

The OUTLOOK on Books

The 23rd Annual Cherie Smith JCCGV

JEWISH BOOK FESTIVAL

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YIDDISH: THE VANCOUVER CONNECTION

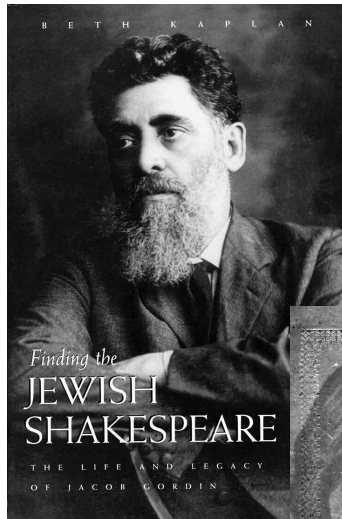
By Faith Jones

The Jewish Book Festival

in Vancouver this past November brought together a variety of authors in many genres. One interesting confluence was in bringing together writers working with Yiddish materials who live in or have connections to Vancouver. Vancouver is hardly a centre of Yiddish literary profusion: the late Sidney Sarkin, a founder of the Vancouver Peretz Centre, wrote the only Yiddish-language book to emerge from Vancouver. Yet, this year's Book Festival featured no fewer than three writers with a connection to both Yiddish and Vancouver.

Beth Kaplan, a staple of the Vancouver theatre of the 1970s and 80s, and a UBC alumna, presented her new book *Finding the Jewish Shakespeare: the Life and Legacy of Jacob Gordin*. Kaplan is not a specialist in Yiddish, but she knows a lot about theatre and has the additional advantage of being Gordin's great-granddaughter. Over the course of many years Kaplan pieced together stories, gradually building a portrait of a man whose influence on Yiddish culture was undeniably enormous.

FAITH JONES recently returned to her home town of Vancouver, where she is a librarian and teaches library science. She is part of a three-person collective that translates the poetic works of Celia Dropkin into English, and serves as Yiddish editor for *Bridges: a Jewish Feminist Journal*.

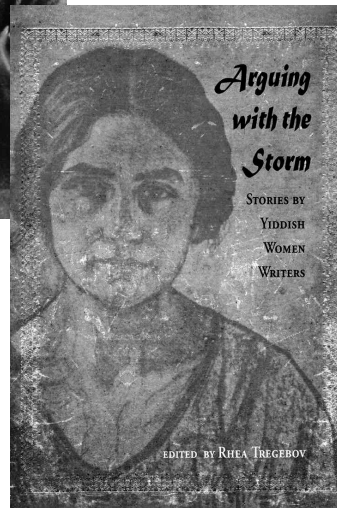


Among other things, Kaplan told a sold-out crowd in Vancouver, she aimed to figure out why

Gordin has been so neglected in contemporary theatre and in literary studies. Kaplan's theatre training

stood her in good stead as she read from the book and answered questions about her research. A witty and entertaining speaker, she clearly captivated the crowd with her lively and illuminating anecdotes. She concluded that an internecine literary battle, in which Ab Cahan, the notoriously curmudgeonly editor of the Yiddish *Forverts*, implied that Gordin was nothing but a common plagiarist, has haunted his reputation to this day.

Appearing with Kaplan was Rhea Tregebov, editor of *Arguing With the Storm*. This new book is only the second anthology of women's writing translated from Yiddish to be published in English. Tregebov, a professor of Creative Writing at UBC, told



the wonderfully inspiring story of her engagement with this material, via a Yiddish women's reading group in Winnipeg which chose her to edit and guide this collection through the publication process. A small excerpt read by Tregebov illustrated the richness of the source material: a single woman in middle age agrees to marry a man she doesn't love, in order to gain social acceptance and material comfort. The fact that he loves and treasures her makes the arrangement only more painful.

A question that occurred to me after the event was why both Tregebov's book and the earlier anthology, *Found Treasures*, emanated from Canada. Why is it that the tiny Canadian publishing industry is better able to take a chance on a minority language and female authors than the much bigger one south of the border? *Arguing With the Storm* has now been picked up for U.S. publication, which is certainly wonderful; but it remains a Canadian endeavour and one of which Tregebov and her translator-collaborators have every right to be proud.

Tregebov and Kaplan appeared at the festival co-sponsored by the Peretz Centre and the Kirman Foundation for Yiddish Culture. The Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre sponsored another Yiddish-related reading. Seymour Levitan, long a mainstay in Vancouver's Yiddish world, read from his work-in-progress, a translation of Rokhl Auerbach's memoir of running a soup kitchen in the Warsaw Ghetto. This material is startlingly unique. Auerbach's descriptions of what could and could not be accomplished through her work, her unflinching language and her vivid character portraits will make for a fascinating and moving book, which I hope will someday emerge from Levitan's efforts. ♦