

New York, NY 10027
April 6, 1989

Ms. Nancy Lane
Senior Editor
Oxford University Press
200 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10016

Dear Ms. Lane,

I enclose my reader's report on Norma Pratt's NEW SONGS IN A STRANGE LAND. I think the book is unsalvageable. That it will eventually be published (by SUNY Press, Wayne State, or Indiana) I have no doubt. But Oxford should definitely not give its imprimatur to such tendentious journalism.

Sincerely,

David G. Roskies

READER'S REPORT ON
NEW SONGS IN A STRANGE LAND BY NORMA FAIN PRATT

Ideological constructs, whether nationalist, marxist or feminist, insure that one will discover what one sets out to find. Thus, armed with the latest in feminist theory, Prof. Pratt discovers the "subordination, mistreatment and exclusion" of Yiddish women writers on the part of "their own contemporary male critics and later by literary historians." How convenient! Unfortunately, neither she nor Kathryn Hellerstein can marshal more than a single article written by Melech Ravitch in 1927 to prove the conspiracy theory. And what to do with Ezra Korman's massive anthology of Yiddish Women Poets published a year later, the most lavish Yiddish book of its kind? Or that Ravitch himself then had a change of heart? Or that he eventually moved to Montreal, Canada, where the Yiddish women poets (Ida Maze, Rokhl Korn, Chava Rosenfarb), shared the limelight with the men?

Intent on charting the liberation of the Jewish masses from the ossified religious traditions of the past, Prof. Pratt then sets up a straw (wo)man of a monolithic Eastern European Judaism. For if it were not everywhere the same -- in the misnagdic north as in the hasidic south; in Poland as in Bessarabia -- how could one characterize its literature, its educational system and its politics, from the sixteenth century through the nineteenth, in a single introductory chapter?

But the author wants to eat her cake and have it, too, so after chronicling the "break with the traditions" she would have us believe that the radical secularists were really champions of "yidishkeit" (defined as "the preservation of the Yiddish language, the celebration of historic Jewish holidays, and the cultivation of Jewish loyalties"). How the anarchists at their Yom Kippur balls would have laughed at that!

Considering that both in her proposal and in the two sample articles Prof. Pratt has practically nothing to say about the poetry itself, one really must wonder why she undertook this topic in the first place. Her thematic and crudely psychological reading of the poetry works alright for the hack writers, but is a terrible disservice to the major figures of her book. And when Prof. Pratt characterizes the journal In zich as the journal of a group known as Di yunge (the two were arch rivals!), this does not invite confidence in her knowledge of Yiddish literary history as a whole.

Reader's Report/2

In making the jump from two sketchy and innacurate articles into a full-scale cultural history of Yiddish women writers in America, Prof. Pratt has failed to examine her preconceived notions of culture, Yiddish, and America. Culture, for her, is highbrow and radical. Yiddish is synonymous with secularism and America is spelled with a "k". How different her book would be if she thought to include the most vibrant Yiddish cultural institution in America -- Second Avenue. Here, in the realm of lowbrow popular culture, the immigrant masses sang a very different tune, and female stars like Bessie Tomashevsky, Stella Adler and Molly Picon did much of that singing, too. But Second Avenue helped the immigrants make peace with America (spelled with a "c"), looked ahead to the good life, and upheld a rearguard definition of "yidishkeit" that included going to shul on non-"national" holidays as well. As crass and commercial as it was, Second Avenue never took its marching orders from Moscow, which is more than you can say for a goodly number of women poets on Prof. Pratt's honor scroll.

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