

Longing To Belong: Jewish Women in the Pursuit of National Affiliation in 20th Century Tsarist Russia

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Short is the letter, ten phrases, no more

Yet, those phrases reveal so much

Reizaleh is imprisoned in Petrus Citadel

A maiden in captive, oye, Reizaleh, Reizaleh my girl!

*The old woman senses that something horrible is approaching her,
threatening to crash her down*

and she has no strength, no power, to resist.

(Shaul Tchernichovsky, Levivot, 1895.)

The Emergence of the Young Female Radical

As these few verses of the well-known poem, *Levivot*, (written in 1895 by Shaul Tchernichovsky) illustrate, the winds of change blowing in the Russian Empire, also swept away young Jewish women. Their fascination with radical ideas deepened in the 1905 revolution. In past decades historians such as Jonathan Frankel, Nora Levin, Deborah Hertz, and others pointed out that Jewish women were eager to veer away from their traditional subjugation in their families and communities, and they flocked into radical circles. The radicals advocated universal suffrage for all women, regardless of religion and nationality. This was the premise that drove many women into those circles. Data on the rates of

participation of Jewish women in radical groups albeit insufficient, highlight their robust involvement. For example: the share of Jewish radical women among the Jewish radicals- is more than twice the share of Christian women among Christian radicals.

Several factors contributed to the growth in Jewish women's radicalism. Structural shifts in the Russian economy wreaked havoc on the Jewish way of living. Strict quotas regulating residency, employment, and education distressed any social mobility. The achievements enjoyed by Jews in other parts of Europe were denied from their Russian brethren. As a result, those who could leave their Shtetls chose to do so. Some of these men and women hoped to find solace in immigrating to the land of their forefathers. From the 19th century onward Jewish women were also able to escape the grip of the rabbinical control mechanisms via education, which enhanced their ability to provide for themselves, and when duty called also for their families. As a result, women became more and more exposed to modern ideas. In 1911, for instance, 55% of Jewish women in Russia could read, and a quarter of them could also read Russian. Education was therefore, an arena of conflicts between the religious and traditional elements in the Jewish society, who sought to maintain old ways of living on the one hand, and the more modern *Masclim* and *Mascliot*, who aspired to change them, on the other. Are any of these factors can be pertinent to Rosa Cohen?

Cohen was born in Bialystok in 1890, one of 8 children. When she was 5 and orphaned by the death of her mother, the family moved to Gomel where the children would be raised by their paternal Grandmother and uncle, Mordechi Ben Hilel Ha-Cohen. In Gomel, half of the population was Jewish and many were active politically, making their way to the Zionist organization. Others sought to solve "the Jewish problem" in the Bund. The clash between the 14 years old Rosa, and

her Hasidic father, attests to the above mentioned change. Cohen wanted to attend school and her father forbade it and threatened to deny her the needed funds. In spite of that, Rosa graduated from high school and even continued her pursuit of a degree in Chemistry engineering, which she did not complete. Her choice of vocation was atypical among radical women. Many first generation radicals chose to study midwifery and other health professions. Nonetheless, Rosa's aborted attempt to gain higher education mirrored the revolutionary era. Many young female professionals who turned radicals, decided to relinquish their professional path and join the deprived masses. Presenting a certain degree of education, albeit not a complete one, was entangled in the rejection of women's subjugation and inequality many young women radicals have professed.

The fact that radical women, both Jewish and non-Jewish, tended to be more erudite did not grant them access to the inner circles of intellectuals and ideologists. For, men almost exclusively penned the manifests and carved the politics of the radical movements. Rosa Cohen's vita was not an exception to this rule. Graduated from Christian Girls high-school, with diploma, and a skilled professional, Cohen possessed the knowledge of both Yiddish, Russian and eventually also Hebrew. Yet, she did not leave any written ideological legacy, nor did she participate in conceptualizing the ideology of Labor Zionism, to whom she would finally contribute her vigor.

In contrast to the lack of equality in the intellectual field, in other areas of activity radical women exhibited fervor and participated more equally with their men peers. One of these fields was political terror. In popular and terrorist movements women tended to execute individual heroic actions. The failing assassination of Zubatov, one of the top agents of the *Ucharna*, the Russian secret police, by the

Bundist Manya Wilbushevitz (later Shochat) is an example of **the** participation of young Jewish women in terrorist action.

Changing Localities, Changing Loyalties: Rosa and Manya- A Comparison

Indeed, there are few common threads in the biographies of Rosa Cohen and Manya Wilbushevitz. Manya, the older among the two (was born in 1879), was fierce and courageous, and did not regard herself a sentimental- a trait usually associated with genteel women: “it is not become my character to write ‘letters d’amour’ [=love letters],” Manya admitted in a letter to Henrietta Sold in 1909.¹ Akin to Manya, Rosa Cohen grew up to be an austere young woman, and was also ‘non-sentimental’. Both radicals came from well to do families: a business of lumber yards in Rosa’s case; and a Mill in Manya’s case. Both fathers were devote Jews who negated their daughters’ higher education and forbade them from attending the *gymnasium*. The two young women rebelled, and in their early teens run away from home. Manya fled to Lodge, where she was living by herself, working in a factory as a heavy-weight parcels carrier; Rosa set herself free from her father’s grip by earning her tuition through her own resolve.

Similarities between Manya and Rosa do not end here. In both cases, the ‘enabler’ of the teen girls’ Socialist conscious was an older brother. In Manya’s case, her beloved brother, who was an avid Socialist, Moshe; in Rosa’s case, her brother Virgilie-Baruch, a zealous Bundist and one of its leaders. Both women activists were exposed to the Zionist ideology, which stirred debates within their families. Rosa grew up in the household of her passionate Zionist uncle, and Manya with fervent Zionist brothers. Both witnessed members of their families

¹ Manya Shochat to Henrietta Sold, 7 March 1909. In Reinharz, Reinharz, Golani, *A Fearless Visionary*, p. 67.

immigrate to Eretz Israel.² However, while Manya was close to her siblings, in mind and soul, Rosa was not.

Rosa shared Virgilie's world view: they negated the Zionist ideas, and saw the Zionist movement as an amalgam of middle class thinking and practices; and favored the Bundist non-Zionist dogma. Despite that, both found their way to Eretz Israel where they have lived closely by in Tel Aviv. In Tel Aviv the ailing siblings also died, one after another: Virgilie in 1936, and Rosa in 1937.

The choices and challenges met by Rosa Cohen and her brother, Manya Wilbushevitz and her siblings, exemplify the Jewish micro-cosmos of their time and place. In the late 1890s, the 17-18 years old Manya was severely bitten by the police and has had the bitter taste of life in prison.³ Rosa took her baton in political activity at the age of 15, during the turbulent time of the 1905-1906 pogroms in her town Gomel. Manya and Rosa scrutinized the exploitation of the "masses", the Russian peasants who worked in their families' businesses. Both were active in ameliorating their deprivation in earnings, in work conditions, and in education. In manifestation of their sympathy to the workers, the two young women's life style became quintessential 'Narodnic': Both chose to dress in man's cloths, worked and lived among the 'masses', the 'muzhiks', thus, implementing the radical ideas of their time, "going to the people" [= *Narodna yavolia*]. Despite their criticism, however, Manya and Rosa enjoyed their families' connections, social networks and resources: working in the family businesses before and after fleeing Russia is one of them. Manya worked as a carpenter in her brother

² Rosa had a great-uncle on her father's side, who came to live in Jerusalem accompanied by his daughter. Probably at the second half of the 19th century. Ben Hilel Hacoheh, *My World*, Vol. 2, p. 159.

³ After a demonstration she led in Minsk against the Tsarist regime. She got imprisoned for several month. *Memoirs of Manya Shochat; on Minsk in the late 1890s' May 1st demonstration in Reinharz, Reinharz, Golani, A Fearless Visionary*, pp. 601-602.

Gedalia's workshop in Minsk, and Rosa in her father's leased forests in Pulesya, a large swamp region near Pinsk, where she preached the Socialist dogmas and the principles of political organization to the workers. Preaching to the masses and educating them was also Manya's path into the political arena few years beforehand. This activity brought in both cases the secret police to their doorstep. Manya was imprisoned in Grodno and was transferred to Moscow, where she was later dismissed from jail.⁴ Rosa fled the country before the secret police got hold on her.

At the onset of First World War Rosa was already an experienced agitator, working as a book-keeper in a factory near St. Petersburg. Among the circle of Zionists living in the city, Rosa's anti-Zionist views did not go unnoticed. Not only did Rosa negate the principles of the Zionist ideology, she also negated its Eretz Israeli program. During the war, when the military took charge of the factory, Rosa was promoted to a managerial position with a hefty pay check attached to it (500 rubles per month). It was not before long, when the Bolsheviks took over the factory demanding that Rosa join the party. Rosa refused. At that time, her dismay toward the party's anti-Jewish policy, and its executing arm: the *Yvsectzia*, deepened. Her disobedience resulted in the party's attempt to remove her from office, and denying the factory the necessary materials- which led to its demise. Thereupon, Rosa decided to retire from office, and in a couple of days she left to Kiev, where she was followed by the determined agents of the secret police. Disguised as a Red -Cross nurse, she fled by train to Odessa, where she saw at the dock a ramshackle vessel, the *Ruslan*, loading new and old comers to Eretz Israel. In December 1919 on board of the *Ruslan* - to Eretz Israel Rosa came!

⁴ Not before she got acquainted with one of the Ucharna's top agents, Zubatov, which, would hunt her in forthcoming years. See Yaacov Goldstein, *Mania Vilbuschevitz-shchat: Her Revolutionary Leadership in Russia* (Hebrew), Haifa, Haifa University Press 1991, pp. 20-23.

Living under the yoke of the Bolsheviks, Rosa was motivated to try another path in life. After all, she was first and foremost a Jewish nationalist who guarded the interests of the Jewish people at heart. Thus, in spite of the common assertion vis-a-vis Rosa's journey to Eretz Israel, I maintain that her coming to the county was neither unplanned nor accidental. In November 1919 she sent yet another letter to an acquaintance of her brother Virgilie, scolding him for taking a much too long time to address her inquiries about the prospects awaiting her in Eretz Israel. Berl Katzenelson's reply, the receiver of her letters, can be read between the lines of a one remaining letter. Rosa was adamant that her motivation to go to Eretz Israel was not because she sought a way to solve any personal problems; and was eager to learn whether "a woman like myself can find in Eretz Israel means of living?" "In coming to Eretz Israel", Rosa explained, "I have to cut my roots here in order to begin new life there. Once I walk this path, there will be no turning back. Therefore, my going to Eretz Israel **can't be of a touristic nature!!**" Rosa clarified.⁵

A sign to Rosa's change of heart can be traced in a debate which took place in St. Petersburg just before her abrupt departure. A Soviet functionary Rosa knew, inquired why she had decided to transfer her revolutionary zeal to a small place like Palestine. With no hesitation Rosa fired back: "that small place is...ours!"⁶

On board of the *Ruslan* was, among others, a young woman who returned to Eretz Israel. She had lived in Kinneret as one of the trainees of the women's training-farm which was founded there (or, I should say here...) in 1911. This

⁵ Rosa to Berl, Bobroysk 24 November 1919. Curtsey of Rachel Rabin-Yaacov.

⁶ Smueli, *Rosa Cohen*, p. 35.

Kinneret zealot, Rachel Bluvstein, must have been one of the sources who acquainted Rosa with the wonders of the place. Kinneret, established in 1908 as a training-farm for Jewish workers, was a flag-ship of the pioneer endeavor in Eretz Israel. Although, in its first few years its prospects seemed grim and the farm dwindled from deficit to strike. A testimony on Rosa's first days in Kinneret question her reluctant Zionism. "I saw Rosa in the first evening of her arrival to Kinneret. An only woman in a group of pioneers...her face expressed joy. I felt that she was happy because her fortune brought her to take part in a group of workers," reminisced one of Rosa's comrades.⁷ And she continued: "from the first moment [Rosa] was neither a foreigner nor a passive follower of the group. Despite her deficiency in Hebrew, she introduced herself to each and every member of the collective...when I came to the kitchen the following day, I saw Rosa serving food and everyone approached her as if they knew her all along..."⁸ If this portrayal of a new-born Zionist is accurate, then, a question lingers: why in the following decades was Rosa repeatedly described as an ardent non-Zionist? My understanding is, that the farther from the Zionist ideology the immigrants were, the greater and deeper was their conversion to Zionism; which highlighted the might of the Zionist creed.

The road to Kinneret of the 29 years old Rosa is noteworthy, albeit a trying one. Maybe because of her age, or her fervent Socialism, Kinneret was not too keen to admit her. But, Rosa did not deter. Her acceptance to the group was made possible by a letter of recommendation from... Berl Katzenelson, her brother's acquaintance whom she already knew, and Moshe Shertok, whose sister, Ada, was a member of Kinneret, and a friend of Rosa's cousin, David Hachohen. Rosa's

⁷ Z. "In Kinneret", *Deva Hapoelet*, (12 December 1937), p. 176.

⁸ Z. "In Kinneret", *Deva Hapoelet*, (12 December 1937), p. 176.

family ties, her education, her political creed, i.e. being a Socialist but not a Bolshevik! were her vantage points. Likewise was her accumulated work experience. Be the case what it may, in the winter of 1920 Rosa worked in Kinneret, planting Eucalyptus trees in the harsh weather of the Jordan Valley. As many of her peers, she got malaria and her health deteriorated. As a result, her life as a Halutza in a commune of workers came to an abrupt end. In the spring of 1920, just on time for Pesach, she moved to Jerusalem, to her uncle Mordechai's house.

Manya Wilbushevitz on the other hand, immersed herself quite effectively in initiating agrarian communes of workers first in the Horan, which did not materialize, and then in 1907 in Sejera. After their successful experiment, Manya and her comrades moved to the next project, the rehabilitation of the war-stricken Kefar Giladi. Manya was also active in *Ha-Shomer*, an organization aimed at guarding the Jewish property in the country. Rosa too, did not shy away from participating in defense activity. In Passover 1920, violence against the Jews erupted in Jerusalem. This was Rosa's first encounter with the political tension prevailing between the two societies living in the country. "Jerusalem was short of a pogrom against the Jews" Rosa's uncle, Mordechai Ben Hillel Hacoheh, wrote in his diary.⁹ The upheaval began the following day. Although the British authorities forbade Jews to enter the old city, several volunteers from the 'Hebrew Legion' decided to take action. Shmuel Hacoheh, another cousin of Rosa's, and Rosa herself, were among the volunteers.¹⁰ As she did in yester year, Rosa used the nurse's white uniform as a disguise, and with these cloths she

⁹ Ben Hillel Hacoheh, *The Beginning*, p. 205.

¹⁰ Ben Hillel Hacoheh, *The Beginning*, pp. 209-210; Nechemia Rabin, "Defending the Old City of Jerusalem on Passover 1920", in Yehuda Erez, *The Third Aliya Book* (Hebrew), Vol 2, Tel Aviv, Am Oved 1964, p.763. להפשי בעיתונות היומית

entered the old city. There she became a liaison for the guarding units at night, befriending the Indian British soldiers and gathering information at day. Thus, partaking in the Jewish defense in Zionist Eretz Israel cemented the pact Rosa Cohen struck with the Jewish people early on, while she was still a craving-for-independence school-girl in Tsarist Russia.

Epilogue

In more than one aspect, Manya Wilbushevitz and Rosa Cohen's life choices were the mirror of their generation. Erudite and skilled young women from the Pale, they witnessed the turbulent times in the Russian empire, and grew to realize its futile solution to the "Jewish problem". As a result, these two reluctant Zionists, Manya and Rosa's energy and zeal were eventually dedicated to the Zionist enterprise in Eretz Israel. Although the political circumstances which drove the two revolutionaries out of Russia were similar, the circumstances of each woman's debut in Eretz Israel were different. Manya was lured into the country by her brother's gambit. Whereas Rosa embarked on the shores of the land as a result of a calculated decision. Her insistence on joining the Zionist flag-ship enterprise in Kinneret attests that her journey onboard the *Ruslan* was not fortuitous as was later cemented in the collective memory.

Unlike Manya, Rosa chose to refrain from formal membership in the workers' parties and most organizations. Her reluctance had probably to do not so much with her disenchantment with their views, but more so with her character and personality, as reflected in her past patterns. She did join the *Histadrut* (the General Workers Federation), however, where she became an avid activist. Rosa also became the *Histadrut's* representative (on behalf of *Achdut ha-Avoda*, a Zionist Socialist party) in Tel Aviv's municipality. Yet, her most significant mark would be stamped in her passionate volunteer work. Making her living as a

professional bookkeeper in various commercial firms, Cohen devoted her life to ameliorate the working and living conditions of Jewish workers and their families in Tel Aviv, her final town of residence.

Her untimely death in 1937 leaves us to ponder: *what if...* she had lived longer? In what ways would she influence the events that shaped the workers' politics in the country? To which direction would she stir her children's life? One of them, her son, would later become the chief of staff of the Jewish army in the sovereign Jewish state and a future prime minister of Israel: Yizhak Rabin. Regrettably, historians cannot tackle questions of this nature, and thus, they will remain open to speculations.

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