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The Ordeal of Henya Pekelman, a Female Construction Worker

David De Vries and Talia Pfeffermann

Henya Pekelman was born in 1903 to a Jewish lower-middle-class family in the small town of Marculesti, Bessarabia (today part of Moldova). Most of the Jewish residents in Marculesti were farmers who lived off the land, but Henya's large family engaged mainly in minor commerce. Henya studied in a cheder, a Jewish religious preschool, finishing her schooling at the age of eleven on the eve of the First World War. She was a mischievous and inquisitive child, beloved by her warm and supportive father. But relations between her parents were poor, and family quarrels, slanderous exchanges, and ugly gossip were part of daily life.

During World War I Henya's brother was conscripted into the Russian army, forcing her to help support the family from her teenage years. She borrowed money to sustain her parents, traded in flour and tobacco in the town's market, and was quickly absorbed in the local petty and collusive business culture.

Her background as a tobacco trader and an independent knitting worker and her experience of living among farmers in a small community encouraged Henya's identification with socialist ideas and notions of solidarity. They also attracted her to the burgeoning Zionist movement in Bessarabia. Henya associated herself with a local branch of the Zionist youth organization at seventeen and quickly became enchanted with the notion of immigrating to Palestine.

When the war was over in 1918, Henya's brother came home, but he was largely alienated from his family. Shortly after, Henya's father fell ill and on his deathbed crowned Henya "the man of the house." After her father's death she became the sole provider for the family. The stream of Zionist pioneers who passed through town on their way from Russia to Palestine cemented her decision to immigrate.

Despite the family's objections, she persuaded her mother to join her, sold the family property, and joined the local Zionist network, the first step for those intending to immigrate to Palestine. After a long journey which she and her mother began in the fall of 1920, through eastern Romania, Turkey, and Lebanon, they arrived in Palestine in September 1922.

In the next two years Henya roamed Palestine looking for work in simple construction jobs, flooring, and tobacco agriculture. She joined labor recruiting groups in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, was part of cooperative communities of workers in Jerusalem and in the north, and even attempted a small-scale venture in tobacco growing. Often unemployed and poor, she also had to support her mother, who found occasional work as a seamstress. In autumn 1924 Henya was raped by a worker in Tel Aviv named Yeruham Mirkin, who was once her business partner. The violation upon her was extreme.

The worker denied the act and renounced fatherhood of the resulting daughter. Henya's pregnancy led some of her socialist Zionist peers to ostracize her. This reaction stands in contradiction to the perception some people have of the Jewish pioneers in Palestine, who propounded sexual liberation yet in fact followed a fairly strict sexual code.

The child, named Tikvah, died a few weeks old, and the British police incarcerated Henya on suspicion of poisoning the baby. In late 1925 she was freed from jail. A year or so later she married Moshe Ba'al-Taksa, an immigrant from Russia, and in 1928 she gave birth to another daughter. In 1935 Henya published part of her Hebrew-language autobiography. The press, as well as the leaders of the women workers in the Jewish community, ignored the book.

In January 1940, Henya threw herself off the balcony of the movie theater in Dizengoff square in Tel Aviv where she worked as an usher. She was buried in Wahalat Yitzhak cemetery.

HOW TO BE A ZIONIST WORKER?

While largely ignored during and after her life, Henya's autobiography, *Chayei po'elet ba'aretz* (The life of a woman worker in her homeland), offers dramatic testimony to the struggles and sentiments of young immigrant women like her as they participated in the construction of a Zionist identity that simultaneously was inconceivable without them and largely marginalized them from the official narrative. As she wrote, "Lacking paint and paintbrush, I thus wrote of my life. Innocent things, without frills, unadorned" (all translations are ours). Her book reveals not just the many ways that nationalism and gender inflect each other but how women attempt to carve out their futures in situations where their power of action is severely constrained by their marginalized position within society at large.

Zionism for Henya meant the entire process of preparing to immigrate, the experience of the journey and of landing in Palestine, and the initial absorption into the work force. Working-class identity and Zionism were closely intertwined for her, as for so many other immigrants of the late Ottoman and early Mandate periods, with socialist Zionist rhetoric celebrating "the national destiny of the working class" and "constructive socialism." When the kibbutz became a central image of Zionism, the notion of the "urban workers' community" emerged to ensure that industrial and proletarian workers in the Jewish towns of Palestine maintained a socialist and Zionist identity. The tendency to behave as a worker and be part of a social stratum whose way of life is labor-oriented was inseparable from the actual immigration to Palestine, from the effort to speak Hebrew, and from the daily participation in Zionist recreational activities and lifestyles. Few of the Jewish workers in the 1920s made a distinction between their identity as workers and their Zionist identity, and Henya was no different. Her consciousness was formed by the political changes in Eastern Europe during her youth, during meetings and lectures at the Zionist youth movements, and while living on the training farm in her home country—a nationalism from the bottom up, developed by a woman who lived a life of action and work and did not constantly trouble her mind with various ideological articulations. In that sense Henya was like so many other female workers in the 1920s and 1930s, whose stories were published in bulletins and in *Dvar Hapoelet*, the women workers' magazine of the labor movement.

Henya's memories of her early years in Palestine also reveal a class difference in Jewish society that was rarely discussed, either at the time or in scholarship on the Yishuv. As she describes one Friday evening, she went to a "ball" wearing a "burlap dress that my mother had embroidered and sandals without socks." She couldn't help comparing her outfit to those of the other attendees, the men "all smartly dressed," the "young women clothed with silk dressed and red lipsticks. Everybody in the room stared at me in bewilderment."

Henya frequently declared that the significance of individuals was their ability to contribute to the collective and to national objectives. "If there is a need for sacrifice," she writes in her book, "I will be happy to be sacrificed on the altar of my homeland." Her thoughts dwelt on the construction of the country: "The suffering of the individual is nothing compared to the suffering of the entire nation. Hoping that people shall no longer suffer exile—I have forgotten my own suffering." Even in retrospect, as she writes her story a few years after the events, she calls herself "the working woman whose foremost thought was the homeland." The order of priorities, which positioned the homeland first and foremost and required the formation of a "new person" who was worthy of living in this society, necessitated in her mind the cultivation of a sense of difference and distance from the Arabs—the majority in Palestine, of whom her book makes no mention.

A JEWISH PROLETARIAT

Turning from an immigrant into a worker was the key economic and social transformation that shaped Henya's life in Palestine. But her narrated experiences did not fit the idealized imagining of that experience as portrayed by the labor movement. Instead, her life was defined by chronic unemployment, poverty, roaming from one place to another seeking work, and frequent job changes, mostly in construction and agriculture.

Part of the problem was that the urban and rural economies in Palestine during the early 1920s were in a profound crisis, and their ability to absorb the increasing flow of job-seeking immigrants was limited. The immigrants entered a reality of stiff competition for jobs with both Arab and veteran Jewish workers, and many experienced long periods of unemployment. Social and political mechanisms regulated supply and demand in the labor market. The relevant institutions were the Histadrut, the umbrella group of the local labor organizations; Achdut Ha'avoda, labor's leading political party; and the labor exchanges, which constituted the local labor councils of the Histadrut. They acted both on the supply side, by referring workers to jobs, and on the demand side, through Histadrut companies, as an employer. These institutions were perceived as resources for job seekers, although they did not always promise success. Moreover, to support the working public through economic hardship, party institutions provided vocational training in critical professions and offered other forms of assistance—the workers' kitchens, informal justice systems for resolving disputes, and others.

The Jewish workers in 1920s Palestine gradually learned that they could to a certain extent acquire job skills, find employment, eat, and manage their work disputes through the nascent Histadrut institutions. This reliance mirrored the dependence of these institutions on political organs and economic resources outside Palestine, such as the Zionist movement's leadership, the Zionist Congress, and their fund-raising apparatuses.

Upon arriving in Palestine, the female immigrant worker had to adjust to this reality. For women—Henya tells us—competition for jobs was doubly harsh, since Jewish employers preferred not only Arab laborers who worked for lower pay but also a male workforce, particularly in the central fields of the Jewish economy in the midtwenties: agriculture, construction, and transportation infrastructure. The apparatuses of the political parties often collaborated with this discrimination and referred women to domestic work or jobs in factories with harsh conditions and low pay that did not enable subsistence. Letters sent by women to the unions of female workers reveal voices of protest against the discrimination, and many requests for help.

In this context Henya was notable for her independence, characterized by her personal initiative, resourcefulness, and unwillingness to compromise with the

dictates of social norms or institutional difficulties that confronted her. "I always found work for myself, and the contractors liked my work," she wrote. In fact, she noted that other workers "saw how persistently I find work independently, not through the Histadrut's labor exchange." Driven by her determination to work and make a living, between 1922 and 1924 she wandered from place to place, changed jobs, and challenged the cycle of dependence on institutional mechanisms when they did not meet her expectations and needs. She enlisted her local knowledge and improvisation skills to make ends meet, bypassed the bureaucracies of the labor exchanges, and broadened her job search circles by using personal acquaintances within the apparatus, workers in different workplaces, and people from her hometown. Through these circles, based on networks of people from the same home countries and on networks of labor-recruiting groups, she often found help. However, in conditions of chronic unemployment, the constant process of finding work, losing work, and searching once again became a blur and, often, frustratingly futile. "In 1923 the economic downturn was increasingly felt. All branches saw more and more unemployed, me included. Most of the workers were bachelors and didn't care much for their condition, but I had to provide not only for myself but for my mother as well. . . . I roamed about all day long hoping to find some work. I came home tired after many futile searches and sat in our tent endlessly worried."

Henya's story reveals the extent to which the immigrants' experience of urban work was one of exhausting intraworker competition and struggle without any shelter of protective legislation from the British authorities. But she created opportunities for herself and worked the system, all the while challenging the official rhetoric of the Histadrut and larger labor movement through her experiences and willingness to record them.

In an attempt to escape the cycle of dependency in which male and female workers were trapped, in 1924 Henya joined a tobacco-growing initiative in Petach Tikvah (a few kilometers east of Tel Aviv) as a business partner, ostensibly crossing the lines of class affiliation which she had proudly declared her whole life. However, she noted that even as a partner in the business (which began to flourish that year) she was treated by the local farmers as an employed worker, and when the initiative failed she went back to work as an agricultural laborer.

The shift from searching for work to being an entrepreneur and employer was no trivial matter, creating tensions with the social, labor, and national language that prevailed in Henya's social stratum. The labor leaders frequently slandered those who tended toward economic individualism, referring to "the embourgeoisement of the worker." But for Henya these were natural strategies for economic survival, and so she did not indicate a conflict of any kind between the material reality that dictated such transitions and her ideological commitment to the collective. This was the case, for example when she "contacted Yeruham Mirkin and his relative

regarding growing tobacco. Ben Shamir [the relative] had to attain the money for the work and I had to manage it. The profits we shared equally." When the work was completed, Henya reverted to her position as an ordinary wage worker.

HENYA AND THE ZIONIST LABOR MOVEMENT

The immigrants' increasing disposition to think and act like workers was a marked attribute of the creation of a working class. The aspiration to be a pioneer expressed their desire to be at the forefront of the realization of the ethos to perform physical labor, preferably agricultural, and be part of a productive collective. The fulfillment of this aspiration required many immigrants to reinvent themselves and undergo a type of self-redemption by adopting a new value system, adapting themselves physically, receiving appropriate vocational training, ascetically settling for less, and acquiring a new language. The process demanded the individual's total dedication and was riddled with doubts and difficulties, documented in many protocols, diaries, and autobiographies of the period.

Henya's world was delimited by work scarcity and the numerous vulnerabilities of the nascent laboring community. She was determined to make a living through productive work, was proud of her ability to do so, and kept her self-esteem through myriad difficulties by means of her working-class consciousness. As she explained it to her mother, who lamented not being able to support her daughter: "I aspire to always be a worker, and to earn my bread through labor. . . . I belong to a class, I belong to people, who have laws, to the society of workers, the proletarians. . . . A worker with a consciousness would never want to be bourgeois; his aspiration is to improve his living conditions."

The importance she attributed to her life as a worker also influenced her romantic choices. She rejected the courtship of a physician only because his profession seemed less productive than that of a builder or an agricultural worker: "When I met him in Istanbul as a carpenter," she wrote, "I liked him very much. Later, when I met him in Tel Aviv as a physician, I felt very distant from him."

Despite her enthusiastic laborite consciousness she was not uncritical of the class aspect of her identity. Henya saw through the weakness of the system that was limited in the support it could offer her, writing about the bureaucrats whose behavior did not correspond to their declared ethical codes. In one episode, officials of one of the labor parties in Tel Aviv created an inequitable division of labor, giving preference to a particular woman worker: "Since the labor union considered her a party activist, she and her group were given one construction project after the other." Henya, who was not a member of the party apparatus, found it difficult to make a living in construction, despite her training.

The writings of other workers also criticize the conduct of the labor movement. These memoirs and autobiographies frequently voice doubts as to the correct

ideological way, and their writers often express criticism, though their perspective is still that of one who is an integral part of the movement, a dedicated and loyal member of the collective. This was not the case with Henya. Although she was close to organizational actions led by the Histadrut and the political parties, she positions herself as an outsider. Moreover, her probing of her ideological surroundings, doubts, and reservations is written from the perspective of one standing on the threshold as a welcome guest.

This duality is exemplified by Henya's descriptions of her contact with Gdud Ha'avoda, the early 1920s socialist and communitarian labor battalion. Henya's ascetic and high work ethic led members of the battalion with whom she worked in Jerusalem to suggest that she join them; in an unusual move, they were also willing to accept her elderly mother. Aware of the honor bestowed upon her, Henya examined the ways of the battalion and found that they did not meet the high moral standards she had set for herself: "In the battalion there were at the time many lazy and egotistical comrades, who exploited the good ones, and this held me back from joining." This unwillingness to compromise her private, stringent standards and those of her environment characterized her broader attitude toward life: in any clash between practice and ideology, ideology won out, even when this meant she had to implement it alone.

WOMEN WORKERS

Henya's writings provide a comprehensive and detailed description of the daily practices women employed to overcome the imbalanced opportunity structure and gender discrimination in the job market and to construct their identity as equal members of the emerging society, as well as the responses they garnered. Her testimony surveys experiences in a broad variety of realms, starting with politics, where women's attempts to organize met with patronizing responses from party leaders, and continuing through the social arena, the workers' lifestyle, and the prevalent tension, both hidden and open, around the question of women's social roles.

Women's struggle was unique. Some employed a strategy of gender blurring, representing themselves in the labor market as having a vague feminine identity and increasing their involvement with workers' organizations, party politics, and the labor movement's cultural institutions. Henya recounts women's attempts to enter market segments that were occupied solely by men, such as construction and carpentry. These attempts originated in the idea that by proving their economic efficiency, women would be accepted into the community of laborers as equals and reject traditional Diaspora-associated perceptions. Henya describes her Sisyphean experience in a training group for women pavers. The graduates of the program organized in an independent work group, similar to the ones set up by

men, which acted as contractors in the construction industry. She dwells on the foremen's skepticism of the women's professional skills.

The descriptions of working life also depict Henya's strategy of behaving like her male co-workers as a mechanism for fending on her own when the paving group fell apart. She found work by taunting a group of male workers, claiming they were taking the best jobs. "I once passed by a building where cement was molded on the roof," Henya wrote. "I knew all the workers there, and they asked me why I roam about without work. I answered that since they seize all available jobs, a girl is left only with housekeeping—which I haven't yet agreed to do." When they replied that she was welcome to work with them as long as she could keep up, she climbed up the scaffolding and went to work, saying they were the ones causing her to slow down. Instead of waiting for approval, she set facts on the ground and continued to show up for work on the site until the construction job was finished.

Equally as interesting, Henya's words and actions suggest that many female workers preferred Oriental and masculine clothing, which, along with their male patterns of behavior, led to the creation of a new culture of the body, one that blurred physical differences into an androgyny of sorts. This was further emphasized by what Henya describes as lively, carnivalesque folk dancing during which the young men shouted, "We don't need women."

At the Friday-evening ball described earlier in this chapter, it was not merely Henya's outfit that left the bourgeois partygoers bewildered. Beyond diverging from their dress code, she initiated lively folk dances. The most interesting aspect of her description is the responses of the other guests to her appearance and conduct, and their unspoken condemnation, of which Henya was fully aware, concealed in the praise they showered on her.

Henya constantly examined the expected male and female roles and consistently offers a different interpretation of the binary distinctions that prevailed in her society. Describing her affair with a co-worker, she dreams, "We can both move to a settlement; we will plough together, sow together, and together reap the crops. We shall live together in a little house that we ourselves shall build. I will help him outside in all his work, and he will help me with all the household work. We will both have one outlook, and together we can fight the obstacles that arise in our path."

Unfortunately, the blurring of gender identity which Henya largely embodied was usually a lost cause. To get jobs that were mostly taken by men and keep them or advance to better ones, women had to enter into networks of connections and pressure, which men had to do to a lesser degree. In fact, the blurring of gender identity served as a means for women's integration into only a small part of the labor market. Henya's transitions from job to job and place to place evince a deepening void between her hopes for work and the employers' attitude toward [illegible] between her expectations of belonging to a community and her loneliness [illegible]

Henya thus enables us to observe how in the process of becoming a worker, different identities are at work simultaneously—national, class, and gender. These identities served as tools for understanding and coping. Henya's Zionism colored her experiences as a worker and provided them with justification and logic. "Were it not for the stomach occasionally reminding us the duty of eating," she wrote, "we would forget that altogether. Each and everyone cared mostly for building the land." Her material suffering, which was such a deep-seated part of her identity as a worker, gave meaning to her loneliness in Zionist society as long as she could perceive (and justify) it in terms of a necessary sacrifice for a common goal. Her gender identity, in particular the part that blurred gender distinctions, pointed to a partial and alternative way of surviving. "In the streets of Haifa," she wrote, "women workers were seen in simple cotton dresses and without shoes. Their faces were suntanned, and a unique smile spread all over them. These workers did not crave to attract the men; they had a human aspiration, they had a battle from within and without, against the sentiments of deference that were imprinted in their souls for generations. This battle gave them more grace than silk dresses and cosmetics."

At the same time, Henya notes that excruciating inner conflicts troubled the women around her, who could only resolve them by giving up their gender battle and taking upon themselves the image of woman as shaped by the social environment—namely, by sufficing with traditional female roles in the home and in child rearing without adequate representation or participation in the social and political centers of power. Henya's recognition of women's conditions disillusioned her and distanced her from her original desire to be an active partner in the construction of nation and society: "I have changed; I have come to know life very clearly, and people as well."

GENDER INEQUALITY AMONG THE PIONEERS

Henya's story also underscores a political dimension that was an integral part of working women's experience in this formative period of British rule in Palestine. First and foremost, she exposes the priorities of the labor movement, which positioned nation and state building at the top, and far below, equality between men and women. The difficulty in translating the ideology of gender equality in agricultural society to an urban reality often attested to passivity and neglect.

Henya emphasizes the labor movement's institutional indifference toward women workers, its failure to persuade Jewish employers in the towns to hire women, and its refraining from positioning women in key roles in the local labor organizations.

Working women increasingly expected that the institutions of the labor movement would provide them with organizational representation. However, Henya

claimed that this was not merely an abstract hope of help from remote institutions but a search for actual representation on the ground, in the workplaces themselves, and in the community where the power relations encountered by female immigrant workers required collective representation. In the last instance, she argued, "the woman worker remained empty handed."

Nevertheless, party and bureaucratic conflicts and, no less significantly, tensions between national and local interests marginalized the concern for women workers' interests. The labor movement's leadership rejected the frequent criticism against this marginalization with the argument that preference must be given to building social and cultural institutions, to organizing in the workplace, and to taking control of the labor market, justifications Henya never accepted.

The growing distance between the institutions of the labor movement—particularly the Women Workers' Council—and the female worker as an individual is no rarity in the history of labor movements or in the bureaucratic institutionalization of workers' communities and professional unions. But with Henya this is illuminated in a more complex manner, stemming not only from the embourgeoisement of party and Histadrut leadership. The distance originated in this case from overemphasizing the national aspect of Zionist identity as a sacrifice that individuals were expected to make. "We, the pioneers," Henya wrote, "came to our homeland, to build our new lives and to sacrifice ourselves for our country." By representing an agenda dictated by the labor leadership, female labor leaders grew alienated from people like Henya whose experiences demanded a more personal treatment in finding employment and providing for material needs.

In fact, Henya's book discloses the problem of representation as it developed in the initial stages of the labor movement. It also undermines the party-political elite's argument that the labor movement, and particularly the women workers' movement, faithfully represented women workers both physically—in the job market and in the workplace—and politically. The separate organization of women workers within the Histadrut was unable to compensate for this political deficiency because there were very few women in the leadership of the two main workers' political parties that led the labor movement (Achdut Ha'avoda and Hapo'el Hatza'ir).

Henya's criticism emerges clearly from the way she portrays the female leaders, conveying a vague sense of revulsion at the political development of the Yishuv. Describing one of the leaders of the female workers, Henya held that she was among those women whose main power was but in their mouth . . . and all their doings were the opposite to what she said, and truthfully she cared only for herself." Indeed, Henya's words provide historians with an important sign: in the labor movement there was a gap, even at its inception, between its growing political power in the Yishuv and its ability to represent workers, male and female.

Henya was deeply aware of her gender identity and of its political and social implications. Moreover, her language and style meant to embody the new Zionist woman she and her co-workers drew for themselves. The active, enterprising personality was the basis for the very act of writing and self-representation, while the direct and precise language exemplifies the traits of a new femininity—direct, open, devoid of adornment and embellishment. As she declares in the poem with which she begins the book,

I have not diminished the shadows. I have not augmented the light.
Without paint or brush I have written of my life,
Simple words without mascara or decoration
For which the worker's heart yearns . . .

HENYA'S TRAGEDY

In autumn 1924 Henya experienced what she refers to as "her tragedy." Yeruham Mirkin, whose advances she had rejected, lured her into his rented room, locked the door on the pretense of not wanting the landlady to see them together, and raped her. The word *rape* is never explicitly used in the book, only *sexual assault.* In fact, in the book Henya cannot bear to describe the act, so it appears as two blank lines, with her first memory afterward being her stumbling on the beach "like a madwoman."

According to her narrative, Henya tried to abort the child with a hot bath, and when this failed, thought to commit suicide by drowning herself at the beach. But, according to her account, a higher power "suddenly seized me [and] pulled me by my hair." The power, or inner voice, gave her the will to live through the suffering and overcome the intense guilt for her violated honor: "Why should you kill yourself? Because a contemptible man abused you? Your death will place the blame on you alone, but if you live—you can still take revenge on him. You need to go on living just for the revenge."

However courageous her willingness to stand against her assailant, the reality was that in 1920s Jewish Palestine, as in most places, rape was not frequently discussed; it was a biblical term that was seldom used in spoken Hebrew in a sexual context. When the book was republished in 2007 and the press mentioned Henya's rape, the family of the alleged rapist adamantly denied it. Regardless, the suspect denied his paternity and refused to take responsibility for his act, and Henya, who felt that she could not remain where people knew her, went away to cope with her "personal tragedy" alone.

Her journey was now paved with hardships and loneliness. Since she would have been ostracized for being unmarried and pregnant, she tried to hide her unusual circumstances by changing her name and inventing an imaginary husband

and went back to work at flooring in Tel Aviv. Difficulties earning a living and many conflicts with other workers reduced her to an emotional state she described as "torments of death," filled with vengefulness and suicidal thoughts.

In May 1925 Henya gave birth to a daughter and named her Tikvah ("hope"). A few weeks later the baby died from unclear causes. The police arrested Henya on suspicion of poisoning the child (she was supposedly motivated by worries that she would not be able to sustain Tikvah). Henya suspected that the real culprit was the father. She was released in early 1927, feeling like a social outcast, isolated and persecuted. "And from that day when I was released, my emotional tragedy began," she wrote at the end of her book. A few months later she married, then had another daughter (Zipporah, meaning "a female bird," alluding to the sense of freedom Henya was seeking). The family lived in Tel Aviv, in harsh economic circumstances. Freedom was, as she later wrote, worse than hell.

In the coming years Henya divided her life between work, family, and writing the autobiography which is the only source for the story unraveled above. The small book (published in 1935) is in fact the first volume and covers her story only up to 1928. The drafts for the second volume were apparently lost, and whatever happened to Henya in the early 1930s is unknown, even to her family and the workers she associated with in the passing decade.

The incompleteness and partiality of Henya's life story as retold in the book is quite telling. The book opens with a poetic eulogy on secrecy, openness, individuality, and nationalism and ends twice: first with Henya's final note on the tragic life she has had following the rape, the death of her child, and incarceration, and secondly with a feminist tractate written by her husband. Throughout the book there is an attempt to write the private story as an integral, yet different, component of the collective story. It sheds light on the experiences of a single woman in the city who must construct her life within the confined opportunities available to her, reorganize her world after immigration, integrate into her new environment, and manage the tension between a desire to meet the collective needs and the personal interest of economic subsistence.

Especially prominent is Henya's need to balance her desire to belong with her need to define herself according to her own conceptions. This gives rise to her resistance to what she calls "the demands and taste of society," to which, she explains openly, "I cannot surrender." For Henya, writing—and self-publishing—her book, which conveyed the multidimensionality of the Jewish female worker's identity, was a clear expression of her unwillingness to surrender to the mainstream notions of Jewish society in pre-1948 Palestine. Writing also clearly provided her with support to cope with social loneliness and, above all, the violence of men.

Henya's opposition to the status quo in which she found herself had many manifestations: her gender-crossing dress, her strategy of gender blurring to enter the labor market by adopting masculine behavioral patterns, her constant speaking

out against and open defiance of the establishment and social frameworks. The culmination of this defiance was her decision to write openly and explicitly about the occurrence of a rape in the community, about pregnancy and childbirth out of wedlock. Although other such cases were known, topics such as intimacy and sexuality were concealed and suppressed in the discourse of the pioneering settlement society, and in this respect Henya's voice is unparalleled. Not only does she raise these topics for public debate, but her story contains harsh criticism of society's conduct and its attitude toward those who have suffered these calamities.

Henya's continuous denunciation positions her as patroller of her community's borders: ideological borders (reconciling her belonging to a socialist movement with her role as an entrepreneur), borders that shape gender behavior, ethical borders (justifying the social and Zionist priorities and exposing the problems of achieving them). She constantly examines the limits of these expanses and of her own power, of what is allowed and what is forbidden, while offering her own interpretations and possibilities for a different life.

Moreover, her insistent objections are extremely charged. They hover between silence and direct and even callous words on topics she perceives as interpersonal or social distortions. Her silence contains many tones—awkwardness, shame, insult, concealment—and alongside these are thunderous silences, giving rise to a cumulative and powerful anger. "A strong desire for revenge began to flood all the chambers of my heart," she writes. "A revenge against all those who abuse woman's honor. Many generations blame only the young girl, and it is she who suffers; and no wonder that she herself almost ceases to believe that others would testify to her integrity." But more than rebelling, in her writing Henya created a space for herself, a space for liberty, a realm of self-respect and self-importance and sometimes of absolute justice. Her anger depicts secreted opposition as an active mode. Such opposition is not part of an organized collective militancy but rather reflects a series of behaviors and acts that workers may implement within the confines and dependencies dictated to them in the absence of organized collective militancy.

It is not surprising that the literature that deals with workers, social-democratic parties, and labor movements often downgrades the capacity of small, weak groups and individuals to stand against the power of institutions and male leaders. Accustomed to the organizational passivity of urban women workers and to their embourgeoisement as they achieved higher economic status, society mostly perceived working women as anomalies, existing on the so-called margins of society, and sometimes considered them a threat to the collective.

For this reason, Labor's silent reception of the book must have been frustrating. The Histadrut's leaders aspired to represent women's interests, to protect female workers, and to help them in their struggle in the labor market. But they clearly prioritized nationalism and Zionism and subjugated all social actions to these causes. In a system in which Zionism and politics took precedence over

representation, equal opportunity, and social justice, the woman worker was abandoned. However, while Henya speaks out in anger against the establishment, she does not deny the ideology it represents. Even when she pays a heavy personal price and feels that the community has turned its back on her after her rape and pregnancy, her writing refrains from any measure of rebellion against Zionism or socialism. Her book was thus a cry for attention, a sort of therapeutic act by a working woman who had lost all illusions but had allowed herself to write in opposition and make her voice heard without practically challenging the social ethos or the conformity it required.

EPILOGUE

Five years lapsed between the appearance of the book in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv in 1935 and Henya's death. Not much is known about her life in these years. The book did not receive any press, not even from the Histadrut's women workers' councils that knew Henya well from her requests for jobs. The costs of the publication were probably burdensome, and Henya had to support her ailing husband and seven-year-old daughter. Women workers in the Yishuv suffered more than men from the economic slowdown of the mid-decade. This slowdown followed the financial uncertainty in the wake of Italy's war with Ethiopia, the outbreak of the Arab rebellion in Palestine in 1936, and the arrival in November of that year of the Peel Commission. The contraction of immigration to Palestine in 1937–38 and the consequent reduction in the import of capital brought about a surge in unemployment. This was only partially alleviated by the withdrawal of Palestinian Arab workers from the Jewish economy during the rebellion.

For Henya it meant that she had to find extra work, and in 1938 the labor exchange of the Women Workers' Council assigned her to be an evening usher in the newly built cinema on Dizengoff Square in Tel Aviv. The feminization of the service sector accelerated during these harsh times, mostly because of the reduction of labor costs by private capital, and Henya could now probably boast that there was hardly an unskilled occupation in the Tel Aviv economy that she had not experienced. However, the new employment arrangement could have been unstable as well, and Henya's material insecurity was probably far from dissipating. In January 1940, at the age of thirty-eight, Henya committed suicide by jumping off a rooftop of the cinema. The press published a death notice reminding the public that she had written *Chayei po'elet ba'aretz*. It failed, however, to note the doubling of the number of suicides in the Yishuv in 1935–40 compared with the previous five years and the tripling of the number of women therein over the same period, which was probably associated with the grim economic climate of the prewar years.

After its emergence in 1935, Henya's book sank into obscurity. It is all the more ironic that the reception of its republication in 2007 (followed by its staging

play in 2009) completely contrasts with the frail resonance of the original edition. In 1935 the labor movement was in the early phase of its hegemony in the Yishuv and the Zionist movement, and its leaders and the press completely ignored the book's revealing aspects on the state of women workers in the Yishuv and particularly in the labor movement itself. Now, when the concept of a labor movement has almost totally disappeared from the Israeli political scene and the organizational power of workers is nothing but a shadow of its state and ambitions during the Mandate period, the book has been well received—demonstrating, perhaps, a growing openness in Israeli society to a critical historiography of its past.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

This essay is based on Henya M. Pekelman, *Chayei po'elet ba'aretz* (The life of a worker in her homeland; Or Yehuda: Kineret, Zmora Bitan, Dvir Publishing House, 2007; in Hebrew). The book was originally published in Tel Aviv in 1935. Information on Pekelman's hometown was gathered from Leib Koperstein and Meir Kotik, *Marculesti, Memorial of a Jewish Town in Bessarabia* (Tel Aviv: Irgun Yotzei Marculesti Beisrael, 1977; in Hebrew). See also Tamar Hess, "Henya Pekelman: An Injured Witness of Socialist Zionist Settlement in Mandatory Palestine," *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, Nos. 1–2 (Spring/Summer 2008), pp. 208–13. For women workers in early Mandate Palestine, we consulted Rachel Katzenelson Shazar, *Words of Women Workers* (Tel Aviv: Histadrut, 1930; in Hebrew); see also Deborah Bernstein, *The Struggle for Equality: Urban Women Workers in Pre-state Israeli Society* (New York: Praeger, 1987). Additional information on the perspective of the leadership of the women workers' movement was found in Ada Maimon, *Fifty Years of the Women Workers' Movement* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1955; in Hebrew).

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

For the social history of workers in 1920s Palestine, see David De Vries, *Idealism and Bureaucracy: The Origins of "Red Haifa"* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1999; in Hebrew). For women and the question of equality in the Yishuv, see Deborah Bernstein, *Pioneers and Homemakers: Jewish Women in Pre-state Israel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), and Bernstein, "Daughters of the Nation: Between the Public and Private Sphere in Pre-state Israel," in Judith R. Baskin, ed., *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), pp. 287–311. Among the works on gender and Zionism, see Eyal Kafkafi, "The Psycho-intellectual Aspect of Gender Inequality in Israel's Labor Movement," *Israel Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1999), pp. 188–211. For the movement of women workers in the Zionist-socialist labor movement, see Bat-Sheva

Margalit-Stern, *Redemption in Bondage: The Women Workers Movement in Palestine, 1920–1939* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zviv and Schechter Institute, 2006; in Hebrew), and Margalit-Stern, "'They Have Wings but No Strength to Fly': The Women's Workers Movement between Feminine Control and Masculine Dominance," in Ruth Kark, Margalit Shilo, and Galit Hasan-Rokem, eds., *Jewish Women in Pre-state Israel: Life History, Politics, and Culture* (Boston: Brandeis University Press, 2008), pp. 202–16. On Pekelman and her book, see Orna Ben-Meir, "The Israeli Shoe: Biblical Sandals and Native Israeli Identity," in Edna Nahshon, ed., *Jews and Shoes* (Oxford, U.K.: Berg, 2008), pp. 77–90, and Talia Pfefferman, "Women's Silence in 'The Life of a Worker in Her Homeland' (1935) by Henya Pekelman," in Margalit Shilo and Gideon Kats, eds., *Gender in Israel* (Beersheba: Ben-Gurion University, 2011; in Hebrew), pp. 23–49.