

Jewish Women Writers in the Soviet Union by Rina Lapidus

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Defne Cizakca (University of Glasgow)

Jewish Women Writers in the Soviet Union is a study of eleven non-acclaimed Jewish women writers by Rina Lapidus, a Jewish Associate Professor in Comparative Literature at Bar Ilan University, Israel. Each writer in the volume lived under the Soviet Regime and produced literature in Russian and, prior to Lapidus's work, had not been translated into English. Consequently, *Jewish Women Writers* serves as an invaluable source book to readers interested in minority writing, Jewish women's identity and Russian literary studies even though Lapidus does not specify her work as a source book.

Jewish Women Writers starts with a short, grounding introduction that has two objectives: an elucidation of Russian aesthetic and political theory during the years 1890–1921 and a summary of the policies of the Soviet state towards the Jewish population, both during and after Stalin's dictatorship. Brushtein, the earliest author studied by Lapidus, was born in 1884 while some of the authors she analyses are still writing today. Hence, *Jewish Women Writers* covers a period of 128 years. Lapidus's twofold introduction throws light on the cultural context in which the writers in question produced their work and is followed by eleven chapters, each one dedicated to a particular author. All chapters focus on the following areas: the personal life of each author, the literary content of their works, the understanding each author had of her feminine self, and her perception of her Jewish self. Lapidus specifies that she does not intend to 'relate to the broad social, national, historical, gender,

political or literary contexts of these authors', and that this study 'deliberately distances itself from involvement in literary theories and criticism' (p.2). While such an approach may be necessary in order to cover a vast amount of writers in one book, Lapidus's decision leads to an exclusive focus on biography, which in turn limits the exciting potential of such an unprecedented study.

The main strength of *Jewish Women Writers* is its original research. Prior to Lapidus's work, investigation into Jewish female writing of the Stalinist era had been scarce, and thus the text at hand fills an important gap in current Russian and Jewish literature. Lapidus succeeds in bringing previously unknown Jewish writers into focus. The reader not only grows aware of this very productive minor spectrum of writers, but also gets the chance to experience their work first hand through Lapidus's translations of their poetry and fiction.

Despite its unique contribution to Jewish and Russian letters, *Jewish Women Writers* is not always a comfortable read. The main reason for this is the lack of evidence and counter theories with regards to the personal and spiritual lives of the authors under investigation. This lack of evidence results in a text that reads like a list of projections rather than an academic exegesis.

One such example can be found as Lapidus discusses Alexandra Brushtein's family:

Her family was one of brilliant, talented, moral, honest and lofty spirited people...She was of the same ilk and later married a man who came from a similar circle of people; their children were likewise of the same ilk (p.20).

The definition of these moral qualities is at best vague and the term 'ilk' makes them more confusing rather than clearer. The above-mentioned passage seems to reflect Lapidus's rather than Brushtein's conventions. We are left wondering as to how Brushtein perceived herself or how she was looked upon by her

peers. There are no archival sources cited to establish the truth of Lapidus's statements, either in the form of interviews or diary entries.

Lapidus's personal opinions overpower the academic demands of critique in other instances as well. During a discussion of Raisa Bloch's marriage to Mikhail Gorlin she writes:

It may well be that the ultimate, and perhaps unconscious motivation for Raisa's union with the poet Mikhail (Misha) Gorlin was because his given name reminded her of her beloved Mikhail Lozinsky (also called Misha) (p.54).

Lapidus presents the reader with a possible, secret motive behind Bloch's marriage without, again, providing us with any proof. The radical nature of her claim that a marriage be based on a similarity of first names demands evidence; the lack of it leads to a suspension of belief. While Lapidus's personal interpretations of the authors she studies might serve other genres such as memoir or literary biographies very well, her methodology leads to a superficial reading in an academic setting. The difficulty of an in depth study in such small space (the longest author study is 15 pages long) might account for some of the problems this research suffers from.

Jewish Women Writers does not have a concluding chapter where Lapidus could have highlighted the similarities and differences between the writers she has studied. Such a final chapter could have exposed whether these eleven very different writers had a common denominator apart from their sex and faith. The study of 'social, national, historical, gender, political or literary contexts' (p.2), all of which Lapidus says she will not undertake in her study formed the conditions under which these writers lived and wrote. It is difficult to think that the construction of the self or religious outlook would be devoid of these broader influences. A more in-depth study of these aforementioned contexts could have explored what made these writers unique and how they differed

from their Russian, non-Jewish colleagues. Similarly, a more integrated exploration into how each writer's gender and religious perceptions influenced their writing practices would have added a new layer to the text, allowing it to benefit those interested in the creative process as well.

Jewish Women Writers constitutes an indispensable source book for those keen on Jewish and Russian letters since it introduces us to untranslated, under-studied authors. It is certain that Lapidus's work will inspire further critical exegesis on the writers in question.

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