom and fearing its consequences. Her poem "*Ich bin a tsirkus dame*" (I am a circus lady) illustrated this dichotomy:

I am a circus lady
I dance betwixt
Sharp knives that are fixed,
points up, in the arena.
If I fall I die,
But with my lithe body I
Just touch the sharp edge of your knives.

People hold their breath as my danger they see
And someone is praying to God for me.
The points of your knives seem
To me like a wheel of fire to gleam,
And no one knows how I want to fall.³⁴

Dropkin also expressed hostility toward men—a theme rarely expressed in Yiddish literature.

I haven't yet seen you asleep
I'd like to see
how you sleep,
when you've lost your power
over yourself, over me.
I'd like to see you
helpless, strung-out, dumb.
I'd like to see you
with your eyes shut,
breathless.

32 Iceland, *op cit.*, p. 172.

33 Interview with Esther Unger, Celia Dropkin's daughter, August, 1978, in New York City.

34 Celia Dropkin, "*Ich bin a tsirkus dame*," translated by Joseph Leftwich in *The Golden Peacock: A Worldwide Treasury of Yiddish Poetry* (New York: 1961), p. 672.

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I'd like to see you
dead.³⁵

It is interesting that both Margolin and Dropkin both wondered in their poetry whether they were not under the influence of some "pagan" power. Anxiously, Margolin wrote in 1920, "With fright, I hear in my mind, the heavy steps of forgotten gods." Dropkin was more enthusiastic. She wrote "*Dos lid fun a getsendiner*" (Poem of a pagan): "Silently, I came to the temple/today before dawn/Ah, how beautiful was my pagan god/Bedecked with flowers."³⁶

In the 1920s the women who wrote for the Communist press rarely dealt with such sensuous themes as did those who published in the anarchist and socialist papers. The Communists tended to be puritanical and very much concerned with developing a "correct" working class literature. But the Communists were often more direct than other radicals in their distaste for female oppression. They openly advocated solidarity among women and pride in womanhood. In their poetry, Esther Shumiatcher, Sara Barkan, and Shifre Weiss urged women to combat powerlessness by seeking self respect and by acting in unison. In the December, 1927 issue of *Hamer*, Shumiatcher called upon women to "free yourselves from the dark lattices that imprisoned generations." In the late twenties, she and her famous playwright husband Peretz Hirshbein took an extended trip to China, India, Africa and the Middle East. In a series of poems, "*Baym rand fun khina*" (At the border of China) she lamented the plight of women: "Wife and mother/at the border of China/Baskets, filled with your sadness and weariness, hang from your shoulders. . . ."³⁷ Sara Barkan, who had begun working in a factory at the age of nine and whose life was seriously affected by daily toil for herself and her daughter, wrote "*Mir arbeter froyen*" (We working women), dedicated to International Woman's Day in 1925:

We, working women
We are raped in Polish prisons
We are decapitated in China;
And we forge hammers out of our fists,
In every part of the world, in each country

35 Idem, "Poem," translated by Adrienne Rich in Howe and Greenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

36 Anna Margolin, "*Fargesene geter*," *Di naye velt*, July 23, 1920; Celia Dropkin, "*Dos lid fun a getsendiner*," *ibid.*, May 16, 1919.

37 Esther Shumiatcher, "*Tsu shvester*," *Hamer* (December, 1927), 17; idem, *Baym rand fun khina*, *ibid.*, (July, 1927), 5; interview with Esther Shumiatcher in August, 1978.

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we have cut the rotten cords of yesterday's dark oppression.
Small, delicate our hands have become hard and muscular. . . .³⁸

The Los Angeles poet Shifre Weiss also wrote about working women in the *Hamer* but in a somewhat different context:

We women,
We rebuilt the house and let in the sun
. . . equal captains
With our comrade husbands and brothers
We help pilot the ship
To eternally new lands
Hand and hand at the steering wheel.³⁹

Although the social status of women in Jewish radical circles did not change in the 1930's, a new more aggressive tone, criticizing male behavior, emerged in some women's writings. Golde Shibke in an article "*Di arbeter froy un der arbeter ring*" (The working woman and Workman's Circle) blames her male comrades for limiting the role of women in that socialist "fraternal" organization to a mere women's auxiliary. Since women worked equally hard alongside men in the factories, it was unfair to discriminate against them in a socialist organization.⁴⁰

Kadia Molodowsky, who emigrated to New York City from Warsaw in 1935, provided a role-model for other radical women writers in the late thirties. Considered a serious journalist, poet and intellectual among the Jewish intelligentsia in Poland, she was unhappy to discover that the New York radical literati considered women authors as "exotic flowers of the literary garden for whom direct and powerful thinking was alien." She protested the male categorizing of women as a breed apart. "Writing is more an expression of the spirit than of sexual gender," she insisted in her article "*A por verter vegn froyen dikhterin*," (A few words about women poets) which appeared in the New York Communist literary magazine *Signal* in 1936. While admitting there were some differences in male and female literary style, word conception and personality presentation, she maintained that women writers were the equal of men in their insightfulness, outspokenness, political and social awareness, and in their search for a profound understanding of reality.

Molodowsky, herself, wrote some poems about critical political

38 Sara Barkan, "*Mir, arbeter froyen*," *Signal* (January, 1925), 2; interview with Ber Green in August, 1978.

39 Shifre Weiss, "*Mir, froyen*," *Hamer*, (September, 1928), 50; Reisen, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 961.

40 Golde Shibke, "*Di arbeter froy un der arbeter ring*," *Lodzer Almanak*, 1934.

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issues of the 1930's. One, about the Spanish Civil War, "*Tsu di volontirn in shpanye*," (To the volunteers in Spain) was published in the *Hamer* in 1938:

At night
when the moon burns above you with death
She awakens me
And calls me to the window
And the sky spreads itself
with stars
and a pricetag
And the debt is so great
And your blood falls on my mind
heavy and red.⁴¹

In that same year, a year before the Hitler-Stalin pact which destroyed the illusions held by great numbers of Jewish Communists about the anti-fascist stance taken by the Soviet Union, the *Hamer* also published poetry in praise of the Russian experiment in revolution. Both Sara Barkan's "Near Your Picture, Lenin," and Shifre Weiss' "Biro-Bidzan Bride" sentimentally expressed the great expectation held by radical Jews for the success of the Bolshevik revolution and the possibilities of an autonomous Jewish state in the Soviet Union.⁴²

It is difficult to assess in what way themes about women or poetry about politics affected the female readers of the radical Yiddish press and literature. Rachel Holtman's autobiography offers a rare glimpse into women's responses. In the mid-1930s Holtman traveled to Los Angeles, a city with a population of over 45,000 Jews. Most of the East Europeans had arrived in the First World War period. The city contained branches of the Workmen's Circle, locals of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, groups of the Communist International Workers' Order and their Industrial Union, plus the literary magazines *Zunland* and *Pasifik*. Los Angeles could even boast of a Left youth organization, the *Arbeter klub*, with one hundred "non-partisan" members.⁴³

Holtman found that there were ten women's study circles, affiliated with the International Workers' Order, which held meetings at least weekly and where members studied Yiddish literature. The women read both the Yiddish classics as well as works from contemporary Yiddish writers, and discussed current

41 Kadia Molodowsky, "*Tsu di volontirn in shpanye*," *Hamer* (February, 1938), 2.

42 Sara Barkan, "*Lebn Lenins bild*," *Hamer* (February, 1938), 40; Shifre Weiss, "*Biro-Bidjan kale*," *ibid.* (November, 1938), 57.

43 "*Notitsen*," *Pasifik*, 1 (March, 1929), 45-50.

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political issues. Holtman described these women, most of whom were dressmakers and militant trade unionists: "The women in these study groups are quite another sort of woman – a *mentsh* (human being), who consciously educated herself. It is a pleasure to discuss things with her. She is sensitive, talented, understanding, straightforward. She takes a fine fresh look at the world."⁴⁴ Shifre Weiss, a member of such a Los Angeles study circle, shared her work with her group. Her writings include poems about Rosa Luxemburg, Edna St. Vincent Millay and one "To My Black Sisters." She also wrote a poem entitled "*Lern krayzn*," (Study circles):

We met as a minyan
Eighteen or more;
Building edifices of our culture
Erasing the traces of tears and of pain
Our dream shall come true
By creating and recreating.
Happiness, Justice and Peace
Shall come to this world.⁴⁵

It is clear that immigrant Yiddish women writers created an extensive literature, but they were not "exotic flowers of any literary garden." Rather, they were the first generation of immigrant Jews, an emerging female intelligentsia, whose self analysis and critical awareness is well worth exploring further. It is also clear that they experienced the contradiction faced by most other radical women in the early twentieth century – living within a pattern of seeming acceptance combined with implicit exclusion.

The literature of radical Jewish women has virtually vanished. By the end of the Second World War, Yiddish was hardly read by the majority of the American Jewish population who had become linguistically assimilated. Anarchism, socialism, and Communism, the radical movements which attracted significant numbers of American Jewish workers and intellectuals, were also in deep decline, and the literature produced by radicals lost its audience. Every effort must be made to rescue this literature from oblivion, not only for its intrinsic value, but also because it and the lives of those who created it provide us with a much broader insight and deeper understanding of the cultural transformation of East European Jewry in America.

⁴⁴ Holtman, *op. cit.*, pp. 152-153.

⁴⁵ Shifre Weiss, *Tsum morgndikn morgn* (Los Angeles: 1953), p. 59.

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Appendix 1

(This list is representative; it is not complete)

	Birthdate	Year of Immigration
Bach, Pessie	1904	1916
Badanes, Ida	1874	
Barkan, Sara	1890	1907
Belov, Fraydel	1899	1908
Birek, Dora	1897	1912
Bordo-Rivkin, Minnie	1897	1927
Burstin, Liba	1901	1921
Charney, Freidl	1891	1926
Cooperman, Hasye	1907	American born
Dropkin, Celia	1888	1912
Fell-Yellin, Sarah	1895	1920
Gallin, Rivke	1890	1907
Gerbert, Sonia	1896	1906
Glass-Fenster, Rayzel	1910	1923
Glasser, Eda	1893	1909
Goldworth, Bella	1902	1921
Guterman, Silva	1914	American born
Gutman, Rosa	1903	1939
Halpern, Frume	1888	1905
Hofman, Leah	1898	1913
Holtman, Rachel	1882	1913
Kahan, Malcha	1897	1906
Kahana, Pesi	1895	1908
Karpilove, Miriam	1895	1905
Katz, Esther	1892	1906
Kaufman, Leah		1922
Kling, Bertha	1885	1899
Kudly, Berta	1893	1917
Lee, Malke	1904	1921
Liebert, Sarah-Leah	1892	1902
Levy, Shafra-Esther	1892	1910
Locker, Malka	1887	
Luria, Esther	1877	1912
Luria, Rachel	1886	1898
Margolin, Anna	1887	1906
Miller, Esther	1896	1912
Molodowsky, Kadia	1894	1935
Nevadovski, Rosa	1899	1928
Newman-Wallinsky, Rosa	1911	1915
Pomerantz, Bessie Hershfield	1900	1913
Rappaport, Anna	1876	1890
Safran, Chane	1902	1916
Shumiatcher, Esther	1900	1911
Serdatzky, Yente	1879	1907
Smith, Sarah	1888	1903
Stock, Fradel	1890	1907

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Tarant, Deborah	1898	1923
Tussman, Malka Heifetz	1896	1912
Vartzel, Chana	1872	1902
Veprinski, Rashelle	1895	1907
Weiss, Shifre	1889	1905
Zaretsky, Hinde	1899	1914
Zunser, Miriam Shomer	1882	1891