The Canvas and Other Stories

BY
Salomea Perl

TRANSLATED BY
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In English–Yiddish Format
THE CANVAS AND OTHER STORIES
Introduction

SALOMEA PERL AND YIDDISH FICTION BY WOMEN

By Justin Cammy

“Don’t think that I’ve always been a merchant-woman. My husband, may he live and be well, was once a well-off, wealthy man…” So begins “The Canvas” (1910), Salomea Perl’s last published Yiddish story, with a voice that is at once conversational, anxious, and defensive. The reader soon learns that Perl’s narrator is childless, a theme that reappears in several of her stories as a way to address the broader crisis of continuity that consumed Polish Jewry on the cusp of modernization. That her narrator is also the younger partner in an arranged marriage to a widower she did not desire adds to the tale’s critique of a traditional Jewish world in which the dreams of women (and men) are stifled by communal expectations and the gendered norms of traditional society. Perl’s stories are intimate psychological portraits and socio-economic sketches of a time where one’s fate, especially as a woman, was determined through marriage. Yet “The Canvas” can also be read as a story about the birth of the woman artist in a world controlled by men. Though the narrator claims she was silent when it came to her ability to resist an arranged marriage, she confesses her rare talent as an embroiderer. Though “in my house I felt like a stranger, like a prisoner, like someone bought and sold,” when in a room of her own “what the eye saw, the hand soon reproduced…I understood how to select colors as does a painter; under my hands the canvas became alive…” Perhaps Perl’s narrator, at once silenced by the market forces of marriage but creatively productive when left to herself (her embroidered curtain for the ark containing the Torah scrolls was proudly displayed in the synagogue) is symptomatic of
the broader fate of Yiddish women writers, not only in her own time but even, until very recently, in translation.

Not much is known about Salomea Perl (1869–1916), save for brief entries in two major lexicons of Yiddish literature. She was born in the town of Łomża (now Poland) and raised in the larger city of Lublin, where Jews constituted almost half the population. Her father, Kalman-Avigdor Perl, was a Hebraist and maskil (an adherent of the Jewish enlightenment), best known for his book Oytser loshn khvakhomin (A Treasury of Rabbinic Sayings, 1909). As was common in Yiddish-language biographical dictionaries, no information was provided about her mother. Perl attended a privately-run maskilic school in Lublin, and then completed her studies at the University of Geneva, in addition to studies in Paris and London. Though some fin-de-siècle Polish Jewish women enrolled in European universities (mainly those living in larger cities whose families were already acculturated into Polish society and had the means to support them) it was less usual to travel abroad for studies. Most Polish Jewish women still led relatively traditional lives in Poland’s small Jewish market towns (shtetlekh) or found themselves part of an increasingly politicized urban working class. When Salomea Perl finally settled in Warsaw, she was adept enough in languages to support herself professionally as a translator, a skill that might explain her creative ability to interpret the small-town Jewish experiences of her childhood even though she was already at a remove from that world. Though Warsaw was the largest Jewish city in Europe and a major center for the development and dissemination of modern Yiddish literature and the Yiddish press, Perl’s fictional debut was not in Yiddish but in the Polish-language Jewish magazine Izraelita, where installments of her Z pamiećnika młodej żydówki (From the Diary of a Young Jewish Woman, later published in book form in 1895) and “Lea” appeared. The Polish literary scholar and critic Piotr Chmielowski also published her story “Wiezien” (Prisoner)

in his journal _Ateneum_. It was not unusual for Yiddish writers to first try their hand in other languages that were deemed to hold more status (Polish, Russian, or Hebrew) before finding their way back to Yiddish, and Yiddish literature is punctuated by writers who wrote at different points in their careers in more than one language. Y. L. Peretz, the Yiddish prose master and essayist who would go on to be acknowledged as one of the founders of modern Yiddish literature, was undoubtedly familiar with her Polish writing. The early 1890s were known as Peretz’s radical period, marked by stinging critiques of traditional Jewish ways of thinking and social structures. Part of this critique included his taking up the cause of women in such stories as “Mendl Braynes” (1891) and “A Woman’s Rage” (1893). Perl’s interest in situating her art amidst Jewish poverty where she might challenge sentimental myths of Jewish family and social life, and the psychological realism of her stories must have impressed Peretz, who invited Salomea Perl to contribute to his journal _Yontev blestekh_ (Holiday Pages). Three of her stories (“Childless,” “Seeking Bread,” and “The Theater”) appeared in the pages of Peretz’s self-styled radical magazine in 1895/1896. Though Peretz made it his business to encourage younger writers to publish in Yiddish in order to expand the breadth of this young literature, he could also break a writer’s career. A disagreement with Peretz, combined with trouble in Perl’s personal life and illness, significantly stymied her publication in the years that followed. Over the next decade-and-a-half only four more stories appeared in the Warsaw Yiddish press in the literary biweekly _Der yud_ (“Potki with the Eyebrows,” 1901), in the Jewish affairs weekly _Yudishe folks-tsaytung_ (“Khaykl Latnik,” 1903), in the periodical _Der fraynd_ (“Tsipke,” 1903), and in _Der shstral_ (“The Canvas,” 1910).

The publication of Salomea Perl between 1895–1910 was part of a growing (but still relatively limited) trend among the male gatekeepers of Yiddish literature to provide room to women writers in the Yiddish press and miscellanies. Stories by women were a way to advertise the progressive credentials of male editors and their publications, open their pages to new perspectives, and potentially enlarge their readerships. For instance, Mordkhe Spektor’s literary miscellany _Der_
hoyz-fraynt (The Home Companion) published three women writers (including his first wife Beyle Fridberg, who wrote under the pseudonym Izabella) beginning in 1888. When Spektor published Salomea Perl in the Yudishe folks-tsaytung (The Jewish People’s Newspaper) in 1903 it also included a new section on “The World of Women” which focused on practical advice. Der yud (The Jew) published three short stories by Rokhl Brokes in 1899 and 1901, in addition to one by Perl in 1901. Yente Seredatsky’s first short story appeared in Warsaw’s Der veg (The Path) in 1905. Several years before inviting Salomea Perl to contribute to his Yontev biletkeh, Peretz published a novella by Izabella in 1901 in his literary miscellany Di yidishe bibliotek (The Jewish Library). Perl was thus part of an opportune moment in which the growth of Yiddish newspapers and journals expanded opportunities for women writers. However, since men were far more likely than women to have the time to devote to their professional development, released as they were from the social expectations of domestic responsibility and motherhood, fewer women writers managed to collect their stories into published volumes or had the time to devote to longer works of fiction, such as the novel. Most of their writing would remain in the pages of the Yiddish press, much less accessible to future generations of Yiddish readers and its eventual translators.

It is also worth remembering that the same small group of editors who published Perl were themselves navigating their own internalized stigmas about the relationship between Yiddish and femininity that could potentially threaten the status of this emerging literature. If Yiddish literature was meant to serve as evidence that the Jews possessed a modern national culture deserving of respect, a psychosexual fear of emasculation undoubtedly led them to keep women writers from garnering too much influence, lest their own reputations as writers fall into disrepute. For instance, S. Y. Abramovitch, one of the founders of modern Yiddish literature, confesses in the late 1880s in “Notes

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for My Literary Biography” to his initial shame when turning from Hebrew to Yiddish, which he called an “outcast woman” and “dejected daughter.” Around the same time, Sholem Aleichem (whose Tevye monologues would become the inspiration for Fiddler on the Roof decades later) invented a genealogy for Yiddish literature that traced its origins back only to Abramovitch as its “grandfather,” completely marginalizing any possibility of matrilineal descent or acknowledgment of the relationship between several centuries of earlier Yiddish literature and women readers. Indeed, his most famous hero Tevye repeatedly insists that he is “not a woman” as he struggles to navigate the challenges of his independent daughters. Perceptions of Yiddish as associated with femininity were deeply rooted and a source of considerable anxiety. Several of the historic names for Yiddish, including name-loshn (mother-tongue), Tiytsh-loshn (language of translation) and Zhargon (Jargon) continued to underscore Yiddish as a daily vernacular (rather than sacred tongue), as the language of the domestic sphere, and as something less than a fully realized language. Yiddish carried significantly less prestige than either Hebrew or Aramaic, the traditional languages of Jewish religious text, scholarship, and intellectualism that were considered the preserve of rabbis and their male students. Yiddish also lacked the classical roots of Hebrew, which itself was competing with Yiddish for recognition as the language of the Jewish people in an age of national awakening. Yiddish and Hebrew existed, as Naomi Seidman argues, within a sexual-linguistic system. Indeed, when Yiddish literature first began to flourish in the early modern period, several of its best-selling books were specifically marketed to women readers. The Brantshpigl (Burning Mirror, 1596) was an ethical tract on how to live a virtuous existence; the Mayse-bukh (1602) was a collection of stories drawn from biblical and homiletic literature; and the Tsene-rene (1622), often called “The women’s Bible,” was a Yiddish adaptation and interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. Each of these texts was immensely popular and supported women

in their spiritual lives. The same period also saw the emergence of Tokhines, supplicatory prayers written both by men and women, that developed a spiritual language for women navigating their religious obligations and experiences as Jewish women. (The publication in 1896 of Glückel of Hameln's Yiddish memoirs from 1691–1719 further solidified assumptions that the origins of Yiddish literature were deeply entangled with the experience of Jewish women.) That some early modern Yiddish texts also carried the note that they were intended "for women, or for men who are like women" contributed to a gendered reading of the origins of Yiddish literature as overly influenced by the needs of those who could not navigate complex religious texts or questions, except in translation. These assumptions ignored the fact that many other Yiddish works from this time (codexes, complete translations of Biblical books and epics, Yiddish translations of the high holiday prayer book or Passover Haggadah, collections of folktales and fables, knightly romances) were consumed eagerly both by women and men. When those writers attempting to build a modern Yiddish literature first came on the scene in the nineteenth century they had to contend with the fact that the market for Yiddish books had already socialized mass expectations to associate Yiddish with women readers, and in the latter half of the century sentimental penny-romances were among the most popular Yiddish books among the masses. Shortly before Salomea Perl's death, Shmuel Charney historicized this gendered interpretation of Yiddish literary origins in his essay "Yiddish Literature and the Woman Reader" (1913), suggesting that it needed to be neutralized lest it affect the reputation of the new, secular Yiddish literature going forward. By contrast, Aron Glantz's "Culture and Woman" (1915) urged male writers to swallow their pride and recognize that Yiddish literature risked becoming overly monotonous and hyper-intellectual if it did not nurture more women's voices. Such arguments risked falling into essentialist readings of the function and nature of literature written by women, leading several later Yiddish writers to either resist the very category of woman writer (Kadya Molodovsky, "A Few Words About Women Poets," 1936) or dismiss its relative importance in their own
artistic self-understanding, as when Chava Rosenfarb suggested that her alienation stemmed from her isolation as a post-Holocaust Yiddish writer: "I am not consciously aware of being [a woman] when I write; rather, I am conscious of being some kind of extrasexual, or bisexual creature. What mystifies me in human nature is precisely that which defies gender..."

The publication here of all seven known stories by Salomea Perl is not only important because it marks the rediscovery of a forgotten Yiddish writer. It also allows us to consider her unsentimental portraits of a Jewish world in transition. Her stories reveal deep class divisions and the prevalence of Jewish poverty. She investigates how the religious values that guided everyday life often lacked compassion for lived experience. Perl explores the social and cultural ruptures caused by internal migration from small towns to big cities, and new manifestations of secular Jewish identity associated with modern life. At the same time, for every frayed relationship between a husband and wife or a daughter shunning her father, Perl's fiction also reveals unassuming acts of self-sacrifice and modesty. For every abandonment of religious obligation in favor of the seductions of the secular-modern world there remain those who are content to carry on lives of relative simplicity. For every Jew like the "Warsaw Zionist" Mendl, whose son was a "gobbler of non-Kosher food" and who paraded around town in his shorter fashionable gaberline "like an actor in a Purim costume," there are those like Potki with the Eyebrows, who preserves his dignity by refusing to tolerate the stinginess of those householders who would deny him his meager weekly wages earned by knocking on their wooden shutters to wake them for morning prayers. For every attempt to open up the mysteries of new culture-scapes now available to Jews ("The Theater") there is an ethnographic eye for the traditional geography of Jewish life in small towns "laid out like a hamantasch

with three corners. In the middle of the town stood the synagogue; on
the left end was the bathhouse, and on the right end the poorhouse.”
And what about Rivke, the poor woman who rushes off to the rabbi
to inquire about whether a slaughtered hen meets the appropriate
standard for kosher consumption, displacing her far greater anxiety
about the fact that she and her husband are approaching their tenth
year of marriage without a child, after which he could be obliged
to provide her with a writ of divorce (“Childless”)? Perl is equally
masterful at capturing the rhythms of spoken Yiddish, the internal
thoughts of her characters, and the idiom of epistolary exchange.
The letters between Genendl and Mikhoel in “Seeking Bread” reveal
a wife’s longing for an absent husband, a husband’s desperate search
for work in the big city, and ultimately the ways in which loneliness
and alienation consume the individual. There is a touching moment
in the first letter from Genendl in which we learn that since she lacks
the literacy to compose her own letters she has to pour out her most
intimate worries about her husband to a local man, who then writes
on her behalf and attaches a short greeting of his own. Genendl’s
isolation often leads her to include information that may be news in
a small town (“Sore-Rivke has big troubles – her goat died on her”;
“a cow gored Reb Shloyme the rabbinic judge”) but not particularly
useful to a husband attempting to navigate the big city, as revealed
in his responses to her (“it’s very hard here,” “it is so congested that
sometimes people are simply crushed,” “I don’t know any Polish,” “it
is not the way I thought it would be . . .”). Genendl’s worries about
ending up an abandoned wife were her husband to take off for America
to build a new life there are well documented in Jewish social history,
and a window into the terror women felt when their husbands left
home in search of economic opportunity. The last letter Genendl
receives is from an acquaintance of her husband informing her that
he has been beaten in the street by a local watchman and that he is in
a charity hospital. Its bleakness is almost overwhelming.

If Perl has an ear for the Yiddish voice and the eye of an ethnogra-
pher, her stories also reveal a keen ability to fully realize the inner lives
of characters in only a few pages. For instance, so much humiliation
is contained in the different registers of Tsipke’s dismissive clucks: her husband’s abandonment of her the day after their wedding, the abuse she suffers as a servant for the butcher and his wife, the ridicule directed at her by the town wedding jester. Ultimately, her humanity is restored by a “soft cluck” that overcomes years of social isolation when a young man confesses his desire for her by the well. The slight change in register of a simple sound announces the possibility that she finally has found the human compassion that long eluded her. Such a story forced readers then, as now, to rethink our assumptions of Jewish communal solidarity.

Ruth Murphy’s translations get to the essence of Perl’s artistry by recognizing that literary translation is also an act of cultural interpretation. She invites the reader into Yiddish life on its own terms, refusing to translate certain terms and preserving Yiddish speech patterns that remind us that we are guests in another world. Murphy’s choices never fetishize Yiddish speakers as exotic, but rather expand the imaginative possibilities of English.

Finally, the publication of Salomea Perl must be read within the broader context of recent translations of Yiddish women fiction writers into English. Women writers were significantly under-represented in all of the major anthologies of Yiddish prose in translation that appeared before the turn of the twenty-first century. Since anthologies not only create a canon but also a genealogy of influence, their absence led several generations of readers to assume that women had played only a marginal role in twentieth century Yiddish writing, this despite the fact that lexicons of Yiddish literature include many entries for women writers. It is only in the last twenty-five years, with the general rise in feminist scholarship and the expansion of literary canons to include marginalized voices, that the first anthologies of Yiddish women fiction writers appeared in English translation, establishing an important counter-canon that has significantly shifted our understanding of the contours of modern Yiddish literature.6 These

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6. Irena Klepfisz, “Queens of Contradiction: A Feminist Introduction to Yiddish Women Writers,” in Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers,
include *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers* (1994), *Beautiful as the Moon, Radiant as the Stars: Jewish Women in Yiddish Stories* (2003), *Arguing with the Storm: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers* (2007), and *The Exile Book of Yiddish Women Writers* (2013). Moreover, in 2017 *Pakn Treger: The Magazine of the Yiddish Book Center* dedicated its yearly translation issue to Yiddish women writers. Building on the popularity of Glückel of Hameln’s *Yiddish Memoirs* (most recently reissued in 2019), interest in the social and political history of Yiddish-speaking women also led to the publication of several Yiddish memoirs by women, including Puah Rakovsky’s *My Life as a Radical Jewish Woman* (2001) and Hinde Bergner’s *On Long Winter Nights: Memoirs of a Jewish Family in a Galician Township* (2005). Translated volumes of stories or novels by individual women fiction writers have also appeared with increasing frequency in recent years. The publication of Chava Rosenfarb’s *Tree of Life* (1985), *Bociany* (2000), *Of Lodz and Love* (2000), and *Survivors* (1976, 2004) owes a great deal to the encouragement of her daughter, the scholar and translator Goldie Morgentaler. Esther Singer Kreitman’s novel *Deborah* was first translated and published by her son Maurice Carr in 1946 (and republished in 1954 and 1983) before The Feminist Press provided it with new exposure in 2004 and 2009 as *The Dance of Demons*. However, Kreitman’s publication cannot be disentangled from the fact that she was the sister of Yiddish writers Israel Joshua Singer and Isaac Bashevis Singer (the only Yiddish writer to have been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature). The publication of Kreitman’s *Blitz and Other Stories* (2004) and *Diamonds* (2009) certainly benefited from the desire to expand our knowledge of this literary family. More recent years have seen an exciting burst of translation of Yiddish women’s fiction, including Kadya Molodovsky’s *A House with Seven Stories* (2006), Rakhl Faygenberg’s *Strange Ways* (2007), Blume Lempel’s *Oedipus in Brooklyn and Other Stories* (2016), Yente Mash’s *On the Landing* (2018), Kadya Molodovsky’s *A Jewish Refugee in New York* (2019), and...
Miriam Karpilove’s *Diary of a Lonely Girl* (2020), to name a few. This bilingual edition of Salomea Perl becomes part of this ongoing critical intervention, and an opportunity to rediscover a treasure from the turn-of-the-century Yiddish press in Warsaw.

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