Introduction

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In the mid-1930s, the renowned Jewish historian Simon Dubnow¹ encouraged Jewish educator Anna Pavlovna Vygodskaiia (1868–1943) to write an autobiography about her experiences in prerevolutionary Russia. Initially, Vygodskaiia was reluctant to take up Dubnow's offer, fearing that her "ordinary life experiences" would be of little interest to the reading public. Yet in the end Dubnow's entreaties prevailed, and the first volume appeared in Riga in 1938 to considerable acclaim.² One reviewer, writing for the Russian émigré newspaper *Segodnia*, observed that Vygodskaiia's recollections "are imbued with tender warmth" and faithfully and simply recount life as it was half a century before.³ In his preface to the autobiography, Dubnow recognized that Vygodskaiia illuminated "all of the minor little details [of everyday life] to which male memoirists usually pay no heed, but which are so very important for the history of our material culture and national traditions." Despite Vygodskaiia's initial reservations, *Istoriia odnoi zhizni* (The Story of a Life) is an extraordinary and rare historical document of Jewish childhood and young adult life in Tsarist Russia that has yet to receive the readership that it deserves.⁴

The Story of a Life draws on a number of popular autobiographical genres—it is styled as a family chronicle, a childhood and school autobiography, and a first-person narrative of social integration.⁵ While several East European Jewish women's memoirs have been translated and published in recent years, *The Story of a Life* is one of only a handful written in Russian by a Jewish woman, and is the only first-person narrative to describe the unprecedented social opportunities, as well as the many political and personal challenges,

that young Jewish women and men experienced in the 1870s and 1880s.⁶ In her young adult life, Anna Vygodskaia was not drawn to revolutionary Jewish politics or tempted by the allure of emigration but instead sought to integrate herself into an emerging civil society.⁷ Vygodskaia situates Jewish assimilation—the gradual transformation of Jewish religious practices, culture, and learning; the abandonment of external markers of Jewishness; and participation in Russian culture, society, and institutions—against the backdrop of profound socioeconomic and intellectual changes that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century. At a time when the vast majority of Russia's Jews continued to reside in small market towns in the Pale of Settlement, Vygodskaia liberated herself from the world of the Pale and immersed herself in the day-to-day rhythms, educational activities, and new intellectual opportunities in the imperial capital. Unlike most Jewish women (and men) in the Russian Empire, Vygodskaia was educated in Russian schools, spoke and read Russian fluently, pursued and obtained higher education in the capital, and traveled frequently to, from, and around St. Petersburg.

Until recently, the reconstruction of Jewish women's lives, in all of their geographic diversity and social complexity, has been virtually absent from most historical narratives and interpretations of East European Jewish culture and society. The marginalization of Jewish women's history can be explained in part by the traditional preoccupation of scholarship with the history of ideas and mass politics, and in part by the closure of the archives.⁸ Since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, scholars have used court records, police reports, letters and petitions, and many other personal papers generated, recorded, and preserved by the state to produce methodologically groundbreaking studies of the Jewish family and the gendered construction of everyday experiences. Nevertheless, even with the outpouring of new archival materials, a critical assessment of the life stories of women, whose own personal archives were either fragmentary or, in most cases, nonexistent, remains a complicated task for the historian.⁹

Reconstructing Anna Vygodskaia's life story produces numerous methodological challenges. To the best of our knowledge, her papers were not preserved in an archive, and her biography remains highly fragmentary and difficult to piece together. Yet Vygodskaia's life and

work were not entirely erased from the historical record. Traces of her activities appear, however fleetingly, in contemporary memoirs and diaries, official administrative records, newspaper articles, and pamphlets by and about her, and in an all too brief biographical entry in a memorial book of Jewish teachers.¹⁰ As is the case with so many first-person narratives written years after the events recounted, Vygodskaia's recollections are filled with intentional omissions, lapses in memory, and accidental distortions, to say nothing of editorial alterations.¹¹ But even if we take into account the documentary limitations of the memoir, Vygodskaia's life story offers a unique glimpse of Jewish daily life that rarely appears in public sources: neighborly interactions, children's games and household rituals, love affairs and emotional outbursts, clothing customs and leisure activities. While most first-person narratives reconstruct a Jewish world that is isolated and self-contained, *The Story of a Life* is remarkable for its depiction of vibrant and dynamic encounters in a multiethnic and multiconfessional imperial community. Anna Vygodskaia describes the changing Jewish world she grew up in and later abandoned. She also relates the various everyday encounters between Jewish parents and young, ambitious children anxious to leave the world of the Pale; Polish teachers and schoolchildren; and Russian students, professors, and imperial administrators.

Anna's World in the Pale

The Russian government mandated that all imperial subjects carry an internal passport when traveling beyond their permanent place of residence. The vast majority of the empire's Jewish population, acquired as a result of the partitions of Poland-Lithuania (1772, 1793, 1795), faced additional restrictions that prohibited them from taking up permanent residence in the interior provinces of the empire and required them to remain within the so-called Pale of Settlement. The Pale stretched along the western borderlands of the Russian Empire, encompassing much of present-day Lithuania, Poland, Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, and western Russia. During the Great Reform era (1855–81), Alexander II issued several significant edicts that made Jewish residence restrictions less burdensome and helped facilitate

the integration of select “useful” Jews in Russian civil society. Merchants of the first and second guilds (like Anna’s father), select artisans, students, and army veterans obtained the privilege to travel and reside outside the boundaries of the Pale of Settlement. But until the Revolution of 1917, in spite of the state’s relaxation of restrictions on mobility, Jews continued to encounter a set of convoluted and at times contradictory laws governing where they could move and how long they could travel within and beyond the Pale.¹²

Anna Pavlovna Vygodskaia, née Paperna, was born in 1868 and spent the first years of her life in Bobruisk, a mid-sized border town located in Minsk province in the very heart of the Pale of Settlement. Situated on the Berezina River and at the intersection of trade routes connected to some of the most prosperous commercial centers in the southwestern region of the Russian Empire, the town attracted small-scale merchants and skilled craftsmen who traded or exported timber, dry goods, and grain.¹³ In the nineteenth century, Bobruisk’s population comprised a diverse mixture of Poles, Belorussians, ethnic Russians, and a disproportionately high (and growing) number of Jews. In 1804, only 504 Jews were counted as permanent residents of Bobruisk. But by the time the Russian government conducted the 1897 census, the Jewish population had grown to 20,700, accounting for approximately 60 percent of the town’s residents.¹⁴ The Jewish community, however, was not a homogeneous one. Both the Hasidim and the Mitnagdim had established a firm social base in Bobruisk. While the Hasidim engaged in lengthy and ecstatic prayers and insisted that all people could attain mystical union with the Creator, the Mitnagdim followed rabbinical authority, arguing that salvation would come only through legitimate Torah study. Even as they quarreled among themselves, both groups struggled to suppress the rising challenge of new ideas associated with the *Haskalah* (the Jewish Enlightenment) and economic modernization.¹⁵

An imperial official working for the Minsk provincial statistical committee left a rather unflattering description of Bobruisk at the end of the nineteenth century: “After crossing the fortress, you see a row of paltry, tiny homes that stand on filthy, smelly streets. All summer long, the mud brings much luxury and freedom to the pigs who, together with other ‘noble’ animals, roam the streets by the dozens.”¹⁶ For Vygodskaia, the pigs were less a problem than the

people. She remembered Bobruisk as a sleepy provincial town whose inhabitants "sealed themselves off from the rest of the world. . . . Half a century would pass before one could discern any development or growth in towns such as Bobruisk." In the 1870s, however, the face of the muddy provincial town did begin to change as many towns and cities in the northwest region of the empire experienced the growing pains of economic modernization. The railroad, which connected Bobruisk to Minsk, Vil'na, Gomel, and the port city of Libava, as well as destinations beyond the Pale, came to play an important role in the cultural and economic life of the town. After 1873, Bobruisk merchants relied on the Libava-Romensk railway line to distribute lumber more efficiently and cost-effectively by eliminating overhead expenses associated with water transport.¹⁷ In Bobruisk, as in so many other places in the western borderlands, the last three decades of the nineteenth century witnessed also the emergence of a host of new cultural, educational, and political institutions. By exposing more and more people to secular ideas and to the latest fashions and social customs of the day, voluntary associations and government-sponsored schools helped transform public life and destabilize communal authority.¹⁸

Though the railroad had come and their numbers had grown, the vast majority of Bobruisk Jews continued to live their daily lives in economic poverty, working as shopkeepers, day laborers, street peddlers, and skilled artisans. Anna, however, came from a more respectable milieu. The Papernas were a prominent, pious, and learned Mitnagdic family that had resided in Bobruisk for more than five generations. According to family lore, her father's great-great-grandfather Isroel-Levin had ties to wealthy Polish magnates and reportedly married seven different women, each of whom bore him children. Isroel-Levin saw to it that his sons and daughters married into some of the most respected Jewish families in Lithuania, Poland, and Galicia. But because Isroel-Levin divided the inheritance among his many children, the family fortune dried up as quickly as it had been acquired.

Anna's grandfather Isroel Paperna had been married off to the daughter of a pious rabbi from Kopyl (a small town some 140 kilometers east of Bobruisk). Isroel, however, was drawn more to the comforts of life than to Talmudic learning. Vygodskaia remembered

him as a dandy with a penchant for elegant pipes, fancy dress, and fine furniture. Ever restless, Isroel managed to stay in Kopyl for only three years—long enough to father two children: the prominent man of letters Avraam, and Anna's father, Faitel'. Thanks to a family connection, Isroel found work with the wealthy industrialist Isaak Zabłudovskii, who owned a lumber factory in Belostok, and thus appeared at home infrequently, usually only for the high holidays. A third son, the educator Grigorii, was born after Isroel had begun to make his business trips to Belostok.¹⁹

In his own autobiographical reflections, Anna's Uncle Avraam recalled that Isroel's commercial encounters had infused the Paperna family with a "new spirit" and succeeded in "stirring up" life in the sleepy town of Kopyl. While working in the lumber industry, Isroel not only associated with people of progressive leanings but also made occasional trips across the border to Germany. Here he encountered Jews who differed from their coreligionists to the east in dress, speech patterns, and religious practices, and even developed personal attachments outside the Jewish community.²⁰ Over the course of eighteen years of traveling back and forth across the border, Isroel changed his views on many aspects of Jewish life. Avraam Paperna recalled one moment that made an especially memorable impression upon the Paperna family and their inquisitive neighbors. Isroel had just arrived back in Kopyl from a business trip on the eve of Yom Kippur. When he stepped out of his carriage wearing a fashionable short frock coat and long pants, with his beard neatly trimmed and his long blond hair tied back, the Jews of Kopyl, clad in modest black with their beards unshorn, could not believe their eyes. "The Jewish community," Avraam drily noted in his autobiography, "remembered this particular Yom Kippur for a long time." Isroel commuted regularly between Kopyl and Belostok until he lost his position in the lumber factory, at which time he decided to relocate the entire family to Bobruisk.²¹

Despite extreme social and family pressures (one of Isroel's cousins was the most distinguished Mitnagdic rabbi in Bobruisk), Isroel and his three sons represented a small but growing number of Bobruisk Jews who were drawn to the forbidden.²² Anna's father, Faitel', was perhaps the most "assimilated" of the Paperna brothers. Anna notes that the education her father had received in the *heder*,

or elementary school in the East European Jewish community, had given him a solid background in sacred texts and religious subjects but had not prepared him for a career in the world. Unable to find suitable employment in Bobruisk, Faitel' followed in the footsteps of his father and relied on his wife's family connections to land a job, securing an unspecified position in the Siberian gold mines. When Anna was only two years old, her father left the family to live and work in a "purely Russian environment" at the opposite end of the empire.²³ Ten years spent in Siberia left their mark on Faitel's appearance and consciousness, and it was there that Faitel' changed his name to the more suitably Russian-sounding Pavel Semënovich. Anna's uncles, Avraam and Grigorii, defied conventional expectations as well by choosing to enroll in the new state-sponsored teachers' seminaries in Vil'na and Zhitomir, where they studied a traditional Jewish curriculum supplemented by secular subjects. Avraam and Grigorii represented the first generation of Russian Jewish intellectuals who were proficient in the Russian language and felt at home in Russian elite culture.²⁴ According to Anna, Grigorii was also responsible for piquing her mother's interest in secular knowledge, and after he left to study in Vil'na, Anna's mother hired a tutor to continue her lessons in arithmetic, Russian literature, and other secular subjects. In a conservative environment, where boys were supposed to fulfill their religious vocation by acquiring proficiency in sacred texts in the *heder* and then, if gifted, in a *yeshiva*, and where girls lacked any institutionalized framework of education, the Paperna family's behavior proved exceptional and was the talk of a gossipy provincial town.²⁵

Anna was still a young girl when her mother died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-six. Anna and her older sister moved from one relative to another, while their father continued to work in the Siberian gold mines. At first, the girls remained in Bobruisk with their grandfather Isroel and his wife, a formidable woman whose eccentricities provided Anna with much fodder for her memoirs. After a year, Faitel' sent word from Siberia that his daughters should go live with their Uncle Grigorii, who taught in a public elementary school in Zakrochim (in Polish, Zakroczym), a small town in Russian Poland near Warsaw, about 720 kilometers west of Bobruisk. Here, Wygodskaia attended a public school for girls, where she was

taught in Polish, even though the imperial government's educational policies of the time stipulated that Russian was the official language of instruction.²⁶ In this small border town neither ethnic differences nor religious customs seemed to create impermeable boundaries between neighbors. "Our life in Zakrochim," Vygodskaiia recalled, "passed quietly, without any great disturbances. Jews, Poles, and some Russians too lived together peacefully here, side by side." Unlike state-generated documents (most of which capture male voices and tell us precious little about people's feelings, attitudes, or prejudices), Vygodskaiia's writing recalls the intimate social universe that Jews and their Christian neighbors shared and inhabited.²⁷

After three years in Zakrochim, the sisters relocated westward once again, this time to Plotsk (in Polish, Płock), where they stayed with their Uncle Avraam, a teacher in the town's secondary school, or gymnasium, which prepared students for higher education. Vygodskaiia had grown up speaking Yiddish and studied Polish in the gymnasium, but it was Avraam who instilled in her a special love for all things Russian and a thirst for knowledge. Avraam Paperna, like so many other radical Haskalah literary critics in the era of the Great Reforms, felt that a mastery of the Russian language would ultimately reward the Jewish people with civil integration and equal rights and privileges in imperial society. As Avraam saw it, the archaic Hebrew language could have "an effect on but the few," whereas Yiddish might serve as a conduit for instructing the entire Jewish nation and ultimately arousing "a love for the national tongue [Russian]."²⁸ In his published writings, Avraam argued extensively in favor of women's education as well. Drawing on the ideas of the prominent pedagogue, scientist, and man of letters Nikolai Pirogov, and condemning those conservative critics who felt that women should be denied access to knowledge, Avraam believed that the education of women would benefit society as a whole.²⁹

Anna was around twelve or thirteen years old when her father returned from Siberia. She and her sister went to live with him and his new wife in Vil'na, a multiethnic city known by multiple names to its various inhabitants (Wilno in Polish, Vilne in Yiddish, and Vilnius in Lithuanian). By the end of the nineteenth century, Vil'na was home to nearly sixty-three thousand Jews, approximately 41 percent of the city's population.³⁰ Anna spent her formative

years here, in the very heart of Jewish life and culture, but as she recalls in her autobiography, she came to feel smothered by cultural traditions and middle-class conventions that were out of step with her “desire for a better life, the striving toward what is good, toward self-improvement.” Already as a teenager, Anna came to see education as the key to achieving the kind of life she so desired. As part of its deeply rooted heritage, however, the East European Jewish community placed little value on the education of Jewish girls, promoting religious textual learning for males while actively restricting females from sacred study. Nevertheless, as a result of the gendered divisions that had structured Jewish society for several centuries, young Jewish women benefited from what the cultural critic Iris Parush has called their “marginality.” While most girls did not receive a formal religious education, they could read secular literature, as well as ethical and mystical texts, in the Yiddish language and thus, in the nineteenth century, were able to immerse themselves in modern secular culture to a far greater degree than their male counterparts.³¹ Anna, though, desired more than private study and the rudiments of a secular education. Fortunately for her, at this very time the choices available to and paths taken by Jewish women were being radically transformed.³² By the 1870s and 1880s, private schools, gymnasia, and trade schools financed by a network of Jewish philanthropic organizations, as well as new institutions in the imperial capital, such as the Women’s Medical Courses and the Higher Women’s Courses, offered women unprecedented opportunities for social and geographic mobility, while opening up new paths of employment in the fields of medicine and teaching—two arenas that the autocratic regime deemed appropriate for women’s participation.³³ Anna longed to be a part of this wider world and dreamed of attending the Higher Women’s Courses in St. Petersburg.

With the passing of the older generation, Anna’s family had grown more lax in their religious devotions and more acculturated in manners of dress, speech, education, and mores. Yet however receptive Anna’s father and stepmother may have been to their daughter’s secular studies, they nonetheless opposed her decision to pursue higher education. For an increasingly prosperous family like the Papernas (Faitel’s financial success eventually earned him

the distinguished status of a merchant of the first guild), the cost of tuition was not a major obstacle; rather, it was a fear that their unmarried daughter's decision to leave home and study in the capital would damage the family's carefully cultivated aura of middle-class respectability. "You can study anything you want and take lessons from the best teachers in Vil'na," Anna recalled her stepmother pleading with her, "but stay home, don't disgrace our family." To pursue her studies in St. Petersburg, Anna needed more than her family's blessing; she required her father's written permission. Until 1914, imperial law prevented an unmarried woman from traveling without her father's consent (a married woman required her husband's permission).³⁴

Though she had overcome (or circumvented) the bureaucratic obstacles of Russian imperial officialdom and had been admitted to the Higher Women's Courses, Anna waited two months for her father to sign the necessary travel documents. Unlike many other women who found themselves in similar situations, Anna did not threaten to convert to Christianity, nor did she arrange a "fictitious marriage" with a progressive young man (two popular strategies that would have given her the automatic right to leave her parents' home and reside in the imperial capital).³⁵ In the end, Vygodskaia disobeyed her father's wishes and traveled to St. Petersburg without obtaining his signature. After arriving in the imperial capital, she wrote home, at her cousin's suggestion, saying that, unless her father sent along the requisite paperwork, she would enroll in the midwifery courses, which, through a bureaucratic oversight, enrolled Jews freely and granted students legal residency rights in the capital. Faced with the potential shame of having a daughter who was a midwife, Faitel' eventually conceded and signed the documents. This clever bit of blackmail did not seem to have damaged Anna's relations with her family. While studying in the capital, she traveled home for winter holidays and the summer recess and received a monthly allowance from her family sufficient to cover her room and board and excursions to the theater and opera.

During Anna's years in St. Petersburg (1885–89), police routinely targeted, harassed, and expelled large number of Jews from the imperial capital because their residency papers and other legal documents were not in proper order, yet Anna experienced no

problems with the law.³⁶ By 1886, despite official impediments to their mobility and the rise of ethnic tensions, the number of Jewish men and women enrolled in universities and special women's educational institutions had increased a hundredfold since 1840. Although Jews accounted for just over 4 percent of the empire's population, Jewish women made up an astonishingly high 17 percent of Anna's classmates at the Higher Women's Courses.³⁷ Yet even as Anna developed close friendships with other male and female students from the Pale, she rushed to immerse herself in the wider, secular world of the capital—exploring the neighborhoods of St. Petersburg, learning to navigate the streetcars and crowded boulevards, scrambling for discounted tickets to the opera, joining reading circles and study groups, and living the life of a young woman free for the first time to set her own path in life.

“My Beloved Courses”

Anna came of age at a time when educated Russian society and the imperial regime alike weighed in on the so-called women's question, contesting the public role, civic rights, and legal status of women in the Russian Empire. A key aspect of the debates centered around the issue of women's access to higher education. Supporters such as Anna's Uncle Avraam maintained that qualified women should be guaranteed the same educational opportunities as their male counterparts. Couching their arguments in well-intentioned if patriarchal tones, some proponents claimed that well-educated women would make better mothers and citizens. By contrast, conservatives and chauvinists argued that the feminine temperament was unsuited for such intellectual rigors, and that women's presence in university lecture halls and laboratories would lead to a dilution of standards and serve as a distracting temptation for industrious male students.³⁸ Although Alexander II's University Statute of 1863 formally banned women from enrolling at universities in the empire, the regime recognized the need for trained female teachers and medical personnel and was reluctant to drive them abroad in search of an education. In 1876, the emperor granted permission for special women's schools to be established in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev,

and Kazan. The most celebrated of these was the Higher Women's Courses in St. Petersburg, popularly known as the Bestuzhev Courses, after their first director, the eminent historian Konstantin Bestuzhev-Riumin. Founded in 1878, enrollment was open to women of all social and religious backgrounds, although young women from gentry families predominated in the early years. Subsidies from the Ministry of Education and the St. Petersburg City Duma were insufficient to maintain operation, and the administration relied on tuition revenue and generous support from sympathetic donors (including the Gintsburg family, the renowned Russian Jewish financiers, communal activists, and philanthropists).³⁹

By the time Anna matriculated in 1885, the Bestuzhev Courses had expanded to a four-year program, boasting a new building of its own, state-of-the-art laboratories, and a full range of academic offerings taught by a distinguished faculty drawn from the best institutions in the capital. Students had the option of enrolling in the historical-philological faculty, which offered a classical liberal arts education, or of pursuing a course of study that emphasized the natural and applied sciences. Vygodskaja recalls that "like the majority of female students," she opted for the latter—"such was the general mood of the times." The popularity of scientific study among Russian youth in Anna's day not only was a function of general interest in the explanatory power of science but also reflected a confidence that mastering medicine, botany, chemistry, and agronomy could achieve practical benefits in society at large.⁴⁰ Unlike their male counterparts, for whom a university degree meant increased employment opportunities and access to promotion in the civil service, women who completed the Bestuzhev Courses and other special women's institutes of higher learning struggled to find a place for themselves in imperial society. Many emigrated, to continue their studies abroad. Others pursued further medical training to become nurses, doctors, or specialists. The majority, like Anna herself, sought to make a contribution to society by becoming teachers, headmistresses, and private tutors. Historian Christine Ruane calculates that of the 1,346 women who completed the Bestuzhev Courses between 1882 and 1896, more than 71 percent became teachers.⁴¹

Though law and tradition restricted Russian women from entry into government service and most professions, higher education

did change the way that female students thought about themselves and their relationship to the wider world. Women enrolled at the Courses referred to themselves as *kursistki*, and Vygodskaia uses this term throughout the memoir to describe herself and her classmates. A strong sense of corporate identity and solidarity emerged among the *kursistki*, who not only busied themselves with coursework but also staffed the student cafeteria, formed delegations to present grievances to the faculty, and represented the Courses at social and civic functions in the capital. If the police arrested a female student on suspicion of revolutionary activity—a not infrequent occurrence in the reign of Alexander III—her fellow *kursistki* banded together to work toward securing her release and gathering packages to make her jail time less miserable. Vygodskaia recalls, “Each of us felt responsible for everything that took place within the institution’s walls, and the honor of our Courses was dear to our hearts.” Historian Susan K. Morrissey describes this sense of student solidarity, or *studenchestvo*, as “a unique and plastic ethos, which fused ideals of fraternity and solidarity with norms of ethics and behavior.”⁴²

Yet a *kursistka* was defined not by brains alone. From the deliberately modest clothes they wore to the “democratic” mannerisms they cultivated, *kursistki* sought to present themselves as conscientious, engaged members of society, eager to tackle and solve the social problems of the day. As Richard Stites observed in his pathbreaking study of the women’s liberation movement, “The atmosphere of mild poverty and free and easy equality among the women doubtless helped to nourish dreams of social justice.”⁴³ Fresh from the bourgeois milieu of her parents’ home in Vil’na, Vygodskaia experienced with pride and wonder the mood of radicalism that “infused” the halls of the Bestuzhev Courses. Although she herself seems never to have been affiliated with any of the revolutionary student movements of the day, Anna associated with radicals during her years in the capital and sympathized with their objectives of reforming Russian society: “The desire of female students in those days to strive for pure knowledge, combined with their desire to do good for the common people . . . these were like rays of light penetrating the dark and dreariness of Russian life.”

Vygodskaia aptly describes the Bestuzhev Courses as “the one true liberal oasis in those reactionary times.” The emperor Alexander

III had succeeded to the throne in 1881 following the assassination of his father, the tsar-emancipator Alexander II, and as Vygodskaia recalls, a “somber mood . . . had settled in.” The new emperor was less inclined than his predecessor to countenance potential unrest and revolutionary discontent, and regarded universities and institutions of higher learning with suspicion. Women’s higher education came under particular scrutiny. The regime’s concerns were given voice by figures like the archconservative journalist Prince V. P. Meshcherskii, who described the women’s courses in the capital as “a veritable sewer of anarchist disease.”⁴⁴ Toward the end of her first year of study, Anna and her fellow kursistki were shocked to learn from a terse announcement in the government newspaper that the Bestuzhev Courses would be closed pending further notice. Historian Cynthia Whittaker notes that “only a tremendous outcry on the part of the general public” saved the Courses, which survived the announcement, albeit in curtailed and truncated form.⁴⁵ The Ministry of Education subjected the Bestuzhev Courses to an organizational overhaul that saw Nadezhda Stasova, the beloved director whom Vygodskaia described as “the heart and soul of our Courses,” replaced by a more pliable administrator, caps set on the size of the incoming class, and quotas imposed on the number of “non-Christian” (Jewish) students admitted. By 1889–90, the year after Anna graduated, enrollment in the Courses stood at 144, down from 990 at the beginning of the decade. Applications to study at the Courses remained more or less constant through the 1890s and soared again in the early 1900s, but policy shifts obliged many Russian women to emigrate in search of the educational opportunities denied them at home.⁴⁶

Life and Death

The radical revolutionary Vera Figner, a member of the Executive Committee of the People’s Will, the conspiratorial circle that planned the assassination of Alexander II, recalled in her memoirs that her education at a fashionable girls’ school in the 1860s had provided her with “a cultivated manner and a sense and need of comradeship” but had done her as much harm as good by fostering an “unnatural isolation from life and people.”⁴⁷ It was this sense of detachment

that Anna sought so fervently to overcome in her own education and upbringing. While some young women in the empire pursued higher education as a means to escape patriarchal control, achieve a sense of personal autonomy, secure economic independence, and perhaps find a suitable man for marriage, Vygodskaiia, like many of her generation, describes her educational ambitions in idealistic terms: "I firmly believed that within these walls I could satisfy my thirst for knowledge, that scholarship would help me find the path toward independent, ideal, useful work, that I could live according to the dictates of my conscience."⁴⁸ Like many students on the eve of graduation, Anna experienced an existential crisis of sorts. She confided her fears to her mentor, Orest Miller, a celebrated literary scholar who taught at the Courses. Vygodskaiia recalls Miller's sage advice: "It is possible to live according to one's conscience and be a useful person anywhere and under any conditions," he said. "One needs to rely on one's own instinct, and it will reveal the true path. Each person can do a great deal of good right where he is."

Anna's determination to become a "useful person" and work for the greater social good shaped the future course of her personal and professional development. She rejected the traditional feminine preserves of fashion and accessories, and she gently mocks her sister's fascination with such trifles as fancy dresses and tea towels for Anna's bridal trousseau. While the bourgeois Jewish women who summered at the resort community of Bel'mont, outside of Vil'na, gossiped about their fellow vacationers and promenaded in the latest fashions in their provincial setting, Vygodskaiia sought authenticity—she tramped through the forest, went boating on the river, and embraced the natural world.

These descriptions of the quotidian are among the most revealing passages in the autobiography. In recalling her student days, Vygodskaiia devotes much space to the rhythms and objects of everyday life—the romantic encounters and familial conflicts, the recreational activities and summer vacations—all of which made such a profound impression upon her. Vygodskaiia arrived in St. Petersburg when rapid industrialization, urbanization, and mass consumerism enabled people of all social ranks and religious backgrounds—from the old landed elites, the nouveau riche, and high government officials to workers, middle-class professionals, and

students—to shop in arcades and department stores and to take part in leisure-time activities such as theater and dance.⁴⁹ While she lived a “modest” life, working in the laboratory or listening to lectures in the first half of the day and studying or reading in the evenings, Anna also found the money (and the time) to listen to opera at the Mariinskii Theater and attend concerts by world-renowned pianists such as Anton Rubinstein and Józef Kazimierz Hofmann. On summer holidays, Anna spent her days enjoying recreational activities that were fashionable among youth of her social class: strolling in the countryside, boating, croquet, ring toss, swimming, and amateur theatrical productions.

During her student days in St. Petersburg, Anna confronted a world that challenged the ideals of propriety and modesty that had governed sexual conduct and behavior in the East European Jewish community. On several occasions Anna rejected the matches that her parents arranged for her in favor of advancing her education and asserting the freedom to choose her own groom on her own terms (until the second half of the nineteenth century, most Jewish girls were expected to marry by the age of sixteen, and boys by the age of eighteen). But even as she attempted to distance herself from the strict social codes that regulated sexuality and marriage in the Jewish community, including her parents’ home, Anna refused to succumb to the temptations of city life. Although she recorded the transformation in sexual mores taking place around her (“In my day, female students would spend the night in male students’ lodgings without thinking anything of it”), Anna observed that she herself was “quite naive and punctilious” in her private life. Eventually, after a lengthy courtship, Anna agreed to marry the medical student Mikhail Markovich Vygodskii (known by the initials M.M. in the autobiography), who was the son of a wealthy merchant-contractor and whom Anna describes as “nearer and dearer” to her than anyone else she had met in her life.⁵⁰ Anna was twenty-two years old at the time and had just finished her studies. She married Mikhail for emotional and intellectual reasons, without involving her parents in the decision. Such a match, considered progressive by the standards of the time, reflected many of the societal changes that helped transform the institution of marriage in the Jewish community as well as the criteria by which matches were made.⁵¹

It is at this point that Vygodskaia's memoir ends, and so does much of our knowledge of her professional and private experiences. According to Regina Weinreich's biographical sketch, not long after their wedding, Anna and Mikhail decided to move back to Bobruisk, where they cultivated a middle-class life for the next fifteen years. Mikhail practiced medicine, while Anna taught disadvantaged Jewish girls at a local Russian-language school.⁵² After the Revolution of 1905, Anna and her husband relocated to Vil'na, and Anna worked in the newly opened private gymnasium founded by Sofia M. Gurevitch and Anna's former classmate at the Courses, P. P. Antokol'skaia. The school quickly acquired a reputation for its scholastic standards and progressive teaching methods. At the Gurevitch Gymnasium, the language of instruction was Russian, and children were taught mathematics, physics, natural sciences, art, Jewish history, religion, foreign languages, Russian literature, and Hebrew, at the request of parents. Although the gymnasium encountered numerous economic problems, it was nevertheless able to employ seven teachers, graduate over three hundred students between 1906 and 1917, and earn high praise from the local Jewish community.⁵³ Anna worked at the Gurevitch Gymnasium until around 1908, at which time she resigned her position, following the unexpected death of her husband. The loss of Mikhail dealt a severe emotional blow to Anna. She spent the next years of her life traveling to England, America, and Italy and acquainting herself with the pedagogical methods of the educator Maria Montessori. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Montessori system of education, organized around the basic principle that children should be given the freedom to guide their inner development, had become highly influential among reform-minded educators. Anna was part of an elite group of women, from all around the world, who undertook the work of establishing privately funded schools guided by the Montessori teaching method.⁵⁴

With the eruption of the Great War, Vygodskaia decided to move from Vil'na to the safety of Moscow. The Russian Revolution of 1917 afforded Anna and other educators the opportunity to put their pedagogical theories into practice. In May 1918, Iuliia Ivanovna Fausek opened the first Montessori school in Petrograd; that same year, Vygodskaia founded the first Montessori school in Moscow.⁵⁵ Vygodskaia and her fellow reformers aimed at nothing less than

the total reconfiguration of children's education, arguing that a new revolutionary society required an educational system organized on revolutionary lines, as well. In a 1920 pamphlet addressed to the mothers of young children, Vygodskaia reminded her readers that the political and social transformations in Russia afforded "freedoms and possibilities for the construction of a new kind of vibrant school life. . . . We will no longer teach—we will educate (*vospityvat'*)."⁵⁶ For Vygodskaia and other devotees of the Montessori method, upbringing (*vospitanie*) extended beyond the traditional lesson plans of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Children under the age of eight should be enrolled in special kindergartens, where their natural inclinations and abilities could be nurtured and channeled in positive directions by trained and committed educators. Children's curiosity, wonder, and sense of play should be encouraged, not stifled, so that boys and girls might cultivate and develop their personalities from an early age. Child rearing, Vygodskaia maintained, was a collaborative enterprise: "The tasks of schools have changed and expanded so much that no single educator can manage it without the close cooperation and participation of parents. . . . Our concern, as adults, is to provide children the kind of supportive surroundings where they can act independently and, consequently, develop freely."⁵⁷

Such aspirations were all but impossible to achieve amid the hunger, privation, and general breakdown of social infrastructure that marked the years of civil war following the Bolsheviks' coming to power.⁵⁸ Vygodskaia's remarks at a pedagogy conference sponsored by the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros) reflected, too, her mounting frustration and exasperation with the bureaucratic obstacles impeding educational reform. Reiterating her arguments for the importance of preprimary education, Vygodskaia called upon her fellow delegates to involve kindergarten teachers more closely in the drafting of new educational models. "For some time now, in the Commissariat, the Preschool Commission and the School Commission meet side by side, separated by a single corridor . . . and yet we kindergarten teachers, laying the foundations for a new unified school, have no sense of the very nature of the structure being built atop our foundations. And so the members of the School Commission, building the entire structure themselves, debating fiercely each matter of masonry, proceed without inquiring

whatsoever about the foundation that will be the basis for our glorious new structure. Can this go unaddressed? Of course not! In practical terms, it will come to the point where we will have to fix up, patch up, and make repairs, on account of which the strength and beauty of our new edifice will suffer.”⁵⁹ In 1923, frustrated by the demands of an increasingly authoritarian and unresponsive regime, Vygodskaia left Soviet Russia and returned to Vil’na, which was then under Polish rule.⁶⁰

The multiethnic and multiconfessional city had changed much in Anna’s absence. The restoration of Polish independence after World War I now offered Jews the freedom to run schools, communal organizations, and cultural institutions in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Polish. The result was an unprecedented expansion of national Jewish political expression and experimentation in cultural activity.⁶¹ In the interwar period, amid growing political extremism, Vygodskaia helped establish a Yiddish-language Montessori school for boys and girls from middle-class families. Housed on Wiwulska Street, Vygodskaia’s school belonged to a network of Jewish-sponsored educational institutions known as the Tsentraler Bildungs Komitet (the Central Educational Committee). The umbrella organization operated kindergartens, elementary and high schools, a teachers’ seminary, a library that housed over twenty thousand volumes in Jewish and European languages, and various children’s clubs and associations.⁶² According to Rachel Margolis, who studied there in the late 1920s, Vygodskaia’s school “was considered very advanced.” “All the pupils at school,” Margolis recalled, “had little shelves with a colored sticker of some kind—in my case one with red cherries on it. I found it fun to study unfamiliar Yiddish letters. Then they began to give out cards with words and corresponding pictures on them, bright and nice looking. We sang a lot and did calisthenics. For Hanukkah we put together a musical.”⁶³ Outside of her involvement in Montessori education, Vygodskaia also took an active role in several philanthropic organizations that were established by feminist activists to provide young Jewish women productive employment.⁶⁴

The first volume of Vygodskaia’s memoirs was published in 1938, and Dubnow’s comments in the foreword suggest that plans for a second volume were already under way when the Second World War began the following year. The Nazi occupation of Vil’na in

the summer of 1941 brought the flowering of Jewish cultural and educational life to an end. In September 1941, after months of terror, persecution, and murder, the Nazis proceeded to herd the remaining forty-six thousand Jews in Vil'na—men, women, and children—into the ghetto.⁶⁵ Vygodskaia was among them. In his ghetto diaries, the Jewish librarian and scholar Herman Kruk recorded that "Mrs. Anna Pavlovna has decided to continue writing. But where can you write in the ghetto, since altogether she has here 1.80 meters of space, a corner where she can only sleep, and not even do that properly? . . . The woman roams the streets all day with nothing to do." When a reading room was opened in the ghetto, Kruk set aside a small space at one of the tables for Vygodskaia to resume her writing. He confided to his diary that this small gesture brought the old woman to tears: "Now she sits at her table and writes. The person revives and now feels as if she were born anew."⁶⁶

Anna Pavlovna Vygodskaia, aged seventy-five, died in September 1943, when the Nazis liquidated the Vil'na Ghetto.⁶⁷ The writings that occupied her final years have not survived.