

ways in which the world of family and community she inhabits at once both protect and doom her; Dora Shulner's "Reyzele's Wedding" provides a revealing glimpse into the complex social codes surrounding courtship and marriage; Malka Lee's "Through the Eyes of Childhood" offers a poignant depiction of a young girl whose aspirations to become a poet pit her against her father and the conventions of her community. These and the many other pieces in this admirable collection together illuminate a world of experience that most readers will have heretofore glimpsed only dimly. Further, they add substantially to our appreciation of the important role women writers have played in developing the Yiddish literary tradition.

Women writers have also contributed significantly to the Jewish-Canadian literary tradition in English. The work of Miriam Waddington, Adele Wiseman, Shirley Faessler, Helen Weinzweig, Erna Paris, and Fredelle Bruser Maynard, for example, constitutes an impressive literary foundation upon which younger generations of women writers in Canada, both Jewish and non-Jewish, can build. Though their works vary greatly in terms of subject matter and genre, each gives voice to and celebrates life at the margins rather than at the centres of various kinds of social power. The poems, short stories, and critical writing of Miriam Waddington and the novels and short stories of Adele Wiseman can be seen as emblematic of this perspective. For example, Adele Wiseman's artful and subversive novel, *Crackpot* (1974), foregrounds a working-class Jewish prostitute growing up in Winnipeg in the interwar years, weaving her story into a profound challenge to the glib codes of Anglo-Canadian nativism, puritanism, patriarchy, and materialism.

Two recent books by Jewish-Canadian women writers carry on this tradition of celebrating difference, though their literary quality makes them considerably less significant than their predecessors, in terms of

the contribution they make to Canadian literature. Sharon Kish's juvenile fiction, *Fitting In* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1995), chronicles the often painful experiences of her young protagonist, Mollie, as she comes to understand what it means to be Jewish in a gentile world. Although Fredelle Bruser Maynard makes the same point about difference and the ultimate importance of faith and love with more artistry and the added bonus of insightful depiction of region in her fictionalized memoir, *Raisins and Almonds* (1972), Kish's novel is nevertheless instructive for young readers, providing them, through the medium of an accessible, engaging, and contemporary suburban character with whom they can identify, with a fictional lesson in how it might feel to grow up outside the cultural mainstream.

Karen X. Tulchinsky's *In Her Nature*, a collection of short stories about lesbian experience, is also squarely within the tradition of writing by Jewish-Canadian women I have delineated. Like Wiseman's *Crackpot*, Tulchinsky's stories give voice to women who have heretofore been largely silenced by the powerful mechanisms of both Jewish culture and the larger society. "A Different Kind of Love," for example, portrays a "typical" Jewish mother, recently widowed, coming to grips with her daughter's lesbianism. Despite her initial misgivings, Mrs. Rabinovitch's open and loving nature ultimately enables her to accept her daughter Nomi's lesbian lifestyle as positive and fulfilling. Unabashedly didactic, the stories portray again and again the challenges faced by lesbians in a hostile world, and call for greater tolerance and understanding. Although this is hardly a message one would want to quarrel with, one might wish for more artistry in language, form, and characterization than Tulchinsky's stories display. One might also see in a few of them a perpetuation of some of the very stereotypes Ms. Tulchinsky seems dedicated to writing against, as for example in her depiction of Mrs. Rabinovitch, the

rather stock Jewish mother, or of Toby and the other tough "dykes" who hang out at "Rosie's Seaside" bar, looking for lovers. Nevertheless, Tulchinsky's fictional world is often energetic, earthy, and entertaining and one can see it as yet another strand in the rich tradition created by Jewish-Canadian women writers, working in both Yiddish and English, of giving voice to the previously silenced, of celebrating the margins.

*Tamara Palmer Seiler is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of General Studies at the University of Calgary.*

## THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH AND ME

Minerva Davis. Toronto: Lugus Publications, 1992.

## SWEATSHOP STRIFE— CLASS, ETHNICITY, AND GENDER IN THE JEWISH LABOUR MOVEMENT OF TORONTO 1900–1939

Ruth A. Frager. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992.

## A PARTISAN'S MEMOIR: WOMAN OF THE HOLOCAUST

Faye Schulman. Toronto: Second Story Press, 1995.

## HALF THE KINGDOM

Francine Zuckerman. Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1992.

*by Susan Nosov*

Canadian Jewish feminist movements, like other political movements for social change, are built on questioning and challenging what exists and examining what could be done to make it better. At the root of much of this work are questions of identity. As

Jews and as women, how do we locate ourselves with regards to the anti-Semitism we face here, and how does this connect to other issues of oppression?

A number of non-fiction books written by Jewish women in Canada trace issues of identity and community for Jewish women at different points in Canadian history. Some critically examine the involvement of Jewish women in social justice work, others focus more on life for Jews in Canada in general.

This review gives a brief introduction to four non-fiction books written and published in Canada within the last few years. To varying degrees, all deal with questions of identity, and the period of time they cover is primarily the early part of this century. Some of the women were born in Canada and others came here as young women. Most of the examples in these books look at urban realities, yet small rural communities are also briefly covered. Written either as biographies or research essays, all four books look at very different aspects of being Jewish women, and provide important historical analyses of issues of Jewish identity, as well as questions of gender and race.

*The Wretched of the Earth and Me* is the story of a young woman's journey which starts in Romania and moves to Toronto in the '20s and '30s. She takes the reader through her departure from Romania in 1919 with her mother and sister and into Canada where she had dreams of freedom, wealth, and education. The opportunities life in Canada actually presented to her were hard work and little money.

Minerva began working in the factories shortly after arriving in Toronto at age 15. In her descriptions of her life, she always contextualizes her own stories with the larger stories of politics, geography, and life for other Jews and other women at that time. She is also aware of the connections to racism and other forms of oppression of people different from herself. Her anger and shock at not having the freedom promised to her was turned into a thirst to understand

why this was happening to her and others, and a conviction that it should not be allowed to continue.

As a result, she found a home in the Young Communist League (YCL). It was there that she was able to make sense of her life and put her experiences into educational work and union organizing.

Minnie, as she became known, was a pioneer Jewish feminist activist. Instrumental in forming anti-poverty groups and setting up relief centres that specifically addressed the needs of single women, she was actively involved in fighting the government on social benefits cutbacks. She participated in anti-government protests and even stood on a soapbox or two in the process. Her political analysis is revealed in one such action in which she climbed up a lamp post to get away from a police officer. The crowd gave the young cop such a hard time that he left. Instead of feeling proud of herself, she reflected on the life of the young cop, who like her mother was a member of the working class, doing the job that was available to him, at a time when choice was not an option.

Fear of communists on the part of Jews and non-communists at the time is conveyed through her telling of her mother's disdain and disapproval of the movement. Her thoughtful reflections provide the reader with more than the mainstream opinions about communism, allowing for a more complex understanding of the Canadian communist movement at a specific time and within a particular context.

Her descriptions of the YCL groups and activities create a landscape of what it was like to be a radical Jew in the 1920s. She describes how other women and Jews participated in the communist movement in Toronto and elsewhere, taking us chronologically through Toronto's and Canada's political history from the perspective of this young woman.

*The Wretched of the Earth and Me* is not simply a biography but is also a socio-political historiography. Minerva's critical analysis of class, race, and

oppression gives valuable insight into the realities of current social movements. Although she does not directly describe sexism, much of the way in which she locates women of the time, in the communist movement, on the job or in the unemployment lines, clearly shows her awareness of the oppression of women.

The book takes us to the point of her leaving the movement and looking for more global approaches to battling injustice. This perspective leads her to working for the CCF (Co-operative Commonwealth Federation), now the NDP. Her book ends with a note that in 1963 she worked for the NDP in the Federal elections. It would be fascinating to know where the author is today and what forms her political struggles would take in the light of present political climates.

*Sweatshop Strife* is in many ways an archival document of the union movement in Toronto between 1900 and 1939. Frager's research provides a critical examination of the Canadian labour movement, focusing on the labourer's actions, Jewish involvement in the garment industry, and the crucial role of Jewish men and women within social justice movements. She interviews both men and women involved in the left who fought the battle for the rights of workers.

While Frager examines the various cross sections and interconnections of class, ethnicity, and gender in the labour movement, a great deal of research focuses on the experiences of women and Jews both as workers and owners in the factories. Her examination of women's roles also brings out historical references to strikes by Jewish housewives, and Jewish women's consumer boycotts, during this period. She cites examples of Jewish women boycotting and/or demonstrating outside shops to protest the price of kosher foods.

This book is also a valuable resource in terms of statistical information, locating divisions of gender, race, as well as class. For example: in 1911, 60 per cent of garment workers were female; by the 1930s the majority of Toronto's garment shops were

owned by Jews; by 1931, Jews constituted approximately 46 per cent of the people employed in the garment industry.

Fragar critically analyses the relationships between Jewish employers and Jewish workers, raising complicated issues of solidarity between Jews. She also examines the divisions and solidarity among non-Jewish workers as well as the lack of support from the mainstream women's movement for "Jewish strikes." By providing detailed accounts, Frager's research frames the ways in which ethnicity, gender, and class entered into the reporting of the strikes at that time.

An examination of the interconnectedness of class, race, and gender in the strikes and struggles make Frager's comprehensive book an important piece of Jewish working class history. "As the Jewish labour activists struggled to build a militant movement to advance their class interests," she notes, "their experience of oppression as Jews heightened their political awareness and often sharpened their commitment to activism."

Fragar's anti-oppression analysis of the labour movement incorporates class, race, and gender as separate yet linked issues in social justice struggles and can be particularly useful for such work today.

Faye Schulman's memoir is appropriately dedicated "... to the future of our Jewish youth ... who continue the Jewish heritage and carry on the memory."

Schulman writes about her happy childhood in the little town of Lenin, Russia, and her life as a partisan fighter after Nazi murderers killed her family and most of the other inhabitants of Lenin. *A Partisan's Memoir* is also dedicated to the memory of her family and to the partisans who died fighting for Jewish dignity, honour, and peace. Now a Canadian, Schulman leaves a chronicle of Jewish women's activism, survival, and fight for justice. Justice is in fact a crucial aspect of her survival and is clearly articulated in every part of her telling.

*A Partisan's Memoir* is the story of one Jewish woman who survived the

Holocaust by escaping into the forests of Russia and becoming a partisan fighter. Schulman joined a partisan group with whom she survived for two years in the forests avenging the Nazi murders. Her memoir is a sensitive and insightful story, written almost in a diary fashion. It tells the difficult truth of the abuse and torture and gruesome murders she witnessed under the Nazis. Jewish identity and anti-Semitism and fighting for survival are obviously central to any Holocaust survivor's story; Faye's specific style of writing contextualizes "ordinary" events of anti-Semitism prior to the Nazi invasion as well as the ways in which it was present amongst the non-Jewish partisans. These incidents are written about in a way that keeps them distinct from the Holocaust, yet as the Holocaust is the backdrop to her story, the reader knows how far such hatred can go.

Schulman was one of an estimated 20,000 Jewish partisans, approximately 500 of whom were women. She speaks of the strength she gained in just knowing about all the other Jewish girls and boys who were fighters.

There were Jews from cities and farms, Jews from towns and villages, young men and women raised in a tradition of learning and culture to respect one another. They were a peace-loving people who had known nothing of war.... Torn from the lives they had once known, they stood up and fought like lions.

Her accounts help dismantle the myths that Jews did nothing to resist the mass murders by the Nazis and gives context to the history of Jews fighting anti-Semitism and injustice. Her story reminds us that there *were* uprisings and resistance, that 20,000 or more East European Jews fought as partisans. This represented a pinnacle of bravery in the history of the Jewish people—that should never be forgotten, and need never be repeated.

Today, Schulman continues to fight anti-Semitism and oppression by speaking to high school students

in the Toronto area.

*Half the Kingdom* is a book of seven interviews and three conversations, conducted originally for a film by the same name, which reflect the thoughts and personal stories of seven Jewish feminists from Canada, the United States, and Israel. The interviews are with Norma Baumel Joseph, a Montreal scholar and teacher; Michele Landsberg, a Toronto journalist; Naomi Goldberg, a professor of Religious Studies in Ottawa; Rabbi Elisa Goldstein, a spiritual leader; Esther Broner, a New York writer and novelist; Shulamit Aloni, an Israeli politician; and Alice Shalvi, a professor of English Literature in Israel. Each one examines the place of women within Judaism and that of Judaism within feminism, focusing on rituals, spirituality, and access. To varying degrees the women share insights into questions of Jewish feminism within a secular context.

Two interviews are most relevant to the question of the link between Jewish identity and social justice work. Michele Landsberg, an author, writer, and newspaper columnist, reflects upon her childhood in Toronto. She examines issues of class, gender, and social justice. For her, creating and discovering Jewish feminist rituals is crucial to her being a Jew and to not assimilating. Her clear identity as a Jew and a feminist has led to deeper questions of oppression. She notes "I felt that my whole stance as a Jew who was somehow marginal to society was very much like my stance as a woman. So the two of them are intertwined in my mind."

Naomi Goldberg, from the University of Ottawa, feels that it is important to have a Jewish identity because it is a way of fighting against the dominant Christian ethos. Although she acknowledges that we each have many identities, being a Jew offers important values. She concluded that an understanding of Jewish history and anti-Jewish oppression allows for a more critical approach and "that the study of Jewish history should make Jews more sensitive to oppression in the world."