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Toronto, Canada

Faculty of Arts Department of Political Science

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CARRYING ON THE TRADITION JEWISH WOMEN WRITERS IN CANADA

by Tamara Palmer Seiler

Students of Canadian culture are well aware of the significant contribution Jewish writers have made to Canadian literature. Whether writing in Yiddish as first-generation immigrants, or writing in English as the children or grandchildren of immigrants, Jewish writers have produced literary works that are among the best and most loved in the Canadian literary canon. The work of Yiddish writ-

ers such as Solomon Ary and J. I. Segal has been translated and anthologized for a diverse audience of appreciative readers; and of course writers such as A. M. Klein, Irving Layton, Leonard Cohen, and Mordecai Richler are on virtually every list of English-speaking Canada's literary "giants." Clearly, then, one can talk about a Jewish-Canadian literary tradition that is significant, both as a separate literary strand and as a significant feature of Canadian literature as a whole; diverse, yet characteristically enriched by the many layers of Jewish cultural memory, as an interrelated body of texts, many about immigrant experience, Jewish-Canadian literature offers readers a bittersweet exploration of love and despair, loss, and longing, of struggle and survival: a complex celebration of life. Also clear is the major place that Jewish women writers have earned in both of these literary spaces, though this is not always as widely recognized and acknowledged as it should be.

One need look no further than the work of Rachel (Rochl) Korn and Chava Rosenfarb, for example, to gain an appreciation of the contribution made by women to Yiddish writing in Canada. As well, some of the work of both of these writers has been translated into English, thereby widening their sphere of influence. (See for example the pioneering collection edited by Gerri Sinclair and Morris Wolfe, *The Spice Box: An Anthology of Jewish Canadian Writing*, Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1981; and that of Miriam Waddington, who edited *Canadian Jewish Short Stories*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990). Readers of these works have appreciated Korn's sensitive, yet doggedly bleak and incisive portrayal of the kinds of brutality possible within the framework of familial and shtetl life, particularly when it is complicated by Nazi occupation, as in her short story in that collection, "Earth," which explores unrelentingly the devastation effected when human weakness, need, and depravity collide. They have also ap-

preciated the subtle insights into immigrant experience and into surviving great loss expressed in Chava Rosenfarb's short story, "The Greenhorn," in which a simple act of kindness by a fellow factory worker enables the recent immigrant, Baruch, who has lost all of his loved ones in the Holocaust, to survive for one more day his crippling sorrow, compounded by the horrors of the factory and the derision of his co-workers.

Readers of these two texts will be heartened by the recent publication (1994; 1995) of *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*. Edited by Frieda Forman, Ethel Raicus, Sarah Silberstein Swartz and Margie Wolfe and published by Toronto's Second Story Press, this collection contributes substantially to scholarship on Yiddish literature in general, and to our understanding in particular of the contribution women writers have made to that tradition. It does so by providing readers with heretofore unavailable selections, as well as with a detailed and groundbreaking introduction by Irene Klepfisz: "Queens of Contradiction, A Feminist Introduction to Yiddish Women Writers." Thought-provoking and scholarly, Klepfisz's introduction surveys, from a feminist perspective, the development of Yiddish literature, and doing so, develops a complex and convincing argument that, ironically, the nineteenth-century movement to legitimate Yiddish literature and scholarship worked to marginalize Yiddish women writers in a variety of ways, such that despite

their rootedness in and identification with Jewish life, commitment to Yiddish ... [their] ... publications never secured them an honoured place in Yiddish cultural history. Despite the record of their writings, not a single woman prose writer has ever received attention and respect comparable to those accorded male writers during and since the classical period. The origins of this erasure can be

traced to Yiddish cultural leaders and writers whose ambivalence toward them and their work left women in limbo, a women's country from which most could not escape.

As well, the volume is a kind of total package. Carefully edited, the text is virtually error free and presented in a visually attractive format, and it includes useful bibliographies and a glossary, in addition to biographies and photographs of the authors.

While the two previous anthologies focussed exclusively on Canadian literature, and included works written originally in English as well as in Yiddish, and works by men as well as women, this collection satisfies the appetite whetted by these earlier collections for diasporic Yiddish literature and for literature by women. A substantial volume at 390 pages, it not only provides readers with heretofore untranslated works by Rachel Korn and Chava Rosenfarb, but also with a variety of works by a stunning array of Yiddish writers working in diverse times and places, from the last years of the nineteenth century to the years following the Second World War, from eastern Europe, North America, Palestine, and then Israel.

Because of its considerable scope, this new volume will intrigue a variety of readers beyond those interested primarily in Yiddish literature. Students of Jewish history and culture, as well as of immigration and Women's Studies generally will find the volume particularly worthwhile: the variety of genres, styles, and subjects it contains as well as the diversity of experiences the authors chronicle offer considerable insight into each of these areas and into the ways in which they intersect in the experiences and perceptions of particular women writers. For example, a number of the writers included evoke shtetl life, especially as experienced by women, with unprecedented realism. Sarah Hamer-Jacklyn's "My Mother's Dream" portrays vividly an expectant mother's foreboding about the upcoming birth of her child, and the

ways in which the world of family and community she inhabits at once both protect and doom her; Dora Shulner's "Reyzele's Wedding" provides a revealing glimpse into the complex social codes surrounding courtship and marriage; Malka Lee's "Through the Eyes of Childhood" offers a poignant depiction of a young girl whose aspirations to become a poet pit her against her father and the conventions of her community. These and the many other pieces in this admirable collection together illuminate a world of experience that most readers will have heretofore glimpsed only dimly. Further, they add substantially to our appreciation of the important role women writers have played in developing the Yiddish literary tradition.

Women writers have also contributed significantly to the Jewish-Canadian literary tradition in English. The work of Miriam Waddington, Adele Wiseman, Shirley Faessler, Helen Weinzweig, Erna Paris, and Fredelle Bruser Maynard, for example, constitutes an impressive literary foundation upon which younger generations of women writers in Canada, both Jewish and non-Jewish, can build. Though their works vary greatly in terms of subject matter and genre, each gives voice to and celebrates life at the margins rather than at the centres of various kinds of social power. The poems, short stories, and critical writing of Miriam Waddington and the novels and short stories of Adele Wiseman can be seen as emblematic of this perspective. For example, Adele Wiseman's artful and subversive novel, *Crackpot* (1974), foregrounds a working-class Jewish prostitute growing up in Winnipeg in the interwar years, weaving her story into a profound challenge to the glib codes of Anglo-Canadian nativism, puritanism, patriarchy, and materialism.

Two recent books by Jewish-Canadian women writers carry on this tradition of celebrating difference, though their literary quality makes them considerably less significant than their predecessors, in terms of

the contribution they make to Canadian literature. Sharon Kish's juvenile fiction, *Fitting In* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1995), chronicles the often painful experiences of her young protagonist, Mollie, as she comes to understand what it means to be Jewish in a gentile world. Although Fredelle Bruser Maynard makes the same point about difference and the ultimate importance of faith and love with more artistry and the added bonus of insightful depiction of region in her fictionalized memoir, *Raisins and Almonds* (1972), Kish's novel is nevertheless instructive for young readers, providing them, through the medium of an accessible, engaging, and contemporary suburban character with whom they can identify, with a fictional lesson in how it might feel to grow up outside the cultural mainstream.

Karen X. Tulchinsky's *In Her Nature*, a collection of short stories about lesbian experience, is also squarely within the tradition of writing by Jewish-Canadian women I have delineated. Like Wiseman's *Crackpot*, Tulchinsky's stories give voice to women who have heretofore been largely silenced by the powerful mechanisms of both Jewish culture and the larger society. "A Different Kind of Love," for example, portrays a "typical" Jewish mother, recently widowed, coming to grips with her daughter's lesbianism. Despite her initial misgivings, Mrs. Rabinovitch's open and loving nature ultimately enables her to accept her daughter Nomi's lesbian lifestyle as positive and fulfilling. Unabashedly didactic, the stories portray again and again the challenges faced by lesbians in a hostile world, and call for greater tolerance and understanding. Although this is hardly a message one would want to quarrel with, one might wish for more artistry in language, form, and characterization than Tulchinsky's stories display. One might also see in a few of them a perpetuation of some of the very stereotypes Ms. Tulchinsky seems dedicated to writing against, as for example in her depiction of Mrs. Rabinovitch, the

rather stock Jewish mother, or of Toby and the other tough "dykes" who hang out at "Rosie's Seaside" bar, looking for lovers. Nevertheless, Tulchinsky's fictional world is often energetic, earthy, and entertaining and one can see it as yet another strand in the rich tradition created by Jewish-Canadian women writers, working in both Yiddish and English, of giving voice to the previously silenced, of celebrating the margins.

Tamara Palmer Seiler is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of General Studies at the University of Calgary.

THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH AND ME

Minerva Davis. Toronto: Lugus Publications, 1992.

SWEATSHOP STRIFE— CLASS, ETHNICITY, AND GENDER IN THE JEWISH LABOUR MOVEMENT OF TORONTO 1900–1939

Ruth A. Frager. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992.

A PARTISAN'S MEMOIR: WOMAN OF THE HOLOCAUST

Faye Schulman. Toronto: Second Story Press, 1995.

HALF THE KINGDOM

Francine Zuckerman. Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1992.

by Susan Nosov

Canadian Jewish feminist movements, like other political movements for social change, are built on questioning and challenging what exists and examining what could be done to make it better. At the root of much of this work are questions of identity. As