Rememberings: The World of a Russian-Jewish Woman in the Nineteenth Century


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This abridged English translation of Pauline Wengeroff’s German language Memoirs of a Grandmother constitutes an important source for the study of East European Jewish history, Jewish women’s memoir, and Women’s Studies. During her lifetime, which spanned an 83-year period beginning early in the reign of Tsar Nicholas I and concluding during the First World War, Wengeroff experienced the disintegration of the distinctive Jewish way of life that had developed in the Polish-Lithuanian kingdom over the course of centuries. Russian imperial policy, the Jewish Enlightenment and subsequent Jewish secular movements, and industrial development and urbanization, transformed the Russian Jewish community and prepared it to take advantage of full citizenship following the Bolshevik Revolution. Wengeroff’s attempt to better understand these processes plays an integral role in her efforts to make sense of her life, and helps make this text useful to scholars studying the process of Jewish modernization. Those accustomed to the confessionary nature of contemporary autobiography might find the limited treatment of sexuality, relationships, and intimate feelings, strange, but the interplay between the personal and the communal in these memoirs proves fascinating.

As Bernard Cooperman notes in his useful and well-researched afterward, gender plays an integral role in Wengeroff’s presentation of her life and times. She repeatedly argues that, “the spiritual impoverishment of Jewish life that accompanied modernization is completely the fault of men.” Wengeroff opens her memoirs with an idyllic portrayal of her father Yudl Epstein as a skilled individual capably balancing between faith and worldly success. Awakening at 4AM, he diligently studies Talmud and prays before starting his workday as a manager of a Brisk brick concern. In contrast, her husband Chonon largely abandons Jewish religious practice following a visit to the Lubavitcher rebbe that fails to bolster his faith, while her brother Ephraim converts to Christianity following his immigration to America. While these men will find worldly success as a bank manager and a physician respectively, neither will transmit a strong commitment to Judaism to the coming generations following their loss of faith, a fact attested to by the readiness of Wengerhoff’s sons to convert to Christianity in pursuit of education conducive to personal advancement in the Russian Empire. Despite her continued love for her children and her understanding of the discriminatory impediments that motivate their conversion, Wengeroff views her children’s baptisms as the heaviest blow she experiences in her life, and her memoir draws on her childhood past to present an alternative form of modernization that does not require apostasy.

With faith the central aspect of Chonon’s and Ephraim’s Judaism, their crises of faith lead them to a principled abandonment of various aspects of Jewish religious practice. Their all or nothing attitude places them in opposition to Wengeroff, who
presents an alternative “feminine” form of modernization based upon a hybrid Jewish identity mixing traditional Jewish elements with norms and attitudes of Enlightened European thought that has been compelling explored in Iris Parush’s seminal *Reading Jewish Women*. Despite a description of the Brisk synagogue and a short mention of her attendance at a girl’s *heder*, where she learned reading, prayer, and basic textual knowledge, Wengeroff’s discussion of her youth centers on the annual Jewish holiday cycle and intricate descriptions of the basic rituals and customs typical of Jewish households in the northwest reaches of the Pale of Settlement. Rather than maintaining a form of spirituality that placed high value on the recitation of *tchines*, Wengeroff grounded her sense of Jewishness in these rituals and customs, and her parents’ provision of tutoring in German and Russian language allowed her to gain access to Enlightened European culture, which she did not perceive in stark opposition to the domestic Judaism that she valued and to which she maintained a strong connection. Even as her husband abandoned elements of Jewish practice in his efforts to succeed in the public sphere, Wengeroff maintained selected Jewish rituals and customs in the domestic sphere that made her proud to be maintaining continuity with her Jewish heritage. Her distress and agitation when her husband forces her to cease maintenance of a kosher household fifteen years into their marriage hints at her husband’s violation of unstated rules governing the couple’s gradual process of acculturation. In his desire to control the acculturation process of his whole household, he engenders his wife’s anger and leads her to question his authority. Wengeroff’s implicit connection between the degradation of the domestic Jewish sphere and her children’s conversions hints at her retrospective belief in the need for Jewish women to play a greater role in the maintenance of their children’s religious upbringing, something traditionally considered a man’s role.

Despite their differences concerning Jewish religious practice, Pauline and Chonon seemed to have come to a more effective modus vivendi in their later years through their shared assertion of a primarily ethnic identity. Many affluent St. Petersburg Jews in the later half of the nineteenth century became involved with philanthropic, cultural and social organizations, which offered them a way of remaining tied to their more traditional and less well-to-do brethren concentrated in the Pale of Settlement, and Pauline and Chonon both expressed their sense of connection through the establishment and running of Jewish vocational schools, which combined practical training with a basic Jewish education.

Not only does this translation of Wengeroff’s memoirs allow readers to compare the different gendered strategies for modernization employed by Wengeroff and those close to her, it can also assist scholars interested in broader questions concerning the modernization of East European Jewry and its portrayal in life writing. Read alongside translations of Bella Chagall’s *Burning Lights*, Puah Rakovsky’s *My Life as a Radical Jewish Women* and Hinde Bergner’s *On Long Winter Nights*, this volume can help students evaluate Paula Hyman’s treatment of the secularization of East European Jewish women in her *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History* or it can be used to test the conclusions drawn about the life writing of East European Jews made in Marcus Moseley’s recent volume *Being for Myself Alone*. Regardless of its pedagogical application, this translation constitutes an important contribution to scholarship.