



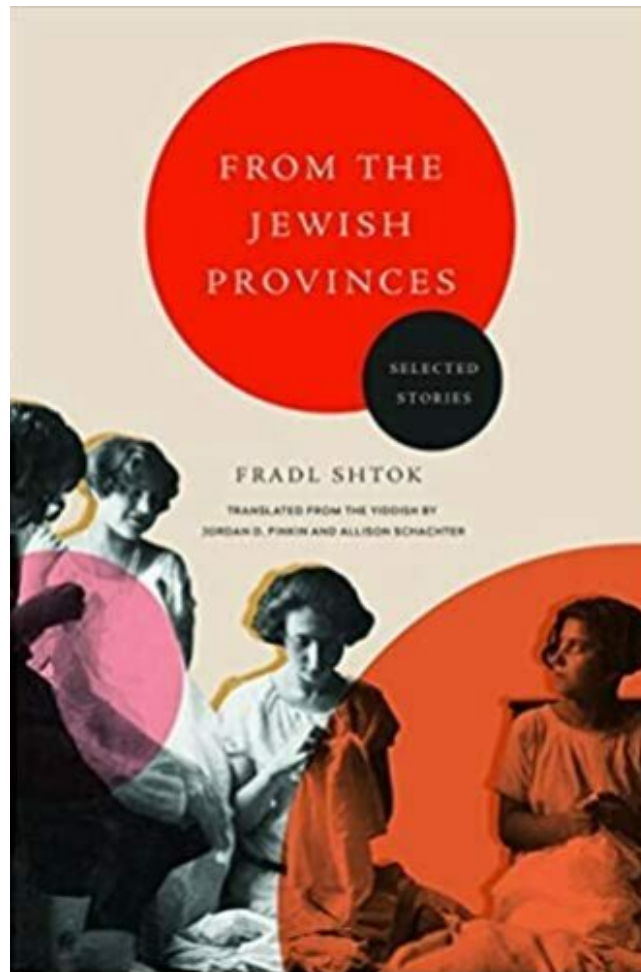
**IN GEVEB** A JOURNAL OF YIDDISH STUDIES

**REVIEW**

**Review of *From the  
Jewish Provinces* by  
Fradl Shtok,  
translated by Jordan  
D. Finkin and Allison  
Schachter**

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*From the Jewish Provinces: Selected Stories* by Fradl Shtok, translated by Jordan D. Finkin and Allison Schachter (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2022). 144 pp. \$21.95, paperback.

Six years ago, when I first drafted a sample syllabus for a university class on women who wrote in Yiddish, I focused on the work of a select few major writers. By the time I finally started teaching a seminar on this topic in October 2022, the landscape of possible readings had expanded dramatically, and it seemed unthinkable not to include many more writers.

We are experiencing a sea change in Yiddish translations and feminist scholarship. Thanks in part to the Yiddish Book Center's Translation Fellowship, there have been a growing number of translations of prose works by women. Anita Norich and Jessica Kirzane have been particularly active in bringing new, overdue attention to novels, but it is in the realm of

shorter fiction that the sheer volume of new publications becomes particularly apparent. Recent collections of short stories include texts by: Katie Brown (*London Yiddishtown East End Jewish Life in Yiddish Sketch and Story, 1930–1950: Selected Works of Katie Brown, A. M. Kaizer, and I. A. Lisky*, trans. Vivi Lachs, 2021), Chana Blankshteyn (*Fear and Other Stories*, trans. Anita Norich, 2022), Blume Lempel (*Oedipus in Brooklyn and Other Stories*, trans. Ellen Cassedy and Yermiyahu Ahron Taub, 2016), Anna Margolin (*During Sleepless Nights and other stories*, trans. Daniel Kennedy, 2022), Yenta Mash (*On the Landing: Stories by Yenta Mash*, trans. Ellen Cassedy, 2018), and Salomea Perl (*The Canvas and other stories*, trans. Ruth Murphy, 2020). These works are not the first to present Yiddish women writers to English-language readers; they join several older collections of stories including those by Esther Kreitman (*Blitz and other stories*, trans. Dorothee Van Tendeloo, 2004) and Kadya Molodowsky (*A House with Seven Windows*, trans. Leah Schoolnik, 2006), not to mention the foundational feminist anthologies such as *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers* (ed. Frieda Forman et al, Toronto: Second Story Press, 1994) that introduced a number of these authors to many readers. Yet with certain exceptions—for instance, Molodowsky, Kreitman, and Margolin, all of whom are better known for their poetry or novels than for their stories—most of the writers named in this list of translations had little name recognition outside of specialist circles.

Enter Jordan D. Finkin and Allison Schachter’s much-anticipated translation of Fradl Shtok’s prose work, *From the Jewish Provinces: Selected Stories*, an anthology that invites questions about changes in the Yiddish translation landscape. As a kind of companion piece to Schachter’s latest monograph, *Women Writing Jewish Modernity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2022), this translation demands that we evaluate if, how, and when works by women are deemed worthy of canonization in Yiddish belles lettres.

Shtok herself represents an interesting test case. On one hand, she has long been a subject of intense fascination, although largely in the context of feminist scholarship. Starting with Norma Fain Pratt’s groundbreaking article, “Culture and Radical Politics: Yiddish Women Writers in America, 1890-1940,” a number of articles and book chapters by scholars including Kathryn Hellerstein have discussed Shtok’s poetry in connection with the works of other Yiddish writers; the two articles dedicated wholly to Shtok’s life and work (Pratt’s 1997 article “Fradel Shtok: Memory and Storytelling in the Early Twentieth Century” and my 2017 article in *In geveb*, “[A Dance: Fradel Shtok Reconsidered](https://ingeveb.org/articles/a-dance-fradel-shtok-reconsidered) (<https://ingeveb.org/articles/a-dance-fradel-shtok-reconsidered>)”) focus primarily on her prose. Some of Shtok’s poems and several of her short stories appeared previously in English translation, including in some of the best-known anthologies of Yiddish or Jewish American literature that were published since the 1990s (especially those devoted to works by and/or about women). Six selected stories by Shtok were published in a bilingual French edition, *Une Danse/A tants* (trans. Batia Baum et al, Bibliotheque Medem, 2021), and her story “The Veil” was

included in Armin Eideherr's 1999 German translation of *Found Treasures*. Irena Klepfisz's poignant poem "Fradel Shtok" reflects upon the experience of being an immigrant trapped between languages, whereas Pratt's short story "What Remains is Random" invents a fictional woman writer inspired by Shtok's life. While the amount of engagement with Shtok's work might seem modest in comparison with other literary traditions, few Yiddish writers have received this level of attention in English regardless of gender, including only a handful of women. The fact that even in Schachter and Finkin's introduction to the present work, the authors reference surprisingly little of the above mentioned scholarship on and translations of Shtok's prose and tend to engage more with existing scholarship on her poetry replicates how views of Shtok as an accomplished writer of prose continue to be overlooked in face of a more 'canonical' vision of the writer as a poet.

Yet on the other hand, Shtok's position in the Yiddish literary canon can seem far from assured, a reflection of how even a writer who has made her mark in English-language Yiddish scholarship is still arguably neglected. *From the Jewish Provinces* is the first English-language book devoted to the work of Shtok, one of the most enigmatic figures in American Yiddish literary history. Like many Yiddish women writers, Shtok's literary works have often been overshadowed by emphasis on her biography—in this case, it was believed for years that Shtok had angrily abandoned Yiddish publishing following lackluster reviews of her short story collection and that she had been institutionalized around 1930, a narrative that seemed to epitomize the struggle of Yiddish women writers to be taken seriously by their male colleagues. Since the early aughts, scholars have been aware that Shtok had published in Yiddish as late as the 1940s, but until now basic details of Shtok's life (like the fact that she had been married or that she lived for roughly a century) remained unknown. Finkin and Schachter have done a great service to the field by offering both a much more complete biographical narrative and a deeper and more extensive engagement with Shtok's stories in English than was available thus far. The fluid, engaging translations underscore Shtok's contributions to Yiddish literary modernism. While Shtok does not necessarily stand out by virtue of the extent to which her literary voice has been neglected, we can rejoice that an author who could be described as "the madwoman in the attic of Yiddish literature" (as I posited in my 2017 article) is finally getting the context she deserves.

The framing of *In the Jewish Provinces* calls for more extensive and robust scholarship of women writers such as Shtok, harkening back to the rallying cry of founding mothers in this field such as Pratt and Klepfisz. This call will likely strike a chord with a broad range of readers who might be making their first forays into Yiddish literature, which mirrors how Finkin and Schachter have published with a press that does not have a Yiddish literature in translation series. This call remains an urgent one, but - perhaps *because* of the current explosion of interest in prose by women - the mere fact of drawing attention to a woman Yiddish prose writer is not in

itself the crowning achievement of this translation. One of the main contributions of *From the Jewish Provinces* is not explicitly stated in the introduction, an omission that might have the effect of obscuring a great source of pleasure to *In geveb* readers: retranslation. Yiddish translators often carry the heavy responsibility of translating works for the first and only time; this is especially true in the case of works by women, with a few notable exceptions (for instance, Celia Dropkin's poem "Di tsirkus dame," Margolin's poem "Ikh bin geven amol a yingling," or Glikl bas Judah Leib's memoirs). Yet here, for the first time to my knowledge, we get to experience retranslations of short stories by a woman who wrote in Yiddish, since at least seven of these stories have been previously translated into English by others (five of these translations are included in the list of Shtok's work in *From the Jewish Provinces*; my 2017 translation of "A Dance" in *In geveb* and Ri J. Turner's 2019 translation of "White Furs" in *Sprachbund* are not). For those familiar with Shtok's work, it is like revisiting an old friend. This retranslation invites us to ask nuanced questions about titles, dialogue, and description that can only enrich our appreciation of Shtok's storytelling.

This elegant volume contains twenty-three of Shtok's 38 stories from her 1919 collection *Gezamlte ertsehlungen* (Collected Stories), as well as the final story she published several decades later, "A Fur Salesman." The stories are divided into European and American stories, with the last story in its own section. This arrangement alters the arc of Shtok's original collection (although "The First Train" remains first in both editions) in a way that permits the translators to more easily make comparisons between the Old World and New World stories, such as the high frequency of female protagonists in the European stories. One of the key stylistic innovations of this translation is the rendering of *style indirect libre* (free indirect discourse), which is set off from the rest of the text in italics. This choice works very well, especially in the European stories, since there is less risk of confusion due to italicization of English-language terms that would be foreign to the Yiddish-speaking protagonists. The decision to highlight Shtok's style in this way is also apt because it keeps the focus on Shtok's technique, a focus that is essential for the project of showcasing her literary achievements yet is made more difficult by the intrigue of her life story. While Norich also discusses this form of narration in her Blankshteyn translation, free indirect discourse is addressed at greater length in *From the Jewish Provinces*, and the way it is laid out so clearly will be an asset for literature instructors.

Ultimately, Finkin and Schachter's translation does more than simply settling many lingering questions about Shtok's biography or recovering a cultural figure they claim has been "relegated to the footnotes of Yiddish literature" (xi), although both are significant accomplishments on their own. Recent Yiddish feminist scholarship has been moving away from emphasis on biographies, writers who lived in New York City, women's participation in the development of a Yiddish high culture, reception by the male-dominated literary establishment, and specific genres (especially poetry), and toward a focus on content, a greater range of genres, expanded

geographic diversity, greater appreciation of popular fiction, and more complicated understandings of the gendered publishing marketplace. *From the Jewish Provinces* incorporates aspects of both classic and more recent work; it centers an American Yiddish writer and addresses the question of her literary neglect, but also devotes much more attention to the style and themes of her work than on the quibbles of her male colleagues. By engaging in depth with the artistic dimensions of Shtok's prose works, Finkin and Schachter demonstrate how she fits into global modernism more broadly and provide a useful example of how to make a claim for inclusion in the Yiddish canon on the grounds of literary merit. *From the Jewish Provinces* is a valuable and highly readable addition to Yiddish literature in translation, which gives overdue justice to Shtok's literary achievements in prose in a volume that will be appreciated by students, scholars, and the general public.

#### **MLA STYLE**

Gollance, Sonia. "Review of *From the Jewish Provinces* by Fradl Shtok, translated by Jordan D. Finkin and Allison Schachter." *In geveb*, December 2022: <https://ingeveb.org/articles/from-the-jewish-provinces>.

#### **CHICAGO STYLE**

Gollance, Sonia. "Review of *From the Jewish Provinces* by Fradl Shtok, translated by Jordan D. Finkin and Allison Schachter." *In geveb* (December 2022): Accessed Mar 08, 2023.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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