



Nora Gold speaking at the Toronto Jewish Literary Festival in 2013, in celebration of the third birthday of Jewish Fiction.net

Nora Gold

Jewish fiction in the digital era

By Mordechai Beck

WHY WOULD a published and prize-winning author decide to expose other writers to a wider audience? Isn't there something about jealousy among writers that would prevent such a radical move? Not so for Nora Gold, a Canadian Jewish writer, who some ten years ago created an online literary journal solely for Jewish fiction, called JewishFiction.net. A professor of social work at McMaster University who left academia in 2000 to have more time for her own fiction writing, by 2010 Gold had already won a Canadian Jewish Book Award for her first book (*Marrow and Other Stories*), and then in 2014 her first novel (*Fields of Exile*) won the Canadian Jewish Literary Award. Her third book, the novel *The Dead Man*, published in 2016, garnered international praise and was published in Hebrew in Israel with Carmel. But back in 2010 she began noticing that a number of writers she knew were having trouble getting their work published.

"In 2010," she told *The Jerusalem Report*, "I spoke to these writers, who I knew wrote very well, and asked them what was happening. Basically, the publishing industry was undergoing a sea-change due to the move into digital publishing. This may sound weird now because at this point digital publishing is such a fact of life, but back then it caused a real crisis to the industry, and publishers were reluctant to take a chance on anybody who was not already well-known. One of the writers I spoke to was told by a publisher she'd approached that within a decade or so this would probably all settle down, so until then she

should just put her novels in a drawer. This writer told me: 'I can't wait 10 or 15 years. If no one is willing to publish my work, I'm just going to stop writing.' This got me worrying about all the good Jewish fiction being written that had no way to get out into the world. And even if things got better in a decade's time – which I'm not sure even now it has – it meant that in the interim a lot of great work would be lost. I thought that, even though I am not an expert in digital technology, perhaps I could do something to help these writers. So I created Jewish Fiction .net (the name taken from its website address, www.jewishfiction.net).

"Fortunately, as I was starting this journal and preparing for our first issue, I attended the Kisufim international conference for Jewish writers, taking place at Mishkenot Hashananim in Jerusalem, organized by Israeli poet Hava Pinhas-Cohen. There were writers there from all over the world and people got very excited when they heard about JewishFiction.net. Someone suggested I make an announcement about it at one of the plenary events, so I did. I explained that this journal would publish Jewish-themed stories or novel excerpts that were either written in English or translated into English, but not yet published in English. Many people came up to me afterwards, and some offered me their work, including translations from Romanian and Turkish. Now, ten years later, Jewish Fiction .net has published 475 works of fiction that were never before published in English, and which were originally written in 17 languages. And we are the only

English-language journal, either in print or online, devoted exclusively to the publishing of Jewish fiction."

When its first issue appeared, the response to JewishFiction.net was instantaneous and positive. Articles about this journal appeared in *The Forward*, *The Jewish Week*, and *The Jerusalem Post*, and many writers wrote to express their gratitude.

"We received some very touching letters from authors," said Gold. "They were enthusiastic and appreciative of what we were doing. And we could sense the importance of our work because often, as soon as we accepted a story, the author would immediately send us another one, since they felt there was no other place for Jewish-themed fiction. Being a writer myself, I could understand how glad they were to find a publication that respected and valued what they were doing. But because this happened so frequently, we had to institute a policy of publishing authors only once; otherwise we would just be repeatedly publishing the same select few, and there would be no room in our journal for other emerging writers.

"Of course, we do not publish only emerging authors. We are honoured to have published fiction by such eminent writers as Elie Wiesel, Aharon Appelfeld, Chava Rosenfarb, and A.B. Yehoshua, to name just a few, and every issue is a mix of well-known and lesser-known authors side by side. We also include a mix of languages. For example, in our most recent issue, Issue 28, we featured stories originally written in five different languages: Czech, Hungarian,

Yiddish, Hebrew, and English. Discovering new translations and translators in a particular delight for me. For example, at one point I received through our submissions portal the translation of an outstanding story originally written in Hungarian by Gábor T. Szántó. We accepted this story and then I asked its excellent translators, Walter Burgess and

Marietta Morry, if they had translated any other Jewish-themed stories that had not yet been published in English. In fact they had, and we published that one, too! So it happens that sometimes through a translator we discover new authors. The same thing happened with Andrea G. Labinger, a translator from Spanish who introduced us to a number of terrific Jewish writers from South America.”

Does Gold find some authors or translators difficult?

“Certainly there have been a few who have not been a pleasure to work with. But for the most part the writers and translators I’ve met through Jewish Fiction .net have been wonderful, and it’s been a real, and unexpected, gift to now have this literary network from around the world. Regarding translators, we have a very fruitful collaboration with the Institute of Translation of Hebrew Literature, and as a result we’ve been able to include many exceptional Israeli writers in Jewish Fiction .net. We also work with a number of other independent translators from Hebrew, all very talented. Hebrew is the language with the most translations that we have published: so far we have published 77 Israeli stories or novel excerpts.”

In the sometimes cut-throat business of publishing, how does Jewish Fiction .net survive? On this point Gold is candid:

“We exist entirely on donations, and all of us – except for our lawyer and website technician – work on this journal on a volunteer basis. I am blessed with an amazing group of volunteers who evaluate our incoming submissions or edit manuscripts. Every story we receive is read by at least two reviewers, and all our reviewers are very knowledgeable about Jewish literature. When we read submissions, we do so using anonymous review, so we don’t know



Gold hosting and moderating a panel that I convened called “When Women Write,” at an event sponsored by the Toronto International Festival of Authors, May 29, 2019, at Harbourfront. With me in the group photo are Loren Edizel, Susan Glickman, C. Fong Hsiung,

who the author is, or even if they are male or female, Jewish or non-Jewish, famous or unknown. Actually it has happened a couple of times that we’ve rejected something by someone well-known, and that was awkward. But unless we think a work is first-rate, we just won’t publish it. It’s a matter of integrity.”

Gold is glad when she sees emerging writers she has published going on to publish elsewhere and meeting with success. She stays in touch with a number of them and encourages them however she can. One question that emerges in our discussion is why there are not more online literary journals like Jewish Fiction .net. And why, too, there is not a print version of this journal. Gold has a very explicit take on the whys and wherefores of the current situation, and it is not limited to Jewish fiction writing.

“Part of the answer to both questions is economic,” she says. “About the second one, we simply do not have the funds to put out a print journal. As for the first question, many people think that fiction in general, and Jewish fiction even more so, will not make them a profit, either in book form or in a journal. Whether or not they are correct, this is not a problem for us, since we are not a money-making venture. It could be, I suppose, if I chose to relate to this journal as a business, but I have no such inclination. I see Jewish Fiction .net as a gift to the Jewish people. It feels meaningful to me to support new authors, or to discover Jewish fiction translated from a language we haven’t published before. (In Issue 28, we published our first translation from Czech.) It’s also exciting to get to publish a classic work that has never before been translated into English, such as Agnon’s *And The Crooked Shall Be Made Straight* translated by Michael P. Kramer, or

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a new translation of a classic work that has been previously translated, like Babel’s *Red Cavalry*, but newly translated by Boris Dralyuk. This really is a thrill.”

One specific problem that Gold has faced throughout the ten years of Jewish Fiction .net is the fact that as a genre the short story is perhaps the most difficult to pull off successfully.

“We publish stories of between 1,500 and 6,000 words, as well as novel excerpts of the same length, and it says so on our submissions page,” she says. “Yet, to our surprise, some people send us plays, poetry, drawings, or writing that is one page long, apparently not having checked our website. In any case, we are flooded with submissions, most of them short stories. I love stories myself, and consider them a challenging and sophisticated form. I remember finding it strange when, after I published my first book (a collection of short stories), people would say to me, ‘Okay, you’ve done that; now you can write the real thing: a novel.’ I have written two novels, and novels are great, but I don’t see novels as superior to stories. It’s interesting about length. There are novels that need to be 350 or 400 pages, but many of the ones I’ve read lately really do not. Recently I finished writing two novellas, which will be published together, and I think the novella form is marvelous. So concise and so powerful. There is also a case to be made for the forms of fiction that are shorter than novels because of how differently people are reading now, even less than five years ago, in terms of shorter attention spans. This may be due to reading online instead of print, or in the past year and a half because of Covid and other factors, but brevity nowadays is attractive to many readers.

What of the future?

“I hope JewishFiction.net will continue for many years to come. The donations we receive are obviously an essential component of this, as is my persisting in this role – which I plan to do. It feels important. There are all sorts of Jewish publications, but there is no other journal that offers what we do. So here’s hoping for another decade of fantastic Jewish fiction from around the world.” ■