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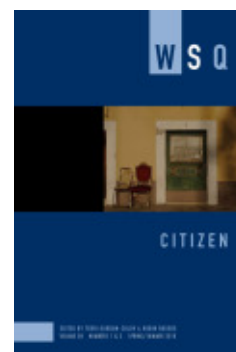
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## **Henya Pekelman: An Injured Witness of Socialist Zionist Settlement in Mandatory Palestine**

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# HENYA PEKELMAN: AN INJURED WITNESS OF SOCIALIST ZIONIST SETTLEMENT IN MANDATORY PALESTINE

TAMAR S. HESS

Henya Pekelman was born in about 1903 in Markuleshty (Mărculești) Bessarabia (then part of the Russian Empire and now in Moldova) and emigrated to the British Mandate of Palestine in 1922. Her memoir, *Hayey Po'elet Ba-aretz* (The Life of a Worker in Her Homeland or, more accurately, The Life of a Woman Worker in the Homeland) self-published in Hebrew in 1935, follows the events of her life until about 1925. Recently reprinted, it had been ignored over the years.<sup>1</sup> The title indicates that Pekelman wished to place her story within the national context of Zionist socialism and to offer it as representative of the collective experience. The work's epigraph, "Let your fellow's honor be as dear to you as your own," is taken from the midrashic tractate Pirkey Avot (Ethics of the Fathers). As she tells her story it will emerge that Pekelman reads "honor" in a gender-specific denotation that diverges from that of her source: she seeks "revenge against all those who abuse woman's honor" (2007, 173). Although the Hebrew term for "woman's honor" itself stems from a patriarchal value system in which to abuse a woman's honor would mean either hurting a man's right to ownership or, correlatively, damage to a woman's possibility of winning protection from a man by exchange of ownership, Pekelman gives the term a different meaning: "a woman's honor" denotes her own ownership of her body and life.

Pekelman declares at the outset that she is following an inner obligation to defend her honor and feels compelled to break accepted codes in order to do so. "I cannot surrender to the demands of my surroundings and their taste," she writes (9). Her story stems from a violent affront to her honor: she was raped, became pregnant, and gave birth, and when the child died a month later, she was suspected of murder and finally was left to mourn alone.

Socialist Zionist circles in Palestine of the 1920s propagated a strict

sexual code (Biale 1997). Manifestos from the period call for abstinence until the national project might attain a secure foundation. When Pekelman's pregnancy was discovered, she was ostracized by her peers for breaking sexual codes. Until her pregnancy came to term, she wandered, seeking odd jobs under a false name. Her intention in her narrative is to clear her name.

The book begins with a poem in which Pekelman compares the exposure of the hidden corner of her heart to the lifting of the curtain (*parokhet*) that covers the Torah scrolls in the ark in a synagogue.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Pekelman introduces her testimony as a challenge to male ownership of the truth (in the image of the ark). She insists that her narrative is a straightforward and exact testimony: "I have not omitted from the shadow, nor embellished on the light. Without paint or brush, I have only written about my life" (10). Pekelman describes her narrative as "innocent" and devoid of artifice. At first reading it may seem as such: a narrative written by a woman with a minimal education (her official education was complete when she was eleven).

Beginning with her early childhood, Pekelman depicts herself, whether at school, home, or work, as an innocent victim of cruelty, manipulation, and insult. Her description of her immediate and her extended family reveals violence and emotional abuse, in an exposure rare within the conventions of Hebrew Zionist settlers' memoirs. As she grows up, she highlights her lack of awareness of sexuality and slight grasp of social norms and codes. She does not understand what the sailor aboard the ship to Palestine wants of her when he approaches her at night on the deck, but her screams awake the other travelers, and he leaves her alone.

Our faith as readers is stretched to its extreme when this portrait of the asexual chaste woman adopts a recognizable cultural pattern: that of a virgin birth that takes place in the Galilee, the Virgin Mary's home province and the cradle of early Christianity. When Pekelman gives birth to the baby, the doctor and nurses whisper to one another that it is "a wonder" (185). She later finds out what they were amazed by, when the head nurse (who assumes that Pekelman is married) asks her how she had lived with her husband and remained a virgin.

Singular though her story may be, Pekelman invests every rhetorical effort into framing it as collectively emblematic. This position serves her self-defense. If all women are alike, they are all at risk of being

raped, and nothing she had said or done could have brought the rape on her, since any woman might have been in her place (see also Brison 2002, 18). She consistently treats her personal pains and tribulations as collectively representative first of Jewish life in the shtetl and later of Socialist Zionist circles in post-World War I Eastern Europe and Palestine. When her mother is upset that she cannot provide or her daughter's needs, Pekelman tells her: "I am not alone, mother. I belong to a class, I belong to people that have rules and regulations, the workers circle, the proletariat" (47). Watching a tipsy young woman being ridiculed, she comments: "I felt this young woman's insult was my own, the insult of all young women" (36). To support her case, Pekelman frequently blurs the ethnic, age, and class marks that can differentiate Jewish women, a unifying universal vision being necessary to her all-encompassing claim. Thus, for example, in the hospital, after meeting a woman who has just miscarried her seventeenth child, she comments, "Woman herself, not man, is responsible for her suffering, for she is not independent, and does not live for herself, but for the man, always trying to find favor in his eyes" (186). The forty-six-year-old woman, who was born in Tsfat and had raised sixteen girls, is aligned with young women immigrants immersed in socialist Zionist ideology, who in Pekelman's eyes are identically subject to masculine dominance (194).

Pekelman was raped in the fall of 1924, while on a visit to Tel-Aviv, by Yeruham Mirkin, a former business partner. Pekelman describes meeting Mirkin by chance, after their partnership had ended badly, and his begging her to come to his room so that he could show her family photos that he had just received from his relatives in Europe. Reluctantly she followed him, but as soon as they entered his room he locked the door, saying that his landlady did not allow female visitors. Pekelman began to struggle but Mirkin knocked her down and she lost consciousness. The rape itself appears in the text as two blank lines. Pekelman next remembers herself walking on the beach "like a madwoman" (163). When she found she was pregnant, she at first thought she could cause a miscarriage with a hot bath; it didn't work.

Words cannot describe what I felt. I decided to go immediately to the beach and commit suicide. . . . I walked up to the roaring sea and decided to throw myself into it. But it was as if a transcendent power suddenly seized me, pulling me by my hair and

crying: In thy sufferings live! The will to live overcame me. And life seemed more beautiful than ever. A terrible war raged within me. I heard a voice calling me to die and another calling me to live. The first voice was shouting: “You have no right to live, you have strayed from the right path, you have violated your own honor, a woman’s honor. You are about to bear a child against the law of Moses and Israel.” And the other voice was comforting me and saying: “You have not wronged anyone, how can you murder a living soul within you? Who knows if your child will not be more useful in its life than a child born within the laws of Moses and Israel? You are still young and cannot take your own life. Whom have you wronged? Why should you kill yourself? Because a contemptible man abused you? Your death will place the blame on you, but if you live—you can still take revenge on him. You need to go on living for revenge.”

These two voices raced within me, threatening my sanity, and the idea of my mother’s pain over my situation haunted me as well. . . . Depressed and helpless, I stood on the roaring shoreline until it was dark. Then I went to sleep at my friend’s without thinking about anything else. It was as if I was dumbfounded, and my mind was no longer capable of any thought (166–67).

The words “in thy sufferings live!” connote a widely quoted phrase from Ezekiel 16:6, “In thy blood live.” The prophet addresses the people of Israel, who are cast in the image of an abandoned girl baby whose mother’s blood has not been rinsed off her. God walks by the deserted infant and orders her to live, but he does not reach out to her or adopt her until she approaches puberty, when he recognizes her sexual potential and then weds her. The prophet’s words connect the blood to the child, but it is her mother’s blood, not her own, that the baby is covered in. Thus, Ezekiel’s narrative breaks the tie between mother and child, and God replaces the mother as husband and Lord. Pekelman’s narrative enables a return of the mother that the biblical text has erased. In tying the potential child within her to her own mother, Pekelman creates a lineage of women that stems from the biblical text—in its choice of words—but rejects its values and allows for the baby and mother to live. Paradoxically, the baby later becomes Pekelman’s bodily proof and evi-

dence of Mirkin's guilt, as she grows and her resemblance to him becomes apparent. Pekelman publicly insists on her right to love the baby as well as to document in detail her own and other women's conditions of life in Palestine. The rape leaves her "dumbfounded"; she feels she has become an automaton (191), but bent on revenge, as she terms her act of witnessing (192), she documents her exchanges with Mirkin, as he denies his connection to the child.

Pekelman named the daughter born in the spring of 1925 Tikva (hope), but at one month old, the child died. Pekelman was arrested on suspicion of poisoning, but was soon released. Her narrative ends at this point. In 1927 she married and had a second daughter. The memoir does not reach these events, but the subtitle, *Book One*, suggests that the author meant to continue her story. The chilling last sentence, describing her feelings after she was released from jail, may explain why she was unable to pursue her undertaking: "On the day I was set free my emotional tragedy began" (194). In 1940, while working as an usher at a cinema in Tel-Aviv, she threw herself off the building's balcony.

Pekelman's testimony is a contemporary revelation of the extreme discrepancies between what individual women hoped for in immigrating to Palestine and the actual conditions that they faced. Other women underwent similar ordeals and later wrote of them, but Pekelman was the only one to bear witness to rape. Her shattering experience put her fellow Socialist Zionist settlers to a test, which they failed. Their circles could not embrace her as an injured witness; they denied her the belonging, support, and approval that she desperately needed. Telling her individual story as a representative and universal one, Pekelman can rewrite herself into the collective that rejected her. In writing her desolate narrative she is therefore motivated by not only the desire to set the facts straight and to clear her name, but also, no less, to analyze and expose the conditions that permitted her story to take place. The fact that her book was ignored attests to its failure to reach its intended addressees, but does not diminish the heroism and significance of her attempt.

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## NOTES

1. Deborah Bernstein was the first to note Pekelman's memoir (Bernstein 1987, 44–46). However, this reference relates to the sexually discriminating working conditions that Pekelman describes, of importance in themselves and not to her personal story. The recent Hebrew edition of Pekelman's book includes two essays, one by labor historians Talia Pfefferman and David De-Vries, and the other by myself. The limitations of the present essay do not allow a presentation of the full intricacies of the historical context of Pekelman's writing.

2. In a Jewish synagogue, the Pentateuch (Torah), written on scrolls, is kept in a closet at the fore of the hall and taken out at the peak of the prayer service for the ritual reading. This closet, called the ark, is traditionally draped by decorated curtains, often lavishly embroidered. The ark is a symbolic remnant of the Holy of Holies in the Temple. In Jewish collective memory an intruder raising the curtain that protects the ark is an image loaded with connotations of violation and rape, as epitomized in the story about Titus, the Roman conqueror and destroyer of the Second Temple, who marched into the Holy of Holies, ripped the curtain with his sword, spread it on the altar, and raped two women on it (Talmud Bavli, Gitin, 56b). Pekelman's employment of this image is therefore suggestive of unsettling gendered arrangements of meaning and interpretation.

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