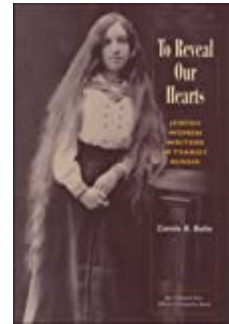


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Carole B. Balin. *To Reveal Our Hearts: Jewish Women Writers in Tsarist Russia.* Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2000. x + 269 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87820-423-6.



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Published on H-Judaic (October, 2002)

In the past decade a number of books and dissertations have taken the experience of Jewish women in Russia as their subjects. While Carole Balin is not the first to realize that standard histories of Russian Jewry in the modern period often address both traditionalism and modernity as if women were not present, her innovation lies in allowing women writers, as both participants in and chroniclers of this tumultuous period, to tell their stories. Balin's lucid and highly readable book brings to the fore the complexity of women's lives in pre-revolutionary Russia by examining five fascinating individuals.

In her introduction, entitled "Neither Balebustes Nor Revolutionaries," Balin explains how scant references to individual Jewish women writers in published works, and accidental discoveries of the work of others, led her on a quest to find all of the women who wrote for the thriving periodical press of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Russia. Balin's first person chronicling of her own search readily engages the reader in her detective work.

By perusing Hebrew, Yiddish, and Russian periodicals of the period, and by consulting the major contemporary encyclopedias, Balin was able to uncover sixty-seven Jewish women published in Russia between 1869 and 1917. (One minor criticism: It would have been use-

ful to readers involved in related research if Balin had included this list, if not in the body of the text, then at least in the notes or an appendice.) Although some of the women Balin found were already well known in either Russian or Jewish literary circles; others were completely forgotten in the passage of time. Given the tremendously varied amount and quality of data available, Balin chose to focus on five Jewish women writers, in a combined literary biography:

This book then is not a history of Jewish women writing. Rather, it is an introduction to five literary women whose lives and works tell a larger story of Jewish cultural history in the Russian Empire. (p. 5)

Each of the five subsequent chapters is devoted to a different woman writer, and the five are about as different as imaginable. Miriam Markel-Mosessohn (1839-1920), a correspondent of such well-known maskilim as Yehudah Leib Gordon and Avraham Mapu, who, despite being multi-lingual, published only in Hebrew. Sofia Dubnova-Erlikh (1885-1986), although best remembered for her famous father and husband, also had a successful writing career in her native Russian language. Then there are the more obscure women, such as Hava Shapiro (1879-1943), who wrote short stories in Hebrew, Rashel' Mironovna Khin (1861-1928) who wrote and socialized with the Russian literati of her time, and Feiga Israilevna

Kogan (1891-1974) who published poetry and criticism in Russian while keeping her Hebrew writings to herself.

The largely self-contained chapters introduce the lives of the individual women, their writings, and in particular how each of them related, in life and writing, to being both a woman and a Jew. Balin is at her best when weaving a story out of the threads of material available. Hava Shapiro's pained quest for recognition and self-realization as a female writer in the Hebrew language is as vivid as Rashel' Mironovna Khin's inner struggle between self-hatred and tolerance.

In addition, each chapter contains a good deal of important contextual information. In order to adequately describe women of such diverse backgrounds and trajectories Balin had to set the contextual scene for each. Understanding both Markel-Mosessohn and Shapiro requires a familiarity with the Russian Jewish Haskalah and in particular its ambivalent stance with regards to women. For Khin it is the culture of the elite intelligentsia of the capitals that is needed. Symbolism forms the backdrop to the life of Kogan, while Dubnova-Ehrlikh's life only makes sense in the context of the political agitation of her generation.

As a student of history, rather than literature, Balin does not, for the most part, comment on the quality of the writers' literary creations. Her analyses of their work center on biographical data and issues of identity. Given the focus of the work, and Balin's talents as a biographer, this seems an appropriate decision. Translated selections of each woman's work within each chapter, as well as a complete bibliography for each at the end of the book, allow interested readers to make their own evaluations.

Balin's conclusions, based on the lives and works of these five women, fill the final seven pages of the book. Only here does she begin tentatively to generalize from the specific case studies, suggesting, for example, that it was easier for a Jewish woman to become a successful writer in Russian than in Hebrew. Balin also points to factors of education, socio-economic standing, geographic locale and domestic life as crucial in both en-

abling and hindering these women.

Balin's book makes a critical contribution to Russian Jewish history. Reading any one chapter quickly dispels common assumptions and characterizations of Jewish women in the Old Country. Balin's thorough research in Hebrew and Russian sources, in at least four different countries, has amply demonstrated the complexity and relevance of Jewish women's experience in Tsarist Russia.

And yet, despite its strengths, the reader is left with a sense of missed opportunity. Balin's book, like her dissertation, maintains separate chapters for each of the women and offers analysis of the larger questions and phenomena relating to Jewish women writers only briefly in the introduction and conclusion. Balin explains clearly that the paucity of documentation determined her course, but the lack of overarching analysis is disappointing.

To be sure, Balin offers preliminary conclusions, but the structure of the book makes recognizing patterns and comparing the subjects difficult. Balin could have organized her material into thematic chapters, on such topics as education, family life, literary output, Jewish identity, and public recognition. This would have allowed her to discuss these women in the context with each other, and with their contemporaries, and thus more effectively challenge common dogmas about Jewish women.

There can be no question that this book is an important addition to the corpus of work on Russian Jewry. Balin's clear writing, engagement with the material, and depth of perception place the individual stories of these five women writers within the greater story of Russian Jews in a period of upheaval and change. Academics and lay readers alike will find themselves intellectually and personally involved in its pages where literature, biography, and history are artfully combined. By bringing the stories of these five women to light Balin has raised a series of questions that she and other scholars will seek to answer in the coming years.

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Citation: Eliyana R. Adler. Review of Balin, Carole B., *To Reveal Our Hearts: Jewish Women Writers in Tsarist Russia*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. October, 2002.

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