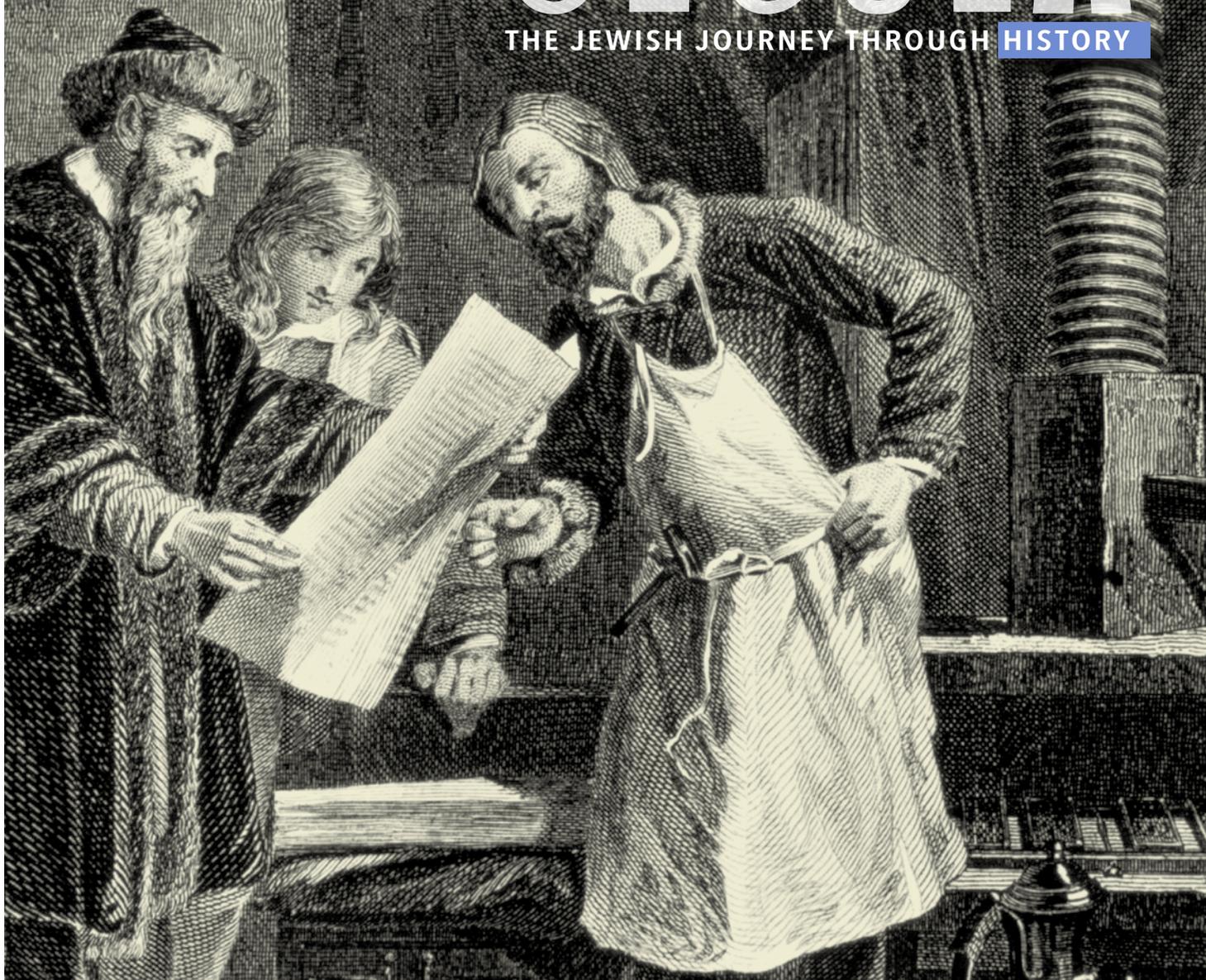


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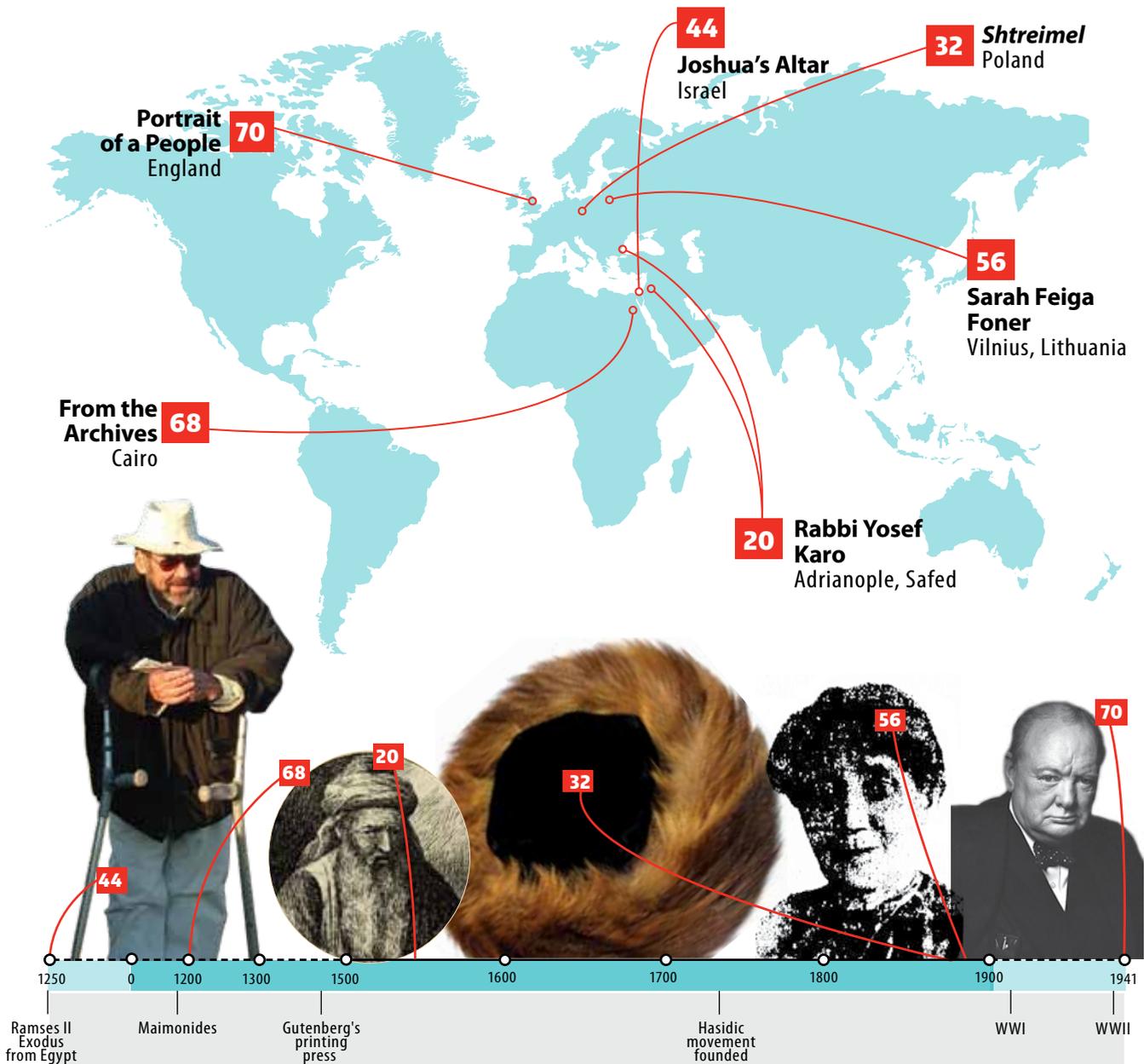
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A HEBREW WOMAN IN A MAN'S WORLD

AS IF WRITING THE FIRST HEBREW NOVEL BY A WOMAN WEREN'T CHALLENGE ENOUGH, SARAH FEIGA FONER FOUND HERSELF CRITICIZED, RIDICULED, AND EVEN ACCUSED OF PROMISCUITY. HER WORK MAY HAVE BEEN FORGOTTEN, BUT HER STORY IS ONE TO REMEMBER
// MICHAL FRAM COHEN

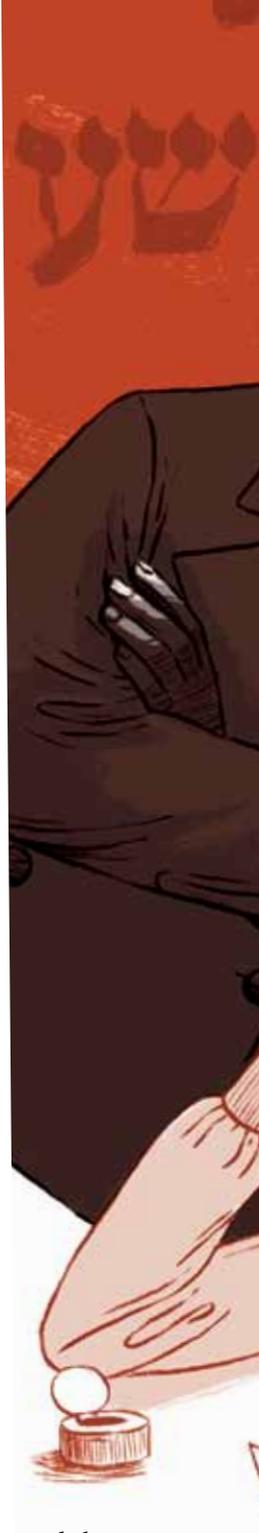
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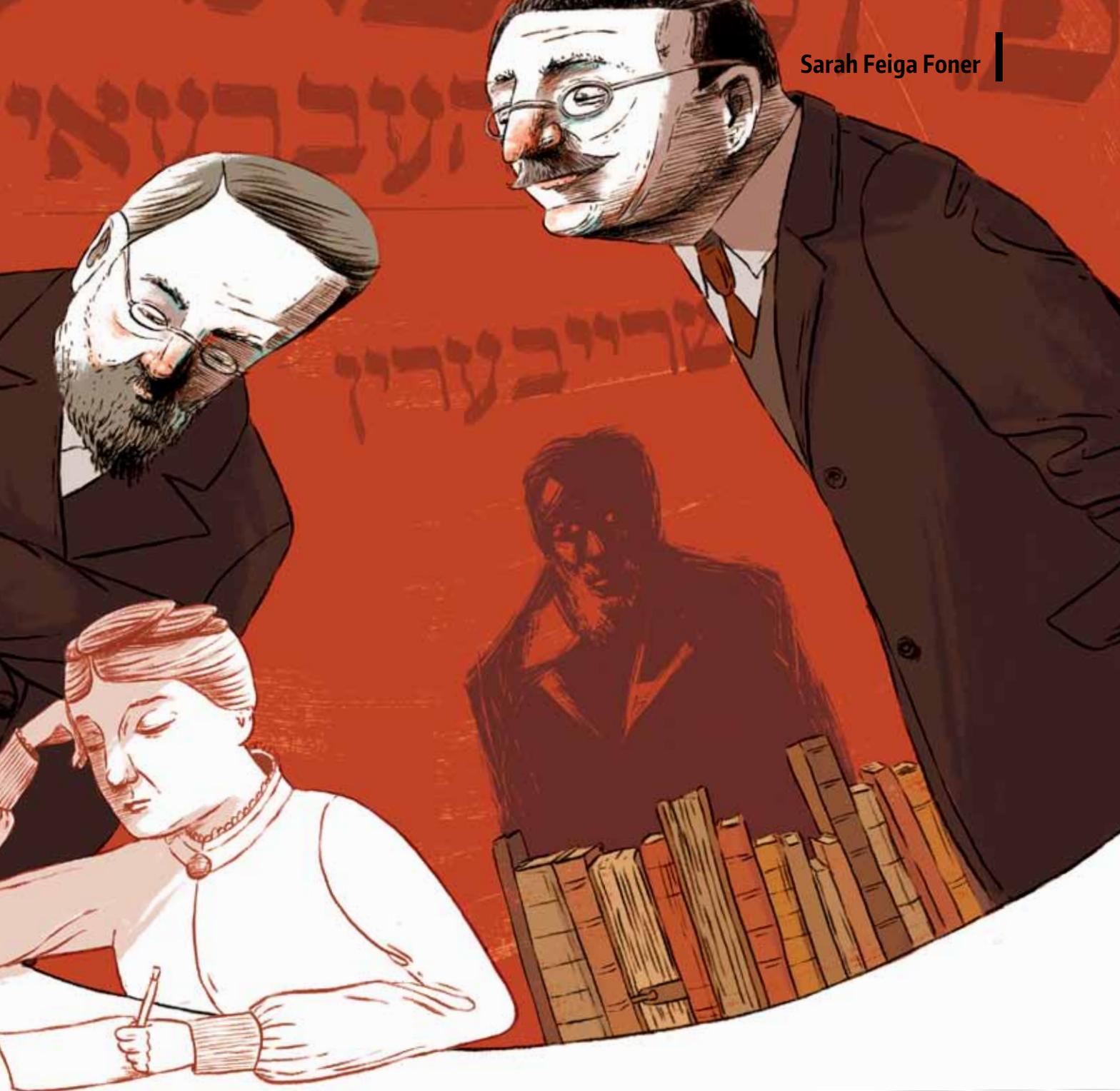
In 1881, a young Jewish woman in Riga sent the manuscript of a Hebrew novel to influential Hebrew poet and author Yehuda Leib Gordon. Gordon was well known for his dedication to Jewish women's education and writings, particularly in Hebrew. Jewish students, the young authoress among them, met regularly to converse in Hebrew in the home of Ze'ev Wolf Hakohen Kaplan, whose son happened to be married to

Gordon's daughter. Kaplan delivered the manuscript to Gordon, who returned it with a wry comment:

And the Lord remembered Sarah, and she conceived and bore the book she'd written. (*Yehuda Leib Gordon's Letters*, vol. 1, p. 312)

The writer in question was Sarah Feiga Menkin, later Foner, and the novel was *Love of the Righteous, or, The Persecuted*





Families (Vilna, 1881). Clearly impressed, Gordon compared the miracle of a Hebrew novel written by a woman to the biblical Sarah's miraculous conception of Isaac despite her advanced age.

Jewish women writers weren't unknown. Rebecca Tiktiner wrote an ethical tome – *Meneket Rivka* – in 1609. And Grace Aguilar had produced works in English, including a romantic novel (*The Vale of Cedars*), in the 1840s (see

Asael Abelman, “Writing with Grace,” *Segula* 12). But Sarah Feiga was, to the best of our knowledge, the first woman to publish Hebrew fiction.

Of course, she was far from the only Jewish woman active in the Hebrew literary renaissance inspired by the Haskala (Hebrew Enlightenment). But while Rachel Morpurgo, Miriam Markel-Mosessohn, and Olga Belkind, to name a few, published poems and articles in



Criticism couldn't stop her writing. Photo of Sarah Feiga Foner, published alongside an interview with her in the Yiddish newspaper *Die Wahrheit*

the Hebrew press (see Tova Cohen, “A Woman’s Hand,” *Segula* 37), Foner was unique in several respects.

Her non-Jewish counterparts published anonymously (Jane Austen) or hid behind male pseudonyms, such as English novelist George Eliot (Mary Anne Evans) and French writer George Sand (Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin), but Sarah Feiga used her own name. She preceded Devorah Baron, whose first Hebrew story appeared in *Ha-melits* (The Advocate) in 1902, as well as Hemda Ben-Yehuda (wife of the famous Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, father of modern Hebrew), who began writing for the *Olam Katan* children’s journal in 1901.

After *Love of the Righteous*, Foner published two historical novellas, a collection of anecdotes about her childhood in Latvia, and an autobiographical children’s story. Yet this pioneer has sunk into oblivion, with Baron generally credited as the first woman to join the almost exclusively male club of early Hebrew authors.

Beyond the Pale

Sarah Feiga Menkin was born in 1854 in Žagarė, Lithuania, then a center of

rabbinic scholarship. Her father, Yosef, descended from Rabbi Elijah, the famed Gaon of Vilna. Influenced by the Haskala, however, he refused to follow the family tradition and become a rabbi. Instead, Menkin ran a distillery for the Russian army, moving his family to the Latvian town of Dvinsk (now Daugavpils) – where there was a Russian garrison – and later to Riga, outside the Pale of Settlement.

Sarah Feiga’s brother Yehoshua Ber was sent to the rabbinical seminary in Vienna, followed by a stint at the famous rabbinic academy in Breslau, Germany. His sister, however, had to content herself with the local Russian Gymnasium for Girls, where – like many of her contemporaries – she received a comprehensive general education. Sarah Feiga graduated with an impressive knowledge of modern European history – and, apparently, a strong integrationist tendency. *Love of the Righteous* is set against a swiftly changing European political background, including the military coup that installed Napoleon III as ruler of France (1852), the Crimean War (1853–6), and the establishment of the independent Kingdom of Italy under Victor Emmanuel II. Jews who adopt French or Italian nationality feature in the novel as role models, representing an ideal promoted by Haskala proponents such as Gordon, whose younger daughter was evidently Sarah Feiga’s classmate. The most famous lines he ever penned – from his poem “Awake, My People” – speak for themselves:

“Be a man in the streets and a Jew at home / a brother to your countryman and a servant to your king.” (Michael Stanislavski, *For Whom Do I Toil?: Judah Leib Gordon and the Crisis of Russian Jewry* [Oxford University Press, 1988], p. 50)

Young, secularly educated Jewish women were growing disillusioned with their faith, and Jewish education for girls was a hot topic in the increasingly popular Haskala journals. Gordon frequently broached the urgency of



In her youth, Sarah Feiga subscribed to poet Y. L. Gordon's philosophy: "Be a man in the streets and a Jew at home"

providing girls with a thorough Hebrew grounding, so it's hardly surprising that he published a positive review of *Love of the Righteous* in *Voskhod* (Dawn), a Russian-language Jewish journal:

A woman writing in Hebrew is a rare phenomenon. Due to the Talmudic dictum "One who teaches his daughter Torah teaches her foolishness," Jews have refrained from exposing their daughters to the original text of the Holy Scriptures and from teaching [girls] Hebrew. [...] Here and there, daughters of Israel have begun studying authentic Hebrew, the language of the Bible and Hebrew literature. We are familiar with such women, who understand Hebrew well and can read and are even beginning to write in Hebrew. But even today, when an article or report by a Jewish woman appears in the Hebrew press, it's pointed out as a rarity. [...] Miss Menkin is the

first to publish her own work, and this is definitely an unusual occurrence. (Yehuda Leib Gordon, *Learning the Language of the Homeland: Articles in Voskhod, 1881–1882*, trans. Rina Lapidus, pp. 150–1 [Hebrew])

Men's Club

Though the book's publication and Gordon's praise were both enormous achievements, Menkin's success was not untainted. In a rival Enlightenment publication, critic David Frishman slammed the novel for its literary and linguistic flaws, concluding:

I'm not at all sure whether an unripe maiden ought to [submit] work, or whether we should overlook the truth to curry favor with her. Will our literature truly collapse without this young woman's contribution? Let each maiden learn what she must and [leave us to]

A street in Žagarė, the Lithuanian town where Sarah Feiga Menkin was born
Photo: Laima Gūtmane

The first Hebrew novel written by a woman received mixed reviews. Flyleaf of Menkin's *Love of the Righteous*

Well-known poet Yehuda Leib Gordon (top right) immediately grasped the significance of Sarah Feiga's first novel, while opinionated critic David Frishman (below) rejected it solely because it was written by a woman



take care of the future. (*Ha-boker Or* [The Light of Morning], May–June 1881, p. 391)

Frishman's scathing critique was at least partly motivated by his fundamental opposition to Jewish women writing in Hebrew. An 1887 article of his declared:

I have always objected to our sisters' learning Hebrew, and I've never believed any woman could learn this language innocently and wholeheartedly, or with wholly pure motivation. [...] Hebrew – I have always said – is a man's tool, not to be taken up by a woman. For the day she appropriates it, it will no longer be a tool, only a woman's frock. ("Letters Regarding Literature," *Ha-yom* [Today], September 6, 1887, p. 2)

But Frishman couldn't deter Menkin. She sent the aging Sir Moses Montefiore a copy of *Love of the Righteous*, and he responded with an encouraging letter and a grant. Her second book, *The Way*

of Children, or, A Story from Jerusalem (1886), was dedicated to Montefiore and prefaced by a copy of his letter.

In 1882, Sarah Feiga's essay "The Spring" was included in an anthology featuring such famous names as Gordon himself, *Ha-melits* editor Alexander Zederbaum, and journalist Avraham Ber Gottlober, editor of the rival *Ha-boker Or*. Twelve years later, Gottlober inscribed her copy of his book *All the Songs of Mahalalel*:

In honor of the eminent lady, the dear and esteemed woman of wisdom Mrs. Sarah Feiga Foner (may she live long), a

memento of friendship, Bialystok, 1894, from the author Avraham Ber Hakohen Gottlober. (S. Sirkes, “A Fruitful Hebrew Authoress,” *Die Wahrheit* [Truth], May 12, 1918, p. 4 [Yiddish])

Ideological Shift

Foner’s writings reflect the ideological shift of many Hebrew authors in the 1880s and 1890s, when increased anti-Semitism shattered their hopes of Jewish integration into Russian society. For some, such aspirations were replaced by Jewish nationalism, coalescing around the Hovevei Zion (Lovers of Zion) movement. Chapters spread from Romania throughout Russia and eastern Europe with the goal of settling the land of Israel. In Riga, where Sarah Feiga lived, the local branch eventually established the village of Hadera.

While *Love of the Righteous* had advocated integration into European society and culture, Foner’s later historical fiction reinforced Jewish nationalism. (In fact, the birth of the European historical novel coincided with the rise of nationalism across the continent.) Set in the Holy Land during the Second Temple period, *The Way of Children* highlights four brothers’ conflicting paths: one joins the Sanhedrin, another rises through the ranks of Herod’s army, the third becomes a farmer like their father, and the last leads a failed revolt against Herod. *Traitors’ Treachery, or, A Story from the Time of Simeon the High Priest* (1891) relates the abortive attempt by Ptolemy the Son of Abubus, leader of the Jewish Hellenists, to depose the Hasmonean Dynasty. Foner’s narrative condemns the Hellenists as traitors, an implicit criticism of Jewish integration into European society and culture in her own day.

A Childhood Memoir, or, A Portrait of Dvinsk (1903), written two decades after *Love of the Righteous*, was openly Zionist. One passage describes the author’s visit to Dvinsk in the mid-1880s, long after she’d left the city. The sight of the thriving Jewish district built in her absence makes her wonder if Zion might not similarly be



Private words of encouragement. Letter from Sir Moses Montefiore, thanking Menkin for a copy of her book and enclosing a sum of four pounds sterling

Author Avraham Ber Gottlober, who autographed a copy of his book for his friend Sarah Foner in Bialystok in 1894

rebuilt, and she urges the Jews of Dvinsk to heed her call:

If only, my people, you’d take this to heart and [...] visit our desolate land, would it not once again be settled? [...] Here you live on foreign soil, while there you’ll dwell in the land of your fathers. [...] If here, such a great city can spring up from barren earth [...], what a fine moment it will be when I’m privileged to see the land of my fathers, long desolate and destroyed, resettled and speedily rebuilt. (p. 18)

This appeal is a far cry from Foner’s earlier idealization of Italy:

Isaac’s blessing to his eldest son, “May you dwell amid the fates of the earth,” was interpreted by our sages [as a] reference to Italy. (*Love of the Righteous*, p. 7)

Personal Politics

Sarah Feiga’s ideological development mirrored changes in her personal life. In 1883 she married writer Yehoshua Mezah, a Hebrew writer who was highly skeptical of attempts to settle the land of Israel. An open letter he published in 1884, “Concerning the Departure to Palestine,”

“Hebrew [...] is a man’s tool, not to be taken up by a woman,” wrote critic David Frishman. No wonder he panned Sarah Feiga’s first novel

Sarah Feiga married her first husband in a private ceremony without her parents' consent; after she became pregnant he deserted her, denying their marriage and his paternity of their son

complained that Hovevei Zion activities were compromising Russian Jews' efforts to gain acceptance as loyal citizens. After Mezah abandoned her, Sarah Feiga married dramatist Meir Foner, an active member of Hovevei Zion, in 1886. He too, expressed his opinion of the colonists in Jewish Enlightenment journals, but in a very different vein:

They volunteered of their own accord to walk the ruins of Judea, to eat their fill of toil and wandering, purely out of implacable hope that God would take pity on His people and the banner of Judea would fly over its land as before. [...] Future generations will bow to them, and their name will be glorified in Israel. (*Ha-maggid* [The Spokesman], May 23, 1883, p. 159)

Personal disillusionment probably had much to do with Sarah Feiga's political re-orientation. She wrote to Yehuda Leib Gordon that she had married Mezah in Vilna without her parents' consent, in a private ceremony without a *ketubba*, and that after she became pregnant he'd deserted her, denying their marriage and his paternity of their son.

When I was in Vilna last summer (after Passover, I went back to Vilna to have part 2 of my book printed), a fellow named Mezah happened to be there, who seduced me with his smooth talk – not, God forbid, to live in sin, but according to the law of Moses and Israel. He married me in a traditional ceremony,

but against my parents' will... He wronged me twice, deserting me after he had married me according to the law, though in times of hunger I had provided for him according to my wifely duty of not differentiating between my money and his. And of his son and his offspring, [...] he would say Woe unto God that I have come to this pass! Now am I left lonely and abandoned, with no means of support, with my son. [...]

[Mezah] went and hired people for this reprehensible purpose: to testify that I hadn't been married to him, though [...] nobody dared to say such a thing before the rabbinic judge in Vilna, Rabbi Yossele, and his court, which ruled that I should accept a divorce without payment. (Tova Cohen and Shmuel Feiner, *The Voice of a Hebrew Maiden: Enlightened Women's Writings in the 19th Century*, pp. 134–6 [Hebrew])

Mezah denied Sarah Feiga's claims. In a letter to colleague Peretz Smolenskin (preserved in Smolenskin's archives in the National Library of Israel), he maintained that she had lived a life of debauchery in Vilna, fabricating their marriage and his paternity of her son once she'd become pregnant.

The dispute sucked in Mezah's friends and enemies alike, with the latter taking Sarah Feiga's side just to attack him. Thus, Alexander Zederbaum published a reader's letter in *Ha-melits*, stating that Mezah had attended the circumcision of Sarah Feiga's son and that the couple

					
1854	1861	1871	1881	1882	1883
Born in Žagarė, Lithuania	Moves with her family to Dvinsk	Moves with her family to Riga	Publishes <i>Love of the Righteous, or, The Persecuted Families</i>	Publishes "The Spring," dreaming of a Jewish national rebirth	Marries Yehoshua Mezah in Vilna and gives birth to their son, Noah



had shared a hotel room. The reader also testified that Mezah had deceived and deserted other women. (Indeed, Sarah Feiga’s own letter to Gordon describes how she pursued Mezah to Tilsit, where he’d just married someone else.) Literary critic David Frishman, on the other hand, vouched for his friend in a private letter, “because I saw he was being pursued relentlessly for nothing at all, and everybody was badmouthing him” (*David Frishman’s Letters*, New York, 1927, p. 63).

In 1887, Frishman panned Sarah Feiga’s latest book, *The Way of Children*. He mocked the title, comparing women’s writing to children’s scribbling, and again noted the fundamental femininity of Foner’s work:

It’s just like its title: a way of children; it also has the way of women. (*Ben-Ami*, March 1887, p. 32)

Quite possibly, Frishman reviewed the tale only to denigrate Foner – as a favor to Mezah.

Sarah Feiga’s experiences and relationships clearly colored her writing. The headstrong heroine of *Love of the Righteous* – published when its author was still single at twenty-seven – chose her beloved without her parents’ knowledge, much as Sarah Feiga did Mezah, although her fictional lovers remained true to each other. Her first book set in the Holy Land, *The Way of Children*, was published the year she married the proto-Zionist Foner. Her later works continue in the same historical and nationalist vein. In

Sarah Feiga’s family moved to Riga, capital of Latvia, when she was a teenager. The city in the early 20th century



1886	1891	1897	1903	1909	1919	1937
Marries Meir Foner and settles in Bielsk, Poland. Publishes <i>The Way of Children</i> , or, <i>A Story from Jerusalem</i>	Publishes <i>Traitors' Treachery, or, A Story from the Time of Simeon the High Priest</i>	Moves with Foner to Łódź and founds Bat Zion girls' school	Publishes <i>A Childhood Memoir, or, A Portrait of Dvinsk</i>	Immigrates with her son to the United States	Publishes a children's book, <i>Youthful Memories</i>	Dies and is buried in Pittsburgh

As an engineer, Foner's son, Noah, was a welcome immigrant to the United States. He took his mother with him, later changing his name to Newton. An immigrant ship docks at Ellis Island, New York
Photo: Library of Congress collection

Just decades before Sarah Feiga, female novelists adopted male pen names. Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin, a.k.a. George Sand, and Mary Anne Evans, a.k.a. George Eliot



her last such novel, *Traitors' Treachery*, the villain Ptolemy son of Abubus murders his wife, the daughter of Simeon the High Priest, to pursue a Greek princess. This sordid plot, though based on Josephus, may echo Sarah Feiga's own betrayal and desertion by Mezah.

Women at Sinai

Sarah Feiga's situation improved greatly after marrying Meir Foner. He adopted her son, and the family settled in Congress Poland, where both husband and wife worked as tutors. Sarah Feiga also opened the Bat Zion girls' school in Łódź in 1897, twenty years before Sarah Schenirer launched the Bais Yaakov educational

movement in Kraków (See Tali Brener, 'Clothing the Soul' *Segula* 29). From the front page of *Ha-melits*, she warned her students' fathers that without a thorough Jewish and Hebrew education, Jewish girls would assimilate:

[The words] "Moses proclaimed the law to us" (Deuteronomy 33:4) – in Hebrew – were addressed not only to men, but to all of us. We all stood at Mount Sinai, we all heard, and we all answered: "We will do, and we will listen!" (Exodus 24:7). ("Address to Fathers," *Ha-melits*, September 14, 1900, p. 1 [Hebrew])

Sarah Feiga's new Jewish nationalism also brought her back to religious observance:

The Zionist movement is the antidote to all the Enlightenment's perversions, inflicted by those who knew not how to receive [its benefits]. [...] In a word, it will restore that which the Enlightenment deprived us of: love of Torah, love of our land, our nationhood and brotherhood. [...] Even if some Zionists are still estranged from Jewish observance, no matter: they're on the way back. Their spirit is turning to their land and their people, may they be blessed. When all the ultra-Orthodox and their children also join this great movement, then, when God redeems our captivity, Israel shall arise and flourish as of yore. (*A Childhood Memoir*, p. 33)



Though Meir Foner wrote avidly in support of Zionism, and published plays set in biblical times and in the reign of Herod, the couple remained in eastern Europe. In 1909, Sarah Feiga's son immigrated to the United States, and she accompanied him. Meir, however, remained in Łódź until his death. The passenger list of the ship transporting his wife noted her profession as "authoress." She'd hoped to publish the manuscripts she brought with her, including a novel set in the time of Don Isaac Abravanel, but only a children's story, *Youthful Memories*, was printed in the U.S.

In 1918, Sarah Feiga spoke at the convention of the Histadruth Ivriith in New York and was subsequently interviewed by the Yiddish newspaper *Die Wahrheit*. When asked why she didn't write in Yiddish, she replied:

Yiddish is all well and good, but in the land of Israel [...] only Hebrew can reign supreme. Jews from all over the world can communicate with each other only in Hebrew. (Sirkes, p. 4)

The interview concluded:

Among scholars, you know, as long as you can learn, you only improve with age. That's true for men and women. I still hope, God willing, to live and breathe in the land of Israel. (ibid.).

Sarah Feiga Foner died in 1937 at age eighty-three and is buried in Pittsburgh, where she lived with her son and his family. She never made it to Israel, but a great-granddaughter and some great-great-grandchildren did, and her descendants there form an extensive family. Though her politics and loyalties altered amid her many travails, Sarah Foner vociferously advocated – in the eloquent, elegant Hebrew prose that so surprised Yehuda Leib Gordon – peace and equality for all under the setting sun:

The sun began to set, girding all its remaining strength to gather its light [...], as if wishing to send condolences to all those enjoying the sunshine [...]



withheld from them during the heat of the day. They'd hidden in their houses, behind doors bolted shut, so as not to be burnt by the heat. Now, however, though barely visible, [the sun] cast its rays from the tops of the towers and trees, extending over the entire plain around the city as if to tell all its maker's creatures, "For you, God's creatures! For you I've left the city to dwell in the fields, vineyards, and villages, that you might know me, the messenger of the God of Zion. Great and small are equal before me, villager and city dweller. [...] Come, delight in so much peace, for you know no jealousy, and there's no hatred among you. (*Traitors' Treachery*, pp. 9–10) □

Family constraints kept Sarah Feiga Foner in the United States despite her avowed desire to emigrate to Palestine. Foner's headstone in Pittsburgh

Sarah Feiga published her first book set in the Holy Land the same year she married the proto-Zionist Foner. She continued to write in a nationalist vein

Further reading:

Morris Rosenthal, *A Woman's Voice: Sarah Foner, Hebrew Author of the Haskalah* (2001); Wendy I. Zierler, *And Rachel Stole the Idols. The Emergence of Modern Hebrew Women's Writing* (Wayne State University Press, 2004).



Dr. Michal Fram Cohen

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