

Introduction

Women do not write books about men.

Why are women . . . so much more interesting to men than men are to women?

—Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

It is doubtful that Pauline Wengeroff would have thought of her *Memoirs of a Grandmother* as a book “about men,” but that is certainly one way to read it. It is the first work in the history of Jewish literature to make men the subjects of a tale, of inquiry—that is, not the generic (Jewish) human, whose experience is presumed universal, but a specific case whose behavior was particular and different from that of women. Doing so necessarily makes women a focus of the work as well, a rare if not singular occurrence in Jewish literature. Wengeroff’s contemporaries, the *maskilim* (the Jewish enlighteners), certainly wrote about women, descriptively and didactically, if also misogynistically.¹ In Wengeroff’s writing, however, women are not Other to a male norm but simply and self-evidently, the other variant of “Jew.”

Like the *maskilim*, Wengeroff, too, writes didactically, though with a far less obvious purpose than they. She also writes with no model I can discern, in contrast to the *maskilim*, who patterned their memoirs consciously on those of Solomon Maimon and Jean-Jacques Rousseau and who had millennia of elite, male Jewish expression as precedent.² As her subtitle declares, Wengeroff wrote a “cultural history of the Jews of Russia in the nineteenth century”—an unheard of project for a woman, whose scope and audacity are also unprecedented in the history of Jewish literature. The seventeenth century memoirs of Glikl Hamel, the only comparable extant work by a Jewish woman, have no such intended purpose.³ Wengeroff refracts the history of her time and place through the experience of women, men, and families as she lived and perceived this, crafting, I argue, a deliberate tale from powerful subjective needs and for pressing, indeed, I would say urgent, subjective purposes.

2 Introduction

To write of men as subjects requires standing outside of male experience and stripping it of its assumed normativeness. This Wengeroff does, not from a feminist stance, that is, from a position fundamentally critical of unequal power relationships between men and women and of women's subordination to men in matters of family, property, culture, and religion. Rather, Wengeroff's female positioning is naive—without theory or ideology. It flows, precisely, from her uninterrogated socialization and experience—first, as a girl and adolescent in traditional Jewish culture, in which women exercised extensive and significant power in the hierarchically inferior sphere assigned them, and then from her experience as an adult undergoing what she considers unjust and catastrophic contraction of women's domestic function and authority. This contraction was catastrophic for her personally but even more so, she asserts, for Jewish culture.

Wengeroff's naïveté is not the result of ignorance of contemporaneous feminism, robust versions of which existed in Russia in her lifetime and about which she was quite aware from the involvement of two daughters, if nothing else; to which, I argue, she gives oblique yet clear retort in her second volume.⁴ Rather, her position, which I infer from several comments in that volume but which is the upshot of her whole presentation of traditional women's world in her first volume, is that the power of traditional women was right for women and for Jewish society.⁵ This is not the entirety of Wengeroff's position about all this; she is also a clear advocate and practitioner herself of the cultural goals of (moderate) *haskalah*, and no simple apologist for "tradition," female or otherwise. But her woman-centered naïveté about what we would call a gender analysis is a core aspect of her worldview, and it is this that allowed her perception of Jewish men and women in their gendered specificity.⁶

Wengeroff's second volume is both a sequel to her first—her final line in Volume One is clearly a segue to a subsequent work, which, archival evidence makes clear, was well underway when she published Volume One—and a pronouncement in its own right about Jewish modernity and its losses.⁷ Together, the two form a magisterial statement about the transition from traditional to modern in Jewish society, evoking traditional culture, historical forces that overwhelmed it, and the historical tragedy that ensued. They describe folly and hubris and, despite a focus on loss, also assert some significant hope.

It is common in the relatively meager writing about Wengeroff thus far to characterize and dismiss her simply as an apologist for tradition, but that is a distortion. Her position is anything but simple. To be sure, Wengeroff reveres many, though not all, of the values and practices of traditional Jewish society.⁸ Above all, she reveres the perception that all its adherents—men, women, and children; sages and servants—knew and upheld their respective places in a greater system in which God and God’s revealed Will—not personal ego and ambition, wealth, or material things—ruled. In this system all were subjects, if justly unequal ones, in a timeless structure that offered function, meaning, and ultimately, redemption. Crucially, in her presentation, traditional Jewish society offered everyone shared values and complementary roles. All encompassed within it knew that everyone else could be relied on to perform their assigned roles, an awareness that offered stability, predictability, and interconnectedness, which was a potent preventative for the modern malady of anomie.

Wengeroff calls this system “patriarchal,” repeatedly evoking its supposed peace and orderliness (“*Ruhe*”), as opposed to the narcissistic chaos and meaningless ruminations of her children’s generation, which she excoriates in both volumes of *Memoirs*. Wengeroff is nostalgic about tradition because she lived its benefits and its loss. That loss was written into her flesh, in the defection of her children from that which was most dear to her and in the betrayal of a beloved husband who rode roughshod over her most precious sensibilities, including her expectation that he be her “friend.”

Wengeroff’s volumes are chronological. The first reflects events and culture in the late 1830s and the 1840s (she was born in 1833 and records memories from about the age of three). The second reflects on developments from 1848, when she became engaged, through 1892 and the death of her husband, Chonon. Volume One is set during the reign of Nicholas I (1825–55), under whose rule and because of whose policies, *haskalah*—Jewish enlightenment—took off as a movement, becoming a contender for cultural influence in Jewish society.⁹ It evokes traditional Jewish culture as lived by her family in loving, if not completely uncritical, detail, including an unprecedented focus on the religious behavior and spiritual practices and outlook of women. And it provides a participant-observer’s perspective on the beginnings of the

4 Introduction

unraveling of that culture under the impact of *haskalah* and Nicholas's Jewry policies.

Wengeroff's second volume is set in the rule of Alexander II (1855–81), which began with significant reforms that appeared nearly messianic to Jews. (“Let there be light!” Wengeroff writes of Alexander's ascent to the throne, appropriating God's words about Creation.) One of the new tsar's first acts was to abolish the detested cantonist system of military draft, which had engendered horrific abuses in Jewish society—the kidnapping of boys as young as five and six for near-certain death in, effectively, lifelong service, or if they survived physically, targeted conversion. (Alexander II also emancipated the serfs; as Wengeroff notes, approvingly he was a liberator.) Under him, a new policy, which one scholar has termed “selective integration,” also took effect.¹⁰ This policy offered select groups of Jews—wealthy merchants, graduates of Russian higher education, army veterans, certain artisans—permission to live, or in the latter case, at least work, outside the Pale of Settlement, Russia's western provinces between the Baltic and Black seas to which Jewish residence and economic opportunity were confined, an increasingly suffocating restriction (see the Map in this volume).

Wengeroff came of age as an adult—when she married in 1850—under the rule of Alexander, in the initial “liberal” phase of his reign. Her husband, Chonon (Afanasy) Wengeroff, came from a family of wealthy Lubavitch Hasidim, who held a government-issued concession for the sale of liquor. Her family and his shared economic status and a close relationship to the government: Wengeroff's father and paternal grandfather were building subcontractors for Nicholas I. Culturally, her marriage was “mixed”: she came from a family of Lithuanian *misnagdim*, literally, “opponents” of Hasidism, and Wengeroff had much to learn as a bride about the customs of her husband and in-laws, something she did readily and with notable sympathy. Her marriage was patrilocal, also not the norm in Jewish society—her older sisters' marriages were all matrilineal. She went to live with her new husband and his family in Konotop, a small town in Ukraine, leaving behind the larger and culturally more advanced Brest-Litovsk (Brisk, in Jewish parlance), her parents, siblings, and her childhood (see Map in this volume).

Chonon, ostensibly religiously fervent when they married—Wengeroff's father had tested his Talmudic knowledge before conclud-

ing the engagement formalities and found him well fit, as he did the religious solidity of Chonon's family—soon went on a pilgrimage to his rebbe, as Hasidic custom dictates for males, and lost his faith there. He never spoke of what happened, Wengeroff notes, with clear regret. In any case, Chonon returned altered, his faith shattered. Although he maintained his religious practice, for a time at least, it was now perfunctory where once it had been fervent, something the discerning eyes of a loving wife, as Wengeroff puts it, sensed immediately. And then one day, Chonon appeared with his traditional, untrimmed beard trimmed—clear indication that he had crossed to a European aesthetic and cultural orientation.

In fact, Chonon's loss of faith was far more complicated and occurred in other physical and cultural venues and points in time than this depiction conveys. According to Wengeroff's explicit testimony as well as from hints in *Memoirs*, Chonon had dallied with western ideas and probably with *maskilic* texts before their marriage. Indeed, we wonder if his desire to see the rebbe was prompted by a desire to squelch doubt as much as by Hasidic fervor, the two impulses feeding one another. If Chonon sought definitive resolution of his conflict at the rebbe's, he certainly achieved it, though hardly in the direction he had sought, consciously at least, or which his parents or Wengeroff would have wished.¹¹

Religion was no longer the shared patrimony of the new couple, as it had been in Wengeroff's depiction of her parents' marriage, but the subject of fundamental and intractable conflict. It would remain so for fifteen years, during which Chonon not only left Jewish practice but pressured Wengeroff to abandon her own, and she resisted. Children were born—Wengeroff mentions four in *Memoirs* but the couple actually had seven—but Chonon, in concert, she asserts, with Jewish men as a whole, claimed that “the children need no religion!” This, she insists, against the ardent desire—and ability—of women (as opposed to men), to impart both Judaism and European culture to the children. Despite mouthing “in society” the ideals of the French Revolution—“freedom, equality, and brotherhood”—Chonon and Jewish men of the age behaved as “the greatest despots” at home, to their wives, she claims. They imposed their abandonment of tradition onto the new generation, depriving them of Jewish knowledge and memory; producing a generation which, unlike its fathers and mothers, had no remembered

traditions to fall back on for values in daily living or for strength and resolve when times turned bad.

One of the most extraordinary and significant features of Wengeroff's writing is her insistence that what happened in her marriage was occurring in Russian Jewish society at large, with women wedded to tradition and capable of and wishing to transmit it, along with European culture, and men incapable of such moderation. She is adamant that for women it was both; that she, and Jewish women generally, were not obscurantists, simply resisting modernity. Wengeroff's claim of microcosm-macrocosm makes her experience not just personal but historical—and it asserts a gender binary at the heart of modern Jewish cultural and religious experience. In Wengeroff's telling, what Chonon, and Russian Jewish men as a whole did, caused a catastrophic loss of Jewish tradition and created a generation of cultural orphans.

Their actions also caused a profound and radical shift in power relations between Jewish women and men in modernity, to the detriment of women. Wengeroff does not state this explicitly but it is the clear implication of her writing: men imposing their loss of faith onto the home meant the obliteration of the traditional sphere of women's control and creativity—"the supplanting of the numinous world," that Wengeroff so richly depicts in Volume One.¹² Wengeroff had been socialized from earliest childhood to inherit this sphere as an adult—as a wife—and yearned to do so.

We know that she aspired to this role from her description of herself toward the end of Volume One when she had become the oldest unmarried daughter in the household and, despite the presence of servants, was charged with Sabbath eve preparations, including many tasks particularly important to her father, like washing and ironing his handkerchiefs and collars, making the Sabbath evening fish just as he liked it, and setting up his silver goblet for his recitation of the kiddush, the sanctification of the day over wine, at the table. Clearly, these labors were not just instrumental. Wengeroff was being primed to assume the role of traditional wife. Describing the customary "beautiful" chanting of the "Woman of Valor" poem (*eysles kbayil*; Prov. 31: 10–31) by her father and the other males in the home on Friday night, Wengeroff states, "I was a girl in my teens in those days and at the singing of this song . . . I used to swell with pride and I resolved to become worthy myself of this praise."¹³

This sphere and the control and power that went with it—Wengeroff’s model was her ferociously punctilious and dominating mother, depiction of whose behavior forms a central part of Volume One—was what Wengeroff lost with the end of traditional observance. This is what all Jewish women lost, as Wengeroff makes clear in many barbs in Volume Two and in scathing depictions of the Sabbath and Passover in assimilating Jewish homes in Kovno and St. Petersburg, respectively, in which she compares traditional observance to the farcical sacrilege that had replaced it and notes the gendered difference in the behavior of suffering wives, wedded to tradition, and crude, transgressing husbands.

In addition to the forced loss of religious roles and authority, Wengeroff states that Chonon, and again at least a class of Jewish men (here, she specifies that it was contractors of the government liquor concession—the profession of her in-laws), also adopted a peculiarly modern, middle-class family innovation: the domestication of women. In this new pattern, women were removed from income-producing labor and made adornments of the bourgeois home, testifying to the husband’s earning ability, since only successful men earning well beyond subsistence could afford to dispense with the earnings of the family’s women. Chonon enacted this innovation, too, in their marriage, also very much against Wengeroff’s wishes and her conviction that she had better business sense than he (he lost her entire dowry in a failed venture). Hers is the only account I know by a Jewish woman undergoing “domestication” and putting this in the context of the whole panoply of innovations that was modernity—another singular aspect of Wengeroff’s writing.¹⁴

It is important to stress that Wengeroff’s assertions, however globally and dramatically she phrases them, cannot be taken as representative for Russian Jewish society. They hardly encompass what we know about gender and modernization there, or elsewhere. Indeed, we hear, often, from women who became active in the Zionist and Bundist (Jewish socialist) movements (albeit, from people several generations younger than Wengeroff, coming of age in the late nineteenth or at the turn of the twentieth century) that it was women in particular who chafed at traditional society and rebelled against its limits on women. It was to counter the perceived widespread defection of girls and women from Judaism that Sarah Schenirer founded the Bais Ya’akov school system

for girls in Krakow, Poland, in 1917, to offer them a formal, traditional education; for this path-breaking enterprise, she received authoritative rabbinic support because of a widespread perception of female defection from Judaism.¹⁵

Puah Rakovsky (1865–1955) comes readily to mind in this regard, as well: forced into an arranged, unhappy marriage, straining to realize her intellectual and professional potential against the constraints of traditional society, Rakovsky rebelled, threatening to convert herself and her children if she were not granted a Jewish divorce. She got her divorce, and became a Jewish educator, pioneer in Palestine, and activist in the Zionist movement. Earlier in Jewish history, the salon Jewish women of turn-of-the-nineteenth-century Berlin rejected traditional Judaism, many converting and marrying non-Jews, explicitly because they found Judaism meaningless and the position of women within it, in particular, oppressive and intolerable.¹⁶ No matter how small their numbers, the case of the salon women looms large in its forthright articulation of women's particular alienation from traditional Judaism.

Wengeroff's assertions must be evaluated against what we know of her class and social circle. They are neither to be accepted wholesale nor dismissed; I find Wengeroff a reliable reporter who omits and "spins," but does not invent. However, she was born and inured to privilege, with a particular, bourgeois outlook that affects what she sees and misses and how she interprets.¹⁷ What she asserts about gender and tradition in modernizing Russian Jewry merits systematic study.

Wengeroff and Chonon moved a great deal within and even outside the Pale of Settlement as they—significantly, she uses the plural in referring to their first business venture, a liquor concession—sought to establish themselves. Their first move was to Luben (Lubny), in Ukraine, about four years after their marriage (1854), when their period of *kest* (support by one set of parents while the husband is to study Talmud) at Chonon's parents' home came to an end. From her account, it would seem that strife between Chonon and his parents over his lapsed observance may also have played a role in the couple going out on its own.

In the next fifteen years, they and their children moved repeatedly—Wengeroff calls it her "wandering ballad"—from Konotop to Luben (1854), to Kovno (1859), to Vilna (1863 or 1864), to Helsingfors [Helsinki, Finland] (1866), to St. Petersburg (ca. 1868), to Minsk (1871) (see

Map in this volume), where Chonon finally “made it” as deputy director of a commercial bank. (Wengeroff does not date their moves; with some significant exceptions, she is uninterested in such factual details. This is my reconstruction, based on references in *Memoirs*.) For each place, Wengeroff provides a running description of the battle between tradition and modernity raging in Jewish society and, she says, in Jewish marriages, her own and those of others.

It is in this context that she writes her accounts of the parody of Jewish tradition that Sabbath and Passover observance had become in assimilating Jewish homes and of the pain of Jewish women seeing all that they (she) held sacred being violated: men lighting cigarettes with Sabbath candles; Passover traditions that had transported her father to ecstasy and tears, now no more than symbols, mnemonics of traditional childhoods to which the men still had some sentimental attachment. In these circles, the Passover seder, subject of a lengthy, reverential account in her first volume, had become “a genial supper with a few oddities, more than that, though, not” (see Chapter 14).

Chonon maintained his pressure on Wengeroff to relinquish traditional observance, her marriage wig, for instance, and she resisted even when the women around her had given up theirs. She kept a kosher home even when the family lived in a fortress in Helsinki, where the only other Jews were former cantonists and obtaining kosher food was very difficult.

Matters came to a head in St. Petersburg. The capital city, outside the Pale, had been closed to Jews until “selective integration” allowed in an upper crust of wealthy financiers and entrepreneurs, including Wengeroff’s cousin and brother-in-law, Avraam Zak (spelled Sack in *Memoirs*). One of Zak’s contacts—he worked for the wealthiest Jewish plutocrats of the city, Evzel Ginzburg—got Chonon a position there. Here, Wengeroff finally broke under Chonon’s pressure, which included ridicule; sarcasm that, in her words, “could have poisoned three lives, not just one!” He demanded that she relinquish kashruth—the ritual diet, with its prescribed and prohibited foods and strict separation of meat and milk dishes and utensils—the job par excellence of the traditional Jewish wife to oversee and maintain. The children, Wengeroff writes, “children of their age,” sided with their father: Judaism was but a battleground between their parents, not a credible religious or cultural option.

Perhaps, I speculate, their frequent moves prevented Wengeroff from having stable friendships that might have supported her in her proclivities and ability to resist—the more remarkable that she did so anyway for fifteen years. Alone and isolated in her stance within her family, far from her parents, worn down by Chonon's relentless pressure, and in a larger environment that proclaimed traditional Jewish behavior obsolete, irrelevant, and absurd—Petersburg, unlike Vilna, had no established community to inhibit the rush to sacrilege or uphold the credibility of a traditional option—she broke, at Passover time.¹⁸

Wengeroff gave up kashruth—insisting on, however, and winning Chonon's agreement to one week a year of complete, traditional observance: Passover. But, no matter how complete the observance that week, its nature had been transformed fundamentally. Observance had become a symbol, an artifact, a cultural curiosity no less than the seders in other assimilating homes she so excoriates. A sacred canopy, to cite Peter Berger, might have been hoisted over the Wengeroff household for a week, but its fabric was rent.

During the trauma of giving up kashruth, Wengeroff recorded her grief and despair in a diary. Such writing is testimony to her isolation and loneliness—and to her proclivities: she was a natural writer; writing, her outlet.¹⁹ Wengeroff retained these entries and later embedded them in *Memoirs*: she was a historian, too. This we see clearly throughout *Memoirs*, with its rich recording of folk practices, sayings, and songs, and of personal vignettes from her family and the families of others that illuminate the cultural moment—the interplay of microcosm and macrocosm that is one of the most significant contributions of *Memoirs*.

In her diary writing about the loss of kashruth, Wengeroff expresses the betrayal she felt in Chonon's inability to understand and respect her attachment to all she knew from childhood and had been reared to uphold as a Jewish wife. That she felt *betrayed* testifies to the companionate nature of the relationship she expected to have with Chonon despite their marriage having been arranged, to the emotional intimacy she says the two of them in fact enjoyed, including romantic feelings, from their first meeting at their engagement through the early years of the marriage, and later. Indeed, despite strife, love clearly persisted, as Wengeroff's distraught account of Chonon's death, with which she

abruptly closes *Memoirs*, attests. There, she says she had come to understand the Indian custom of *sutee*, in which a widow is immolated on the bier of her husband.

But now, Wengeroff's distraught diary entry records, all Chonon could see in her behavior, was obstinacy; not principles, fealty to her parents, nor beloved traditions. She, a traditional wife, child of a proud Jewish home, was an embarrassment to him; in the rarified atmosphere of Jewish St. Petersburg, a perceived impediment to his drive to achieve acceptance in the circles, I argue, of aspiring, ambitious Jews there. For, it is clear to me that Chonon's secularizing behavior was not oriented primarily to non-Jewish society but to assimilating *Jewish* society—its norms those he felt it imperative finally and fully to adopt.

The nadir of Wengeroff's life came with the conversion of her two sons when they were faced with anti-Jewish educational and professional discrimination. Without condoning their actions, Wengeroff, typically for her, historicizes them—putting them not only in the context of the discrimination of the time but in the generation's lack of meaningful Jewish education or experience. Let the greatest *tsaddik*, she cries, come and challenge this youth, raised as they were, to forego all the opportunity they are capable of realizing in the name of a Jewish tradition meaningless to them and to live in a Jewish backwater in the Pale. She could not! The conversion of her sons was the greatest tragedy of her life, she writes, though—characteristically—it quickly took on for her the aspect of the national tragedy it was, the best of Jewish youth lost to its people.

Chonon, she records, was devastated and said to the first of their sons to convert that it was unseemly to abandon the camp of the vanquished. The wording betrayed his own dim estimation of the possibility of a Jewish future and his perception of Jewish identity as ethnic, not religious.

Chonon eventually found solace in Jewish philanthropy in Minsk, where the couple lived for many years and he was a banker and member of the City Council. He helped found and finance a school for the sons of impoverished Jewish artisans, finding great meaning in this work, onto which she makes clear, he transferred his religious impulses. Then, in 1881, the year of the tsar's assassination and of pogroms—about the fear of which Wengeroff writes a gripping account—a devastating fire

broke out in Minsk, destroying the Wengeroffs' magnificent home and all their costly belongings. They were lucky to have escaped with their lives, she writes.

Wengeroff took the children and went to Vienna for three years—about which she says nothing further in *Memoirs*, picking up the narrative again at their return to Minsk in August of 1883, archival letters establish.²⁰ It is not clear even from these documents why the destination was Vienna, but the choice is certainly notable: great, cosmopolitan Vienna, heart of middle European culture and creativity. Why Vienna? If not Minsk, why not Pinsk?²¹ Or Vilna, with the salutary traditional influence she says it exercised on Chonon when they lived there? We do not know. During her time in Vienna, the children continued their (secular) educations and Chonon had a new, magnificent house built in Minsk, furnished with truckloads of expensive furnishings Wengeroff shipped back from Vienna (details and much bickering about which is omitted from *Memoirs* but prominent in Wengeroff and Chonon's correspondence).²²

When she returned to Minsk, a *gabete*—a woman religious functionary of a type she describes in Volume One—approached Wengeroff and suggested that she spearhead creation of a vocational school for impoverished Jewish girls, a charge Wengeroff accepted enthusiastically and gratefully. As had been the case for Chonon, Jewish philanthropy provided Wengeroff an outlet for a great, quasi-religious need to feel a larger purpose and to serve the Jewish community, while also enacting modern, European bourgeois norms about philanthropy that had reached Russia by this time.²³

Wengeroff notes pointedly that she had religious instruction instituted in the school and that while Russian was taught there “only” twice a week, Hebrew was offered daily: given some control, Wengeroff used it to inculcate Jewish culture to the younger generation. At a time of desperate and growing Jewish poverty in the Pale, graduates of her school, she notes with pride, were master seamstresses able to make a living and, under the terms of the policy of selective integration that remained in force under Alexander III, even to leave the Pale, a coveted ticket to betterment.

We see the overwhelming psychological importance that Jewish philanthropy had come to assume for Wengeroff in the way she ends

Volume Two and *Memoirs*: not with her own words but with those of the *shtetl maggid* (the city preacher) of Minsk, who pronounced over Chonon's grave the words, "Although he had disregarded many Jewish practices in his life, one must nevertheless acknowledge loudly . . . : 'he was an *ahav amau yisroel*—that he loved his people, Israel.'" We can safely speculate that these words offered Wengeroff a critical perch on which she hung her own modern Jewish identity. And note her tremendous—overwhelming—need for exoneration.²⁴

When Wengeroff writes of her sons' conversions and of her pain and grief at their loss to the Jewish people, she follows immediately with an imagined scene of another Jewish youth—not that of her children's vacuous, self-indulgent circle but a different one: eager, hungry for the traditions they never experienced and the sounds they never heard. This youth sit around her at the fireside, she imagines, their eyes large, rapt as she, the grandmother, tells of the culture lost through the folly of their elders but which they will restore and revive.

This is the youth—these are the grandchildren—to and for whom Wengeroff wrote *Memoirs*. It is not for her own children who, we know from comments in *Memoirs* and from much information outside it, were at best interested in her work as a literary artifact, and some, not even as this.²⁵ Of grandchildren—biological ones, of which Wengeroff had quite a few—this grandmother mentions not one. The grandchildren for whom Wengeroff writes *Memoirs* are the fin de siècle generation of return—those reviving Hebrew, seeking to document Jewish culture in anthropological expeditions in the Pale that, among other things, collected Jewish folk songs, with which Wengeroff, too, richly embroiders her narrative in both volumes (insisting that she culled these from her own "stamp in wax" memory), a generation beginning to research and write Russian Jewish history; a youth returning to Zion. These are her consolation and her hope.²⁶

It is clear from close reading of *Memoirs* alone but established definitively from material outside it that Wengeroff was a Zionist. Not just an adherent of the traditional, religious (apolitical) love of Zion that permeates traditional Judaism and that suffused her parents' home, but of full-blown, political, Herzlian Zionism. She and Theodor Herzl corresponded. She sided with him in a critical dispute within the movement about the attempt to obtain a "night (temporary) asylum" in Uganda

for battered Russian Jewry after the Kishinev pogrom—against the opposition of East European Zionists (like herself, that is, the ones actually experiencing pogroms), so-called “Zionists of Zion”—who would countenance nothing but Zion, for any reason, even temporarily, and who attacked Herzl vehemently, driving him to an early grave. She signs her letters to Herzl *Zionsgruss*—“Greetings of Zion,” boasts to a daughter about their correspondence, and sends Herzl’s mother a letter of condolence upon his death.²⁷

Why did Wengeroff write *Memoirs*? There were multiple reasons. First, as we have seen, she was a born writer. Two of her children, Simon and Zinaida, were prolific and published authors; in this case, the older generation may well have been competitive with the younger, or at least, encouraged by their example, something imaginable (albeit, only by a robustly ambitious woman) by the turn of the twentieth century. Chonon may have imposed his will in their marriage but with him safely dead, Wengeroff got the last word in their dispute and its meaning. Indeed, she has him validating her position when she records him exclaiming, toward the end of his life, after a dinner party in their home, “Ach! Sixty Jewish children sat here and ate *trefe!*” (non-kosher food).

She had other scores to settle, too—with a young artist who betrayed her patronage and her emotional need; and favors to repay to those who stood by her—several sisters, a brother—whom she includes in her narrative, from which she excludes three children and much else we might expect to read.

But above all, Wengeroff writes to address her overwhelming guilt for her failure to maintain and transmit Judaism in her home and for her sins in contributing to the larger loss of Jewish culture in modernity. For it is clear from *Memoirs* that while Chonon may have played the role she describes, and however much she blames him and Jewish men generally, Wengeroff was a full and willing participant in the family’s acculturation and assimilation.

She, not just he, wished a fine style of living, though she herself says, repeatedly, that such ambition and levels of consumption were tied to loss of traditional behavior that desire for success and social status trumped religious observance for modernizing Jews. She, not just he, wanted their brilliant children to succeed in the non-Jewish world, though she knew that this entailed loss of traditional Jewish behavior.

Thus, she writes that their son Simon refused to kneel before icons during a religious service at school, for which he was expelled from his *gymnasium* (the equivalent of middle and high school in the United States)—hardly, we would note, the behavior of a child bereft of all Jewish identification. Wengeroff rushed to the school, distraught, begging the headmaster to let Simon stay. He had not meant disrespect, she records herself saying, only fealty to the education given by his parents (*sic*), and in “the rabbinical school”—a reference to the State-sponsored rabbinical seminary in Vilna, which Simon attended briefly (not to become a rabbi, just for Jewish education). Obviously, then, despite her assertions, Chonon had not opposed all Jewish education for their children. On the contrary, she reports that he himself tutored Simon—albeit badly—in Jewish texts when the family lived in Helsinki and Simon reached the age of bar mitsvah and before this, when they lived in Vilna.

The headmaster would not relent but did recommend Simon to another *gymnasium*—at which point, Wengeroff regained her composure: she was a full participant in wishing her children to attend elite, non-Jewish schools and to attain the secular success of which they were capable even though, obviously, given the circumstances of Simon’s expulsion, such settings were hardly conducive to Jewish observance.

Many other examples in *Memoirs* establish that Wengeroff’s position about tradition and modernity was anything but simple and straightforward. It was complex and conflicted. The sharp gender binary that she asserts about tradition is subverted by information she herself provides in *Memoirs*—a narrative counter-current, albeit, conveyed sotto voce—and by information outside it.²⁸ And she bore a tremendous, if not a consciously acknowledged, burden of guilt for her own behavior.

With *Memoirs*, Wengeroff had the opportunity to write up Jewish Tradition so that it would not be lost—as great a service to Jewish life as her support of Jewish trade schools for impoverished Jewish children. And it would not just be written up, monument-like—given a decent burial—but transmitted to an enthusiastic youth waiting to appropriate it and give it new life. Volume One of *Memoirs* was the *Jewish Catalog* of its day: this is the reason for its detail about ingredients and food preparation, dreidl playing, the rituals of Passover preparation and the seder: it was a how-to manual, driven also by longing, loss, nostalgia, and—

hope. Volume Two was a reverse road map: if the youth of the fin de siècle wanted to know how a great culture was lost within a generation, if they wanted to know how they came to be, to borrow Paul Cowan's words, "orphans in history," this was the story—a story with a didactic twist whose meaning could not be lost on them: here is the culture, she was saying, take it, give it new life. Thus would she expiate her sins and make good her own participation in the follies of Jewish modernity.

In her Preface to Volume Two, Wengeroff thanks God "that it pleased Him to sustain me to see this day and that it was granted me to hear the hour struck that brought such great transformations in Jewish life: the reawakening of the love of Zion—a ring around the orphaned youth." Evoking perhaps, Herzl's utopian Zionist novel, *Altneuland*, she also calls this youth "that ancient people, my younger brothers and sisters!"—a generation as mystical and miraculous as memory itself for inhabiting simultaneously both past and present. These developments—the reawakening of love of Zion and an orphaned youth repairing the fissures of Jewish modernity, thus bestowing parentage on themselves and cultural progeny to her—were Wengeroff's hope and consolation.

Did she succeed? *Memoirs* was certainly a resounding publishing success, going through five editions in fifteen years, from the publication of Volume One in 1908 to the last edition of the two-volume set that came out, posthumously, in 1922.²⁹ It received rave reviews and not only in the Jewish press. One German review cites it as the testament to the loss of traditional culture, which all moderns, regardless of ethnicity, experience. This is a most remarkable statement: here is a German reviewer, taking the writing of a Russian Jew—an *Ostjude!*—depicting Jewish experience in Russia, and holding it up as the universal statement of modern anomie.³⁰ Translated excerpts from *Memoirs* were published in the Yiddish press and even in Hebrew, in the *yishuv* in Palestine, in 1942, at the height of the Shoah, during what has been called the worst year in Jewish history.³¹

There is no happy ending to report for Wengeroff. Terrified of pogroms, she died, "lonely and miserable" in Minsk, in 1916, in the midst of a crumbling tsarist empire and the First World War, having encouraged one biological grandson, child of a daughter unnamed in *Memoirs*, to practice the piano well so that he might, as I believe she wished for herself, get to America.³² Her grandson, Nicholas Slonimsky, a brilliant

pianist, eventually succeeded in reaching the United States, as did three of Wengeroff's children, Zinaida, Isabelle, and Faina (Slonimsky's mother), after Wengeroff's death. A Petersburg address book from 1913, however, shows Semyon, Zinaida, and Isabelle in that city—in Russia, but not near their mother.³³

Whether the masterpiece that is *Memoirs* or the conviction that it had reached its target audience and purpose gave Wengeroff any solace in her last days, we do not know but can hope.