Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica, **14**, 1 (2022) 14–28

DOI: 10.2478/ausp-2022-0002

Wilhelmina Wittigschlager's Minna: The Portrait of a Dazzling Jewish Feminist, Anarchist, and Nihilist

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Abstract. Wilhelmina Wittigschlager's novel, *Minna: Wife of the Young Rabbi*, published in 1905, serves as a case in point for characterizing a young audacious Jewish female protagonist who, against all odds, by breaking societal conventions and exercising a strong will and remarkable determination, attains individual freedom and struggles for political and social justice. This study has yielded some important insights regarding the key role Minna's multiple racial, religious, and national identities play in the construction of her fictional self. By examining the cultural, historical, and societal influences upon Wittigschlager, as she was in the process of writing the novel, this paper aims at showing how the fictional portrayal of a Jewish defiant female protagonist is interlaced with the factual lifestyles, culture, and representations of some actual contemporary female rebels such as Lucy Parsons, Emma Goldman, and Hesya Gelfman. Minna's Jewishness serves as the central point of her characterization, while the exploration of the pertinent socio-historical, cultural, political, and economic aspects outlines the environment in which her character was conceived.

Keywords: Jewish female revolutionaries, nihilism, anarchism, feminism, social justice

> "Anarchism stands for the liberation of the human mind from the dominion of religion and liberation of the human body from the coercion of property, liberation from the shackles and restraint of government. It stands for a social order based on the free grouping of individuals." (Goldman 1910, 68)

A popular 2020 Netflix mini-series, *Unorthodox*, inspired by Deborah Feldman's 2012 autobiographical novel, *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots*, documents a young Satmar Hasidic woman's course of defiance of the values and norms that dominate this fully segregated and fanatical Orthodox

community.[1] James Poniewozik, in his review of the series, comments that "it is, unambiguously, the story of a woman's escape from a society that she finds suffocating and unsustaining" (2020, n. p.). In 1905, Wilhelmina Wittigschlager[2] published her only autobiographical novel, *Minna: Wife of the Young Rabbi*. The novel, among many other themes, depicts a Jewish girl, aged thirteen, who (similarly to the seventeen-year-old Esty, the protagonist of *Unorthodox*) is compelled to marry a Yeshiva student whom she has not encountered prior to the marriage ceremony. In both novels, soon after the marriage takes place, the young female protagonist leaves her husband and the repressive Jewish community and escapes overseas, where in spite of her physical freedom, she finds herself in an emotional and spiritual limbo, trapped between two worlds. In both novels, the Jewish community is depicted as narrow-minded, intolerant, and harshly abusive towards its disfellowshipped members. Moreover, both feature a young protagonist who goes through a complicated acculturation process and eventually relatively successfully, though at times gruellingly, incorporates the values, beliefs, language, and mores of her new country.

While Esty escapes to Germany aiming to pursue a musical career, Minna slaves in Hamburg for years as a housemaid and then in London as a seamstress and an actress. Upon arriving to the United States, "the Land of the Free" (Wittigschlager 1905, 99), she toils again as a seamstress and later works as a midwife in a New York City hospital. Next, Minna moves to Chicago, where she attends an evening medical college, gets a degree, and becomes a successful doctor. Wittigschlager's novel, though mixing several literary genres (sentimental, sensation first-person confessional memoir, historical novel, as well as Bildungsroman and a "ghetto story"), at times teetering on the edge of soapy melodrama and featuring some incredible coincidences and plot twists, is an extraordinarily unique document that does not merely record a rather early feminist trial but delves into a universal human struggle to achieve personal freedom, first from the despotic frame of a repressive religious community and its patriarchal pressures, then when

1 The Satmar Movement was established by Yo'el Teitelbaum (1887–1979). "In 1944, he escaped the Germans in the 'Zionist' rescue train […] reaching Switzerland and going from there to Palestine. After a brief stay, he left for the United States, where he reestablished his court, making it the largest Hasidic community in existence after the Holocaust" (Assaf 2010, 2).

2 There is almost no biographical information about Wilhelmina Wittigschlager. The only records I found on the Internet site of The Ellis Island Foundation, Inc. state that she was born in 1869, had both a German and a Russian passport, and entered the United States by ship in 1921 and 1924. *https://heritage.statueofliberty.org/passenger* (Last accessed 30 July 2021). *Minna: Wife of the Young Rabbi* (1905) is Wittigschlager's only published novel. I assume that the book was quite popular, as it has been reprinted nine times since its publication. In 1925, Wittigschlager published a book of essays, *Emanuel: The Kiss of the Rose: The Philosophy, Wisdom and Power in Psychology, with the Key to the Eternal Shrine*, which has not been republished since. Interestingly, there are two patents on her name (a hatpin, registered on 26 April 1904 and an astronomical toy, registered on 8 March 1940).

disputing the ills of America's pitiless capitalism, and, finally, when challenging the oppressive Tsarist rule in Russia.

This paper intends to examine a nineteenth-century female protagonist's convoluted path from repression by tyrannical forces towards attainment of relative personal liberation and coherent self, achieved mainly thanks to her strong character, grittiness, high moral values, and intellectual growth. Moreover, it investigates, through feminist and cultural lenses, important historical events and political movements in Russia, Britain, and America that have been interpreted and commemorated by Wittigschlager in her autobiographical memoir, taking place during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The paper shows how Wittigschlager's novel echoes various actual occurrences such as women's participation in the Chicago anarchist movement, as well as their dominant role in the Russian nihilist movement during the revolt against the Tsarist regime, which eventually results in Tsar Alexander II's assassination in 1881. In addition, the paper demonstrates how the literary image of a Jewish female rebellious protagonist is interwoven with the factual lifestyles, culture, and representations of some actual contemporary female rebels such as Lucy Parsons, Emma Goldman, and Hesya Gelfman. Thereby, this study explores the reciprocal interaction between art, politics, and culture, as Minna's fictional construct might have been modelled after real female rebels of the period.

The novel starts with Minna's father's announcement that she is about to marry a Yeshiva student whom she has never met. Minna, an illiterate girl of thirteen, is constantly verbally abused and beaten by her adoptive parents, whom until the age of thirteen she considers as biological ones. For her, the news of her hasty and non-consensual betrothal is even harsher than the parents' abuse. Minna is devastated when hearing the stark predicament: "Perspiration covered my forehead and then again I was shivering cold. All that that woman who called herself my mother had said, pierced me through and through" (Wittigschlager 1905, 6), she cries out. Then, a lengthy description of the mores of the Jewish community follows, mainly centred on the debased physical and moral state of the Yeshiva students, who are

> a lazy, worthless set: they do not care to learn a trade, as they have no desire to work. They prefer to lead an idle life. They never study, but lie about the beishamedres [Yeshiva] willing to be dirty, filthy and hungry so long as they do not have to work. They are sharp, for when they see a citizen enter the beishamedres, they open a prayer-book, droop their heads, wrinkle their foreheads, and look like the hardest-working students present. (Wittigschlager 1905, 15–16)

Wittigschlager does not spare her criticism from the hypocrite and morally depraved Jewish community whose members take bribe (the Yeshiva's caretakers),

cheat brides and grooms and their respective families (matchmakers), fabricate documents and official records to evade military service, and abuse children and community members who are old, weak, or unprotected. The ruthless and sadistic behaviour is mostly shocking among the women who during a bride's preparation ceremony for her wedding night insult and molest her. The female bath attendant brutally cuts the bride's finger- and toenails, and "being in a hurry, she sometimes cuts so deeply that the poor girl has a sore toe or ringer to nurse for weeks after the wedding" (Wittigschlager 1905, 32). The attendant also spanks the bride and

> as a general joke everybody [all women present at the bride's preparation] joins in spanking the bride, so there is usually a pretty lively time. Her torture is further increased by all manner of vulgar jokes, perpetrated at the bride's expense. Every woman asks her embarrassing questions and demands a reply; and if the poor bewildered girl refuses to answer, she is badgered all the more. (Wittigschlager 1905, 32)

Meanwhile, Minna accidently discovers that she is the daughter of a Christian nobleman and a Jewish mother, who was cruelly forced to give her up for adoption. She decides to escape the community a day after her wedding night and searches for her true parents. Helped by a friend, Minna moves to Hamburg, Germany, where she discovers that she is pregnant. After giving birth to a boy and toiling as a servant for several years, the local authorities discover that a Jewish woman illegally resides in Germany, contrary to German laws, which do not allow Jews to settle down. Minna is deported to England, where she works as a seamstress until her adoptive parents (who, unbeknown to her, moved to England while she lived in Germany) find her and soil her reputation. Consequently, after a short attempt of being an actress in a local Jewish theatre, Minna has no choice but to move out since the adoptive parents tarnish her name wherever she goes. Looking for a chance to escape, Minna encounters a lady who promises to take the former with several other young women to America where they will seemingly be trained as midwives. On the ship to America, Minna accidently discovers that she and her fellows have fallen victim to a scam, and they are about to be employed as prostitutes. Minna, a true fighter and a feminist, protects herself and her mates by revealing the ploy to the ship's captain, hence saving the young women from bondage. Upon arriving to New York, she works as a seamstress and later enrols to a college and becomes a midwife. Minna's friend and former doctor, who delivered her son back in Germany, helps her along the way, encourages her to move to Chicago and study medicine. Eventually, Minna finishes her training and becomes a surgeon.[3]

3 According to Eve Fine, "In nineteenth-century Chicago, a medical degree was not always needed to practice medicine. No licensing laws yet governed medical practice, and doctors

The incredible events and the far-fetched coincidences, typical to sensation novels, though at times exaggerated, do not mar the novel's impact when presenting a realistic account of the Russian-Jewish community's vileness, the debased status of women, and the hardships one has to overcome to achieve moral development and self-sufficiency. Although some gaps in the narrative, trivial incidents in the text, its fractured development, and breaks between events may conceal the hidden occurrences and mirror the difficulties of Minna's passage to maturity and self-reliance, the protagonist still attains the readers' approval for successfully pulling herself out from a lowly stance. Garrison justly argues that "the sensation novel inspired a new form of reading, one that depended first on the physical effects it inspired in the reader and secondly on the psychological effects that occurred as a result of this form of reading" (Garrison 2010, xii).

Hence, the brutal and harsh scenes coupled with Wittigschlager's ironic comments, often peppered by colourful Yiddish vocabulary (Minna's native tongue), add to the emotional effect on the reader. Choosing the first-person confessional genre, though time and again reputed as being too sensational and tabloidish, in this case adds to the story's credibility. "The confessional form," according to David M. Earle and Georgia Clarkson Smith, "denies the primacy of literary genius and privileged authorship, and as such empowers liminal voices" (Earle and Smith 2013, 35). As such, it addresses largely working-class audience, mainly urban one, who can empathize with new American immigrants, labourers (Minna's fellow seamstresses and manual labourers), and ethnic and gendered minorities.

Minna's tale, especially its first part (consisting of five long chapters), may also be considered as one belonging to the then popular genre of "ghetto stories," but also differing from it. Like many "ghetto stories,"[4] Wittigschlager describes the Jews' dreary existence and offers minute details about their daily routine and traditions. Appropriating this genre allowed Wittigschlager to reveal, among other themes, such as Russian anti-Semitism and harsh physical and economic conditions Jews were subjected to, the roots of patriarchal oppression of women

commonly learned medicine by apprenticeship or by reading medical texts […] except for one woman, Mary Harris Thompson, who received her second medical degree from the Chicago Medical College in 1870, women could enroll but could not graduate from medical school in the nineteenth century. In 1871, the newly established Woman's Hospital Medical College, later renamed the Chicago Woman's Medical College, and then the Northwestern University Woman's Medical School, provided Chicago women with access to formal medical education" (2005, n. p.). Most female college students, similarly to Minna, were employed in factories or shops during the day and studied medicine in the evenings.

4 Kenneth H. Ober asserts that the "ghetto story seems at first glance rather stereotyped and uniform, but a close examination of the entire body of this literature reveals a great variety. A wide range of social and religious problems within the ghetto are openly dealt with; while persecution by the surrounding Christian populace is a presence constantly hovering menacingly in the background of most of the stories, it rarely plays a central role in the plots" (Ober 2000, 72).

within the Jewish community. Moreover, the novel often emphasizes the difference between the ruthless anti-Semitism that Jews were put through in Europe and the relatively liberal atmosphere they benefited from in their adoptive land, America. Nevertheless, although anti-Semitic feelings are not featured in the tale as a threatening determinant in America, the strong capitalistic forces that are at play are not less intimidating and oppressive to both Jews and non-Jews.

The novel, to some extent, also complies with the genre of a female Bildungsroman,[5] especially as it addresses Minna's belief in constructing a coherent self, faith in the possibility of moral growth, intellectual advance and spiritual development. Pin-chia Feng asserts that such novels show "a linear progression toward knowledge and social integration, and an upward movement toward spiritual fulfillment" (Feng 1998, 2). While some early "coming-of-age" novels ordained female protagonists' compliance with anguish and cruelty, as an appropriate means of training a young girl to face hardships (Pratt et al. 1981, 13–14), Minna's position is different, since at no stage in the novel she abides by strict societal norms.

Another characteristic trait of the Bildungsroman genre is that its male or female protagonist, as in Minna's instance, is described as a provincial, and thus, on occasion, a naïve person. Minna's moving to a big city in a far-off country detaches her from the evil but still a familiar small Russian shtetl's setting and compels her to deal with new challenges in an alienated and menacing setting. Her pursuit is even further aggravated as the foreign urban setting may be seen in this case as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it frees Minna from the limits of her hometown (where she was both physically and emotionally abused); on the other hand, it puts her at risk – while in Hamburg, London, and New York – of dealing with harsh financial, moral, and cultural challenges, especially as a single fourteen-year-old mother who needs to provide for her newly born son. Later, when she is back to Russia, searching for her biological parents, Minna has to struggle against the malevolent forces at the scene of crime (a place where she was kidnapped from her mother and given for adoption). If the new urban and seemingly more progressive setting is presumed to set her free from the oppressive Jewish community's bullying, it is not always the case. As an unwedded mother, a Jewess, and a woman without family or friends, Minna becomes an easy prey

5 The term "female Bildungsroman" was first used by feminist critics in the 1970s. Annis Pratt in *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (1981) classifies the "female Bildungsroman" and discerns it from its male counterpart. Feminist critics maintain that the initial epitome of a Bildungsroman that portrays a male hero as an individual who matures and evolves to become a better and self-sufficient person is wrong, and thus the genre should also consider female protagonists. In reply to the disregard of female heroines as Bildungsroman's protagonists, Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland published *The Voyage in: Fictions of Female Development* (1983), a collection of articles on the female "novel of emergence." Such an outlook helps to examine the ways in which nineteenth- and twentieth-century female writers depict the suppression of female personal and artistic freedom by the governing patriarchal rule.

for cheaters and charlatans, such as in the case of a woman who promises the naïve Minna a midwife training in New York City, pays for the latter's travel but soon turns out to be a brothel keeper, gathering several young and desperate women, including Minna, and locking them on a ship.

Several critics point at another underlying feature of the Bildungsroman novel – namely, in the case when the young hero's or heroine's misdeeds or carelessness are later amended and eventually lead to his/her re-education and redemption. In Minna's case, it is not true, as the obstacles are not posed by her own transgression. On the contrary, they are set by the outer world (mainly by the patriarchal Jewish community), by an abusive family, and/or by an anti-Semitic Russian and German society. For Franco Moretti, a Bildungsroman protagonist learns to socialize and to live with the outer world's conflicts and contradictions and even manages to turn them into a tool for survival (2000, 10). This is exactly Minna's way to achieve her goals; by closely observing every new setting she arrives at, by adapting herself to new societal mores (in Germany, England, and America), by never complaining of the hardships and the hostility she often faces, Minna manages first to survive and later to thrive fairly well in her new world.

Using a first-person autobiographical memoir allows Wittigschlager to resort to excessive dramatization, which often characterizes women's autobiographical genres and the sensation novel genre. For Marlene Kadar, life writing is a self-probing genre, and as such it corresponds well with women's contemplations of their condition.

> The most broadened version of the term "life writing" as a specific genre is the one often celebrated by feminist literary critics concerned with the proliferation, authorization, and recuperation of autobiographical writing, especially in recent decades. Here, life writing is the subject of "gynocritics," a literature that has been identified according to its subject matter – women's texts, personal narratives […] It is a kind of writing about the "self" or the "individual" that favours autobiography, but includes letters, diaries, journals, and (even) biography (Kadar 1992, 5).

Such contemplations, quite unusual for a very young and, at the time, illiterate girl, drive Minna towards action. Moreover, after attaining personal liberation, Minna progresses fast to the social realm, making quite a remarkable movement from inner development to outer social participation. Despite being somewhat mechanical and even overdramatic, the narrative is fairly effective since it immerses in actual experience. The first-person viewpoint, in addition to the realism of the genre, promotes subjective identification and, hence, an active reading.

Moreover, it should be noted that the novel was not just meant to entertain the audience. Probably, in an attempt to promote her newly-published novel, but

surely also wishing to voice her protest against the oppression of Russian Jews, and thereby enlist American Jews to act against it, Wilhelmina Wittigschlager gave a lecture about the former's suffering. The anonymous writer of a short article, published in *The Pittsburgh Press Newspaper* on 26 January 1906, states that:

> Wilhelmina Wittigschlager, author of *Minna: Wife of the Young Rabbi*, held her audience spellbound when […] she talked to a gathering of patriotic societies and women's clubs on Russian life and conditions. Much of this is told in her book; and if she has written of it, the lecture must have been both pleasurable and profitable for her listeners. Madame Wittigschlager has spent many years in Russia studying the life of both Jews and peasants and ought to know whereof she speaks and writes.[6]

This interesting piece shows how Wittigschlager uses her novel to propagate political and communal change. Similarly to her protagonist, who acts against the injustice enacted towards oppressed workers in Chicago and against Russia's oppressors who torment peasants and working class, Wittigschlager uses the public stage to advance humane, patriotic, and national goals. The novel is mobilized or, to be more precise, feels mobilized to give prescriptions of what should be done to enlist public opinion and action against social and economic inequality.

Minna's involvement in the Chicago anarchist movement is detailed in great length in the novel and serves as a precursor to her much more risky association with the anarchists in Russia. Minna is invited by her friend, Ella, to attend one of the meetings of a labour organization. "The first one [meeting] was a shock," Minna confesses, "but now I wholly sympathize with them even if they are Anarchists" (Wittigschlager 1905, 196). Minna's involvement in the Chicago labour protest movement, which advocated shortening labourers' working hours and increasing their wages (Heberman 2004, 977),[7] is minutely described. The movement that started in the 1870s, with modest protests aimed at instituting an eight-hour workday to provide more rest for workers, as well as to offer additional jobs for the unemployed, became more persistent during the economic slowdown occurring between 1882 and 1886. The uprising eventually led to an anarchist riot, known as "The Haymarket affair" ("The Haymarket massacre"), an aftermath of a bombing that took place at a labour demonstration on 4 May 1886, resulting in the deaths of seven police officers and at least four civilians. Eight anarchist

6 Untitled article, *The Pittsburgh Press Newspaper*, 26 January 1906, 5.

7 According to Michael Heberman, Chicago workers were employed for more than 60 hours a week and were paid an average of $1.5 a day (Heberman 2004, 971). According to Kemmerer and Wickersham, "the first union to become national in scope, and also to survive a major depression, was the Knights of Labor, founded in 1869. But its growth was slow until the 1880s. Between 1880 and 1885 membership expanded from 28,000 to 100,000, and in 1886 it mushroomed to an estimated 700,000" (Kemmerer and Wickersham 1950, 213).

organizers were convicted in a sham trial, and in the end four were executed by the state, the most famous of whom was Albert Parsons.

Albert's wife, Lucy E. Parsons, the only female leader among the protesters, was a well-spoken revolutionary and the founder of a newspaper, *Freedom*, which addressed labour organizing. The fictional Minna might have been modelled after Lucy E. Parsons.[8] Both are feminists, and both have moved the boundaries of their roles as mothers and working women, as well as ethnic and religious ones (Lucy, a woman of colour and a former slave, and Minna, a Jew and formerly "enslaved" by tyrannical adoptive parents). During one of the anarchists' meetings, Minna decides to give an enthusiastic speech in support of the Russian labourers, in which she supports their Russian comrades. Minna's speech at first seems to subvert the anarchists' cause, as the speaker extols the American labour system, saying that "I've been here long enough to know that you are the best paid workers on earth [...] In Russia, where I come from, the wages you get would make the average worker feel like a prince. You, shoemakers, you get in a week what your fellow workers in Russia get in six months!" (Wittigschlager 1905, 197). Nevertheless, in an ironic twist, after being almost removed from the stage, Minna wins back her audience, turning their attention to the hardships of the Russian workers. In a fervent address, aimed at evoking the unionists' solidarity with their fellow workers, speaking against the latter's abuse, inequality, physical and economic insecurity, and despair, Minna emerges as a true social leader, confident, assertive, and convincing. Speaking about Russian peasants' hardships, Minna eloquently proceeds:

> There (in Russia), they have the government to fight and there is no law with them. They ask for a voice in making the laws and they are beaten and cast into prison! They rise in defense of their rights and are shot down like dogs! They cry for bread and get the knout! Fellow workers, I want your help to assist those people. Help me to help them and I will help you to help yourselves. (Wittigschlager 1905, 196)

As a true Bildungsroman heroine, Minna, a recent immigrant to America, a single mother, a foreigner, a Jew, and, till recently, a lowly seamstress, has finally

8 Minna's address echoes Lucy Parsons's speech "I am an Anarchist," in which Parsons calls labourers to action, saying "count the myriads starving; count the multiplied thousands who are homeless; number those who work harder than slaves and live on less and have fewer comforts than the meanest slaves […] They are not objects of charity, they are the victims of the rank injustice that permeates the system of government, and of political economy that holds sway from the Atlantic to the Pacific […] The constitution says there are certain inalienable rights, among which are a free press, free speech and free assemblage. The citizens of this great land are given by the constitution the right to repel the unlawful invasion of those rights […] Liberty has been named anarchy. If this verdict is carried out it will be the death knell of America's liberty. You and your children will be slaves" (Parsons 1998, 657–660).

accomplished her private mission. She went through a successful acculturation process, went to university and became a medical doctor. Now she feels powerful enough to help unprivileged workers in her professional capacity of a doctor, as an active participant in workers' insurgence, and as a feminist who promotes women's rights. Ironically, though, we should not forget that the same capitalist system that she and her fellow rebels protest against has allowed her and many other immigrants to gain high education and improved status.[9] Noteworthy, the first part of Minna's speech in which she contrasts America's relatively non-violent treatment of protesters with Russia's brutal tyranny, and which has almost led to her banishment from the stage, turns out to be prophetic. The Haymarket affair has proved that the Russian government's brutality is akin to the American one, as a quiet workers' protest turned into a violent riot, causing the death of eight people and the conviction of eight others despite a lack of evidence against them.

Interestingly, Lucy Parsons's speech "Southern Lynchings," published in 1892 in *Freedom*, a newspaper she founded, responds to and, at the same time, offsets Minna's speech at the anarchists' meeting. Parsons asserts that Americans do not have to travel to Russia to "drop a tear of sympathy over the persecuted Jew. If they tread behind Mason's and Dixon's line, they will encounter such atrocities before which those of Russia, bad as they are, pale into insignificance! [...] Where has justice fled?" (Parsons 2004, 70).

It cannot be verified whether Wittigschlager read or heard Parsons' speech. Nevertheless, the reference to the persecution of Russian Jews and to Russian labourers' destitution attests that these struggles were well known to the American readers, and hence it explains why Minna's address at the meeting was eventually empathized with. On the other hand, Parsons' speech undermines Russian despotism, since, according to her assertion, the atrocities that people of colour endure in America are much graver than those suffered by the Jews and the Russians.

When modelling Minna, in addition to envisioning Lucy Parsons as an ultimate female rebel, Wittigschlager probably had in mind the figure of Emma Goldman,

9 Interestingly, William M. Feigenbaum (1886–1949), a Jewish statistician, politician, and journalist, who immigrated to America from Belgium and was member of the Socialist Party of America, addresses the same controversy as Wittigschlager does with regard to the costs and benefits of the capitalistic system. In his article "Have We a Country to Defend?" (1917), Feigenbaum maintains that, on the one hand, "the capitalist class owns the nation; hence, it owns everything within the nation; hence, the working class owns nothing within that nation," but, on the other hand, "there are flaws in the reasoning. The poor worker — no matter how poor — HAS a home. It may be a few poor rooms in a tenement. It may be a shack in a mining camp. But he has a home, and the few sticks of furniture that he has purchased with so much sacrifice, the few ornaments, the few dishes, mean more in actual life stuff to him than all the palaces of millionaires, who have homes in every summer and winter resort in the land" (Feigenbaum 1917, 1). The price of capitalism is dear, but without it, Minna could neither receive an opportunity to attain personal freedom and relative equality nor attain professional and economic success.

the most renowned female anarchist at the time. Goldman was born in Kovno, Lithuania, in 1869 to a Jewish family, and after moving to St Petersburg in 1882, the young Emma made contact with radical students who shared revolutionary ideas. Despairing from the prospect of changing Russian reality and picturing of a new reality epitomizing equal opportunity and liberty, Emma and her sister Helena immigrated to the United States in 1885. Goldman, similarly to Minna, was employed as a low-wage seamstress in Rochester, NY, and suffered from poverty and abuse. Her dream for a better and just life was shattered by the dreary realities of working-class life. Goldman understood that life in America could be as restrictive as that she had left behind. Emma Goldman, like Minna, left her husband after a very short and unsatisfactory marriage and moved to New York City to become a revolutionary. She was sentenced to a year in prison in 1893 for a speech at a demonstration of the jobless. After her release, she triumphantly proclaimed that the authorities "can never stop women from talking" (Goldman 1910, 207).

Goldman experienced political repression for several years but avoided arrest until 1917, when she was jailed for eighteen months for speaking out against American soldiers' draft during World War I. In 1917, Emma and her lover, Alexander Berkman, were jailed for revolting against compulsory draft. After spending two years in jail, they were deported back to Russia. Initially sympathetic to the Russian October Revolution, Goldman changed her opinion and condemned the Soviet Union for its brutal despotism. Consequently, Goldman left the Soviet Union and in 1923 published a book about her experiences, *My Disillusionment in Russia* (McKay 2017, 38). The fictitious/semi-biographical account of Minna's life has many parallels with that of Goldman, including their revolutionary spirit, joined by their rebellion against patriarchy. Both women sought justice and invested untiring efforts to improve workers' conditions. Both triumphed over gender restrictions and constructed identities outside marriage. Both were jailed, persecuted, abused, disillusioned, and ultimately set free.

After settling in Chicago, working as a doctor and actively participating in Chicago's labour meetings, Minna decides to go back to Russia and realize her long-term dream, that of finding her biological mother. Helped by a Russian nobleman, Count Karapot, whom she meets in Chicago, Minna arrives to Russia and resides in the Count's castle while the Count sends detectives to trace Minna's parents. Meanwhile, Minna secretly joins a group of Russian anarchists/nihilists. In an overly melodramatic speech, Minna confesses that:

> while I drink at the fountain of Nihilism and find it sweet to my taste. Oh, to do something for humanity! To serve the world as a ministering angel sent to relieve its suffering! Everywhere I go there are thousands in want and only a few in luxury. I see on every hand people downtrodden and oppressed; and Nihilism the only salvation for Russia. To help them I

> must help the cause. Up with the good cause, then! Life and liberty for the people! (Wittigschlager 1905, 227)

The narrator, similarly to her protagonist, using a sensational and possibly an ironic undertone, comments being "consumed with the fire of such thoughts, the American Socialist opened her arms with a welcome and took the Nihilists in" (Wittigschlager 1905, 227). The comment is worthy of notice, since mostly throughout the book the narrator sides with Minna's actions and seems to admire her protagonist for her firm determination and lucid judgment. In this case, the text implies that Minna was acting irresponsibly and irrationally, which foreshadows tragic outcomes and perhaps also entails some disapproval. Minna collaborates with a group of revolutionaries and communicates intelligence about the whereabouts of the Russian Tzar, Alexander the II, which eventually leads to the latter's assassination in St Petersburg on 13 March 1881. The ten members of the nihilist group Executive Committee of the Narodnaya Volya ("People's Will") are seized, tried by the Special Tribunal of the Ruling Senate, and sentenced to death by hanging. Minna is also arrested by the police and after a trial is sent to "katorga," a forced labour camp in Siberia, where she slaves as a mining and timber labourer under terribly harsh conditions until her unexpected release a year later by Count Karapot.

The Narodnaya Volya's radical nihilist group that was involved in the Tsar's assassination included seven men and three women – Sophia Perovskaya, a Russian aristocrat, Vera Figner, a descendant of Russian and German nobility, and Hesya Helfman (1855–1882), a young Russian-Jewish revolutionary, whose biography, similarly to Goldman's, echoes that of Minna. Like Minna, Hesya runs from home (a small rural town in Belarus) to the big city, Kiev, at the age of sixteen, supposedly to avoid an arranged marriage. There, Hesya is employed, similarly to Minna (while living in London and New York) in a sewing sweatshop. In 1881, Helfman joins the Narodnaya Volya group, runs a conspiratorial apartment, and is accused of actively participating in the Tsar's assassination. Hesya is sentenced to death, but after her conviction declares that she is in the fourth month of pregnancy. Consequently, her execution is postponed until after childbirth. Helfman remains in custody during pregnancy, and several months after giving birth to a girl dies in jail due to postnatal complications. Her daughter is taken to an orphanage where she dies shortly thereafter.

Helfman has become quite famous at the time, and several important newspapers, such as the Russian *Golos* and *The Times of London,* published numerous articles about her trial and conviction. I speculate that Wittigschlager, due to her frequent trips to Russia and her thorough acquaintance with Russian culture and politics, was well aware of Helfman's heartbreaking fate. Hence, when writing her novel, she might have modelled Minna's story after the life story of

Hesya Helfman or/and of Emma Goldman or combined both accounts within Minna's story. The fact that the three women were Jewish is of importance, though none of them, especially after leaving their small town or shtetl, is an orthodox or an observing Jew. What connects them as Jewish women is certainly their desire to escape arranged marriages at an early age and a strong yearning for a life different from that of their mothers or other women in their respective Jewish communities. For them, receiving education and joining progressive social or political movements are the only means for evading a gloomy predicament.

In *A Price below Rubies*, Naomi Shepherd portrays six remarkable though frequently neglected Jewish female revolutionaries (one of whom is Emma Goldman) who embraced various political directions ranging from social democracy, revolutionary communism to anarchism. Shepherd rightfully affirms that these women are most noteworthy historically as Jewish women, not just because of their involvement in politics but thanks to their "efforts to create a new identity for themselves as women, in defiance of the norms of their own society" (1993, 290). Since they grew up within repressive vicinities that presented little chance for personal and intellectual development, they have to reject their cultural and religious heritage, a rejection that comes with a heavy price. When travelling to Russia in search of her parents, Minna leaves her friends, job, and son behind (the latter under the care of acquaintances). She cannot imagine that her journey will last several years and that she will eventually be sent to labour camps, get sick, recover, and be miraculously rescued by a friend. Similarly, Emma Goldman and Hesya Gelfman sacrificed their familial and marital bonds, their motherhood and, their health, and in Gelfman's case, even her life.

While yearning for an inspiring life-changing existence and looking for intellectual challenges as well as when toiling for collective advancement and advocating progressive ideas, the fictional Minna as well as the factual Hesya and Emma are epitomes of "a new woman" who exercises personal and economic control over her life and fights for radical change. As a Jewish woman, a foreigner, and a female revolutionary, the figure of Minna is the ultimate "Other;" actually, she is a triple "Other." As such, Minna has the leeway and the audacity to break societal conventions, which I speculate that Wilhelmina Wittigschlager, like her protagonist, would like to do as well. The cultural influence of actual Jewish female anarchists and rebels on the literary depiction of a fictional Jewish woman, Minna, and on the literary work produced by a Jewish female creative writer of this period is of importance. Shepherd maintains that defiant women unrelentingly stood for their political beliefs. As "women of ideas they tried to evolve a new, difficult, but more rewarding way to live as a woman" (Shepherd 1993, 290), which made them thoroughly modern and worthy foremothers for today's generation of young Jews.

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