

Toronto, Canada
March 8, 1984

DIE FARBRENTÉ SHVESTER

Die Farbrente Shvester ("The Firebrand Sisters") is a study group that was formed shortly after International Women's Day, 1983. In fact, some of the events surrounding that particular IWD were among the factors behind our formation. We were all concerned about the workshop on "Disarmament and Imperialism" that presented only a rejectionist Palestinian view of the Middle East situation. We were also concerned about the chants at the Saturday rally of the 1983 IWD, during which we were asked to shout support for Palestinian women, but not for our Israeli sisters. While (being farbrente shvester) we all have differing views on the Middle East, we all believe in the right of the Jewish people to self-determination. We felt a need, as Jewish feminists, for a group in which we could explore and express this Jewish-feminist perspective.

We also wanted a group where we could study our Jewish heritage from a feminist point of view. While the writing and the contributions of Jewish women are sometimes studied within the context of traditional Judaism, such study is rarely from a feminist viewpoint. And while studying in women's groups is often undertaken from a feminist perspective, the Jewish heritage and Jewish women's contributions are often ignored or misrepresented. We wanted to explore and develop both facets of our culture.

During our first meetings we studied the first few chapters of B'resheet ("Genesis"), comparing various Rabbinic commentaries and other interpretations. We are fortunate enough to have several women in our group who are fluent in Hebrew and who were able to indicate where the English translations were sometimes more patriarchal than the original text.

We then studied the writings of Jewish women. Among the books and articles we read, the following provided the main focus for several months of discussion and debate:

1. The Memoirs of Gluckel of Hameln, the autobiography of a 17th century Jewish woman living in Germany, who raised her large family while acting as a partner in her husband's business, which she ran after his death. Our historical study of both Jewish life at that time, and of German society in the 17th century, provided us with background for understanding Gluckel.
2. The Open Cage: An Anzia Yezierska Collection, an anthology of short stories by an early 20th century American Jewish woman, who wrote in a feminist romantic vein, focusing on the struggles

of immigrants, the working class and generational conflict.

3. The Woman Who Lost Her Name, a collection of 20th century short stories written by Jewish women from various countries, and including such diverse authors as Nessa Rappaport and Andrea Dworkin.
4. Tell Me a Riddle, a collection of four stories by the American Tillie Olsen, who writes within the context of the Bund (Jewish European socialist) tradition, and portrays her female characters powerfully.
5. Levitations and The Pagan Rabbi, two collections of short stories by the American writer Cynthia Ozick, whose themes are closely connected with varieties of Jewish religious and intellectual pursuit.

Our next topic is Jewish women of the left, and we will study the lives, writings and choices of such women as Rosa Luxembourg, Claire Zetkin, Emma Goldman as well as silenced Jewish women of the left. We will include studies of Jewish women's participation in revolutionary Europe, as well as trade union and radical activists in North America. Future themes will include the Holocaust and Jewish women in the resistance movement, and the role of women in founding the state of Israel, as well as their lives in Israel today.

While our group is primarily a study group, we follow the Jewish tradition of alternating between study and crisis. We have taken action on various issues, and two of the letters that we have written recently are attached. We have even taken on an international perspective, as participants in a comparative study of Jewish feminists in Toronto and New York.

One of the main joys of the group is the feeling of relaxation and acceptance. We can be loud and excited and enthusiastic and laugh (and eat) without worrying about being branded as aggressive or pushy or vulgar (or fat). Exuberance carries problems, too: we are still trying to work out how to protect the hamish ("friendly/family/warm") feeling while making sure everyone has a chance to be heard.

We certainly do not agree on all issues, though everyone has a feminist/socialist/Zionist perspective. But as Farbrente Shvester we do not feel defensive about being either Jews or feminists, or about behaving the way Jews and feminists behave, and that alone is naches ("pleasure").