



PROJECT MUSE®

*Fear and Other Stories*, translated by Anita Norich by Chana  
Blankshteyn (review)

Sonia Gollance

*Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, Number  
41, Fall 5783/2022, pp. 142-144 (Review)

Published by Indiana University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2979/nsh.2022.a880811>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/880811>

Chana Blankshteyn

*Fear and Other Stories*, translated by Anita Norich

Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2022. 138 pp.

reviewed by Sonia Gollance

The protagonists of Chana Blankshteyn's short story "The Decree" are caught at an impasse: Shtoltsman, a high-ranking Soviet official, is promoting the government ban on religious weddings, but his sweetheart, Leah Svirski, has promised her grandfather, a rebbe, that she will get married in a Jewish ceremony. With Shtoltsman's trip to Leah's hometown looming, the fictional lovers are locked in a battle of wills that reveals the high stakes of Soviet policy for east European Jews. Can Shtoltsman convince himself that his feelings for this "privileged person" (p. 45) are immaterial? Will Leah succumb to his silent treatment? Reading this story, I was drawn into the personal drama—and also recognized in it a fine example of a Yiddish literary text about the early days of the Soviet Union. In Blankshteyn's *Fear and Other Stories*, first published in Yiddish under the title *Noveles* in Vilna in 1939, intimate relationships are fully emmeshed in the political reality of early twentieth-century Europe—decades before "the personal is political" became a feminist rallying cry. These stories by an avowedly political and feminist writer center the concerns of women, emphasizing the importance of labor and personal autonomy.

This slim volume of nine short stories is a stunning new addition to the recent surge in translations of short stories and novels by women who wrote in Yiddish—and not simply because of the deftness of Anita Norich's translations, or because Blankshteyn (1860?–1939) is a writer who has been unfamiliar even to most scholars who work on women writers. Her newness on the scene can be explained in part by the more general focus of scholarship in this field on writers who lived in the United States, an emphasis that has much to do with the availability of archival resources and the disciplinary expertise of the scholars who did the initial recovery work in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet we are now experiencing increased attention to women writers who spent their entire careers in eastern Europe, with new work on Dvoyre Fogel (Burshtyn, Galicia [Ukraine], 1902—Lwów [Lviv], 1942) and Salomea Perl (Łomża, Poland, 1869—Warsaw, 1940?).

Norich's brief yet forceful introduction does not emphasize this recovery project in the context of gender, instead situating the publication of Blankshteyn's book in

its historical context, shortly before Blankshteyn's death and just prior to the onset of World War II. Only two copies of Blankshteyn's original Yiddish volume made it to the United States, and this provenance history is itself fascinating. As Norich argues: "Everything about this collection . . . is remarkable, including the fact that it exists at all. It was published just weeks before the Nazis invaded Poland and undertook what came to be known as the Final Solution." (p. vii) Norich continues with remarks on Blankshteyn's biography, which included running for office in Vilna, in what was then the Polish Republic, and learning Yiddish only as an adult, and her recognition by noted Yiddishist Max Weinreich, who wrote an introduction to the volume (also included here).

As Norich explains, fear permeates many of the stories in this collection, even though only one story—"Director Vulman"—addresses the growing threat of Nazism. Stories such as "Who?," "An Incident," and "Our Courtyard" offer a poignant perspective on the disruption unleashed by World War I, especially with regard to intimate betrayals by soldiers and shifting national borders. A character in "The First Hand" is a Jewish refugee from what is now Ukraine. These stories provide a literary voice to accompany recent scholarly interest in the carnage of war and pogroms that swept through eastern Europe a century ago, among them: Irina Astashkevich's *Gendered Violence: Jewish Women in the Pogroms of 1917 to 1921* (2018), Elissa Bemporad's *Legacy of Blood: Jews, Pogroms, and Ritual Murder in the Lands of the Soviets* (2019), Jaclyn Granick's *International Jewish Humanitarianism in the Age of the Great War* (2021), Brendan McGreever's *Anti-semitism and the Russian Revolution* (2019), and Jeffrey Veidlinger's *In the Midst of Civilized Europe: The Pogroms of 1918–1921 and the Onset of the Holocaust* (2021). Blankshteyn does not simply offer a literary voice by a woman writer that adds texture to these historical studies; she portrays the devastating impact of mass mobilization and political violence on family life. In this way, Blankshteyn's narrative emphasis diverges from that of such better-known male contemporaries as Sh. An-Sky, Isaac Babel and Lamed Shapiro, who describe pogroms and antisemitism in gruesome detail. Blankshteyn subtly reveals the aftereffects of violence and war for the women left behind.

While certain topics repeat across several stories, the nine stories are extremely—and pleasingly—varied, including both female and male protagonists. Several stories emphasize the importance of women having careers and a sense of personal autonomy. "The First Hand" and "Colleague Sheyndele" both describe women who gain satisfaction from their demanding professional lives, yet the contexts are quite different: "The First Hand" charts the life and upward mobility of a French orphan who rises in the ranks at a Parisian dress shop, whereas "Colleague Sheyndele" introduces a doctor and single mother who resists the amorous interest of men in her life. Both women's romantic lives contain echoes of violent historical events: Andréa, the protagonist of "The First Hand," marries a man from a Marrano background whose ancestors were persecuted by the Inquisition; Sheyndele's marriage could not withstand a separation caused by World War I.

*Sonia Gollance*

Fans of Yiddish literature (in translation) might be reminded of Kadya Molodowsky's emphasis on the importance of a woman's financial autonomy in stories such as "A Fur Coat"<sup>1</sup> or Miriam Karpilove's devastating criticism of both a disappointing suitor and antisemitism in her novel *Judith*.<sup>2</sup> Yet, although some of Blankshteyn's concerns may find parallels in other works of Yiddish prose, the variety of topics, narrative approaches and perspectives in *Fear and Other Stories*, combined with the pulsing political context, make Blankshteyn's work stand out as an extraordinary contribution to Yiddish literature. Norich's translation is a valuable tool for educators of Jewish Studies, women's writing and modern European history that will also find eager readers among the general public.

**Sonia Gollance** is Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in Yiddish at University College London. Her book *It Could Lead to Dancing: Mixed-Sex Dancing and Jewish Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2021) was a National Jewish Book Award finalist. She is currently translating Tea Arciszewska's *Miryeml* (1958), a Yiddish modernist play about pogroms and the Holocaust, supported by a 2020–20221 Yiddish Book Center Translation Fellowship. [s.gollance@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:s.gollance@ucl.ac.uk)

*Notes:*

1. Kadya Molodowsky, *A House with Seven Windows* (English transl. by Leah Schoolnik; Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006), pp. 25–31.
2. Miriam Karpilove, *Judith: A Tale of Love and Woe* (English transl. by Jessica Kirzane, Farlag Press, 2022).dp