



A PRICE BELOW

RUBIES

Jewish Women as

Rebels & Radicals



NAOMI SHEPHERD

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AND RADICALS

NAOMI SHEPHERD

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INTRODUCTION

‘My father was a small, sickly, grey-haired Jew with lively, kindly eyes. I can picture him bending all day long over huge ledgers in which he counted up the profits of his masters, lumber merchants, who were also his distant relatives and ‘benefactors’ for whom he worked as a bookkeeper at forty rubles a month. In the evenings and far into the night, he would also bend over no less voluminous books ... in which he vainly sought the meaning of life ... My mother ... was illiterate ... interested only in narrow, material family questions, and her husband’s soaring into the clouds often aroused her to the verge of frenzy. The inevitable wrangle usually ended with father taking his ‘holy’ book under his arm and escaping into the next room, slamming the door behind him. The lock clicked, and through the keyhole one could see his shabby figure bent again over the Talmud ... Mother often wept bitterly; I pitied her, but my sympathies were with father, even though I had long ago lost faith in the holiness of the Talmud, and my belief in God had vanished.’

This is not the first chapter in a nostalgic memoir of life in a Jewish township of Eastern Europe, but the opening of a book entitled *Twenty Years in Underground Russia: Memoirs of a Rank and File Bolshevik*.¹ There is barely a subsequent mention of the author’s parents. As usual in revolutionary memoirs, there is virtually no reference to her private life. The fact of her marriage to a fellow revolutionary is only revealed when she casually mentions a meeting with her husband on his way to exile in Siberia.

The author, Cecilia Bobrowskaya, was one of the second generation of Jewish women radicals. Her background was typical

of thousands of such women who joined revolutionary movements, Russian and Jewish, between the 1870s and 1917. She lived in a small town in the Russian Empire inhabited mainly by Jews, with 'more tailors and shoemakers than there ever could be buyers', and she was mainly self-educated in Russian classical and revolutionary literature. In the winter of 1894, until fired for her radical activities, she went out to work in a lace factory, where illegal 'workers' circles' gathered. She then went to Warsaw to study and 'agitate' among Polish and Jewish workers. This began her career as a revolutionary.

The passage I have stressed carries within it the central theme of this book. Not all the fathers of Jewish women radicals studied the Talmud; some also had a secular education, like the first generations of the Eastern European *maskilim*, the children of the Jewish Enlightenment. But Jewish women had all been excluded from that intellectual inheritance which was the mainstay of Jewish life, while much of the responsibility for family and communal survival had been placed on women's shoulders. From about 1870 the radical ideas current in Eastern Europe were immensely seductive for young Jews of both sexes. But the limitations accepted almost unquestioningly for so long by Jewish women now intensified their motives for rebellion, just as their practical energies, approved by tradition, sought fresh outlets.

The sources of Jewish radicalism have been examined by Jewish historians; but women have not been treated separately from men, as has been the case for Russian revolutionary women and European socialist women. Feminist historians know little of Jewish history; Jewish historians have shown little interest in Jewish women in the modern period until recently. It has been generally assumed that Jewish women had the same motives for rebellion as the men, or, that their loyalty to the Jewish community was more important to them than the desire for greater independence as women. As serious research on the Jewish family, that much praised and much sentimentalised institution, is only now beginning, there has been no basis to challenge that assumption. A further problem is that so many of the outstanding women radicals disclaimed their heritage and disassociated them-

selves from other Jews—a fact which has not encouraged Jewish historians to accord them serious treatment.

Jewish historians have, however, noted the emotional aspect of women's participation in revolutionary movements, as if men's commitment was always intellectual, and have made critical reference to the many cases of conversion.² In a cooler vein, the Marxist historian Isaac Deutscher defined Jewish radicals who abandoned the community in a famous phrase as 'non-Jewish Jews'; many of the women would correspond to that definition. But no historian has thought to ask why Jewish women among the radicals were often tormented by their Jewishness. The words 'neurotic', 'hysterical', or 'temperamental' very often appear in Jewish historians' accounts of radical Jewish women. That their problems were as much circumstantial as emotional is not considered.

Certainly the nature of women's Jewishness—apart from the fact of their birth—is often hard to define precisely, for reasons discussed in the first part of this book. But even those women who disclaimed all interest in Jewish politics, like Rosa Luxemburg or Emma Goldman, the two most celebrated women radicals, are identifiable as Jews; those who know little of Luxemburg's critique of classical Marxism, or of Goldman's brand of anarchism, know at least that they were Jewish. This is not just a matter of formal 'origins'. 'Non-Jewish Jews' like Rosa Luxemburg or Leon Trotsky were often being less than frank in claiming amnesia about their early lives. The Jewish radicals, men and women alike, came from Jewish communities which until late in the nineteenth century had lived lives totally separate, as regards religion, language, social customs, and economic occupations, from the majority populations in the countries in which they lived. These communities lived according to a code which today would be comprehensible only to scattered orthodox groups in the Diaspora and the religious population of Israel. This code had elements particularly unacceptable to those women who sought independence and a new relationship between the sexes.

Judaism, a religion and also a complex legal and social system affecting every aspect of everyday life, was the central and most

powerful force in the lives of these communities, from which almost all radical women came. Those who know only the vestigial form of Jewish life in the West can have little sense of what it meant to be a member of those communities, and still less what it meant to be a Jewish woman living in one at that time. At the beginning of the revolutionary period in czarist Russia, for a woman to join a radical movement meant challenging the family and community to which she belonged. The records and formal histories of these movements, with the exception of the Jewish socialist party, the Bund, tell us little about their women members, but a number of memoirs and biographical sketches remain. Further evidence of the women's lives may be buried in archival material in Russia and Poland only now being mined. But the evidence already at hand indicates that just as the experience of men and women in traditional society was different, their attraction to revolutionary ideas was based on different motives.

While radicalism among Jews was still a novelty, habits of religious training among the men were carried over into secular politics, especially among the 'half-intellectuals', the name given the many radicals who had been schooled in rabbinical dialectic and were now drawn to the theology of Marxism. Bobrowskaya recalls that, in the workers' circles, political arguments with a Russian Gentile instructor often became religious disputes. But most Jewish women, by comparison, whatever their origin—whether in the homes of the *maskilim* or the orthodox—had little or no Jewish intellectual training, and whatever they had acquired was at second hand. They did not know the Hebrew (which they usually could neither read nor write) of more than a few basic prayers, or the Aramaic terminology of the Talmud. They were barred (or 'exempted', as Talmudic scholars have it) from taking part in learned arguments. By contrast, there is much evidence that they were increasingly hungry for secular education.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the mother tongue of most Jews in the Russian empire was Yiddish; only three per cent gave Russian as their native language in a census carried out in 1897. Only a small minority of women over the age of

forty, according to Jewish research statistics, had learned to read Russian by the end of the nineteenth century, and most were thus 'illiterate' like Bobrowskaya's mother. This did not mean, however, that they could not read Yiddish, written phonetically in Hebrew characters. There was a dramatic rise in the ability to read Russian, at this time, among younger women who were still Yiddish speakers. About a third of adolescent Jewish girls in the towns, and a quarter in the country, could now read Russian. While their reading skills in Russian were still inferior to those of Jewish men, they were still more than three times higher than those of women in the Russian Orthodox population, most of whom belonged to the peasantry.³ Both this, and the fact that so many now worked in the artisan trades and industries in the towns, meant that it was far easier for them to be exposed to revolutionary literature than it was for the female population of Russia at large—despite their relative lack of learning within their own religious culture.

Anna Heller was a Jewish socialist leader, daughter of a family whose members, as so often happened in Jewish communities, were mill owners, brewers, lumber merchants, bailiffs of large estates—middlemen between the landowners and the peasantry. Briefly enriched during the nineteenth century and then impoverished as Russia freed the serfs, introduced punitive laws for the Jews, and industrialised, many such families produced radical children. Heller was one of the very few Jewish women who wrote, in Yiddish, a brief record of her life, before dying in a Soviet prison. Heller recalled that, as a devout small girl, she was reproved by her father for excessive piety as she garbled the Hebrew prayers. She retorted: 'Anyway I don't understand a word I'm saying', and was slapped for her impertinence.⁴

Jewish women had far less to discard, doctrinally, than men. Moreover, the lure of secular literature, which was more accessible to them than it was to men, proved to be much greater. Though Jewish tradition excluded women from the scholarly élite, it loaded them with responsibilities which far exceeded those borne by women in the corresponding merchant or artisan classes in non-Jewish society at this period. In traditional Jewish society,

women—whether wives, mothers, or even mothers-in-law—were often solely responsible for the economic support of the scholarly aristocracy, and thus exposed to the world outside the Jewish community. In the famous Bashevis Singer family, where the father was a Hasidic rabbi, the remarkable (self-taught, and learned) mother of Israel Joshua Singer and Isaac Bashevis Singer gave birth while on a business trip on behalf of the family.⁵

In Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century, women in the Jewish working class formed a quarter of the entire work force. Even this figure is probably an underestimate, as so many women took work home.⁶ Like the responsibilities of motherhood for the previous generation, wage earning now began at puberty. The young girls—seamstresses or workers in tobacco factories and the soap and sugar industries run by Jews in the north-western provinces of the Russian Empire—were hungry for learning. Russian working-class women, by comparison, who were mainly peasant in origin and totally subordinate legally, socially, and economically to their menfolk, were far less politically articulate.⁷

Esther Frumkin—probably the greatest of Jewish radical women journalists after Rosa Luxemburg but little known, as she wrote in Yiddish—describes in a memoir that at home it was only after their fathers had fallen asleep that ‘one would read by the covered light and swallow ... the holy, burning little letters ... How many tragedies they would suffer at home if it became known that they were running around with the “brothers and sisters” ... how many insults, blows, tears! It did not help. “It attracts them like magnets”, the mothers wailed to each other.’⁸ One set of ‘holy books’ had taken the place of those others that the girls could not read. If the girls ‘swallowed’ Marxist doctrine so fervently despite the penalties involved, asking questions in the circles rather than arguing, it was very probably because, unlike their brothers, they had not been trained in dialectic.

The potential for rebellion, the desire for radical change among Jewish women, was all the stronger as they glimpsed for the first time the chance to rid themselves of traditional disabilities. Jewish men, too, sought to escape the domination of young lives

by their elders—some historians, indeed, have seen the spread of the Enlightenment in Eastern Europe as the result of the ‘youth culture’ which followed an unprecedented leap in the Jewish birthrate during the nineteenth century—but the impact of the new ideas on women was even more devastating. It led them into political activity; it also encouraged them to seek a relationship with men hitherto unknown in Jewish society, one based on shared intellectual interests.

Jewish women’s participation in revolutionary politics from 1870 onward is notable by any standard. In Czarist Russia, Jewish women in the earliest revolutionary groups, including those which resorted to terrorism, ranked second in numbers only to those of Russian women. Historians have noted this fact without trying to explain it. The leading authority on women’s history in Russia during this period, Richard Stites, suggests only that ‘the Jewish family was even more despotic than the Russian’.⁹

In fact, many of the fathers of those Jewish women who figure in Czarist revolutionary records in the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, and who belonged to the tiny, privileged merchant class allowed to reside in the great cities of Russia, were exceptionally indulgent towards their daughters and encouraged their higher education (even when this meant sending them to Switzerland for university studies). Even more striking (in the context of the allegedly ‘despotic’ or patriarchal families which are supposed to have alienated their daughters) is the fact that, as in the case of Bobrowskaya, radical Jewish women had a complex and often intimate relationship with their fathers, against whom they rebelled but whom they also wished to emulate.

The second group of radical Jewish women appeared in the Pale of Settlement, those provinces of the Russian Empire—mainly in the north-west—to which the majority of Russia’s Jews were confined between the first partition of Poland in 1722 and 1917, when all restrictions on Jewish territorial settlement were abolished. Both middle-class and working-class Jewish women were among the small group of founders of the Jewish socialist party, the Bund, which inspired both admiration and hostility

among the Russian social democrats. Several of the Bund's leaders, subsequently, were Jewish women, many active jointly with their husbands. The Bund, though a minority political group, had a large female membership, and its teaching cadres were packed with privileged women who took on themselves the education of working women, both in general studies and in Marxist doctrine. This was in striking contrast with the non-Jewish Russian populist and Marxist women of the intelligentsia who took it on themselves to educate the Russian women workers. Heirs to the feminist leaders of the 1860s, they stressed the importance of basic literacy and vocational rather than political training. Nor was their attitude towards egalitarianism between men and women workers as pronounced as that of the Bundist women.¹⁰

The importance of the Bund in Jewish women's lives was not just a matter of political belief. For the first time ever in Jewish community life, women now participated in public activity on equal terms with men. For the early revolutionaries of the Jewish élite, like their Russian populist counterparts, radical politics had meant a solitary life away from family and community, their sole allegiance to a small and endangered group of revolutionaries. This was not the case with the Bundist women. The notion of Jewish nationality was central to Bundist beliefs, and their radical activities were organised within the community.

But taking a stand against religion—for the Bund was strongly anticlerical—involved clashes with the women's families. Moreover, because it meant young men and girls studying together, usually after working hours, and taking part in political activities with no parental supervision, it flew in the face of tradition. The same was true of Zionism. Joining a Zionist youth movement was in many ways a more total rebellion than joining the Bund, as it ended in a complete break with the family through emigration—at this early stage an emigration only of the young.

However, not all Zionists were socialists and, even among the socialist pioneers, the process of reforming and changing Jewish life as it had existed for millennia in the Diaspora was more apparent than real. The earliest pioneers, of whom women were

about one-third, left their families behind them in Eastern Europe and with them, as many women hoped and expected, the inequality of the sexes. Just as revolutionary women of the period believed that socialism would solve the problem of women's liberation, Zionist women, during the early period in a frontier society, were confident that building a society from scratch, without the older generation, would ensure them equality with men. They struggled to share the 'productive' manual tasks that conferred status, such as building and work in the fields. A small group even tried, though on a temporary basis, to establish all-women communes, when they found that in the early collectives they were usually relegated to what had always been woman's work: cooking, laundering, the care of infants and children, and, later, teaching. Ironically, this kind of work carried even less social status in the pioneering Zionist community than it had in the Diaspora. Many Zionist pioneer women ended up, to their bitter disappointment, working as domestic help to middle-class women in the new Jewish towns of Palestine—work which immigrant Jewish women in the West often refused to do. Only a handful of exceptionally ambitious and gifted women were to play a formative political role in the new Jewish state.

The remaining manifestations of Jewish women's radicalism were mainly offshoots of the movements in Eastern Europe, transferred to Western Europe and the United States with the mass immigration that began in the 1880s. Jewish socialism gradually petered out in this very different political climate, though Jewish women played an important part in the anarchist circles of the West during the early years of the century. They were also prominent in pacifist activities before and during the First World War.

Finally, a significant group of Jewish women were pioneers in the trade union movement in the United States until the 1930s. The economic exploitation of Jewish women in the industries of the main American cities was dismayingly reminiscent, on a larger scale, of what had happened in Eastern Europe, with additional friction between Jews of different origins: German Jewish Americans were often the employers, Eastern European

immigrants were usually the employees. Thus, given Jewish women immigrants' political consciousness, it was not coincidental that Jewish women led the fight for unionisation, strike action, and protest against conditions in industry during the first third of the twentieth century.

At this point, however, the limits of Jewish radicalism began to be evident in what was one of the most mobile and successful immigrant communities in the United States. As the Jews moved into the American middle class, the Jewish family reasserted itself. The élite of religious scholars had diminished to a small group; those who headed the Jewish social hierarchy were now businessmen and professionals—as in Western Europe. Women left the workplace at marriage and returned to the home, where they assumed a new importance as domestic guardians of Jewish tradition (something which had happened much earlier in Western Europe); but it was a tradition by now considerably attenuated. The mainspring for rebellion had lost its tension.

Historically, then, radicalism among Jewish women, which had always clashed so emphatically with the conventional image of the Jewish woman, was limited both by political and by social developments. The Jewish women in the earliest radical groups, like their non-Jewish counterparts, were doomed. Many died, either in prison or by their own hands, and others fled from the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union. Most Bundist women who did not emigrate perished in the Holocaust. Politically organised women in socialist and Zionist movements played a part in the inevitably limited but none the less remarkable episodes of resistance to the Nazis. The Zionist women pioneers did not achieve the complete equality they sought, both because the economic facts of state-building and the importance of the army in the life of the country militated against them—and also because the Jewish family, from which the women pioneers had taken a prolonged holiday, reasserted its power. In the United States, as Jewish immigrants moved from the American working class into the middle class, women either became housewives (with fewer economic responsibilities than in the past) or competed for the professional opportunities open to those who now

qualified for an education. With the passage of time, some have become radical feminists, or—when they remain observant Jews—campaign for change in Jewish law. But this is in a very different era.

The disintegration of the socially autonomous Jewish society of Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century meant the end of what had been a clearly defined Jewish class structure, though one which did not correspond to the Marxist pattern. Today, Jewish radicalism looks historically limited, the product of a very particular period in Jewish history. How much of it was intrinsically Jewish? And in what way were its ideas particularly appealing to women?

Jewish radicalism borrowed heavily from current political ideas in the host countries; but the Jews also had their own 'class struggle' and, perhaps even more important, a clash between the generations. The older, privileged minority, and the religious leaders, tended to be loyal to the regime, while their educated children became radical leaders. The rank and file of radical Jews came, however, from the poorer artisan class. Privileged Jewish girls who had enjoyed a secular education became the mentors and teachers of these working-class women. Jewish women radicals resemble other socialist women of the period in that they subordinated their own separate needs and interests to the founding of a new, just society; but they also had to fight a battle of their own against class differences within Jewish society, differences which had been codified in Jewish law, were still part of the fabric of Jewish communities, and affected women more than men. Men continued to exclude women from public life, and the education of sons was considered more important than that of daughters, even when the rabbinical law which had made these customs mandatory no longer held sway over the community.

Jewish women traditionally possessed a worldliness and energy often absent among the scholarly élite. In Eastern Europe, women active in economic life had mixed freely with non-Jews in the marketplace. In Western Europe, by contrast, women of privileged families who no longer worked were often educated in