

A PRICE BELOW RUBIES: JEWISH WOMEN AS REBELS AND RADICALS

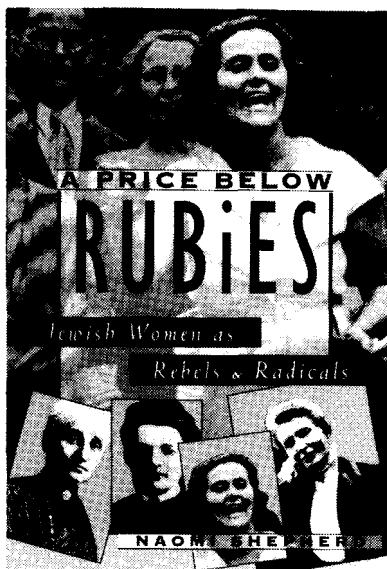
Naomi Shepherd. Cambridge, Mass.:
Harvard University Press, 1993.

by *Deborah Heller*

Jewish women played prominent roles in the movements for radical social change that arose in Eastern Europe and radiated outward in the late nineteenth century. They thereby challenged their traditional status within Jewish family and communal life. Shepherd's engrossing book offers sustained studies of some half dozen of these women radicals, along with brief sketches of many more. It is her view that they have been inadequately served by both Jewish and feminist historians. Jewish historians have failed to consider the distinctive nature of the Jewish woman's experience of her culture and how this differed from that of the Jewish man. Consequently, they have been insensitive to the separate motives animating women's endorsement of radical ideas and to the fact that, in rejecting the norms of their community, Jewish women rebels were not rejecting the same life that was being offered their brothers and lovers. Feminist historians have failed to examine Jewish women in the context of Jewish society and history, and so have been unable to appreciate their true social and intellectual contributions.

Intent to right the balance, Shepherd begins with a richly informed account of Jewish history and culture and of women's place in it from biblical times to the Diaspora. She vividly illuminates Eastern European Jewish communal life as it persisted essentially unchanged from the Middle Ages to the mid-nineteenth century, when the ideas of the Enlightenment finally reached the Jewish masses. Shepherd stresses the exclusion of women "from the intellectual inheritance which was the mainstay of Jewish life," and hence from the

scholarly élite. Viewed as intellectual inferiors and sexual threats to the studious Jewish male, women at the same time assumed much of the practical and financial responsibility for the survival of their families and communities. As energetic businesswomen or members of the working class, women often had closer contacts with the host cultures than men. This, along with Jewish women's traditional exclusion from the world of



ideas, prepared them to be more receptive to secular literature and to the radical ideas that were flourishing in the world around them. In fact, during the nineteenth century, prosperous Jewish merchant families often provided a better secular education (especially in languages, like French and Italian) for their daughters than for their sons, who continued to study Hebrew and the Talmud.

In tracing the lives of her protagonists, Shepherd offers a grand tour of radical thought and movements in Europe from the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth. Anarchism, communism, socialism, the Bund (Jewish socialist party), Zionism, trade unionism—all appear here, refracted through the lives of a series of remarkable, courageous women. She is sensitive to distinctions of class as well as gender and to the differences in Jewish life in Western, Middle, and Eastern Europe. Particularly striking is the peripatetic history of many of these women.

Rosa Luxemburg, born in Poland, became a prominent Marxist theorist and leader of the failed Spartacist (German communist) uprising in Berlin. Anna Kuliscioff moved to Italy from Russia, by way of England, France and Switzerland, and played a major role in the Italian Socialist Party. The Zionist Manya Shochat relocated from Russia to Palestine. Seeking financial and technical assistance for rural collectives in her new country, she made frequent visits to Europe, the U.S. and Canada (where she was much impressed by the model of the Dukhobor communes).

In Western Europe, where Jews were better assimilated into the dominant culture of the middle class, Jewish women were more likely to be reformers than radicals. Bertha Pappenheim, known as "Anna O" to readers of Breuer and Freud's *Studies in Hysteria*, moved from Vienna to Germany, where she founded the Jüdischer Frauenbund, a social welfare and educational organization. Campaigning publicly against the traffic in women, she visited brothels in Eastern Europe and the Middle East to learn about the conditions of Jewish prostitutes and pimps there, and to seek help from community leaders who often preferred not to acknowledge the problem. (Pappenheim described the biblical verses evoked and subverted by Shepherd's title—"A woman of worth, who can find? For her price is far above rubies"—as "a lovesong with gefühlte fish.") Rose Pesotta went to the U.S. from the Ukraine and became the sole woman on the executive of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. She organized workers from coast to coast as well as in Puerto Rico and Montreal (where the Catholic church urged her deportation from Canada). Emma Goldman moved from Russia to New York, where her anarchist and pacifist ideas led to her deportation back to Russia. Disillusioned with the Revolution she moved on, spending time in England, Spain, and Canada, where she died in Toronto.

None of the women Shepherd dis-

cusses achieved her goal, or at least not in the way she envisioned. All were seeking to reconfigure the private as well as the public world. They shared a “desire to appropriate the world of ideas—hitherto, in their communal tradition the world of men alone—and to build a new and egalitarian relationship with men.” Their most enduring legacy, Shepherd argues, can be appreciated only when they are seen in the context of Jewish society and history. “Their efforts to create a new identity for themselves as women, in defiance of the norms of their own society, made them pioneers of women’s liberation.” *A Price Below Rubies* tells a fascinating story and is an important contribution to women’s history, Jewish history, and the history of radical movements in modern times.

THE TRAITOR AND THE JEW: ANTI-SEMITISM AND THE DELIRIUM OF EXTREMIST RIGHT-WING NATIONALISM IN FRENCH CANADA FROM 1929-1939

Esther Delisle. Montreal: Robert Davies Publishing, 1993.

by Donald A. Wright

Highly specialized, often burdened with impenetrable vocabulary, and aimed at small, academic audiences, Ph.D. dissertations, even published dissertations, rarely attract national media attention. Yet a 1992 political science dissertation from Laval University, “Antisémitisme et nationalisme d’extrême droite dans la province du Québec, 1929-1939,” found itself at the centre of a contentious, emotional, and at times puerile de-

bate: was French Canadian nationalism then, and is Quebec nationalism now, exclusive, xenophobic, and anti-Semitic?¹ Its author, Esther Delisle—who at one point was publicly condemned as an intellectual Vychinsky, in reference to Stalin’s show trials prosecutor—rightly likened the controversy to caricature. Indeed, looking beyond the controversy, one finds in Delisle’s thesis not a vituperative attack against Quebec nationalism, but rather an intelligent, well researched analysis of right-wing nationalist thought in Quebec during the 1930s.

Translated into English, and published by Robert Davies Publishing of Montreal with a preface by the historian Ramsay Cook, *The Traitor and the Jew: Anti-Semitism and the Delirium of Extremist Right-Wing Nationalism in French Canada from 1929-1939*, thoroughly documents the vicious anti-Semitism inherent to the nationalism of Abbé Lionel Groulx, *Le Devoir*, *l’Action nationale* and the youth organization, *Jeune Canada*. Although Delisle states very clearly that “nowhere in my thesis is there any mention of *French Canadian* anti-Semitism” (emphasis not mine) she also states very clearly that her subjects were neither marginal nor insignificant. For example, Claude Ryan once honoured Lionel Groulx as “the spiritual father of modern Quebec.”

Moreover, the anti-Semitism of Groulx, *Le Devoir*, *l’Action nationale* and *Jeune Canada* was not isolated, nor was it merely mischievous as André Laurendeau would later describe it; it was essential to their nationalism. The Jew, as a symbolic construct, represented liberalism, democracy, capitalism, and modernity, all threats to the French-Canadian nation. Indeed, the Jew remained the ultimate negative Other, defined by Michel Foucault as “that which, for a given culture, is at once interior and foreign, therefore to be excluded (so as to exorcise the interior danger).”

However, and this is central to Delisle’s thesis, the French Canadian and the Jew were not binary oppo-

sites, the one absolute good, the other absolute evil: Groulx also maintained a profound contempt for French Canadians who he regarded as Traitors committed to modernity and its concomitants, pluralism, individualism, liberalism, democracy and capitalism. In Groulx’s world, watching a hockey game, or listening to jazz (that “Negro-Semitic cocktail”), were fundamentally acts of treason. In 1935 he concluded, “The great misfortune of French Canadians, I must dare to say, is that there are no French Canadians.” *The Traitor and the Jew*, writes Delisle, fell “into the same vortex of hatred.”

Despite his abiding nihilism Groulx did not drift into despair. Taking his cue from the European dictatorships of the 1930s, Groulx sought salvation for French Canada in millenarian Fascism. “Weak minds which believe in democracy at the expense of the Church and Christ react with horror to Fascism in all its shapes and forms,” Groulx argued in 1937. “This despite the fact that certain nations are currently very content, experiencing the most glorious kind of rebirth under this political system.” Towards realizing a Fascist utopia, wherein French Canada “would reconcile itself with the soil and its ancestors,” solutions were required for the Traitor problem and the Jew problem.

Inspired by Hitler’s early answer to the “Jewish question,” writers at *l’Action nationale*—including André Laurendeau who would eventually become co-chair of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism—argued that because pogroms do not work, “government measures” were required. A euphemism, “government measures” meant the building of ghettos, the imposition of quotas at educational institutions, the repeal of voting rights, deportations to Palestine, mandatory identification cards and the institution of economic boycotts.

Meanwhile the Traitor, that “French Canadian *incapable* of solidarity” (emphasis not mine), required a thorough political and national re-education: the Jew would always be a