

## Introduction

I loved books.

How real the past was to them (speaking of her parents and family).

—Pauline Wengeroff, *Memoirs of a Grandmother* (2:29; 1:87)

### Why Does a Jewish Woman Write Her Memoirs?

On July 20, 1898, as she records in her memoirs, an elderly Russian Jewish woman sat down “on a small bench under an oak in the woods” outside Minsk and gathered her memories of youth. “As chance would have it,” she writes, just that day, she had “bumped up against the strong box” containing the letters that she and her fiancé had exchanged during their engagement, in 1849. She “leafed pensively through the yellowed pages” and felt the “crusts of ice” that a difficult life had built up around her heart “gradually melt away.” One picture after another rose up, she said, “like sculptures” in her memory and would not let her be, stirring the wish “to record for my children all that I lived through, as a remembrance of their mother.”<sup>1</sup>

With these words, Pauline Wengeroff (1833–1916), author of an extraordinary set of memoirs about Jewish society in nineteenth-century Russia, gives us entrée to her methods, putative motive for writing, and the seductiveness and complexity of her narration. She sets a dramatic scene: a bench in the woods of summer (Minsk was known for its surrounding forests), to which she retreated after a chance encounter with some of the most emotionally charged mementos of her life—letters, she tells us elsewhere, that were her most cherished possession, every one of which she had saved.<sup>2</sup> Yet this passage also tells us that, while Wengeroff originally may have preserved personal documents for sentimental reasons, she was now, as a memoirist, using them professionally, to ground and give immediacy to her narrative. Indeed, the story of her engagement is not the only place that Wengeroff uses contemporaneous

documentation to support her tale. In her anguished portrayal of the end of kashruth observance in her marital home, she embeds diary entries she made at the time into her retrospective account, the memoir. Wengeroff makes occasional but significant reference to sources written by others, as well: to a published collection of Yiddish folk songs when she records her own memories of such songs and speaks of the Russian-Jewish dialect; to books and periodicals when describing such major events as Max Lilienthal's tour of the Pale; or when she even invites her readers to "compare *Zeitschrift Voskhood*."<sup>3</sup>

Wengeroff then, uses external documentation despite asserting that she had, and relied on, a formidable memory. "Many incidents are imprinted in my memory like wax," she declares in her "Preamble" to Volume One (1:1), "so that I remember them even now with perfect clarity." Coming at the very opening of *Memoirs*, this declaration announces her credentials—betraying of course, her perceived need to do this. Having proclaimed herself a grandmother in the title of her work, she immediately warns against being dismissed as one. It is significant that Wengeroff returns to the theme of her memory's authority at the end of her writing, late in Volume Two, where she asks, rhetorically, "Is my memory dull? . . . Does a dark gauze blanket my eyes?" To which she responds, "Oh, no. I am a true chronicler."<sup>4</sup> Effectively, then, Wengeroff brackets her work with assertions about her memory, regarding which we have precious corroboration from the Russian Jewish historian, Saul Ginsburg, who marveled about "the clarity of her memory" even in Wengeroff's last years, when he interviewed her in Minsk.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, Wengeroff does not intend to impugn the credibility of her memory. Writing at a time that Freud and others were fundamentally challenging the factual reliability of memory, Wengeroff never even considers the possibility that memory is selective or biased. In her protestations, memory is all, or seemingly nothing, and she has it all. And yet, she buttresses her account with documentary evidence.<sup>6</sup>

Further complexities abound. Despite her attempt to assert the spontaneous nature of her urge to remember and write, the muse seemingly alighting on her on that bench in the woods, that very depiction betrays Wengeroff's self-consciousness as a writer. Neither serendipity nor fate led her that day to the strong box with its letters. Surely, this was not the only time since she first stored it that she happened upon it. As she

details in Volume Two, she, her husband, and their children moved a great deal; the box would have been moved and handled many times to have followed her to Minsk. Moreover, she also tells us that she perused the letters from her groom “from time to time,” “conjur[ing] up” the happy days of her engagement at less happy times.<sup>7</sup> This then, was a habit to summon pleasure, not a one-time accident. No force suddenly compelled Wengeroff to pore over those pages that day in 1898, much less write two volumes of memoirs as a result. She says she yielded to memory inexorably, its images rising and working their inevitable effect on her. Yet, to use her own metaphor, the pictures of her memory rose like “sculptures,” and there is no sculpture without sculptor.

Ironically, Wengeroff presenting her drive to write as inexorable betrays just how conscious and deliberate this act actually was, down to her recording the exact date and location of her thought-gathering, a kind of detail Wengeroff rarely provides. In all this, we glimpse a central feature of Wengeroff’s writing: the gap between an explicit story line and details she herself provides that subvert that same line. No minor gaps of fact, these disparities are more like detonations, though they lie so quietly in a dramatic and flowing narrative that we are apt not to notice them on first, or even second, reading. Wengeroff conceals in the act of revealing. Yet, she also reveals in the act of concealing. This dynamic is not the result of simple duplicity (if anything, it is duplicity of the complex sort, the first victim of it being Wengeroff herself), much less sloppiness or intellectual weakness. It arises because what Wengeroff is about is not simply *recall*, despite her own self-characterization as simply a “true chronicler,” but something quite different: *memory*—selective and crafted deliberately, if not consciously, with a purpose and a message.<sup>8</sup>

Despite her announced credential, Wengeroff was no “grandmother” in the usual sense of the term commonly preceded by “Jewish.” Her memoirs mention not a single biological grandchild (and she had quite a few), while her fury at her children—the four she mentions and the three she omits—the supposedly loving, or at the very least, attentive, audience for her memories (“the wish stirs in me to record for my children all that I lived through, as a remembrance of their mother”), burns hotly in her work. She omits all mention of the extraordinary accomplishments of several of her children; her ties to some very prominent

and wealthy in-laws; and not least, her acquaintance and correspondence with Theodor Herzl, founder of political Zionism.<sup>9</sup> Wengeroff lavishly details food preparation and meals in her childhood home—that is, she describes her mother’s table and food rituals—but with a few notable exceptions, says nothing about her own table when she was matron of her own hearth.

Wengeroff’s recorded memory was no impulsive response to a chance encounter but a calculated decision driven by complex motives. No grandmother spinning tales, Wengeroff bears the weight of her life and of an age in Jewish history in her narrative. It is only with an appreciation of these complexities, especially the existence of both story line and counter-narrative in her writing, that we can begin to understand her and, to cite Ginsburg once more, “one of the best works of Jewish memoir literature.”

### Who Was Pauline Wengeroff?

Ah, a woman’s life! (1:176)

Pauline Wengeroff was born Pessele Epstein in 1833, in Bobruisk, northern Belorussia (which she and Jews generally referred to as “Lithuania-lite”), in the Minsk district. She died in Minsk in 1916.<sup>10</sup> Wengeroff is known for her memoirs, which were recognized as a major historical source from the beginning and which scholars have cited as a source for a variety of subjects, from traditional Jewish customs and folklore to modern Jewish assimilation.<sup>11</sup> Her memoirs, however, have been largely excluded from treatments of modern Jewish memoir and autobiography and their place in the history of Jewish self-referential writing has not been reckoned.<sup>12</sup>

Wengeroff’s childhood home was wealthy, prominent, and very pious, though some of her family held what were at that time, culturally forward-looking views on certain subjects. Her father, Yehuda (Judah) Yudl Halevi Epstein (ca. 1800–d. Warsaw, 1879 or 1880), like his father, Simon Semel Epstein (d. Warsaw, 1856), manufactured bricks and was a supplier and contractor (*podraczlik*) to Nicholas I in some of the Tsar’s many road, canal, and fortress-building projects. Semel, “one of the great contractors in the region,” built his fortune in a major

fortress-building and provisioning project in Bobruisk in 1810, before being summoned to Warsaw, Wengeroff says, to “take charge of the great fortress construction there.”<sup>13</sup> In the 1840s, her grandfather built the “great road” connecting Brest-Litovsk and Bobruisk for the government, cutting the trip between the towns from two days to one, a shocking advance for that time.<sup>14</sup>

Around the time of Wengeroff’s birth, her family moved to Brest-Litovsk, which Jews called Brisk. Wengeroff links the move to her grandfather’s relocation to Warsaw; Yudl probably took over at least a part of Semel’s business in the Lithuanian region, though Semel did not withdraw from it altogether, since Wengeroff details his periodic visits to her family, undertaken she says, in the context of business trips. Father and son did business together: her father’s factory produced “many millions of bricks,” stamped with his initials, “J.E.,” for the fortress in Brisk that her grandfather was charged with building.<sup>15</sup> Brisk was considerably larger than Bobruisk and favorably situated at the confluence of the rivers Bug and Muchawiecz and the junction of commercial routes connecting Moscow, Warsaw, and Kiev (see the Map to this volume). It had been a major center of Jewish life for centuries under Polish rule and was home to prominent rabbinic figures of mitmagdic (anti-Hasidic) persuasion in Wengeroff’s time. The town was also the site of a smaller, Hasidic presence of the Chabad school.<sup>16</sup>

There were many rabbis and scholars in the Epstein line. According to a great-nephew, of two sons, Semel dedicated Yudl to Talmud study after an inspiring encounter during adjudication of a business dispute: the rabbinic judge refused to take payment for his services, saying that money only caused worry while Torah study brought inner peace. Yudl had shown a proclivity for such study, and Semel now resolved that this son should be a “nazarite” for Talmud. After some years of successful study, Semel presented Yudl to the same rabbinic judge for examination as “delayed payment.”<sup>17</sup> While already a married man and father of three, Wengeroff tells us (surely relating a family tradition, since this would have been prior to any recollection of hers, and probably prior to her birth), Yudl studied in the Volozhin yeshiva (talmudic academy), one of the most rigorous and prestigious of Europe, coming home only for holidays.<sup>18</sup> Typically, even accomplished Talmud students would, after some years, turn to business to support their families (the alternative, a

rabbinic post, especially in desirable locations, was limited), and such it seems was Yudl's path.<sup>19</sup> His business was a substantial success, allowing him to provide his family an extremely comfortable life, as Wengeroff's account of material circumstances in her home makes clear, from descriptions of her mother's jewelry and lavish dress by both parents; of rich family meals and furnishings; and of her house, which had several wings, a "parade balcony" and pillars, and which was home to a large, extended family and servants.

Yet Wengeroff consistently and insistently portrays her father as absorbed in study, prayer, and sacred ritual ("the chief purpose of his life"), with all else, and certainly monetary affairs, circumscribed to set hours and decidedly secondary. She provides many details that corroborate this assertion and the family lore about Yudl's proclivities.<sup>20</sup> His diligence in sacred study even while running a major business and more, after he retired, would result in several large, published works whose erudition (*bekint*) his great-nephew, Baruch ha-Levi Epstein, a renowned rabbinic scholar, notes.<sup>21</sup>

Oddly, Wengeroff gives us no background information whatever about her mother. Though she is a central, even a commanding, presence in *Memoirs*, Wengeroff never tells us even her first or last name, nor does she mention her place of origin or anything about her family, giving only some physical descriptions and psychological characterization. Her mother was "dressed magnificently" for the seder table, "young and pretty" around 1840, "her bearing modest and unassuming, yet self-assured. Her entire bearing, her eyes, expressed sincere, profound piety, calmness, and peace of mind."<sup>22</sup>

"I can still see her before me now," Wengeroff writes elsewhere,

how she stood there, lost in thought, with eyes closed and arms hanging down, how she removed all petty, worldly things, and recited the silent *shemone esre* prayer. Her lips barely moved but in her features lay her praying soul!<sup>23</sup>

From an autobiographical essay by Wengeroff's brother, Ephraim, we get the following:

My mother was blond, of quiet, unresisting, unpretentious nature and in every respect bodily and mentally different from my father [from whom Ephraim was estranged]. She married my father when

she was thirteen years of age, he being one year older.<sup>24</sup> [Ephraim too, omits her name.]

The ages of Wengeroff's parents at marriage are consistent with wealth. Only Jewish families of means could afford to marry off pubescent children, whose support for several years thereafter one of the families undertook in a traditional contractual arrangement called *kest*.<sup>25</sup> Several of Wengeroff's married sisters and their husbands and children lived with her parents in such an arrangement until the family's fortunes fell, and it was forced to move to a more modest dwelling; Wengeroff and her husband, too, would live in a *kest* arrangement for the first years of their marriage, though in the (less common) patrilineal setting. Such marriages, arranged by parents, usually through the agency of relatives or a paid professional, were typical for the rabbinic and business elite. Means and respectability, at a minimum, would have been required of any bride for Yudel Epstein, who possessed all the critical variables for a distinguished marriage match in traditional Jewish society: wealth and rabbinic *yikhus* (lineage), as well as his reputation for "learning." From Wengeroff's many descriptions of her mother's piety, we deduce that she came from a solidly religious, if not an eminent, rabbinic family (had there been such descent, we would have heard about it in some family source). We know that she read rabbinically authored, popular, but not simple, Yiddish-language ethical texts, as well as the Yiddish translation of and commentary to the Bible that was standard study material for pious women in eastern Europe.<sup>26</sup> In the parlance of traditional society, which Wengeroff uses about her own engagement, citing the type of match her future in-laws were seeking, her mother was surely considered a *bas tovim*, that is, daughter of a fine family, or as Wengeroff defines it, "a daughter of a learned and religious man."<sup>27</sup> From one of Yudel Epstein's books, we learn that his wife's first name—he, too, omits her family name—was Zelde (and that he remarried after her death). He says that she was "wise, righteous, and high born."<sup>28</sup> She died in her sixties, sometime after the Polish insurrection of 1862.<sup>29</sup>

Wengeroff contrasts her parents' personalities, saying that, "Father was sharp and strict where Mother was soft and fanciful,"<sup>30</sup> a contrast echoed in her brother's characterization, cited above. These assertions, however, particularly the description of the mother, do not accord with

the many vignettes Wengeroff tells about both parents, in which the father, though deeply pious, religiously stalwart, and forcefully opinionated, is shown having much greater cultural openness than his wife, as well as psychological insight and a sense of humor, while the mother emerges as religiously severe, tyrannical, with tendencies of the fanatic. It is no accident, I believe, that Wengeroff denies the plain meaning of her mother's imperious behavior, as Wengeroff herself presents this (she is after all, our sole source of information about her mother's behavior), preferring to assert other, "softer," aspects of her personality. Wengeroff too, was imperious. As for her brother's similar apologia, as we shall see, he was estranged from his father and very close to his mother.<sup>31</sup>

Wengeroff's omissions are very significant; indeed, I argue that they are key to understanding her memoirs. But we should not assume the seemingly obvious from the omission even of her mother's name: there is no trace in *Memoirs* of tension, much less alienation, between mother and daughter (we will not draw the same conclusion about Wengeroff's failure to mention several of her children). Wengeroff admired her mother to the point of awe, apparently naming a daughter Sinaida (Zinaida, born in 1867) after her.<sup>32</sup> Wengeroff's mother is a central figure in Volume One, which focuses on Wengeroff's childhood years, but she is a strong presence in Volume Two as well, looming as a model of pious fortitude and awesome (and much envied) parental authority, and cited as a figure of prescient wisdom. Understanding the role that Wengeroff depicts her mother and other women playing in the family and in the female religious culture of traditional Jewish society is central to understanding not only Wengeroff's childhood but her adulthood, worldview, and the core message of her memoirs. Traditional society, which formed Wengeroff's values, including those about gender, did not reckon lineage through the maternal line unless there was distinguished rabbinic descent, which would account in part, but I believe, only in part, for Wengeroff's omission of personal detail about her mother. Given what Wengeroff says about the effacement of women in Jewish modernity, it is precisely her mother's power and significance in the home and the importance of women's roles in traditional Jewish culture altogether, which I believe is largely responsible for Wengeroff's omission of personal detail about her. Her mother serves a larger, culturally symbolic purpose in the memoir.



Wengeroff's reticence about basic biographical detail is hardly confined to this relationship, however. Although she criticizes her father's failure to provide names and dates of family members in his books, she herself fails to do this. She never tells us her own birth year (though she gives information from which it can be deduced; that is, she neither fabricates a date, nor obscures facts from which it can be computed).<sup>33</sup> Nor does she provide a comprehensive, systematic reckoning of her siblings—how many she had, their names, or birth order. As we shall see, this gap conceals a glaring contradiction, and I believe, a cover up. Knowledge of Wengeroff's siblings comes from vignettes with which she illustrates a point in Jewish culture or history and from personal details she mentions in passing. Readers interested in the most basic family information must comb through her entire narrative to reconstruct what we might expect to find front and center in memoirs of a grandmother. A few other family sources help—and muddy the waters further.

Wengeroff frequently mentions sisters, referring to "older" ones: Cecilie, Eva, Kathy, Marie, and to "my youngest sister," Helene. However, we also get "older" sisters with Yiddish names—Khashe Feige, Khenye Malke, Khaveleben. These are surely identical to some of those named above, referenced by their Jewish names, just as Wengeroff refers to herself, when recalling childhood and family dialogue, as Pessele. Wengeroff herself, however, never makes this clear.<sup>34</sup>

There was also, as we have noted, a brother Ephraim to whom she refers as "my older brother" several other times, also mentioning an "older" or "eldest" brother, meaning of course, that there was a younger one or ones.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, there is a single, passing reference in Volume Two of *Memoirs* to a younger brother, eight years old at the time of Wengeroff's marriage (in 1850), thus, about ten years her junior.<sup>36</sup> Yet she pointedly notes that Ephraim was "the only son in the house," who as such, was called "the kaddish": the child in families with only one son who would recite the memorial prayer for parents in the synagogue, a public act devolving only on males.<sup>37</sup>

Their father, she says, saw in Ephraim "a successor to his Jewish national conviction" (late nineteenth-century, secularized terminology that is surely her construction, not his) and introduced him to the Pentateuch, Prophets, and then Talmud. In his autobiographical essay,

Ephraim relates that he began school at the age of four for basic studies (Hebrew alphabet and prayers), which was typical, traditional practice for boys; that he had private tutors in Bible and Talmud; and that he pursued the study of Russian and German “by stealth,” a common expedient for boys seeking “enlightenment” in the 1840s.<sup>38</sup> A precocious student, “visionary” soul, and jolly prankster, Ephraim was spoiled by both parents and all his siblings, Wengeroff says. Both she and Ephraim relate that he chanted the weekly Prophetic portion in the synagogue, according to him, well before the age of *bar mitzvah*, supporting her depiction of him as the family’s precocious, precious son. Both say that he was particularly close to his mother, an assertion borne out by a powerful vignette Wengeroff relates in Volume Two from Ephraim’s adult years.<sup>39</sup> Both also state, he with vehemence, that he was estranged from his father.

Reconstructing from the references in Wengeroff, the family had eight children, six daughters and two sons, with Wengeroff somewhere in the middle. In his essay, however, Ephraim (who had a medical degree), states flatly that their mother “gave birth to eleven children, three sons and eight daughters,” only two of whom he insists (in an essay ostensibly about longevity in his family, written from a quasi-medical perspective), a daughter and a son, died in childhood. Thus, according to him, there were nine, not eight, children who survived childhood. Ephraim says he was the fifth child and gives information that would date his birth year as 1829, making him Wengeroff’s elder by several years, according with her characterization of him as her elder brother.<sup>40</sup>

It is bizarre, of course, that a brother and sister who grew up under the same roof would give different accounts of the number and gender of their siblings. How, in particular, to account for Wengeroff’s pointed recollection that Ephraim was the family’s “kaddish,” against his bland report that there was another brother who lived to adulthood and even married? (Significantly, Ephraim does not refer to himself as the family’s “kaddish.”) And what to make of Wengeroff’s own slipped-in statement that there was a younger brother?

I cannot account definitively for these disparities and contradictions. I will conjecture that the younger brother that she mentions died in childhood (in line with Ephraim’s account), an event Wengeroff does not recount because it happened after she married and left her parents’

house, putting it outside her experience and observation. I will also conjecture that prior to this, another, older brother, closer to Ephraim in age, came to an ignoble end—converted—which for a rigorously traditional family like Wengeroff's, effectively would have meant his death, observed with all the mourning rites save burial—converts being excised from all contact with the family. Such a “death” Wengeroff would have experienced but not reported, for it would have given the lie to one of her central claims: that Tradition reigned supreme in her parental home and the society of her childhood (as we shall see, she gives the lie to this claim many times, but never explicitly). A converted older son would account for Wengeroff insisting that Ephraim was the family's “kaddish” because the youngest brother would not yet have been born in the years Wengeroff describes in Volume One (1836 or so through about 1841).

The conversion of an older son (and the death of a young one) would have lent particular urgency to Ephraim's continuing his father's religious legacy, accounting for Wengeroff's characterization, cited above. It would also account for the pressure the family exerted to have Ephraim marry a cousin he did not wish to wed, done as both she and Ephraim report, because Semel Epstein did not want the family's fortune dissipated by Ephraim marrying outside the family (a converted son would have been disinherited; daughters would be dowered—meaning a loss of fortune to the family—but would not inherit, leaving Ephraim the sole heir). As Wengeroff relates in Volume Two, the family's coercion of his marriage and his unhappy home life led Ephraim to emigrate to America, where he converted to Christianity for a time, according to her; in fact, permanently.<sup>41</sup>

The obvious question is why family facts do not matter to Wengeroff, or more precisely, why she neither systematizes nor fleshes out the details in a family chronicle, nor excludes them altogether and just writes an account of her times.

### What Sort of Memoirs Are These?

A good part of the answer lies in their full title: *Memoirs of a Grandmother: Scenes from the Cultural History of the Jews of Russia in the Nineteenth Century*. In her memoirs, Wengeroff uses her life as a

prism to refract a tumultuous age in Jewish history, and her telling of her era, to make sense of (and I argue, justify and exonerate) her life. Wengeroff's life straddled the boundaries of a largely undisturbed traditionalism in the first half of the nineteenth century and precipitous modernization in the second. Using personal experience, she testifies to both realities and to the road leading between them; first, by painting a rich portrait of the traditional Jewish culture she knew as a child and then, by rendering an anguished, angry tale of radical assimilation in the small but conspicuous group of upwardly mobile Russian Jews of which she had become a member as an adult.

Wengeroff's first volume focuses on traditional Jewish society in Lithuania in the 1830s and 1840s, including a rich ritual world of women, and on the first inroads of modernity as the Russian Jewish enlightenment movement, the *haskalah*, began to coalesce. She illustrates traditionalism by taking the reader through a year's cycle of Jewish festivals and observances as lived by her family. She gives important insight into the ways that deep cultural change occurs by showing the reactions of various family members to the first organized expressions of *haskalah* to reach Brisk and the conflict this set off among them. In her second volume, Wengeroff gives a graphic account of the unraveling of traditional society from the 1840s till the early 1890s, focusing on the dissolution of tradition in her family and its circle and on the devastating impact this disintegration had on women—on her, but also she insists, on Jewish women as a whole. The coupling of the personal and societal in Wengeroff's writing is intrinsic and systematic and, I believe, the most fundamental among a number of reasons for her writing. Wengeroff at times cannot resist including personal details or criticisms and grievances that do not illuminate social reality—her grandmother-in-law had whiskers; her step-mother-in-law was critical and domineering. But *Memoirs*—while also achieving other goals—to a remarkable degree does what Wengeroff promises in its full title: tell cultural history through the life of a grandmother, writing the personal as political.

Because the personal is female in Wengeroff's case, her assertion of microcosm-macrocosm about her life and that of the Jews in modernity is remarkable and unprecedented in the history of Jewish literature. Wengeroff does not, after all, claim to write a "cultural history of Jewish

women in the nineteenth century”—an unimaginable focus, certainly for anyone who wished to be published—but a cultural history of *the Jews*. Yet she does this through the lens of female experience. In writing this way, Wengeroff fits neither of the now-classic categories that Elaine Showalter discerned in English women novelists for the years in which Wengeroff lived and wrote: “feminine” (1849–1880, during which women “wrote . . . to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture and internalized its assumptions about female nature”) or “feminist” (1880–1920, during which women writers “reject the accommodating postures of femininity and . . . use literature to dramatize the ordeals of wronged womanhood”)—that is, protest traditional women’s roles and limitations in patriarchal culture. Wengeroff certainly “dramatizes the ordeals of wronged womanhood” in Jewish modernity but hardly in a feminist voice. If anything, Wengeroff’s writing best fits a form of women’s writing that Showalter dates as emerging after Wengeroff’s death—“female,” dating since 1920, in which women “reject both imitation and protest—two forms of dependency—and turn instead to female experience as the source of autonomous art.”<sup>42</sup>

Wengeroff, indeed, writes from a fiercely female perch as a woman about women and female experience. The sheer quantity of information she gives us about women in traditional and modernizing Jewish societies itself makes *Memoirs* a historical treasure. Her first volume affords rare insight into girls’ games and pranks; their religious and secular education; their religious socialization at home and in society; and their experience of and reactions to arranged marriage. The last is a central, excoriated theme in the famous autobiographies of the *maskilim* (practitioners of the *haskalah*), but the narration there is exclusively from the male perspective. In Wengeroff, we view that of brides—an older sister and Wengeroff herself. Her second volume gives readers a window into girls’ acculturation and women’s experience of modernization during the era of the Russian Jewish enlightenment, treated by the *maskilim* exclusively, and by scholars nearly so, from the perspective of men and male experience.<sup>43</sup>

In all this, Wengeroff’s memoirs are in stark contrast to those of Glikl Hameln (1646–1724), the only possible precedent of a Jewish female memoirist Wengeroff could have had. Glikl’s memoirs were published for the first time two years before Wengeroff claims to have sat

down on her bench.<sup>44</sup> Wengeroff never mentions them (another of her notable omissions), but it is inconceivable that she, who was highly literate and attuned to the culture of German-speaking Jewry in particular, did not know of them or was uninfluenced by the fact of their publication, or as I believe, their content. Glikl's memoirs are a rich source of information about the economic activities of the Jewish merchant (upper) class in central Europe in her time; about the nexus between economics and family ties in this class; and about the education, piety, and economic and family roles of women in this group. This is not however, because Glikl writes for this purpose. Readers must seek external sources to even identify the Court Jews, including women, that populate Glikl's account, much less grasp their economic significance, or Glikl's. Glikl does not write from the perspective of women. Of *a* woman, yes, but purely an individual, and a private one, at that.

Wengeroff's perspective is fundamentally different. Her memoirs not only record women's experience (or to be sure, her representation of this). They make it central to the tale of emerging Jewish modernity and to grasping what Wengeroff portrays as the fundamental tragedy of modern Jewish history: the loss of traditional Jewish culture. This catastrophe, she asserts, illustrating with the tragedies of her life, was a consequence of women's loss of power in the Jewish family and thereby, in Jewish culture, a loss brought about by the arrogance and shortsightedness of modernizing Jewish men. Her narrative, then, is both woman-centered and gendered, telling us about culturally based relations between men and women in traditional and modernizing Jewish societies, and giving a particularly stark reading of the role of gender in shaping a different experience of Jewish modernity for women and men.

### *Naïve Women-Centeredness*

Wengeroff writes from a woman-centered perspective naively and unself-consciously, not as a feminist, that is, someone aware and critical of constructed power relationships between women and men in family, society, and culture that privilege men and subordinate women.<sup>45</sup> Movements for women's rights existed in Russia in Wengeroff's time, and she was well aware of them. Her daughter Zinaida was a promi-

nent Symbolist literary figure of the turn of the century and an avowed feminist who wrote about women's rights, expressed radical critiques of marriage, and lived in a *ménage à trois*. Another daughter (Faina, omitted from *Memoirs*) attended medical school for a time, one of the first women in Russia to do so, and "planned to go into the country upon graduation to teach peasant women how not to be slaves." A third daughter, Isabelle, had an abortion at the age of sixteen, an act associated with feminist radicalism at the time.<sup>46</sup> As we shall see in Volume Two, Wengeroff mentions the Russian feminist movement of the fin de siècle in what I am convinced is a deliberate allusion (and retort) to Zinaida's and Faina's involvement.<sup>47</sup> She does not cite this movement's tenets as a reference for her own thinking or work, much less situate herself in its ranks. Nor does Wengeroff cite another potential model for Jewish women's literary assertiveness: scholars have documented the existence of some thirty *maskilot*—women writers who advocated maskilic ideas and composed letters, essays, poetry, and fiction in Hebrew. Some of these women were published. Some were influenced by Russian feminism, decried the traditional status of Jewish women, and criticized rabbinic culture on that account—something Wengeroff never does. We cannot say for certain that Wengeroff knew even of those of the *maskilot* who were published, but this is at least a possibility. Avraham Mapu, creator of the modern Hebrew novel and a major figure in the *haskalah*—as Wengeroff notes in some detail, citing his main works and their literary significance—tutored Wengeroff's son Semyon in German and Russian and "often" spent time in their home, for a "cozy little chat" and in conversation with her husband.<sup>48</sup> Mapu corresponded with one of the *maskilot*, Devorah Ephrati, whose Hebrew letter to him was published in the Hebrew journal *Hamagid* in 1858—around the time that Mapu would have tutored Semyon.<sup>49</sup> Thus, it is quite possible that Wengeroff could have associated herself with these women writers, had she felt that her work and theirs shared an essential affinity.

Wengeroff writes from a woman's perspective because this is what she knew, because her consciousness was forged in a traditional female culture of formidable potency from which, as I argue below, she never separated. Born of this experience, Wengeroff has a naive conviction of women's cultural importance. She expresses that conviction in a central

way in *Memoirs*, by locating women's sphere—the family—and women's experience, as the sites of radical cultural change, making these the epicenter of the upheaval that undid traditional Jewish society. This is in sharp contrast to the autobiographical writing of the *maskilim*, her contemporaries, who for all their focus on, and critique of, the traditional Jewish family make the intellectual struggle between science and rationalism against traditional obscurantism and fanaticism—the battle for “enlightenment”—the site of cultural change. Wengeroff's position is one that family and social historians readily take today but that was unprecedented in Jewish writing of her time, or until quite recently, ours.

Even if Wengeroff had not told the story of Jewish modernity through gender and women's experience, but written a memoir of women's social and religious realities, this would have been remarkable, for writing normatively of human experience from the perspective of one of its genders has, until quite recently, been the exclusive prerogative of males. Writing at all—recording for transmission one's version of reality—is an elemental act of power, which for most of history women have been denied. The traditional Jewish culture out of which Wengeroff emerged, obsessed with texts and scholarship, made learning imperative for males and the culture's highest ideal, but tolerated for females only the literacy necessary for compliance with religious behavioral norms and an accompanying, appropriate piety.<sup>50</sup> The *haskalah* sharply criticized the neglect of female education in traditional Jewish culture and advocated a certain level and kind of education for women, but it overwhelmingly saw women as consumers, not producers, of “enlightened” culture. To the *maskilim*, women were a “lower” population in need of cultural elevation, just as Jews in general, in this type of colonialist thinking shared by European and Russian statesmen and *maskilim*, were a “lower” population in need of “betterment.” The *maskilim*, who created a cascade of writing in several genres, were heirs to a vast tradition of male writing. Many of them had been groomed for the rabbinate, the height of literacy. The issue between them and the traditional authorities against whom they rebelled, was which men would control culture. That men did so was a given. As Iris Parush puts it, the *maskil's* “ideal of the modern, well-ordered society was one in which the enlightened and educated man would have unchallenged authority.”<sup>51</sup>