

♀ Shira Gorshman: ♀ A Writer of Unusual Power

By Faith Jones

A surprising number of people who are interested in Yiddish literature have never heard of Shira Gorshman, let alone read her work. And that is a shame, because she is a writer of unusual power, and one who inhabits a unique place in our recent history. Perhaps it is because she produced all her work while living in the Soviet Union and Israel. I've noticed before that Soviet and Israeli writers are less accessible to us—both in terms of their experiential distance from most North American Jews, and in the actual availability of their work—than those writers from pre-Soviet Eastern Europe, most of whom ended up in the United States.

Gorshman was born in 1906, which is on the late side for a Yiddish writer. And since she started writing later in life, she wrote almost all her work after the Holocaust. The double vision this afforded her is evident in many of her stories, including an entire series she called “Out of Hell,” in which survival is often as great a tragedy as death, and the life that remains is always in debt to the life that has been lost.

Gorshman's stories reflect the upheavals of her own life story. Born in a *shtetl* in Lithuania, she left home at 14 and became active in left-wing Zionist circles in Kovno (Kaunas). At 16 she had a daughter with her first husband, and soon thereafter they moved to Palestine to build the Jewish homeland in the most literal way: working in a collective of heavy-labourers known as *Gdud ha-Avodah* (The Work Brigade). In 1928, during an internal split in the group, Gorshman allied herself with the Communist-inclined branch. This entire sub-group then moved to Soviet Crimea to found a collective farm.

On the farm Gorshman became a specialist in milk cows, and in spite of the incredible hardships of this kind of life, she apparently took the work seriously and considered her labour dignified and valuable. By this time she was a single mother of three daughters, and seemingly considered her romantic life over. She would likely have remained on the farm had she not, in the early 1930s, met the painter Mendel Gorshman. They soon fell in love, married, and Shira and her three children went back to Moscow with him.

In Moscow, she began writing stories for Soviet Yiddish literary journals. In 1948, the first of her books



appeared in Moscow, followed by others published in the Soviet Union and Poland. Eventually Mendel Gorshman died and Shira's children moved to Israel. In 1990, she followed them there. Returning to Israel in her 80s was

a tough adjustment: modern Israeli society had none of the collectivism she recalled, and she struggled to figure out how and where to live. Her acceptance into Israeli literary life, however, was an unexpected bonus, and allowed her to flourish artistically. She republished many of her stories from the Soviet years—they were not available in Israel at all—and produced a steady stream of new material. She hoarded her small income to help pay for publishing her books, the last of which came out in 1998. She died in 2001, a few days short of her 95th birthday.

Among Gorshman's stories we find numerous tales of life on the collective farm in Crimea; of the traditional life

into which she was born; of the evacuation of Jews to Central Asia during the war; of the Holocaust itself; of post-war Soviet life, both Jewish and general. She writes of middle-class people as well as labourers and farmers; her settings range from the *shtetl* to the farm to the large industrial cities.

Perhaps because of official Soviet attitudes towards Israel, she did not write of *Gdud ha-Avodah* and the building of Jewish life in Palestine until she was back in Israel at the end of her life. These writings include fiction, memoirs and sketches, and her tone is sharp:

“I live now in an apartment building among people who only eat, sleep, and worry about themselves. They don't begin to know how much blood and toil was expended so that they should be able to come to Israel” (from *On a Gal* [Without Malice], 1986).

Many of Gorshman's stories are proto-feminist, and show aspects of women's lives hardly touched on in Yiddish literature. Her stories show women working in hard labour or as professionals. Women have children out of wedlock, struggle to raise them with or without husbands, or choose abortions. In one stunning, very short story, “*Tsvishn Berg*” (Between Mountains), the narrator, living temporarily in a remote area of the Caucasus, comes to realize that her neighbour and new friend is living in terror of a violent husband. I have found myself wondering if Gorshman is gesturing, with her title, to Peretz's “*Tsvishn Tsvey Berg*” (Between Two Mountains), in which the pressures of two competing spiritual points of view disrupt the narrator's ability to form his own identity. As Peretz's narrator is trapped between the two mountains of differing rabbinical interpretation, Gorshman's female characters are in danger of being crushed under mountains of powerlessness.

Some of her stories invoke the folk beliefs, medicinal and spiritual, of which women were particular keepers. Although Gorshman was non-religious and a true believer in the value of scientific rationality, the

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criticism of Israel and makes unholy alliances with the Christian Right.

Her own critique of Israel and Zionism appears in an essay "Jewish Days and Nights," included in *Wrestling with Zion: Progressive American Responses to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (2003) edited by Tony Kushner and Alisa Solomon. There she argues that "As long as a solution...is sought in nationalistic terms, both Arab and Jew are condemned to a vicious circle of hatred and revenge...In the long run a way out may be found beyond the nation state, perhaps within the framework of a Middle East federation." Meanwhile, she works with organizations such as Brit Tzedek v'Shalom (Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace) and supports the work of Israeli organizations such as Gush Shalom, Women in Black and Rabbis for Human Rights.

Rich is not a Zionist, but a Diasporist in the tradition of Isaac Deutscher, whose Jewishness was based first and foremost on internationalism and solidarity with the oppressed and persecuted, Jewish and gentile. These ideals are poignantly expressed in her poem "Eastern War Time," which is characteristically full of Jewish references:

Memory says: Want to do right? Don't count on me.
I'm a canal in Europe where bodies are floating
I'm a mass grave I'm the life that returns
I'm a table set with room for the Stranger
I'm a field with corners left for the landless
I'm accused of child-death of drinking blood
I'm a man-child praising God he's a man
I'm a woman bargaining for a chicken
I'm a woman who sells for a boat ticket
I am a family dispersed between night and fog
I'm an immigrant tailor who says *A coat is not a piece of cloth only*
I sway in the learnings of the master mystics
I have dreamed of Zion I've dreamed of world revolution
I have dreamed that my children could live at last like others
I have walked the children of others through ranks of hatred
I'm a corpse dredged from a canal in Berlin
A river in Mississippi
I'm a woman standing with other women dressed in black
on the streets of Haifa, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem
There is spit on my sleeve there are phone calls in the night
I am a woman standing in line for gasmasks
I stand on a road in Ramallah with naked face listening
I am standing here in your poem unsatisfied
lifting my smoky mirror

—from *Atlas of a Difficult World: Poems 1988-1991*

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folk wisdom of women is unabashedly elevated to an almost mythic quality. In her obituary, the *Forverts* noted: "The central hero in her work is the woman as a folk-figure in this uneasy historical epoch. This particular figure, through whom the writer embodied the important problems of reality, always appears in a time when the foundations of old forms of social organization are broken, and new relationships and alliances in social life and in the life of a new kind of family are being constructed."

Other critics note that Gorshman's most important thematic is

"*beyn odem lekhaveyre*"—the responsibility of each person for every other. Perhaps in keeping with this thematic, Gorshman's work is stylistically more Russian than Yiddish, particularly in its detailed realist portrayals of people and relationships. Yet her stories are very Jewish, not only because most of her characters are Jewish, but because they are consumed by issues of belonging and identity, of creating community and discovering the meaning of our lives.

We do ourselves a disservice by ignoring the Yiddish writers of the former Soviet Union. In its problematic official relationship to Yiddish culture, the Soviet Union served as a huge refugee camp for Yiddish, keeping it alive while con-

tained; Yiddish in the Soviet Union lacked freedom, at times it was demonized, but it retained its inherent humanity. And now there is less excuse for our ignorance, as the National Yiddish Book Center has managed to put 10,000 complete readable and printable Yiddish books online at the Internet Archive. Two of Gorshman's nine books are among them.

For those who don't read Yiddish, there are only two stories currently available, one each in the anthologies *Found Treasures* and *Beautiful as the Moon, Radiant as the Stars*. My translation of "*Tsvishn Berg*" will appear in *Bridges: a Jewish Feminist Journal* this fall. There is a book-length translation available in Hebrew as well.

There are many lacunae also in what is known of Gorshman herself. Her maiden name, for example; what became of her first marriage; what work she did in Moscow. Her stories of the Caucasus hint at a personal journey, yet whether she herself was evacuated there is unclear. But ultimately, it is her stories themselves that are important, vibrant and throbbing with surprises that expand our understanding of what Jewish life was, and is, in all its troubling complexity. ♦

ERRATA

In our January/February issue, the cutline beneath the group photo of Yiddish writers on p. 25 gave the writers' names in reverse order. It should have read as follows: (l.-r.): **A. Reisen, I.L. Peretz, Sholem Ash, Chaim Zhitlovsky, and H.D. Nomberg.**

In Ismail Zayid's letter in the same issue, there was a passage which should have read as follows: "Ben Gurion, when announcing the creation of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948, refused to define its borders, declaring, 'We are creating a state in the western part of our country.' He later stated in his diaries, after the conquest of 78% of historic Palestine: 'To maintain the status quo will not do. We have set up a dynamic state bent upon expansion' (Ben Gurion diaries, edited by Michael Bar-Zohar, and published in 1954). Israel is thus the only state in the world that has no defined borders."