

# Dangerous Politics, Dangerous Liaisons : Love and Terror among Jewish Women Radicals in Czarist Russia

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## *Résumé*

Pendant les années 1870 et 1880, les femmes juives sont très représentées dans les mouvements de gauche qui ont émergé en Russie. Dans cet article, nous explorons les origines sociales, les expériences de vie, et les motivations des femmes attirées par la politique socialiste à cette époque. Nous portons une attention particulière à la mixité sociale parmi les militants, et établissons un modèle de romances judéo-nobles qui figure aussi dans les salons dans d'autres époques et villes. Quatre notes biographiques approfondissent ce que nous pouvons apprendre des statistiques. Les femmes mises en exergue sont Gesia Gelfman, Anna Kuliscioff, Anna Epshtein et Rosalie Idelson.

## *Abstract*

*During the 1870s and 1880s, Jewish women were strongly represented in the left movements which emerged in Russia. In this article we explore the social origins, the life experiences and the motives of the women drawn to socialist politics in this era. We pay special attention to the social mix among the activists, and point to a pattern of Jewish-noble romances occurring in the salons of other epochs and cities. Four biographical sketches expand what we can learn from the statistics. The women highlighted are Gesia Gelfman, Anna Kuliscioff, Anna Epshtein and Rosalie Idelson.*

## **Explaining Why Jewish Women became Radicals**

In 1895, the Russian-Jewish writer Sholem Aleichem began to publish a series of short novellas in Yiddish. The narrator of the novellas is ostensibly recording his conversations with a dairy delivery man called Tevye. The imaginary Tevye and his wife Goldie were poor and observant, the parents of five daughters<sup>1</sup>. Raising funds for so many dowries was an obvious challenge. Tevye frequently shared his hope that their daughters would marry wealthy husbands and thereby lift the family out of poverty. Yet he also clearly did

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1. See Hillel Halkin, translator to *Sholem Aleichem, Tevye the Dairyman and Railroad Stories*, New York, Shoken Press, 1987, p. xviii-xix.

respect their intellects and encouraged his girls to read widely<sup>2</sup>. As they came of age and chose mates, Tevye's fantasies were disappointed in various ways. The first to marry was Tsaytl, who rejected a rich groom to marry a tailor. They were happy in love and rich in children, although impoverished. Next, Tevye's favorite daughter Hodl, bright, well-read and passionate, ran away to follow her beloved Perchick, a Jewish revolutionary, to his prison exile. A third daughter, Chava, broke her parents' hearts when she converted to Russian Orthodoxy and married Chvedka, her Christian boyfriend. The fourth marriage seemed to fulfill the parents' dreams when Beilke married a wealthy war contractor, but money did not buy happiness whatsoever, and she was desperately unhappy. Eventually the couple fled their troubles and emigrated to the United States. The last daughter, Shprintze, became pregnant out of wedlock, but her lover refused to marry her, and she chose suicide rather than bearing the child<sup>3</sup>. At the end of the last monologue we learn that some years after Goldie's death, Tevye and two of his daughters left Russia for a new life in America.

Sholem Aleichem's fictional family has enjoyed a robust life in posterity, known to many from the Broadway musical and film called *Fiddler on the Roof*. Historians too have also turned to Tevye's fictional family to illustrate historical trends. Yuri Slezkine, for instance, chose the Hodl character to illustrate the phenomenon he labels *Jewish modernity*. In his book *The Jewish Century*, Slezkine describes Jews who left their *shtetlach*, or little villages, to move to the big cities of Russia, to the United States and to Palestine. He argues that Hodl symbolizes not just the modern Jewish experience, but also global patterns of mobility and modernization<sup>4</sup>. In this essay we turn away from Tevya and Hodl, and away from Slezkine's bold claims about the significance of Jewish mobility. Here our focus is on the actual historical experience of Jewish women in this era who chose the path of Hodl, fleeing tradition to become radicals. We deepen the analysis by exploring the biographies of four radical women who fell in love with Christian radicals they met in the movement. We explore their motives for dedicating their lives to radical politics, and ponder the significance of their activism for Jewish fate during these tumultuous decades.

The memoirs of the time portray many dramatic departures of Jewish women leaving behind family behind to pursue vocations and politics. Often their flight was triggered by their refusal to enter an arranged marriage. In one account, "the revolution awakened, among Jewish girls from comfortably off families, a burning desire for higher education and independence, and this shook the very foundations of Jewish traditional life, far more seriously than the educational development of the male intelligentsia"<sup>5</sup>. Historians have agreed, concluding that women's rebellions against their families tended to be stormier than the men's rebellions<sup>6</sup>.

2. For an overview of the variety of books that Jewish women were reading in this setting, see Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Society*, Waltham, Massachusetts, University Press of New England, 2004.

3. For useful background, see Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1996, especially the pages on Tevye, p. 171-176. On Tevye's imaginary daughters, see Janet Hadda, *Passionate Women Passive Men: Suicide in Yiddish Literature*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1988, p. 43-55.

4. See Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006.

5. Citation from Naomi Shepherd, *A Price Above Rubies: Jewish Women as Rebels and Radicals*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 3, note 2, citing Elyohu Cherikover, "Yidn-revolutsyonern in rusland in di 60-er un 70-er yorn", *Historische Schriftn*, III, Vilna and New York, 1939, p. 129-130 and 133-134.

6. Both Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews 1862-1917*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 202, and Nora Levin, *While Messiah Tarried: Jewish Socialist Movements 1871-1917*, New York, Schocken Press, 1977, p. 30, claim this about Jewish women's rebellions.

Obtaining precise information on how many and which Jews chose to join the left parties is a contested arena indeed. In Russia at the close of the nineteenth century the proportion of the total population which was Jewish was roughly four percent. On some accounts the Russian left around 1900 included a mere 4% Jewish membership, on other accounts half of the radicals were Jewish<sup>7</sup>. Those who hated both radicals and Jews desired to pillory a movement which they described as densely Jewish. In contrast, activists concerned that Jewish participation was a liability counted a weaker proportion of Jews and tried to keep Jews away from the limelight. Accurate statistics on the internal composition of the left parties are likewise rare.

Luckily, we do possess meticulous numbers on *The People's Will*, a notorious radical organization from the 1870s and 1880s. These figures reveal that Jewish women were spectacularly overrepresented in this circle. *The People's Will* attracted 2193 activists during the decade of the eighties. Among these two thousand some radicals were 95 Jewish women, who represented almost a third of the 348 women in the party<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, the 95 Jewish women were twice as well represented among the Jewish activists as Christian women were among the Christian activists. Statistics on the high proportion of Jewish women in the *Russian Social Democratic* movement and the *Social Revolutionaries*, the successor party to *The People's Will*, also show a very robust participation by Jewish women<sup>9</sup>.

When we seek to understand why Jewish women were so attracted to the left movements, we must consider the deteriorating situation of Russian Jewry in these years. The overwhelming majority of Jews were confined inside of the *Pale of Settlement*, the western region of Russia, the former territory of the historic Polish-Lithuanian state<sup>10</sup>. Structural shifts in the economy wreaked havoc on the village lifestyle, where family, observance, and occupations overlapped so seamlessly. But the functions Jews played in the agricultural economy were less and less needed as Russia became more urban. Meanwhile, harsh quotas regulating residency, education and employment frustrated geographic and social mobility. With every passing year, the dream of achieving what so many Jews in Vienna and Berlin had attained was harder to realize. Many moved to Minsk or Vilna or Vitebsk, working in sweatshops and factories which turned out clothing, matches, leather goods, and cigarettes. Further departures to New York City or even to the stony landscape of Ottoman Palestine were two other routes out of the abundant misery.

Politics as well as economics enhanced Jewish existential despair, because the czarist political system was proving stubbornly difficult to reform. By the middle years of the 1870s, circles of activists who called themselves *Propagandists* were recruiting many of the best and brightest students across the major Russian cities. It was during the middle years of the seventies that Jewish teens from modest backgrounds first began to flock to

7. The 4% estimate comes from Salo Baron, *The Russian Jew under Tsars and Soviets*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1976, p. 44. The 50% estimate comes from an estimate by Count Sergei Witte in 1903, as noted in Theodore Friedgot, "Jews, Violence and the Russian Revolutionary Movement", in *Studies in Contemporary Jewry Annual XVIII*, 2002, 43-58, p. 45. See also Leonard Schapiro, "The Role of the Jews in the Russian Revolutionary Movement", *Slavonic and East European Review*, 40, 1961-1962, p. 148-167, p. 148.

8. See Erich Haberer, *Jews and Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Russia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 273-276.

9. See the useful statistics in Beate Fieseler, *Frauen auf dem Weg in die Russische Sozialdemokratie 1890-1917*, Stuttgart, Steiner, 1995, appendix, and also see Anna Gelfman, *Thou Shalt Kill: Revolutionary Terrorism in Russia*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995, Chapter One.

10. For background, see Israel Bartal, *The Jews of Eastern Europe 1772-1881*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.

the *Propagandist* circles. During the 1860s, the proportion of radicals who were Jewish had been tiny, and the few prominent Jewish activists had been born to privileged, wealthy families. The activists read incendiary literature smuggled from abroad and wrote and published their own newspapers, journals, books and manifestos. The most dedicated *Propagandists* took their cause directly to the people, which then meant Christian peasants, sometimes urban workers. The well-bred *Propagandists* needed to hide their soft hands and refined manners when they moved to villages to educate and recruit peasants for the cause<sup>11</sup>. Teen radicals debated strategies and tactics wherever they roamed, in their parents' drawing rooms, in urban communes, in *yeshiva* hallways, on forced exile marches to Siberia, and in their fetid prison cells. From our distance in time it is not at all obvious why so many lucky young people gave up their fate to join the cause. We can justly surmise that they were attracted to the experience of lived equality in a large surrogate family of peers, as well as a chance for public influence. In this essay we explore how the movement provided Jewish girl recruits with rare opportunities for romance across painfully wide barriers of class and religion.

In the decade we explore here, most of the Jewish men in the movement were *half-intellectuals*<sup>12</sup>. This was the contemporary term for those caught between *shtetl* poverty and the positions in mainstream society which bestowed real *intellectual* status. Both the half-intellectuals and the few authentic intellectuals were caught up organizing the schools, publications, and subculture of the Jewish Enlightenment, the *Haskalah*. The *maskilim*, as the reformers were called, aimed to help contemporary Jews master mainstream languages and skills, modernize religious rituals, and thereby justify their civic emancipation<sup>13</sup>. The Jewish enlightenment emerged much later in Russia than in the German lands, depended greatly on state support, and was often met with hostility by traditional Jews. By the seventies the Russian *maskilim* had founded a range of schools, where Jewish youth mastered secular languages and subjects. This new knowledge often sparked a violent clash with traditional Judaism, and many turned on their heels and left ritual and belief behind. Traditional families were distraught and bereft.

Some historians argue that the break between tradition and radical politics was not nearly so polarized as it seemed at the moment, both for the participants and in posterity. Some argue that the teen boys who joined the left were actually channeling the values of the *Haskalah*<sup>14</sup>. At first glance such an analysis could never apply to the women radicals, because they were totally excluded from the modernist elite secondary schools. Overall, the rhetoric of the *maskilim* was sometimes sympathetic to women's plight, but they created few institutions to help them. Indeed, some harsh critics are now claiming that the *maskilim*

11. See Adam Ulam, *In the Name of the People: Prophets and Conspirators in Prerevolutionary Russia*, New York, Viking Press, 1977; Daniel Brower, *Training the Nihilists: Education and Radicalism in Tsarist Russia*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1975; Ana Siljak, *Angel of Vengeance: The Girl Who Shot the Governor of St. Petersburg and Sparked the Age of Assassination*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 2009, and Philip Pomper, Peter Lavrov and the Russian Revolutionary World, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1972.

12. For discussion, see the indispensable work by Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, p. 201-202 and p. 387-388, and the more popular treatment by Levin, *While Messiah Tarried*, p. 27-31.

13. Major sources include: Jeffrey Veidlinger, *Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2009; Jacob Raisin, *The Haskalah Movement in Russia* Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1913; Shmuel Feiner and David Sorkin, *New Perspectives on the Haskalah*, London, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004, and most recently, Olga Litvak, *Haskalah: The Romantic Movement in Judaism*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2012.

14. See Haberer, *Jews and Revolution*, Chapters Four and Twelve.

actually conducted an “imaginative assault on women”, and targeted women as prone to “superstition and the pursuit of luxury and sexuality”<sup>15</sup>.

The problem the girls faced was rooted in the larger dilemma of how isolated the *maskilim* were on the Jewish street<sup>16</sup>. Rabbis, teachers, and parents were angry with the support that Russian state officials showed for reforming Judaism, when they were content with tradition as it had been for centuries. Parents resisted their daughters’ desires to learn, to change the world, and to marry for love, because they rightly feared that traditional ways were endangered. The girls were pawns in a contest between religious loyalty as a kind of ersatz political autonomy and the freedoms of a modern society. There was, moreover, a strong economic rationale for arranged marriages, considering how difficult it was for *half-intellectual* teen boys to advance in the world. Sholem Aleichem knew all of this in his bones when he created Tevye and Goldie and their rebellious daughters.

Arranged marriages were a central feature of Jewish life at the time, in which family finances, religion and filial loyalty were seamlessly connected. A brief look at the life of Puah Rakovsky illustrates the problem dramatically. Rakovsky was born in 1865 in *Congress Poland*, then part of the Russian *Pale of Settlement*. While still in her late teens, Puah’s parents leaned on her to marry a man whom they had chosen, but whom she detested. Against her better judgment, worn down by their pressure, she relented and went forward with the marriage. Several years later, when she was already the mother of two children, she proposed to her parents and to her husband that she move to St. Petersburg to study to be a midwife. Her husband’s response was: “You’ll study to be a midwife? Well then, go and convert instead - as far as I’m concerned, it’s the same thing!”<sup>17</sup> Her parents were equally horrified, and responded: “If you do that, we’ll disown you and your children. You’ll study to be a midwife and you’ll blacken our name. We still have to find husbands for six girls.”<sup>18</sup> In her situation, the most minimal rebellion by daughters of traditional families was seen as a danger to the marriage plans of her siblings. In time Rakovsky ended her marriage, trained to be a teacher, founded and directed a Hebrew-speaking gymnasium for girls, and flourished as a Zionist activist in Poland and indeed in Palestine as well.

As Puah’s life story well illustrates, in spite of the barriers they faced from parents, from the rabbis, the *maskilim*, and from the wider society, the Jewish teen girls took matters into their own hands to acquire education, skills, and freedom. They read romantic novels in Yiddish, which often celebrated love matches. They attended the new modernist primary schools which were open to girls, and sometimes found a place at a Russian all-girls elite secondary school. They were robustly over-represented in the nursing and midwifery courses. Often their mothers or aunts had been business wives who supported their families, a model for female public roles that could easily be channeled into politics. And although the parties of the left in this era were hardly feminist, many male activists made it a point to help with money and sympathy. The stormy exits of many Jewish women radicals from home and community can well be contrasted to the more harmonious experiences of many Christian women activists. Often they were born to privileged gentry families,

15. These quotes are from Litvak, *Haskalah*, p. 43-45. For a recent summary of the scholarship on these issues, see Michael A. Meyer, “Women in the Thought and Practice of the European Jewish Reform Movement”, in Marion Kaplan and Deborah Dash Moore, *Gender and Jewish History*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2011, 139-157.

16. In addition to works cited in note 13, see Nancy Sinkhoff, *Out of the Shtetl: Making Jews Modern in the Polish Borderlands*, Providence, Brown University Press, 2004.

17. See Puah Rakovsky, *My Life as a Radical Jewish Woman: Memoirs of a Zionist Feminist*, edited with an Introduction by Paula Hyman, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2002, p. 38.

18. Rakovsky, *Memoirs*, p. 39.

and their sisters and mothers joined them in their political sympathies and activities. Some historians point to their childhood religious experiences, amplified by continuing intimacy with parents and siblings, to account for their radicalism<sup>19</sup>. In contrast, few of the Jewish girl activists seemed to enjoy much emotional and religious continuity once they cast their lot with the movement.

Participants and historians alike often have represented the left movements of the era as secular, cosmopolitan, or universalist. We can imagine that many activists themselves were proud that their circles were a utopian space where participants could transcend the rigid constraints of religion and class. In the pages to come we move away from ideology, so as to concentrate on the lived experience of heterogeneity. Here we learn that the Russian left during the seventies and eighties was definitely not a small-scale replica of the Russian population, but rather a complex amalgam of specific social types.

### Gesia Gelfman and her Peers

Because of her public role in the 1881 assassination of the czar, Gesia Mirokhovna Gelfman became perhaps the best known of the Jewish women radicals of her era. She was born into a religious Jewish family in Mozyr, a town in the province of Minsk, in Russia, during the early years of the 1850s<sup>20</sup>. She received no formal schooling, either Jewish or secular<sup>21</sup>. When she was still a teen, her father chose her husband for her. But the groom, whom she later referred to a “Talmudist,” or a yeshiva student engaged in advanced religious studies, was not to her taste. She ran away from home sometime in 1868, on the eve of her wedding<sup>22</sup>. She explained her abrupt departure by her antipathy to what she called the “repulsive rituals dictated by ancient Jewish customs,” presumably a visit to the local *mikve*, the religious bath<sup>23</sup>.

One of her fellow activists later noted maliciously that she “fled from her parents’ house, taking with her, as her sole inheritance, the malediction of these fanatics, who would willingly have seen her in her coffin rather than fraternizing with the *goi*”<sup>24</sup>. In this formulation of her plight we see a distinct lack of sympathy toward Jewish life and toward the understandable consternation of her family. Initially, Gelfman lived with a local Christian friend, but soon left for Kiev. There she worked as a seamstress for two

19. See Barbara Engel, *Mothers and Daughters: Women of the Intelligentsia in Nineteenth-Century Russia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983. See, also, Anna Hillyar and Jane McDermid, *Revolutionary Women in Russia, 1870-1917: A Study in Collective Biography*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000, and Margaret Maxwell, *Narodniki Women: Russian Women Who Sacrificed Themselves for the Dream of Freedom*, Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1990.

20. Gelfman was born sometime between 1852 and 1855. We should assume 1852 is true, because she was apparently 17 when her marriage should have taken place. This is the age noted in Olga Liubotovitch’s memoir, as translated in Barbara Engel and Clifford Rosenthal (eds.), *Five Sisters: Women Against the Tsar*, DeKalb, Northern Illinois Press, 2013, p. 185.

21. The best, perhaps the only short biography of Gelfman, in Russian, is: Vladimir Iokhel’son and R. M. Kantor, *Gesia Gel’fman: Materialy dlia biografii i kharakteristiki*, Petrograd-Moscow, 1922. I am grateful to Margarita Levantovskaya for help in translation of selected passages. See also Stepniak [Sergei Kravchinski], *Underground Russia: Revolutionary Profiles and Sketches from Life*, London, Elder Smith Publishers, 1896, p. 111-116.

22. See Hillyar and McDermid, *Revolutionary Women*, p. 32. According to the published statistics, 61% of Jewish women in Russia then would have married at ages 20 or younger. See Table 1.1 in Saul Stampfer, Chapter One on “The Social Implications of Very Early Marriage,” in his *Families, Rabbis and Education: Traditional Jewish Society in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe*, London, Littman Library Press, 2014, p. 23.

23. As noted in Engel, *Five Sisters*, p. 85.

24. This quotation is from Stepniak [Kravchinsky], *Underground Russia*, p. 112.

years, and then entered a course to become a midwife<sup>25</sup>. It was in this setting that she became a committed radical. Five years after she moved to Kiev, she was arrested, although apparently she was engaged only in “modest propaganda work”<sup>26</sup>. After several years in various prisons, Gelfman found a way to escape, and by November of 1879, we find her back in St. Petersburg, the central city for radical politics.

By this time, activists were bitterly divided about how to move forward. Conflicts about whether violence against state officials would awaken the downtrodden became so acrimonious that in the summer of 1879, the *Propagandist* movement experienced a bitter split. Gelfman joined the more militant tendency, called *The People's Will*. For the next two years, she took a leading role in editing and distributing party publications. Ultimately Gesia took on the task of managing the safe house where the dynamite grenades were made and stored. On March 1<sup>st</sup> 1881, dynamite grenades thrown by *People's Will* militants killed Czar Alexander II. The day after the assassination, Gesia's hideout apartment was raided. Soon afterwards, Gesia and five other accused activists were put on trial. When the word spread that she was pregnant, the foreign press began reporting on her situation, and her death sentence was first postponed, and then waived<sup>27</sup>. Two of the revolutionaries who lost their lives on that day were a romantic couple, Sophia Perovskaya, born to the nobility, and Andrei Zelyabov, the son of a serf. Their love affair was an example of the very mixed social ambience of these circles. Gesia herself was in love with a noble radical named Nicolai Kolotkevitch, and he was the father of her baby. By the time of the assassination, Kolotkevitch had been incarcerated for several months, and his trial came up the following year, in 1882. Two years later, Kolotkevitch died in prison<sup>28</sup>. Gesia, meanwhile, gave birth to a daughter while in prison, and all requests to adopt the baby were denied<sup>29</sup>. Her daughter was instead sent to an orphanage, where she soon perished<sup>30</sup>. Five days after her daughter's death, Gesia Gelfman too died, of peritonitis.

Gesia Gelfman's story is particularly dramatic and we might say tragic. On the wider stage of Jewish history she played a role too. As her role in the assassination became known, several marauding hooligans who plundered Jewish villages in the pogroms of 1881 targeted her as the *Jewish* killer of the czar<sup>31</sup>. Of late historians have vigorously debated the complex causation of the pogroms which began that spring of 1881, largely refuting the myth that government officials provoked the attacks<sup>32</sup>. Pogrom hooligans in Kiev “made Gelfman into the symbol of all of the Jews”<sup>33</sup>. Precisely how the leadership

25. Cathy Porter, *Fathers and Daughters: Russian Women in Revolution*, London, Virago Press, 1976, p. 145, notes that Gelfman worked for two years as a seamstress in Kiev, then joined a course for midwives.

26. This is the judgment of Porter, *Fathers and Daughters*, p. 241.

27. This quotation from Hillyar and McDermid, *Revolutionary Women*, p. 51. See articles about her case in *The Times of London* (March 26, May 11, June 1 and July 7, 1881) and in *The Jewish Chronicle of London* (May 6, 1881).

28. See Maxwell, *Narodniki Women*, footnote 36, p. 83.

29. Individuals who volunteered to take in Gesia's child include her family, Olga Liubatovich, Kolotkevitch's family, and the mother of fellow radical Sergei Degayev, as noted in Richard Pipes, *The Degaev Affair: Terror and Treason in Tsarist Russia*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2003, p. 10.

30. See Adam Ulam, *In the Name of the People*, p. 381.

31. See Levin, *While Messiah Tarried*, p. 17.

32. The best summary of the current state of research is by John Klier, *Russians, Jews, and the Pogroms of 1881-1882*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

33. This is the summary by I. Michael Aronson, “The anti-Jewish Pogroms in Russia in 1881”, in John Klier and Shlomo Lambroza (eds.), *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 39-40.

of *The People's Will* should interpret the pogroms became a testy issue, especially for the most prominent Jewish figures in the party. The party executive issued a statement actually supporting the pogroms, declaring the violence to be a first step toward widespread rebellion against the czarist state. This stance was obviously upsetting to leading Jewish activists, but none of them publicly dissented from their party's official position<sup>34</sup>.

We now turn to Gesia's peer Anna Rozenstein, the luckiest radical Jewish woman of her generation<sup>35</sup>. Anna and her sister arrived at the University of Zurich in the fall of 1871. These were years when Russian women were agitating for higher education with a remarkable passion, and Switzerland was their mecca. Indeed, Switzerland was the only European land whose universities offered authentic degrees to women<sup>36</sup>. The Rozenstein sisters were born to assimilated parents who owned a landed estate in Simferopol, on the shores of the Crimean Sea<sup>37</sup>. Not only were they rich, they were actually no longer Jewish, having converted to Orthodoxy. Anna and her sister had been tutored at home, and their parents strongly supported their further education<sup>38</sup>. Shortly after arriving in Zurich, Anna enrolled in the engineering faculty of the *Zurich Polytechnic Institute*. Although she had not been politically engaged at all before she arrived, it was not long before Rozenstein threw herself into activism. She joined a club called the *St. Zhebunists*, named after two brothers then studying at the university. Soon she fell in love with another radical, Peter Markelovich Makarevich, son of a noble family, and some sources claim that Anna and Peter were formally married at this point<sup>39</sup>. The story circulated that several months after her arrival, she actually "ripped up her student book and certificate" so as to dedicate herself to the cause<sup>40</sup>. In her own words, "eagerly I threw myself at the worker's periodicals, studied the labor problem, and university study moved to the background"<sup>41</sup>.

Anna would remain in Zurich until the fall of 1873, when she and Peter returned to Russia. Peter was arrested in 1874 and sentenced to five years of hard labor, and the couple never met again. For three years, she lived in Odessa, and then she moved to Kiev, working with the leading populist activists to organize the peasantry against the czar. She was often living under false identities, in flight from the police, and once travelled abroad to buy

34. See Frankel, *Prophecy*, p. 97-107, and on Akselrod, see Abraham Ascher, *Pavel Akselrod and the Development of Menshevism*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1972.

35. Beverley Springer provides two dates for her birth, 1854 and 1857. Here I use 1854 as her birth date; see B. Springer, "Anna Kuliscioff: Russian Revolutionist, Italian Feminist", *European Women on the Left*, edited by Jane Slaughter and Robert Kern, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1981, p. 13-28.

36. For background, see Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism 1860-1930*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1978; J. M. Meijer, *Knowledge and Revolution: The Russian Colony in Zurich (1870-1873)*, Assen, Van Gorcum Press, 1955; and Daniela Neumann, *Studentinnen aus dem Russischen Reich in der Schweiz*, Zurich, H. Rohr Press, 1987.

37. I have relied here on Claire LaVigna, Anna Kuliscioff: *From Russian Populism to Italian Socialism*, New York and London, Garland Publishers, 1991, p. 5.

38. Secondary sources offer conflicting facts about Kuliscioff's secondary education. Naomi Shepherd's article on Kuliscioff, in the online Jewish Women's Archive, claims she was privately educated. Springer claims that she and her sister graduated with honors from the Simferopol gymnasium. The memoirist Ksenia Pampilov Silbergberg discusses the "Christian" gymnasium for girls in Simferopol in her memoir *Im Dori: Pirke Zichronot*, Haifa, Mo'etset po'ale Hefah, 1957, as cited in Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish Women*, note 91, p. 277.

39. For instance, see the chapter "The Political Salon", in Emily Bilski and Emily Braun (eds.), *Jewish Women and their Salons: The Power of Conversation*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005, p. 76.

40. LaVigna, *Kuliscioff*, p. 7.

41. As cited in Porter, *Fathers and Daughters*, p. 136, without a primary source reference.



a printing press, which she smuggled back into Russia<sup>42</sup>. At a low point in the city of Kharkov, Anna survived by singing in a town park. One historian noted that “no woman could have symbolized more dramatically the overturning of that Jewish tradition which ordered the covering of women’s hair... than Anna... as she stood in the park in Kharkov, her thick plait of blonde hair hanging on her shoulders, singing for the revolution”<sup>43</sup>.

After three years of living on the run, Anna left Russia in 1877, first for Paris and then to Lugano Switzerland. At this juncture she fell in love with the Italian anarchist Andrea Costa, and their daughter was born in 1881. The two moved to Naples, where Anna finished her medical studies, graduating as the first female physician from the University of Naples. When their daughter was four, she and Costa separated. Meanwhile, her politics had shifted from the vague *Propagandist* politics of the seventies to Marxist socialism, and she soon took on a leadership role in the Italian socialist party. She and the activist lawyer Filippo Turati joined forces in love and in their politics. Along the way, she replaced her family name of Rozenstein with the name Kuliscioff, which means “unskilled worker”. Their apartment in Milan was a gathering place for Italian radical women, subsequently labelled as a “political salon”<sup>44</sup>. Her descendants vanished into Italian Catholic society, as her daughter Andreina married into a conservative Catholic family, and one of her grandsons became a Catholic priest<sup>45</sup>. Beneath all of the wanderings and the self-imposed hardship, Anna Kuliscioff experienced quite the fulfilled life. She was a well-heeled, well-educated woman who enjoyed her family’s financial support wherever she wandered and whatever her cause. She became a pioneering physician, achieved a leadership role in the Italian socialist party, raised a child, and enjoyed a contented relationship with Turati. It seems fair to conclude that the radical movement was a social space where she could shed whatever Jewish identity she still possessed when she arrived at Zurich in 1871.

We now shift our gaze to Vilna during the middle years of the seventies, when this very Jewish city became an important location for radical politics. St. Petersburg had long been a center for the noble radicals attending university there, and by the mid-seventies, movement circles had also appeared in Kiev and Moscow. To no one’s surprise, the Vilna activists were almost all Jewish, most of them students at the *maskilic* high school there. In our era, during the 1870s, almost half of the city’s 154,000 residents were Jewish. Jewish merchants in Vilna dominated trade across the *Pale* and with Germany, and Jewish artisans produced textiles, beer, furniture, and leather goods. In Vilna, joining the movement did not require one to speak Russian and share resources in urban communes with well-born gentry radicals. The Vilna recruits often provided contact with smugglers, seen as a Jewish specialty in this setting, and our third personality, Anna Epshtein, was an ace example of this fascinating trend.

Epshtein, and her *doppelgänger* Rosalie Idelson, were born to industrious business wife mothers. The business wife was a common figure in that setting. Productive public labor was not at all typical among women from the upper Christian classes, but was highly valued by Jewish families. The rationale for this gender role reversal was that because men were supposed to spend their days in the *yeshiva*, their wives were expected to support the

42. This detail is noted in Franco Venturi, “Anna Kuliscioff é la sua attività rivoluzionaria in Russia”, *Movimento operaio*, 4, 1952, p. 277-286, as cited in Springer, “Anna Kuliscioff”, p. 14, note 4.

43. Shepherd, *Price Below Rubies*, entitled her chapter on Kuliscioff, “Singing for the Revolution”, because of this incident, p. 69.

44. Bilski and Braun, *Jewish Women*, p. 78.

45. This information comes from Springer, “Kuliscioff”, p. 15.

family<sup>46</sup>. Business wives labored as tavern managers, shopkeepers, innkeepers, rooming house managers, grain millers, sometimes as smugglers or peddlers. Commercial labor was usually done in or near the home, which meant a seamless integration of paid work with the tasks of housekeeping and motherhood. This intersection between public and private was altogether typical for this era, but the Jewish women's public commercial activities were highly unusual. To succeed as business wives, women would need to be independent, industrious, fluent in the local language, adept at accounting, and skilled at managing staff. The practice of naming children after their mother, using her first name, such as "Braine's Joseph" or "Lea Dvosse's Chaim" is a legacy of the mother's importance in the family<sup>47</sup>. The activist women we meet in this book may well have channeled the business wife role when they moved from city to city, smuggled printing presses across the border, used false names, hid bombs and carried revolvers.

Vilna had long been the esteemed Jewish intellectual capital of the *Pale of Settlement*, a city where Talmudic debates were not only a crucial measure of status, but were also a form of entertainment. This we learn from the memoir by Abraham Cahan, who left Vilna as a radical on the run from the police in 1882, and in time became an influential socialist editor in New York City. Cahan later remembered that "it was common to see two Jews stop in the street, begin to chatter like two turkeys about a passage in the Talmud, gather about them in short order a small crowd and engage in heated debate, to the delight of the listeners... there were skillful arguers, Talmudic athletes and contenders who enticed others into argument for the sheer enjoyment of exposing the ignorance of their opponents"<sup>48</sup>. This vignette drives home the burning question of whether and how radical politics resembled Vilna's atmosphere of intense Jewish intellectual debate.

Epshtein's father died when she was young, and she and her mother remained intimate throughout her life<sup>49</sup>. Her mother endorsed her daughter's politics, which was rare among Jewish parents in that setting. Between 1868 and 1873, while she was in her mid-twenties, Anna was the most active young woman in the local radical cell in Vilna. When she was younger she might have attended one of Vilna's private schools for Jewish girls. By the time that Anna was ten, in 1856, six such schools were operating in Vilna<sup>50</sup>. We do know that she was the rare Jewish teen girl to attend the *Vilna Girls' Gymnasium*, definitely *not* a Jewish institution but which did admit Jewish girls<sup>51</sup>. It was her mother who proved willing to help the movement with their family ties to the smuggling trade. Smugglers who were altogether traditional in their religious practices seemed nevertheless willing to transport radicals and their publications across the Russian-German border. Russian officials had long been concerned about the illegal trading, and back in 1843 they had prohibited Jews

46. See Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997, and Paula Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1995.

47. See Maurice Samuel, *The World of Sholom Aleichem*, New York, Knopf, 1969.

48. This is a quotation from Abraham Cahan, *The Education of Abraham Cahan*, Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1969, p. 30-31.

49. Engel, *Five Sisters*, p. 89-90, citing reportage from Vera Zasulich.

50. See Eliyana Adler, *In Her Hands: The Education of Jewish Girls in Tsarist Russia*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2010, Table 2.1, p. 38-39.

51. See Parush, *Reading Jewish Women*, p. 83-93, and Carole Balin, "The Call to Serve: Jewish Women Medical Students in Russia 1872-1887", in *POLIN: Studies in Polish Jewry*, XVIII, Jewish Women in Eastern Europe, London, Littman Library, 2005.

from settling in villages within 33 miles of the western frontier of Russia<sup>52</sup>. The notion that smuggling was illegal may not have been shared by contemporaries at the time. After all, the border between Germany and Russia shifted several times during the late eighteenth century. Even a century later, transportation and trade infrastructures were still primitive<sup>53</sup>. Smuggling was associated with managing taverns, a frequent occupation for Jews at the time, and critics accused them of fencing stolen goods in their inns.

When she was 26, in 1873, Anna left Vilna to enroll in the new medical course at the University in St. Petersburg<sup>54</sup>. For so many reasons, medicine was a very attractive calling for the radical women of the time. The *Women's Medical Course* at the *Medical-Surgical Academy* at the *University of St. Petersburg* did not offer a proper physician's degree, but its graduates could work as midwives and physicians' assistants. At the time when Anna Epshtein entered the course, a fifth of the women studying there were Jewish. This in itself was an extraordinary achievement, considering their often meager educational opportunities. Puah Rakovsky's experiences illustrate how opposed many parents were to their daughters training for a public medical vocation<sup>55</sup>.

Once she moved to St. Petersburg, Anna was soon deeply involved in the local *Propagandist* circle, where her comrades affectionately labeled her the "chief contrabandist and sister of charity"<sup>56</sup>. She was also called the "chief nurse and smuggler of the revolution"<sup>57</sup>. It was then that she fell in love with fellow activist Dmitri Klements. They were quite the mixed couple, as he was born to a prominent family in the Volga region, where his father was a land steward<sup>58</sup>. Dmitri was then in his mid-twenties, gifted in science, and considered quite brilliant. After two years at the university in St. Petersburg, he had left school so as to devote himself totally to back-to-the-people projects<sup>59</sup>. Dimitri was a poet and writer, and his contemporaries considered him "a brilliant raconteur in a pithy folk style... he was witty and very good company"<sup>60</sup>. His skills were put to good use when he appeared in out-of-the-way villages and towns to liberate prisoners and organize the downtrodden.

Anna Epshtein would eventually marry Klements, a decision which proved problematic for her close relationship with her mother. In spite of her support for the radical cause, Anna's mother definitely opposed her daughter converting or marrying a Christian. Indeed,

52. John Klier, *Imperial Russia's Jewish Question (1855-1881)*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 9.

53. See John Klier article on "Crime and Criminality" in the *YIVO Encyclopedia* (online).

54. Haberer, *Jews and Revolution*, suggests that Anna Epshtein was born in 1843, but he adds a question mark next to her birthdate, p. 288, note 8. He then calculates that she left Vilna at 26 in 1869 to attend the midwives course. However, the course was not yet open in 1869, so if she left Vilna later than 1869, at 26, her birth date would be nearer to 1846.

55. Some historians have concluded that with this enrollment she became the first Jewish woman to attend a Russian university. The claim is misleading for Anna Epshtein because the women's medical course did not lead to a medical degree, and no other formal university degrees were available either. For the Jewish women's proportion of the total female students at the medical course in St. Petersburg, see Table 8 in Christine Johanson, *Women's Struggle for Higher Education in Russia 1855-1900*, Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987, p. 82.

56. See note 8 in Haberer, *Jews and Revolution*, p. 288.

57. Nora Levin, *Messiah*, p. 30. For a contemporary view, see Stepniak [Kravchinsky], *Underground Russia*, p. 217-263. Both quotes in this paragraph are on page 217.

58. Stepniak [Kravchinsky] has a chapter on Demetrius Clemens in *Underground Russia*, p. 65-76, and these details are from this volume.

59. See Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, Dover, Dover Press, 2010, p. 212-213.

60. As cited in Vera Brodov, *Apostles into Terrorists: Women and the Revolutionary Movement in the Russia of Alexander II*, New York, Viking Press, 1977, p. 74.

Anna had actually promised her mother that she would remain true to Judaism. She thus decided to keep her marriage to Klements a secret from her mother. Soon after their marriage we lose track of her, although his peripatetic migrations can be tracked. We find a trace of Epshtein and Klements in 1878, in Switzerland, living with a circle of radicals who had escaped from the Russian police. A year later, in 1879, Klements was arrested, and for over a decade he lived in exile in Siberia. Upon his return to Russia he worked as an ethnologist, first in St. Petersburg and later in Russia. What became of his marriage with Anna Epshtein remains a mystery<sup>61</sup>.

Our fourth and last radical firebrand, Rosalie Idelson, was also the daughter of a Vilna business wife, who supported the family managing a rooming house<sup>62</sup>. Many of her mother's tenants were activists, and in her late teens Rosalie became involved with the Vilna radicals. When she was 17, in 1865, Rosalie entered a *fictitious* marriage to a Jewish student then attending the *Technological Institute* in St. Petersburg, whose family name was Idelson. We can surmise that the aim was to enable her to move outside of the *Pale of Settlement*. The marriage was arranged by her radical friend Michael Sazhin, and the ceremony was held in a synagogue<sup>63</sup>. That location for the wedding shows that even those radicals intent on subverting the traditional marriage system might utilize very traditional institutional spaces. As for Rosalie's stand-in husband Idelson, he apparently walked out of her life forever just after the ceremony. Her radical matchmaker friend Michael Sazhin would soon be arrested and sentenced to internal exile<sup>64</sup>.

After she left Vilna, Rosalie's trail becomes elusive. She earned a teacher's diploma, and in 1870 we find her in Kiev<sup>65</sup>. When she was 23, she was ready to move to Zurich to begin her medical studies, but was short of funds. Her mother had no money to spare, but one of her friends, Lev Ginsburg, a medical student friend from Kiev, contributed to her budget<sup>66</sup>. By the time that Rosalie arrived in Zurich in 1871, her old friend Michael from Vilna had joined the inner circle of Michael Bakunin, the leading anarchist figure of the time. Rosalie herself soon took on two leadership roles in the local left subculture. She worked at the *Russian Library*, where Russian students and hangers-on gathered for reading and debate, and she founded an all-women's debate club, called the *Club for Logical Thought*. Rosalie's plan was to promote serious discussions rather than planning insurrectionist acts. She was concerned that "in the revolutionary history of this period there were more women capable of planting a bomb than making a rousing speech in public"<sup>67</sup>. The subject for debate at the very first session of the Club was suicide. One later observer noted that "it seemed an odd subject for young girls to choose, yet five of those

61. See Kropotkin, *Memoirs*, p. 522.

62. This spelling for her birth name is found in Cathy Porter, *Fathers and Daughters*, p. 136. See also Boris Sapir, "Jewish Socialists Around", *International Review of Social History*, vol. 10, 1965, p. 365-384, p. 376, and, also, Meijer, *Knowledge and Revolution*, p. 69.

63. For details, see Sapir, "Jewish Socialists", p. 378.

64. Sazhin's location at this juncture is noted in Pomper, *Lavrov*, p. 84.

65. She never earned a gymnasium diploma, but according to Johanson, *Struggle*, p. 52, this was not necessary for non-Swiss students.

66. Boris Sapir, "Jewish Socialists Around", notes that Ginsburg "was her close friend to say the least" in 1869 in either St. Petersburg or in the Ukraine, p. 376. Ginsburg is also noted in Pomper, *Lavrov*, p. 137, identified as L.S. Ginzburg, the leader of the Lavrovist faction in St. Petersburg.

67. See Broido, *Apostles*, p. 99, notes how quickly the club fell apart. See also Vera Figner, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, DeKalb, Northern Illinois Press, 1991, p. 43, who notes that the club only lasted for only five or six weeks. The International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam archive has the original rules for the Club in the Valerian Smirnov papers.

present were to commit suicide later, and perhaps there was a premonition that their lives were taking a turn toward danger and tragedy”<sup>68</sup>.

Soon she had fallen in love with Valerian Smirnov, who had arrived in Zurich just when she did, when he was 22, in 1871. Smirnov was well-born and well-educated, and had recently been expelled from Moscow University for political activity. After his trial, he was released into his parents’ custody, a privilege sometimes enjoyed by those born to prestigious families<sup>69</sup>. Rosalie and Valerian were followers of Peter Lavrov, an exiled professor then living in Zurich, who believed in a gradualist strategy, in opposition to Bakunin’s terrorist politics. The couple both worked as assistant editors of a political journal edited by Lavrov, and was invited to live in his home near the university<sup>70</sup>.

The intense politics of the Russian radicals in Zurich must have become taxing for Rosalie when her two important male friends began to quarrel publicly. One day in the spring of 1873 one of Lavrov’s female supporters struck Sazhin, the Bakunin acolyte, with an umbrella, and his comrades responded by physically attacking Rosalie’s mate Valerian, the follower of Lavrov<sup>71</sup>. All in all, Rosalie’s contemporaries admired Idelson and considered her to be “the first lady of the Lavrovists”<sup>72</sup>. As for her standing with Lavrov himself, we do not know to whom he was referring when he wrote to a friend mocking the women who helped him, writing that he “had no illusions about his gullible and inexperienced” female followers<sup>73</sup>. Rosalie’s path becomes murky at this juncture. Archival research has unearthed a picture of a baby born to Rosalie and Valerian, but it is not at all clear who raised the child<sup>74</sup>. She eventually did complete her medical degree, and separated from Smirnov. Later she returned to Russia and married a military officer. As for Smirnov, he moved to London to assist Lavrov in the editing of *Vpred!*, but then his trail becomes elusive.

We have seen that all four of our personalities chose love relationships with Christian male comrades, all from well-to-do, often gentry families. In addition to these four romances, preliminary research reveals eight more relationships among the radicals in this setting. In addition to the four mixed couples we have met in this essay, two more unions brought Jewish women together with Christian men. Georg Plekhanov’s wife Rosalie was Jewish, and Fanny Lichkus married Serge Kravchinsky. Then there were three unions where the Jewish partner was a man. Lev Deutsch, who was Jewish, was the long-time lover of Vera Zasulich, born to a gentry family, Mark Natanson was in a relationship with Olga Schleiser, and Rosalie Idelson’s close friend Michael Sazhin was in a union with Uvgenia Figner, also from a gentry family.

68. This citation is from Broido, *Apostles*, p. 101. Broido’s note 4, p. 101, is based on Figner, *Memoirs*, volume 1, p. 117.

69. On Smirnov’s life in these years, see Meijer, *Knowledge and Revolution*, p. 53. On the release to his parents’ custody, see Pomper, *Lavrov*, p. 137.

70. See Alfred Senn, *Russian Émigré Press from Herzen’s Kolokol to Lenin’s Iskra*, special issue in the journal *Media Transformations*, n° 4, 2008, p. 48.

71. This is noted in Senn, *Émigré Press*, p. 50.

72. See Haberer, *Jews and Revolution*, p. 127, and Sapir, “Jewish Socialists”, p. 365 and 376.

73. Porter, *Fathers and Daughters*, p. 137. See also Pomper, *Lavrov*, p. 117, note 15, regarding the correspondence between Lavrov and Idelson and between Smirnov and Idelson. A good summary of the controversy over the Library can be found in Senn, *Émigré Press*, p. 45-48.

74. There is a picture of her child in the online archive of the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam.

Beyond the nine romances joining a Jew with a Christian, we also find three unions between two Jewish radicals, which resemble the fictional couple of Hodl and Perchik. All three of these matches involved the three daughters of Isaac Kaminer, from Kiev. Kaminer was a physician and writer, a follower of the Jewish enlightenment, who was also very sympathetic to socialism. His three daughters were referred to as the *enfants terribles* of the *Haskalah*. Nahezda married Pavel Akselrod, who began as a *maskil* but migrated to the mainstream left movement.<sup>75</sup> Nahezda's two sisters also married Jewish radicals. All told, Kaminer ultimately blamed himself for providing them with such a progressive education.

Thus six of the misalliances linked a Jewish woman with a Christian man. And preliminary research into the romantic history of left movements in other places and times suggests that this was the prevalent pattern, with the Jewish partner in a mixed relationship often the bride, not the groom<sup>76</sup>. Much more digging and sorting will be necessary before conclusions are appropriate. But we may eventually conclude that left movements were one of the social spaces where Jewish women could meet and fall in love with Christian men. Now we must move to conclude our inquiry into analysis of why the Jewish young women took on such dangerous political tasks and why they chose these lovers, and ultimately the historic significance of their decisions.

## Conclusions

Precisely because they chose such a risky path, the 95 Jewish women in *The People's Will* were certainly not typical of the hundreds of thousands of Jewish teen girls of their generation coming of age in the *Pale of Settlement*. Indeed their notoriety after the czar's assassination elicited shock among many Jews, who had held the dead czar in high esteem. Emma Goldman was 12 in 1881, and she and her mother, then living in the German city of Königsberg, reacted very differently to the killing of the Czar. For her mother Taube, the "good gracious Tsar" was responsible for granting the Russian Jews greater freedoms. Taube was very wisely worried that her rebellious daughter Emma would glorify the radicals. She cried out to Emma: "and him the Nihilists meant to kill! Cold-blooded murderers, they ought to be exterminated, every one of them!"<sup>77</sup> As for Emma, when she heard that the assassins had been hanged, she felt sadness, and she later remembered that "something mysterious had awakened compassion for them in me"<sup>78</sup>. In the years to come Emma's resentment of her father's attempts to control her behavior and of the Judaism she associated with her father would fuel her anarchist politics.

When we look at the demographic trends and the conversion statistics, we can see that the totalistic rebellions of a Gesia Gelfman or an Emma Goldman were extraordinary symptoms of wider trends. The age at which Jewish girls were marrying was gradually rising, and the proportion of converts who were female was also increasing<sup>79</sup>. When we read the narratives written by young Jewish women planning to leave Judaism we see a profound overlap between family loyalty and religious loyalty. When they rejected arranged

75. See Ascher, *Axelrod*, p. 27.

76. See Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990, *passim*.

77. See Emma Goldman, *Living My Life*, Dover, Dover Press, 1970, vol. 1, p. 28.

78. Goldman, *Living*, vol. 1, p. 28.

79. See ChaeRan Freeze, *Jewish Marriage and Divorce in Imperial Russia*, New Hampshire, University Press of New England, 2002; Freeze, "When Chava Left Home: Gender, Conversion, and the Jewish Family in Tsarist Russia" and Rachel Manekin, "The Lost Generation: Education and Female Conversion in Fin-de-Siècle Krakow", both in ChaeRan Freeze, Paula Human and Antony Polonsky (eds.), *POLIN: Jewish Women in Eastern Europe*, vol. 18, 2005.

marriages they were often angry at their families, and in that conflict, loyalty to Judaism seems to have evaporated. The consequences for the Jewish future were significant when women chose Christian lovers, whether or not they actually converted or formally married the men. To be sure, from a traditionalist perspective the children of Jewish women would be Jewish even if the mother had taken on a second religion. Moreover, the religion of their progeny was usually quite a moot issue in their actual lives. Few of the radical women gave birth or raised children, because they placed political activism above family. Even if they and their Christian partners had become parents, children of intermarriages were almost always raised as Christians. But the formal religious identity of actual progeny was not the only reason for parents to be distressed when their daughters chose radical politics over kin and faith. Because so much of Jewish religious practice takes place in the home, women in this culture matter greatly for the transmission of identity, languages, values and habits.

The Jewish radicals who volunteered for left movements in the seventies and eighties were deserting their people politically, and this problematic was ultimately more serious than the romantic choices of a handful of radicals. With the exception of the lonely soul Aaron Liebermann, during the 1870s none of the leading activists worked to synthesize their radical politics with a struggle for Jewish social uplift and civic emancipation. As we have learned in this essay, in these years radical Jewish intellectuals found it very difficult to include the Jewish poor among the residents of Russia who needed their analysis, their organizing, and a vision of the future. Two decades later, when Zionism and Yiddish socialism appeared on the scene, it became not just conceptually possible but also a real-life historical alternative to be a *Jewish radical*. The implications for marriage and family life were obviously very different under this sort of political umbrella.

Our brief survey of these four lives suggests that our activists were not just choosing ideologies. As all four biographies illustrate, the radical movement provided opportunities for love and friendship across the divides of class and faith. Further research could illuminate how often such romances might also begin in salons, in medical schools and hospitals, in local literary and musical societies, and in taverns, parks, and promenades. But the political movements may well have been special insofar as they provided women with the opportunity for intellectual engagement and public influence as well as the attractions of a truly mixed society.

The question of how to understand the role of religion in their lives and in their movements is complex. Historians have argued that both gentry women activists and Jewish male activists were motivated to become radicals because of some buried religious values which they channeled into their politics. Because Jewish women in this era were largely excluded from both traditional and modern Jewish learning, this line of interpretation is difficult to apply to them. Certainly the Jewish women activists we have met in this essay did not seem inclined to integrate religious Christian beliefs and practices into their left politics. Nor does any historical evidence show that any of them formally converted so as to marry their Christian lovers. This is hardly surprising. Many radicals then disdained formal marriage and preferred free unions or fictitious marriages, so as to escape the controls of their parents and pursue their vocational and political passions.

Another way to understand the nexus between religion and politics is to view the movement as a political religion. Activists may have *believed* in the ideologies with a religious-like intensity and loyalty, and the movement might have *functioned* as a religious community. Lev Deutsch, a leading figure in the movement, remembered that his comrades “renounced without hesitation their previous social position... recklessly broke all family ties, and threw their personal fate into the balance.” As if to answer the question of why they made this choice, Deutsch was later nostalgic for how “the enthusiasm of each individual

drew the *Propagandists* together into one great family, linked by all the ties of affection and mutual dependence.” In his mind, “only in great historical moments—have proselytes manifested such personal devotion, such exalted feeling”<sup>80</sup>.

In terms of comparative social history, the social mix in the radical subculture of the seventies resembled the salon circles we see in so many European cities across the decades. Both salons in previous times and places and the Russian left in this era attracted disaffected nobles, intellectual Jews and some commoners as well. The social classes most involved in this sort of fringe social formation were an example of what Hannah Arendt identified as the *noble-Jewish alliance*. She focused on how the salons exemplified this particular social synergy during the last decades of the eighteenth century<sup>81</sup>. Throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, we also see this class mixing in philanthropy boards, musical patronage, friendships and marriages. In this essay, we have seen how the Russian radical movements in the seventies and eighties provided a similar platform for Jews and nobles to mix. The left movements could be a welcome home for rebels from Judaism who did not have the wealth, the education, the social position to enter high society salons.

In some of the prior episodes of the noble-Jewish alliance, it was more frequently Jewish women who married the noble man, rather than the reverse. But although there were definite parallels between salons and radical movements, differences were also salient. Salon gatherings in well-to-do homes were evanescent, fleeting, and unstable. And at the level of individual experience, a salon attendance would last only a few hours a week at most. Only if a couple who met in a salon actually married would their union, with all its complexities, endure when the salon where they met no longer existed. In contrast, activists who were sent to exile in Siberia or lived in urban communes would live in intimate situations with their comrades in deprived conditions. To live in a commune, or in a prison cell, especially when spies were everywhere, required tremendous trust. Jewish women had much to give in addition to the freedoms they achieved. Participation in social movements enabled them to channel their socialized ethic of self-sacrifice and the street smarts of the business wife into their political causes.

Our quandaries today about their choices then were well summed up in a poem written by Ivan Turgenev in 1878, but not published until 1905. Called “At the Threshold,” the prose poem describes a young woman considering a commitment to radical politics. She stands at a threshold about to commit to a life in the populist movement. A voice calls to her and asks if she is ready to suffer, to endure “hardship, contempt, and even death and crime.” She replies to the voice that she is ready, and she steps over the threshold. At that moment, the voices of the contemporary witnesses reflect two very different views of her decision. One sector of the onlookers shouts “fool,” and the other sector shouts “saint”<sup>82</sup>. In this essay we have witnessed up close the life histories of four Jewish women who stepped over the threshold, and every reader must decide for themselves whether “fool” or “saint” best describes these historic personalities.

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80. These citations are noted in Leo Deutsch, *Sixteen Years in Siberia: Some Experiences of a Russian Revolutionist*, London, J. Murray Press, 1904, p. 7. For a translation into English of Deutsch’s article, “Di iden in der rusisher revolutsyonerer bevegung”, *Di Tsukunft*, 1913, p. 248-257, see Steven Cassedy, *To the Other Shore: The Russian Jewish Intellectuals Who Came to America*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 33.

81. See Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York, Shocken, 1951, Chapter Two, and my book, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1988.

82. This summary of the poem is derived from Donna Oliver, “Fool or Saint: Writers Reading the Zaslulich Case”, in Anthony Anemone (ed.), *Just Assassins: the Culture of Terrorism in Russia*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2010, p. 73-96, p. 83-84.