

HISTORY

The Runaway Daughters of Galicia

Rebellious Jewish girls fled their Galician villages, leaving their mark on books, film, and even Orthodox education

BY RACHEL MANEKIN

DECEMBER 10, 2021

IN 1913, THE SILENT FILM *DER SHYLOCK VON KRAKAU* WAS RELEASED WITH A script by the Austrian author and critic Felix Salten, the author of *Bambi*, and its protagonist portrayed by the Austrian actor, Rudolph Schildkraut. The film tells the story of Isaak Levi, a money lender and God-fearing Kraków Jew, whose daughter runs away to Berlin with her lover, a Polish count and a client of her father. Abandoned there by her lover, the daughter had become a beggar to support herself. After many years she returns to Kraków, only to find her father cold, bitter, and old. The father rejects the lost daughter, but finally forgives her on his death bed. As a Viennese Jew, Salten would have been very familiar with the Galician runaway stories, which made Kraków a logical setting for an Eastern European version of the Venetian Shylock.

Indeed, press reports about Jewish female runaways in Galicia left their trace on works of many contemporary authors, playwrights, and even filmmakers. In 1902, the noted German Jewish author Jakob Wassermann (1873-1934) published a story titled *Der Moloch*. The book tells the story of Arnold Ansorge, who, while living in the Moravian village of Podolin meets Samuel Elasser, a poor Jewish peddler, and learns from him that his thirteen-year-old daughter Jutta was kidnapped by Felician nuns and held in a convent against her will. Upon hearing this, Ansorge decides to help Elasser to get his daughter back, especially since the law alone had failed to achieve the justice he deserved. Ansorge's friend, Maxim Specht, is convinced to join the mission, and in order to pressure the authorities he keeps sending articles to the Viennese press about this disturbing convent story (*Klostergeschichte*). Ansorge later travels to Vienna for the same purpose, but while

in the big city—the modern day Moloch—he is lured by the worldly pleasures it offers and forgets his original commitment to seek justice for Elasser. Afflicted with guilt after his life takes a turn for the worse, Ansorge compensates Elasser with a significant sum of money and subsequently commits suicide.

Samuel Elasser's story was based on that of Israel Araten. Wassermann copied details of Araten's repeated failures to obtain his daughter from the Viennese liberal press, especially the *Neue Freie Presse*, without acknowledgment, and placed them in the story after changing the names of the main characters. These details include all of Israel Araten's allegations against the convent and the authorities, his lobbying efforts at government ministries, and his meeting with the emperor. They even include the search in Kęnty and the infamous sentence attributed to the minister for Galician affairs: "The secular authority ends at the convent's walls."

Scholars have noted Wassermann's habit of borrowing from others without proper acknowledgment. In this case, the Galician-born publicist and historian Simon Bernfeld (1860-1940), reviewing *Der Moloch* in the Hebrew press, wrote, "The case of Israel Araten is woven into our story in all its simplicity, without any poetical shading, as if Wassermann took the details of the case from some newspaper and affixed them here." According to Bernfeld, the Moloch is not a metaphor for the city and its false attractions, as other critics had interpreted it, but rather for the failed promise of liberalism to solve social injustices, specifically those directed against Jews.

A different approach to the Araten affair was taken by Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1887-1970) who was born and raised in Buczacz, Galicia. Agnon was likely familiar with the Araten case as it unfolded, since in 1904 he published a short poem on the problem of female education. Moreover, at one point a rumor spread that Araten's daughter was in the train station in Buczacz, and later in the convent in the neighboring town of Jazłowiec. Like the contemporary Hebrew newspapers, Agnon looked for the root of the problem of the rebellious daughters within Jewish society.

In his 1950 novella "Tehilla," Agnon tells the story of an elderly, pious Jewish woman, Tehilla, living in the Old City of Jerusalem in the early twentieth century. Before she dies, Tehilla asks a young writer to compose in Hebrew her life story, which she proceeds to recount in Yiddish. The purpose of this request is to ask the forgiveness of her former fiancé, Shraga, who died many years ago; she plans to have the written account buried

with her, presumably so that Shraga can read it in the world to come. Her father had broken off their arranged engagement after he discovered that Shraga was a Hasid. Because Tehilla's father had not asked Shraga for forgiveness for the shame he had caused him, she attributed a succession of tragedies that befell her to Shraga's curse. Those tragedies included the death of her husband and her two sons, and an unclear incident involving her daughter. Tehilla doesn't specify what happened to her daughter, only that "an evil spirit" entered her, and she went crazy. A careful reading of the story reveals that the daughter's fate is one of the major themes of the novella, if not the major one.

The character of Tehilla appears to be based in part on Israel Araten, who settled in Jerusalem in the early twentieth century and died at a ripe old age. Agnon scatters hints to the historical origins of the story in several places, especially in the words of the other characters in the story. One of them is the grumpy rebbetzin (rabbi's wife), whose father had been engaged to Tehilla's daughter. The writer, who is also the narrator of the story, is curious about Tehilla and keeps begging the rebbetzin to tell him more about her:

And if I do tell, she answered, will it make things easier for me or for her? I don't like all this tale telling [...] But one thing I shall tell you, the Blessed Holy One took pity on that saint [the rebbetzin's father and Tehilla's prospective son-in-law], and so he put an evil spirit into that apostate, may her name be blotted out.

She then tells him what happened to her righteous father, whom she describes as a "real" rabbi:

[S]o the matchmakers in the country were all eager to match him off. There was a certain rich widow. When I say rich, I mean she was very rich. She had only one daughter, and if only she hadn't had her! She took a barrel of gold coins and told them, those matchmakers, if you match him to my daughter, then he gets this barrel, and if it's not enough I'll add to it. The daughter was not worthy of that righteous saint, because he was a saint, and she, may she be damned, was an apostate, just as her end proved about her beginning, because she ran away and entered some nunnery and changed her religion. And when did she run away?—when they were leading her to the bridal canopy. Her mother wasted half her wealth on her in order to get her out of there. She got as far as the Emperor, the wretched mother did, and even he couldn't help her at all, because anybody who once enters a nunnery never comes out of there any more. Do you know who that apostate is? The daughter of—hush, she's coming.

Tillie [i.e., Tehilla] came in with a pot of food in her hand.

The rebbetzin was the only person who had personal knowledge of what happened to Tehilla, but the distraction caused by the latter's entrance leaves the readers to draw their own conclusions. The parallel to the Araten affair in this paragraph is quite obvious: Araten's riches, his daughter's engagement, his monetary spending in an effort to find her, and especially the meeting with the emperor, which no other parent of a runaway merited. Unlike Wassermann, Agnon uses the Araten affair in an artistic fashion and builds around it an elaborate literary structure, in which Tehilla's shameful secret—the religious conversion of her daughter—is the cloud that casts its shadow over all of it.

Another character in the story, the sage, is a son of a mother who knew Tehilla abroad, and Agnon puts in his mouth another hint. Realizing the writer's curiosity about Tehilla, the sage says:

What she was outside the Land of Israel I do not know apart from what everybody does: that she was very rich indeed and conducted big affairs, but finally her sons died, and her husband died and she went and abandoned all her affairs and came up to Jerusalem. My mother, may she rest in peace, used to say, "When I see Tehilla I see that there are things even worse than widowhood and loss of children." But mother never told me what these things were, so I do not know and now we never shall know; for all those who knew Tehilla abroad are already dead, and Tehilla never has much to say.

Other contemporary literary works focused on the plight of Galician village girls like Debora Lewkowiecz. In 1907, a Yiddish melodrama was published in Kraków called *Tate mames tsures: Lebnsbild in 4 akten* ("Father's and Mother's Sorrows: A Life Picture in 4 Acts"). The popular play by Max Gebel was based on the true story of a young Jewish woman, the daughter of a tavernkeeper in a small Galician village, who fled from her parents' home on the first night of Passover, then converted to Christianity and married her Polish lover in 1889. In the theatrical version, the Jewish woman elopes with her lover after her mother reveals to her the identity of her groom-to-be, a Jewish yeshiva student, and the date of her impending marriage. Unlike the story on which it was based, the play ends happily for the Jewish audience, with the young woman returning to her family and her faith.

A similar story is related by Agnon in the chapter “Solomon Jacob’s Bed” of his novel *Hakhnasat kalah* (translated into English as *The Bridal Canopy*). The narrator tells the tale of a village tavernkeeper who quickly arranged a match between his daughter and a yeshiva student after he and his wife learned of their daughter’s romance with a Pole. The story is told from the viewpoint of the naïve yeshiva student, who knows nothing of the background to the engagement. The parents invite him to their house for the Passover Seder. After being affectionately greeted outside by the bride’s father, the shy young man meets the girl for the first time:

While he stood so, his betrothed came out of the kitchen and stood before him pink and pretty, her plaits in her right hand and a smile on her lips. Shifting her plaits to her left hand she greeted him, and as her plump hand gripped his, a quiver passed through him so that his tongue shriveled up, and he lost his power of speech. He bowed his shoulders even more, bent his hand, and gripped the back of the Gemara [Talmud] firmly with his fingers. Said his betrothed, Put away your Bible and sit down; and she took it out of his hands gently and set it on the table.

In came his mother-in-law-to-be, in festive array, veiled and adorned like a dowager, with felt shoes on her feet which had grown swollen during the winter while she stood out in the open to prevent her daughter meeting that gentile.

The contrast between the Talmud student and the daughter can’t be greater, and things get even more awkward later in the evening:

And Solomon Jacob read out of the same Hagada as his betrothed, holding his breath so that she shouldn’t feel his presence, while she, far from being frightened by him, was actually touching him.

After the meal the parents get ready to go to sleep, but the two young people start reading the Song of Songs as is customary on Passover night. Agnon uses the verses of the Song of Songs to drop hints about the girl’s relationship with her Polish lover:

The candles began guttering. There was a whistle outside. The wench started but immediately went on reading in a sweet and happy voice, “’Tis the voice of my love; behold he cometh.” And Solomon Jacob, keeping his finger on the place, went on interpreting in accordance with Rashi, “The poet returns to the beginning like a man

who stops short and returns saying, I never told you the beginning. Behold he standeth behind our wall, peering through the window, peeping through the lattice chinks.” And so they read until they finished the book.

When in his bed, Solomon Jacob, who was used to sleeping on a bench in the house of study, admires the many pillows and crisp sheets, while whispering verses from the Song of Songs:

Behold thou art fair, my love, and our couch is likewise fresh; the voice of my love that knocketh, open to me; they have taken my veil from me, I did not know my mind.” [...] But ere he entered the bed he heard the housewife weeping. Had the evil eye gained sway, God forbid, over his betrothed? Solomon Jacob turned his face toward the window and saw the housewife standing with arms outstretched, howling and wailing and weeping, while his father-in-law-to-be ran half-naked after a coach which was dashing off as though driven by furies. Suddenly the crack of a whip rent the air. His father-in-law-to-be came stumbling back, his hand over his cheek, crying, There’s no daughter, no daughter. Solomon Jacob’s betrothed had fled with her gentile lover.

The responsibility for the failed engagement, implies Agnon, lies not with the young woman but with the Talmud student. In commenting upon the unhappy ending, the narrator asks:

Solomon Jacob, who studied the Bible a great deal and the Talmud a great deal and spent his life in the House of Study, and derived not even as much as his little finger was worth of pleasure out of the world—why was he punished so much? Because he never learnt anything except Torah. My sons, it is a man’s duty to know writing and other tongues, and anyone who does not know writing and other tongues is called contemptible; as our sages of blessed memory remark in the Talmud about the verse in Obadiah, “Thou art extremely contemptible,” because they know neither writing nor other languages. And they also say elsewhere in the Talmud that a disciple of the wise has to know to write.

A writer who understood well the dissonance in the life of Jewish educated village women was Poland's national playwright, Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907). His play, *Wesele* ("The Wedding"), first performed in 1901, describes the wedding of the Kraków poet, Lucjan Rydel, with a young Polish woman from the village of Bronowice, near Kraków. Marriage to village women became fashionable at the turn of the century among Kraków literati, who romanticized a return to nature and authentic Polish roots. (Wyspiański himself married a village woman.) In the play, the characters of the wedding guests are all based on real people from contemporary or historical Kraków, and the same is true of the play's Jews. The character of the tavernkeeper, "The Jew," is based on Hirsch Singer, a bearded Orthodox Jewish tavernkeeper in Bronowice. The character of the Jew's daughter Rachel is based on Singer's own daughter Pepa (Józefa Perel) Singer.

Pepa Singer, who was born in 1881, lacked a formal secondary education. Like Debora Lewkowicz she too studied first in the school of the peasants' children in the village, and afterward in a public primary school in Kraków. We know that she loved modern Polish literature, and in the library of the Academy of Sciences in Kraków there is a copy of the Kraków literary annual *Życie* with the signature "Józefa Singerówna 1898," i.e., a few years before the play was produced. Pepa Singer considered conversion to Christianity as a young woman, but her mother asked her not to do so as long as her father was alive. She finally converted in 1919. In *Wesele* the Jewish tavernkeeper boasts of his daughter Rachel to the poet bridegroom:

As soon as books come, she reads them,
 But still she rolls out dough herself.
 At Vienna she's been to the Opera,
 But at home she still plucks chickens,
 She knows all of Przybyszewski
 And wears her hair in braided loops,
 Like angels in those Italian paintings.

Wyspiański's Rachel knows that although her desires conflict with her father's faith and way of life, he appreciates her achievements and adopts an attitude of forgiveness toward her. She in turn appreciates his liberality and is not ashamed of him:

He allows me everything
 And even boasts about me.

It's interesting—isn't it?

Exploitation, business, I and he?

Rachel's problem does not lie in any discord or bad relations with her father, but rather in the conflict between the way of life she has chosen for herself and her father's traditional ways.

Interestingly, the Polish-born Israeli author, publicist, and literary critic Yoram Bronowski (1948-2001) viewed Wyspiański's Rachel as a ridiculous figure, a traitor to her people who tried to assimilate into a foreign culture and play there the role of "a female Pope more than the Pope." Of the two Jewish characters in the play, Rachel's father is the admirable one since he remains loyal to the religion and traditions of his ancestors and looks with aversion on the gentile world. Bronowski, a secular Jew, wanted the Jewish character in a Polish play to be proud of her tradition; he even considers the representation of Rachel to possess a certain streak of anti-Semitism. One may speculate that Agnon, an observant Jew from Galicia who knew what Orthodox women faced during that period, would have disagreed.

The Kluger affair is the basis of a 1913 novel by the Jewish feminist writer, Aniela Kallas (pen name of Aniela Korngut, 1868-1942), the only female author who wrote about the runaways during this period. Born in Galicia, Kallas wrote about the "local realities and problems, remaining within the regional horizons [...] both in big cities such as Lwów and Kraków as well as anonymous towns in the province." Kallas named her novel *Córki marnotrawne* ("Prodigal Daughters"), an allusion to the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15: 11-32. The novel is about the travails of a young Jewish woman, Malcia Klinger, who is torn between her family and her yearning for academic inquiry, which her family, especially her mother, opposes. Kallas bases Malcia Klinger largely on Anna Kluger and preserves in the novel almost all the elements of the Kluger affair as reported in the press. Even the character of Malcia's best friend, the medical student Regina Karmel, is based on Marie Kragen, Anna's friend and a witness for the prosecution, who was herself a fifth-year medical student. Contemporary readers who had followed the Kluger case in the press would immediately recognize its affinities with the novel.

The novel also describes Malcia's student-friends and their discussions on literature, philosophy, and current ideological movements, using these scenes to introduce different types of young Jewish women, who aspire for a university education, and their parents,

who react in different ways to these aspirations. In her efforts to stop her daughter's friendship with the progressive Regina, Malcia's mother tells Regina:

My daughters are different. Your parents could not raise you as our fathers did. Although your father is a "Polish Jew" [polski żyd] with a long coat [żupan], he is quite progressive and does not care about the rabbis or what people might say about him [...] Nu, he's a very respectable man! But my husband is something else. My husband belongs to the "Hasidim" and he is a rabbi. My ancestors were like that, and I want to go this way too and my children must be like that.

Malcia is unswerving in her desire to study and complete her matriculation examinations, despite her mother's insistence that she cease her studies and become a wife and a mother.

In contrast to Malcia's gentle father, Kallas portrays her mother as mean, vulgar, and physically abusive. This differs from the aforementioned literary works in which the mothers of the runaways play little or no role; the voices we hear are those of the fathers. In many runaway cases, the heartbroken mothers lacked the knowledge or ability to deal with the situation in the outside world, and they relied on their husbands to carry on the fight for the return of the daughters. Anna Kluger's case is different in that regard. As a direct descendant of the founder of the Sandz Hasidic dynasty, Anna's mother was raised in privilege and with a feeling of entitlement. As we have seen, she took an active role in the conflict with her daughter, insisting that she stop her education, enter into an arranged marriage, and after she did that, perform her marital duties as a Hasidic wife. That plays to her disadvantage in Kallas' novel.

A significant part of the novel concerns Malcia's marriage to the man her parents have chosen for her, and her consent to that marriage in order to continue her studies. Hania, Malcia's younger and more rebellious sister, urges Malcia to run away from home and promises to follow her, "I will not allow such misery, and I will not be bullied! Let them only start with me and I will escape to the convent," she says to her older sister. But Malcia tells her: "Girls like you do not go there." This may be a reference to the fact that most female converts came from small towns and villages around Kraków and not from cities like Kraków, where a young woman like Malcia could find her place amidst a group of like-minded progressive Jewish students.

Several scenes in the story describe Malcia's efforts to explain to her father her passion for study and her determination to take the matriculation exams instead of getting married, and his inability to understand it. He replies that he can understand the wish to train in a profession that will provide her with a better job and livelihood, but not a wish to study for no practical purpose. Ultimately, he agrees to convince her mother to allow her to study for the matriculation exams after her marriage, but only on the condition that she promise to remain Jewish and respect the Jewish tradition. He makes her swear on a prayer book that she will remain a Jewish daughter and marry her fiancé, which she does. Malcia finally understands that the gap between her and her father is unbridgeable, but her love for him makes her submit to his will.

If the father fears that Malcia's continuing education will lead her to abandon the Jewish religion, the mother fears that it will lead her to neglect her duties as wife and mother. Kallas takes Anna Kluger's claim that her mother interfered in her most intimate marital relations with her husband and paints a salacious scene in which the mother enters Malcia's bedroom after her daughter has gone to bed and urges the young woman to perform her wifely duties, while Malcia's husband stands near the door. This humiliation ultimately leads Malcia to rebel and run away, arranging to meet up with her sister Hania, whom she instructs to take with her wedding jewelry and money.

Shortly after the appearance of Kallas' book, Kazimiera Bujwidowa, the noted feminist and one of the founders of the Reading Room for Women in Kraków, reviewed it for the Kraków Jewish weekly *Tygodnik*. Declaring that she will not comment on the literary merits of the book, Bujwidowa focused instead on the phenomenon of the runaway daughters. It is not clear, she writes, what these girls want and for what purpose they sacrifice themselves while causing pain to their families, even lying and stealing, especially since none of them achieves freedom. Malcia, the heroine of the story, gives up everything in order to get her matriculation certificate, but for what purpose? She is willing to cheat and marry so she can escape the ghetto, but lying begets lying. If girls like Malcia are really unhappy there is only one thing that they should do—cut their ties with their families, especially their financial dependence on them, and find a job to support themselves.

Bujwidowa emphasizes that she is writing as a mother, and indeed she is specifically critical of the relationship of these girls with their parents. Since she can't imagine mothers who do not wish happiness for their children, she expects that children will find a way to the heart of their parents or simply leave, find a job, and become independent. Relying on legal provisions on the obligations of parents, she says, and coercing them to comply with these obligations by way of legal proceedings and coercion is something so shameful that it is difficult to speak about it without abhorrence.

This last point shows that Bujwidowa was not talking so much about *Prodigal Daughters* as about the events that inspired it. Kallas had omitted from the novel all mention of the Kluger sisters' lawsuit, perhaps because the final verdict had not been rendered yet when she wrote the book, or because she thought that it detracted from the broader phenomenon that the novel describes. By the time Bujwidowa wrote her review, the court's verdict was already known, and Bujwidowa took the opportunity to express her dissatisfaction with the price the Kluger sisters were willing to pay in exchange for their freedom to study.

Kallas wrote a response a few weeks later. She states that she took it upon herself to be the voice of the prodigal daughters, of whom there are many. She describes the difficult conditions under which they live, their striving for knowledge, and their dreams about a different life. She received many letters from them, she writes, and they are crying for help. She cites a short part from a letter of a girl who dreamed about studying and taking professional courses, only to give it all up because of the tears of her mother, who objected to her plans. Kallas accuses Bujwidowa of not reading the book with adequate attention and rebukes her for the impractical suggestions she offered. These daughters love their parents, and some of them get tired of the constant fight and so ultimately they yield. Alluding to the title of the novel, she writes that even the prodigal son in the biblical story returned home. The solution recommended by Bujwidowa grants neither freedom nor independence, according to Kallas, who concludes: "I had a different intention when writing my novel about the prodigal daughters. So far, no one has taken up this problem. I am waiting."

The editorial staff of the weekly also responded to Bujwidowa's suggestions, alluding that as an outsider she was unable to appreciate the importance of the struggle of the young generation. The suspicion held by pious Jews that education leads to the loss of religious faith is particular to Jews and not common among Christians. But the editorial expresses

the view that in time all that will change. For one thing, “if the surging wave of conversion that we are witnessing would stop,” then social evolution would lead Jews, similar to Christians, to agree to a certain compromise between religious faith and education. They would stop fearing that education will lead to the abandonment of religion.

What none of these writers anticipated was the change in the educational ideology within the Orthodox camp that aimed at controlling the drive for higher education among their daughters and channeling it to other areas. This change was first conceived by Sarah Schenirer, who was well aware of the problem of the prodigal daughters and personally experienced the double life of being attracted to lectures in the Reading Room for Women on the one hand, and love for her Hasidic parents and their religious values, on the other hand. Her solution to the rebellion of the daughters was to strengthen their religious identity and weaken the attraction of secular education. Her innovative approach was later developed by Agudat Yisrael into a formal and well-developed educational system that turned the passion for intellectual creativity and freedom into a passion for religion and commitment to Orthodox ideology and practice.

*This is an excerpt from Rachel Manekin’s recent book, *The Rebellion of the Daughters: Jewish Women Runaways in Habsburg Galicia* (Princeton University Press, 2020), which investigates the flight of young Jewish women from their Orthodox, mostly Hasidic, homes in Western Galicia (now Poland) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.*

Rachel Manekin is Professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Maryland. Her area of specialization is the social, political, and cultural history of Galician Jewry. She is the author of *The Jews of Galicia and the Austrian Constitution: The Beginning of Modern Jewish Politics* (Hebrew).