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Introduction

The translation theorist Lawrence Venuti closes his short essay “How to Read a Translation” on a note of defiance: Don’t take one translation of a foreign literature to be representative of the language, he tells us. Compare the translation to other translations from the same language.

Venuti’s point is both political and moral. We cannot really understand a foreign culture by reading a single novel; the perspective of an individual writer will always be slanted. We can only start to understand other cultures when we turn a solitary voice into a polyphony.

The same is true when we set out to learn more about our own heritage. There was never any one Yiddish. Yiddish and Yiddish literary style varied widely. Yiddish literature absorbed different colors as it zigzagged the globe, encountered different people, lived under different politics.

With that in mind, we’ve built this translation issue as a kind of journey. Through the stories, poems, and essays, we move from Israel to the Soviet Union, to New York, to Vilna, and to the world of the fairy tale. We also take an extended trip through Warsaw and see the center of its Jewish life and its slums. We swim in the Vistula and meet the struggling intellectual in his garret. We hear the past’s echo: the writer of one story is a character in another.

Each story or poem is lovingly translated, and wonderful to read on its own. Together they become something more.

—*Eitan Kensky*
Director of Collections Initiatives



“You Have Not Betrayed Me Since the Day We Met” and “You Olive Tree in the Night”

By Avrom Sutzkver

TRANSLATED BY MAIA EVRONA

There is little to write about Avrom Sutzkever that has not been written before. He remains a towering figure in the Yiddish literary world. These poems are from the expanded edition of his collection Lider fun togbukh (Poems from My Diary), published in 1985, when Sutzkever had been living in Israel for nearly four decades after leaving his native Vilna.

You Have Not Betrayed Me Since the Day We Met

You have not betrayed me since the day we met,
in whichever carousel the landscape hasn't changed.
And, as an alcoholic to drink, I am drawn to your magic;
you have not forgotten me, unforgettable ant.

I remember, you brought me green sounds from the fields
when with all my strength I could not reach them,
zigzagging over well-trodden footpaths, to the bottom layer,
to bring me a star, so it would become bright as home.

You snuck across the border to the other world for me
with my greetings to friends and brought back a slice of bread
from that bread which the dead eat long, to remain dead,
and if, perhaps, someone there is inclined to trade his place with
mine.

You have given me a silence, a true rescuer,
so I could taste silence's music and become its connoisseur.
And wherever I may wander, through a thousand days and nights,
you will not have forgotten me, unforgettable ant.

You Olive Tree in the Night

You olive tree in the night and ladders to the stars on high,
shapes gravitate toward you step by step. You are cracked
like your home, the rocky ground, yet who is like You?
Every olive in your crown is the dewy pupil of an eye.

Shapes gravitate toward you, to your rigid branches,
from grass newly cut in a dream—they bring that scent.
And only the night remains limping and limping its silence
while you are wrestling to overcome an angel.

The stars are turning into olives. Already your power
has spread to the dawn's horns of red.
And your pure roots are now at the head of my bed,
whither is it destined for me to flee in my last wander?

These roots are your heirs, hewn by lightning,
through your living abyss you deliver them the rains.
You olive tree in the night, may you protect me until morning
from words and chains.

MAIA EVRONA'S translations from Avrom Sutzkever's *Lider fun togbukh* collection were recently awarded a 2016 Translation Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and have appeared in *Poetry Magazine*. Her own poems, as well as excerpts from her memoir on chronic illness, have appeared in *Prairie Schooner* and other venues. She has recently given readings of her poetry and translations in New York City.



On the Landing

By Yenta Mash

TRANSLATED BY ELLEN CASSEDY

Yenta Mash was born in 1922 and grew up in Zguritse, a small town in the region once known as Bessarabia. In 1941, she and her parents were exiled to a Siberian labor camp, from which she escaped in 1948. She then spent a number of years working as a bookkeeper in Kishinev. In 1977, Mash immigrated to Israel and settled in Haifa, where she finally gained the courage to begin writing and publishing her work. Her last book was published in 2007; she died in 2013.

In many of her stories, Mash buries difficult material in the narrative, approaching it only indirectly. “On the Landing,” published as “Afn pristan” in her 1990 collection Tif in der tayge (Deep in the Taiga), uses a delicately understated narrative strategy to recount a daring escape from the Gulag and commonplace elements to convey the enormity of hunger and terror.

K rivosheino, the regional center, sat on the Ob River, on the other shore, far to the north. The river was frozen for more than half the year, so you traveled there by sleigh—if you had the means—but most people went on foot, pulling little

sleds behind them. For two months of the year—October, when the ice was beginning to form, and May, when it was breaking up—you could neither ride nor walk; then you stayed home. In the summer you could take the steamer that connected the river towns of the Narym region: Krasnoye, Kipriushka, Nikolskoye, Krivosheino, Moltshanova, and so on, all the way to Kolpashevo and beyond. The boat crept along like a tortoise and had no established schedule—it came when it came. Depending on your luck, you could wait for twenty-four hours, for two days, or for three or more. And where did you spend those three days? On the landing, of course: a trampled patch of earth with a sign, a flag mounted on a pole, and a massive piling where the boat would tie up. There you could sit down or even stretch out on the ground, if you weren't afraid of mosquitoes, ticks, or assorted other biting and crawling insects. If you wanted something to eat, you could help yourself to whatever you'd brought with you. Otherwise, you'd starve to death on the landing, and no one would bat an eye.

Esther had brought food. Besides having to wait for the boat, she knew that no one would be waiting for her in Krivosheino with a good meal; she'd be hungry by the time she got where she was going. Nothing would hold her back, though. This time she'd decided, once and for all, to escape from the forest. She wasn't going to think about what would happen at the other end. In her sack she had some boiled potatoes, two turnips, and three days' worth of bread rations, divided into slices to help keep her hands off the share for the next meal. She had some salt, too, tied up in a scrap of white cloth. She had to stick with the plan to the end, she kept telling herself, or else she was in for untold suffering. It was hard to say how she'd come up with the plan. It had occurred to her out of the blue, really. Back at the base, she'd happened to hear that the region's annual teacher conference was coming up in Krivosheino. A longing had come upon her, a gnawing nostalgia.

She yearned to spend even a day among those lucky teachers, to sit in the hall listening to presentations, no matter what they were about. How long had it been since she was seated proudly onstage, a member of the board, the envy of everyone in the room? *God, what has become of me*, she asked herself. A lump formed in her throat, and suddenly the idea came that she must seize this opportunity no matter the cost. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Maybe the plan wouldn't succeed, but as the official slogan had it, "Red or dead!" She had to try. Among the papers she'd hastily packed and brought with her to Siberia was a certificate stating that she was in her last year as a village teacher. With luck, maybe they wouldn't look too closely, wouldn't notice the certificate was from Moldavia, and would let her onto the boat. And what do you know? That's exactly what happened. Holding the paper stamped by the ministry of education, she was taken for a peasant girl, a teacher from one of the local farming communities, and was waved onto the boat without ado—*davoy, davoy*, hurry up, get on, we're late.

And that would have been the end of the tale, if not for the most important part of the story, which happened earlier, on the landing. So we need to back up.

Tired from her long walk, Esther had sat down on the riverbank, taken off her heavy sandals, and put her feet in the river. Bliss! The water cooled her burning feet and drained the weariness from her limbs. She sat for a while; she couldn't get enough. Then she furtively wrapped up the sandals, put them back in her sack, and pulled out her shoes. Now that she was among people, she needed to look like a person. She was in no hurry to eat. That morning she'd had a double portion of soup. In return for a pink hair ribbon, the cook had scooped up two whole ladles from the bottom of the pot, the thick part. She'd filled

herself up. But since then a whole day had passed, and quite a day at that. She'd walked as fast as she could—it would be just her luck if the boat came today and she arrived too late, in time to see it recede into the distance, wagging its stern as it disappeared out of sight. She'd pushed herself to the limit, not permitting herself a moment's rest. So it wasn't that she wasn't hungry—she was *always* hungry—but she knew there would be no food tomorrow. Best to make do now with a slice of bread and a little water from the river, and save the potatoes for later.

Meanwhile, night fell, and those who were waiting on the landing, ten or twelve of them, built a fire to protect against the swarms of mosquitoes eager to take up a collection from the assembly. She couldn't figure out anything to do but move closer to the fire herself. That was when she saw him. He was standing on the other side of the fire, directly across from her, in the jodhpurs they all wore, the big belt buckle, and the familiar N.K.V.D. cap. Esther froze and thought she might pass out. Well, well—you escape from hell and here's the devil in your face. It was none other than Shapovalov, the camp commandant. What could be worse? Shapovalov was about thirty years old and lived in Krasnoye. He supervised the deportees who worked in the forest chemical works from there and was rarely on site. Instead he had his minions, who served as his guard dogs, keeping an eye on every move. Every so often he paid a short visit to see and be seen. It was said that he wasn't a bad guy, but to the prisoners he was not a guy at all, good or bad, but always the commandant. Even if you weren't afraid of the man himself, the blue cap with the red stripe and the star in front still made you tremble. The cap and the trousers alone were enough to strike terror in the hearts of everyone in the forest.

To this day, Esther doesn't know whether he didn't see her or

whether he just pretended not to see. It wasn't a question of recognizing her personally. To him, she was just one of the masses. But all the deportees were easy to identify because of their tattered clothes and how intent they were on hiding themselves. Their scarves were always pulled down low on their foreheads, their eyes full of fear. The deportees had good reason to be afraid. Their fates were in his hands. In this instance, he would decide whether Esther got on the boat to Krivosheino or went back to the forest.

He didn't even glance in her direction, but the exaggerated way he seemed to be avoiding her made Esther suspect that he'd seen her. What to do? She lowered her eyes. It's in God's hands, she told herself. Every minute felt like an eternity. She turned her head away, then worried that she would attract his attention by trying to hide, so she turned back to the fire, looking straight ahead and pinching herself with her hands in her pockets. Lord, how much longer? A minute passed, then another, ten more. He seemed to be playing a game of cat and mouse, certain that his victim wouldn't escape. It was not easy being a mouse, even in an imaginary game. She broke into a cold sweat.

The game lasted so long that she found herself beginning to relax. If he were planning to punish her, she reflected, he wouldn't have let things go on so long. He would have thrown her out right away. Letting it go was a sign . . . a sign of something, even if she couldn't figure out what. A flicker of hope began to glow. Maybe he wasn't going to turn her in after all. The boat was coming—please, God!

The commandant was not alone. With him was someone else, also from the N.K.V.D. but obviously of lower rank; the commandant called him Sashka, and he never opened his mouth,

only listened and smiled while his superior never stopped talking. No doubt Shapovalov felt it was beneath his dignity to have to wait on this muddy landing with ordinary people. He was laughing and talking loudly, probably hoping people would notice that he was no regular fellow but a bigshot official. When his initial supply of stories had run out, he told Sasha, who was standing by the fire not far from Esther, that he had never eaten a carrot in his life and never would, not for all the money in the world. He loathed carrots and wouldn't let them pass his lips, not raw, not boiled, not even baked the way everyone loved them. He couldn't stand to look at them. It drove his mother crazy. If this wasn't the good life, what was?

Meanwhile he was tearing open a bag of cookies, round, plump ones like the spice cookies from back home. He ate one and playfully tossed a second to Sasha over the fire, then another. Whenever Sasha made a catch, the two of them laughed uproariously. Then one fell and rolled close to Esther. Sasha shrugged. He wouldn't bother bending down. There lay the cookie, suddenly the center of the universe. Esther forgot about the commandant. All she could think was that someone else would see the cookie and pick it up. Lifting her eyes as if to study the stars, she edged over and gently covered the cookie with her foot, not crushing it but nudging it deeper into the grass. A little later, when she thought no one was looking, she picked it up, brushed it off, and gobbled it down, her heart weeping with every bite.

Did he witness her in her moment of degradation? Did he drop the cookie at her feet on purpose to humiliate her? To this day, Esther does not know.

Yiddish Book Center translation fellow. With her colleague Yermiyahu Ahron Taub, she was the winner of the 2012 Yiddish Book Center Translation Prize for a collection of stories by Blume Lempel. She is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust*. Her website is www.ellencassedy.com.



From Eternity to Eternity: Thoughts and Considerations in Honor of Passover

By Moyshe Shtarkman

TRANSLATED BY ROSS PERLIN

This essay by cultural critic Moyshe Shtarkman (1817–1906) was first published in April 1960 in the journal Folk un velt (Nation and World). In it, Shtarkman stitches together a complex, wide-ranging argument that historical memory, exemplified by the Passover seder and the retelling of the exodus from Egypt, has been a key factor in Jewish historical survival. Citing famous Jewish historians and thinkers of different eras (Josephus, Simon Dubnow, Hermann Cohen), he also suggests that the very idea of historical memory and national identity may derive from the Jewish prophetic tradition. There is a specifically “Jewish way” in world history, a kind of historical mission that must be remembered and continued. The Jewish “greatest generation” to which Shtarkman himself belonged came through the Holocaust and founded the state of Israel—a powerful demonstration that the cyclical drama of Jewish history is still far from over.

he Jews are a historical people—not only because they are an old people but also because they are constantly being called upon to keep historical memory alive. We are always being summoned to seek a historic rationale for our path through world history, for our ongoing struggle in the wider human arena.

Jewish tradition gives us the keys to many historical puzzles. It tells us that the diasporic history of our people began in the land of Canaan—when our entire people consisted of a single family, the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and that the Lord forged a special divine bond with each one of the Jewish patriarchs that was brought to bear on their children and their children's children, as all of us know.

The children of Israel were not the only people enslaved in Egypt, but of those enslaved, only the Jews kept historical memory alive. They willingly faced pain in order to read stories about their venerable lineage and about the coming liberation. However fantastical, the Talmudic and rabbinic legends are starkly realistic when it comes to clarifying the reasons why Jewish national existence continued during the years of bondage in Egypt. The Jews did not change their language there, did not change their names, did not give up their customs, and they took responsibility for each other. “And so,” as the Haggadah says, “the ministering angels of heaven could bear witness that they were the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”; this is the inspired conclusion from the foregoing, more sober clarification of how Jewish existence can and must be preserved, even under the conditions of greatest hardship.

Because the memory of peoplehood remained alive among the children of Israel, Moses and Aaron were able to come to them with the message of redemption, urging them to begin a “National Spring” by our own national calendar, which indeed begins in the

spring month of Nissan: “This month shall be for you the beginning of the months. It shall be for you the first month of the year” (Exodus 12:2).¹

Jews have never thought of their history as merely the past. They transformed glorious events from “long ago” into a new “now”: every Pesach, a new exodus from Egypt; every Shavuot, once again the giving of Torah; every Sukkos, resting again in those shelters we had during our long desert wander to the promised land.

Historical memory—a national past kindling the desire for national renewal—enabled the prophet Ezekiel to prepare the Jews in Babylonian captivity for the longed-for return to Zion. Historical consciousness, strengthened by a distinctive way of life, was likewise crucial during the long era of diaspora, from the destruction of the Second Temple up until the Holocaust, that third Destruction.² Memory kept alive the faith that our longing would find fulfillment, the longing expressed in the words “Renew our days as of old” (Lamentations 5:21). And the state of Israel is our longed-for renewal. The Jewish state is Jewish history transformed into a Jewish present. Every event in Israel invites us to make historical comparisons. So it is no wonder that archaeology is all the rage from Dan to Eilat, across all of Israel.

Archaeological digs are proceeding in all parts of the world, especially in lands that have played a significant role in the history of mankind. We dig up buildings that bear witness to the construction techniques of certain peoples; we discover statues that illuminate the art of certain regions; we find fortresses that confirm that certain peoples in antiquity excelled in war; we find fortification walls that bear witness to the hard labor of the period’s slaves. But the most important archaeological finds relating to the Jews of the past have not been buildings or

fortresses but written texts whose meanings are the same today as they were when the information was written down: Jewish national consciousness.

In no way does having historical consciousness mean a narrowing of one's own horizon, a limiting of one's gaze. Thinking in Jewish historical categories means the universalism of the prophets, the eternal ethical values of our sages, and redemption not only for Jews but for all of humanity. Thinking in Jewish historical categories means thinking about the connections among nations—not only Jerusalem but also Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon; Rome, Athens, and Carthage. It means thinking through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, philosophy and science, economics and politics. Jewish history is a ring that encircles the history of all humanity. The martyred historian Simon Dubnow³ saw Jewish history almost as an axis running through the center of world history. And it may be fitting to treat a phrase of Hermann Cohen's⁴ as a commentary on Dubnow's idea—that the whole concept and sense of history, in general, is an achievement of the Jewish prophetic tradition.

To use terms from the world of literature, the Passover *Haggadah* is the most successful historical anthology in existence. From the slender *Haggadah* and the inspiration that shines forth from it comes a teaching—that the glories of the Jewish past presage a beautiful Jewish future, because prophecy is really the spirit of Jewish history. The Jewish religion has brought forth many distinguished individuals, but the central hero of Jewish history is the entire Jewish people—so it has been from the exodus from Egypt down to the present day. The accomplishments in terms of learning and in the realm of conscience, the achievement of being a scattered minority in a hostile non-Jewish world—these are attainments without equal in

the annals of humanity. Only faith has given the Jews this strength. The historian Josephus Flavius, son of Matityahu HaKohen⁵, already knew this, at the time when our nearly 2,000-year martyrdom was only just beginning. In his work *The Jewish War*, he emphasizes that religion caused the Jews to become a people—a people their enemies could never conquer.

The Passover reminder “remember the exodus from Egypt” keeps Jews’ historical memory alive. Our journey from bondage to freedom must remain an eternal reminder to be free in spirit, even when physically enslaved. Jews trapped in medieval ghettos—indeed, Jews in ghettos of every era—have understood this. They were prisoners, but they were not slaves; if they had been slaves, they never could have managed to create those values of the spirit with which we still nurture ourselves today.

A single comparison is sufficient to understand the difference between Jewish history and the histories of those foreign peoples among whom Jews have lived in the course of diaspora. While the historical development of Jews and the Jewish religion occurred at the same time, the religion of other peoples was brought to them from the outside. In many cases, “national beliefs” were imposed on subdued peoples either by foreign invaders or by their own brutal rulers. Thus was it possible for one Christian people to go to war against another and for the sword of Islam not to spare even a people believing in Islam. Among Jews there could never be such a division between the purely national and the purely spiritual. In the introduction to his history of Jewish philosophy, the erudite and often impenetrable David Neumark underlined that spiritual unity is the axis on which the entire national development of the Jewish people has turned.

We have to think in historical categories and research Jewish history not to boast but to spin the threads that link us with all

other generations of Jews. We have to ensure that those who come after us will continue spinning the threads. Instead of seeking people to brag to or answer to (as Jewish apologists do), let us rather get to know ourselves better, our national identity and the spirit of our people.

Jewish history is very much an exact science, and all of its predictions have come true. All clever heads put together cannot contradict the facts of our historical experience. There is a “Jewish way” in world history, and we must continue farther along on that path. True renewal does not mean throwing out the old. A true renaissance uses what is valuable from the past in order to enrich the spirit of the present and the future. Jewish history is written not only for the telling but for the showing. Failing to recognize the manifestations of Jewish history means ignoring the truth that our past as a people has bequeathed us, denying a legacy.

Every generation of Jews has a special mission to enact and to repeat certain episodes from the history of previous generations. Our generation of Jews recapitulated the martyrdom experienced by every generation of Jewish martyrs—and it also lived to repeat the glories of the exodus from Egypt and the return to Zion. No previous generation of Jews ever experienced a historical period simultaneously filled with so many destructive and redemptive experiences. Our generation, the generation whose sons and daughters fought inside the ghetto walls and stormed the fortresses of Arab enemies, has demonstrated for future generations that the living legacy of the past is not some additional burden. It is an inheritance of culture and civilization, by which cultured and civilized Jews can be enriched and strengthened during great crises and signal acts of heroism.

The Jews have remained a people from the exodus out of Egypt up until now because in every generation we had idealists who

refused simply to imitate other peoples. Learning from other peoples is no sin, but mimicking others means denying one's own self.

We need to have a historical approach to all problems, and to problems of the spirit absolutely and without doubt. A historical approach teaches us that Jewish history never flows peacefully. Every epoch in Jewish history is a drama—and not some self-contained little chapter but the beginning of yet another drama. The Jewish historical drama can be heroic or tragic, but it should never be turned into a tragicomedy, with unconscious Jews as the protagonists.

As we are speaking of eternity—of Jewish eternity—we must remember that the word *eternity* has a double meaning. There is the eternity of the past and the eternity of the future. And when we speak of the Jewish historical path, from eternity to eternity, let us consider the deep import of a short saying, an aphorism sculpted by a great Jewish mind, that of the medieval philosopher, astronomer, and Bible commentator Rabbi Levi Ben Gershom. He reminds us, just as he reminded his own generation, “Living means thinking and remembering.”

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¹ Although the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah) falls in Tishrei, the seventh month, Nissan is technically the first month because of this verse from Exodus.

² The Yiddish word for the Holocaust, *khurbm*, means “destruction” and refers back to

other major “destructions” of the Jewish past, including the destruction of the two temples.

3 Perhaps the greatest of all historians who wrote in Yiddish, Dubnow (1860–1941) was killed in Riga during the Holocaust.

4 Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) was a famous German-Jewish philosopher.

5 Shtarkman is citing the best-known Jewish historians of different epochs—Josephus (37–100 CE) wrote in Greek on the Jewish uprisings against the Romans.



In Which I Hate It and Can't Stand It and Don't Want to and Have No Patience at All

By Der Tunkeler

TRANSLATED BY RI J. TURNER

Yoysef Tunkel (1881–1949), known primarily by his pseudonym, “Der Tunkeler” (“The Shady One”), was a humorist, social critic, and founder of New York’s two major Yiddish humor magazines —Der kibetser (The Joker) and Der groyser kundes (The Big Stick). His writings, to date almost entirely untranslated into English, are a precious trove of clever, richly parodic insight into the absurdities, pretenses, and foibles that characterized the European Jewish encounter with modernity, especially among the literati. He published prolifically, including stories, parodies, plays, and monologues with titles such as “Khayim Getsl the Reformer and His Twenty-Five Reforms,” “The Graphomaniac,” and “The Big Yawn, or A Boring Day in New York.”

Der Tunkeler’s work is notable for its ability to resonate across time and place. Like much of his writing, this monologue immortalizes a specific moment in political and cultural history while simultaneously depicting an era-transcending curmudgeonly reaction to modern life with which we can easily identify today.

I don't really feel like dealing with literary criticism or with critics themselves. To hell with critics, anyway! I don't want to read the reports from the League of Nations about the Polish-Lithuanian negotiations—so sue me! I'm too lazy to slice open the pages of the newly arrived *Literary Pages*, aside from the listings at the end, which I'll skim through in case one of them mentions me. I don't have any desire to pay my union dues or donate to the public health fund, and even less desire to be levied the community tax or to pay into a mutual aid society or any other kind of organization. I don't like writing when I don't get an advance. I don't particularly like writing when I *do* get an advance, either—never mind when they pay me in full ahead of time. I don't feel like paying my languishing debts, or the new ones either. And I have no patience for sticking a collar stud into a freshly starched collar, and I hate it when the holes in the saltcellar get stopped up. I hate spreading frozen butter on soft bread, and I hate it when the teapot lid falls off in the middle of pouring tea. And I swear to God I don't want to buy a boutonniere. And I don't want to eat vegetarian food, and I hate writing recommendation letters, and I don't want to read about the crisis of Yiddish literature, and I don't want to discuss whether Yiddish literature is going uphill or downhill, and I'm too lazy to fill out questionnaires. And I don't want to give up my seat on the streetcar so that some old lady can have it, and I don't want to walk an ugly girl home on Czerniakowska Street at midnight, and even if it's 10 in the morning I still don't want to, and I hate it when people ask me, "What are you writing lately?" and "Do you get paid by the line or by the article?" and "Is Der Tunkeler your real name, or only a pseudonym, and if it's a pseudonym, then what's your real name?"

I have no interest in traveling to the North Pole, and I don't want to swim the English Channel, and I don't want to take a plane to the Island of Java or to Mexico or even to Paraguay, and I

don't want to swim in the Vistula when it's a frosty 96 degrees, and I hate it when trains run over my feet—a man could break his neck! And I hate debating whether we have a Yiddish theater, and what is art and what is trash and what is the intellectual elite.

I hate it when I ask, “What time is it?” and someone answers, “The same time it was at this time yesterday.” And when I lose at cards, I hate it when someone says, “Oh, well, you must be lucky in love.”

I hate it when my fountain pen dries out and stops writing, and then I shake it and spray ink all over my white pants. I have no energy to read Romain Rolland or Reisfeder's novels or Dr. Schiper's *History of Theater*, or Rabindranath Tagore, or Noach Pryłucki's *Philology*, or the reports from the YIVO Institute, or Rosenstreich's economics articles.

I don't want to learn languages by listening to the radio, and I don't like hearing the “Agricultural Report” or reading the advertisements on the screen in the movie theater. I don't like shaving with dull Gillette blades, and I have no patience for sharpening them, and I hate it when my barber rants at me about politics, the circus, fights, authors, sports, Trotsky, the Sejm, Yitzhak Gruenbaum, Gershon Sirota, or Mussolini—and I hate it when someone shoves a kid in my arms and the kid pulls off my glasses.

I hate visiting sick people who have the flu, tuberculosis, pneumonia, cancer, or anything else. I hate top hats, child prodigies, boors, and corns on my feet. I hate Kumerol margarine, rubber shirt collars, and Esperanto. I hate it when poets rhyme “heart” with “art,” “heaven” with “seven,” or “gleam” with “dream,” and I hate the words “twilight,” “gloaming,” “spectral,” “spontaneous,” “nightingale,” and “considering,” and I don't want to take off my coat in the cloakroom of the sweetshop, especially

when the attendant is elegant whereas my coat is threadbare and doesn't even have a loop by which to hang it, and I don't like leaving a tip, and I hate it when men kiss me, and I hate it when people who talk to me spray their spit in my face and I'm expected to be too polite to wipe it off. I don't want to study Einstein's new theory, and I don't even want to study the old one, and I don't like looking up words in the dictionary. When you find a word, they send you away with "see under," so then I go "see under" and what do I find? "Go back and see under the first one." What am I, some kind of ball to be tossed back and forth? And I hate it when a random smoker asks me if I have a light, and I hate it when a stranger sits down at my table in the café, and I hate it when people bore me, and I hate boring you, so good night!

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Letters

By H.D. Nomberg

TRANSLATED BY DANIEL KENNEDY

Hersh Dovid Nomberg was a writer and activist born in 1886 in Mszczonów, near Warsaw. A protégé of Peretz, he began publishing poems and short stories in 1900. Along with Sholem Asch and Avrom Reyzen, he went on to become one of the most influential Yiddish writers of his generation.

By 1908, however, Nomberg had become more involved in politics than in prose. He was one of the organizers of the 1908 Czernowitz language conference and served as a member of parliament in the Polish Sejm between 1919 and 1920.

Many of Nomberg's stories deal with the theme of alienation, depicting lost and lonely characters trying to find their place in the modern world. "Letters" is an epistolary romance of sorts, with a twist.

Yankev Bender, a tall man of about thirty with a thin, pale, clean-shaven face, paced back and forth across his room, his brow furrowed, deep in thought.

On the table lay a letter he had just received from Rokhl, the very girl he had not let out of his sight for the last two years. He

could think of nothing else. Whenever he walked past the table, his gaze fell unwillingly upon the letter.

His mind was anything but clear, yet he had a strong feeling of satisfaction and triumph and was uncharacteristically invigorated; in such a state he could have paced around the room for two or three hours, giving himself over entirely to those light, wavering thoughts and emotions. And with that he felt a sense of relief, as though someone were calmly stroking his hair, whispering, "You are a serious, worthy, decent man, Bender."

All the while, the words that Rokhl had carelessly let fall in her letter echoed in his fantasy: "After everything that's happened, I have to admit that I didn't know you. Do you love me?" And each time those words came to mind, a contented smile played on his lips, and he remembered what Rokhl had once said to him: that his laugh was strange, that even when he laughed his face retained its usual earnest and sad expression.

Back when she had said those words, he had taken them to heart and they had rankled. Now, though, the idea evoked pleasure, even pride, like everything else that passed through his mind.

His musings were interrupted by the creaking of the door opening behind him. The maid, a young, pretty Christian girl, passed through the doorway and stopped, as if afraid to come any closer.

"Would Sir like some tea?" she asked.

Bender nodded, smiled, and said, "I'll have some tea."

The maid looked particularly pretty at that moment; the green lamp lit up her face and chest, adding a certain charm to her simple beauty. As usual, she stood still awhile. Everything about Bender struck her as peculiar: his intolerable gaze, his curt,

snappish answers, and his nervous, agitated movements, all of which offended her female pride.

She was used to young men chasing after her, trying to kiss and grab her, young men she had to rebuff and push away. Bender didn't say much to her and never tried to kiss her; he never even touched her. And yet whenever he took even one step toward her she panicked and turned pale. She couldn't shake the feeling that he was going to pounce.

Bender, in good spirits, turned to her with a smile. "Does Mariasha have a fiancé?"

"A fiancé? Where would I get a fiancé? I don't need one."

"But . . ."

Bender felt suddenly uneasy and would have been happy if she left the room, but she just stood there by the door and said with a laugh, "I did have a fiancé. I was engaged for two years. If I had enough money, I'd be married by now."

"Good, good, you can bring in the tea then."

The maid left and returned with tea. Once again she idled by the door, looking at the back of Bender's head as he hunched over the table, lost in thought. He felt her burdensome nearness; he went out of his way not to turn around.

Eventually she left. Bender got up and resumed pacing, composing a letter to Rokhl in his head.

"I have never told a lie and I never will," he thought in proud agitation. "I will try to give you my heart, bare as it is; I want to be myself with you." He stared for awhile at the paper in his hand and then started to write.

Dear Rokhl,

I have only just now received your letter, which filled my heart with such

gratification and joy that I hasten to answer you, paying no heed to the gravity and the seriousness of the question you have presented. I want to speak for once from the heart, to explain things to you, my dear, and at the same time to make my feelings clear to myself.

I have already told you that ever since I found a job and started leading a decent, regular life I feel unsatisfied and miserable. My nerves are even more on edge than before. One after the other, my old acquaintances distance themselves from me as if I had committed a terrible sin. And to tell the truth, I do feel like I've sinned . . . why? I don't know. Perhaps because I'm used to living in dirty, cramped rooms rather than eating my fill or sleeping well. I'm used to going hungry; in a word, I had made my peace with poverty. It's always hard in the beginning. I'll get used to it and then I'll live like everyone around me, come what may! You could call me "bourgeois," one of the crowd, but there's one thing I won't let them take away from me, one thing I know for sure: I've never lied. I've never even *wanted* to lie. And yet believe me, my dear, from my childhood up to now, I've never managed to talk to someone without having the unpleasant, shameful feeling that I was hiding something from them, that I was giving myself airs, that I was not who I said I was. But with you, my dear, I've spent many hours without having that distasteful, guilty feeling. And even now as I write to you, my heart feels free and true.

You were surprised by my behavior the whole time that you were here. I did not say a single clear word to you. Not once did I press your hand lovingly; that must surely have offended you. I understand that, but what could I do? You have to understand that for all my searching, all my striving, and everything that has filled my life with meaning, so to speak, that after my ten years of wandering, I was left with nothing that I would consider important. You, my dear, are the only thing I have left. I have thought about you a great deal. Could I pick out a word from the dictionary to say to you? Could I lie to the only creature to whom I felt a connection? No! I could not do that; you are too dear to me. And I did not want to feel like I had sinned against you.

Do I love you? Yes, certainly.

I remember one evening in your room; you laughed and looked very beautiful. Your hair and your whole tender, young body seemed to laugh with you. The piercing fire that used to burn in your black eyes, pushing me back each time I wanted to get closer to you, had gone out. You were pure levity and joy. And I remember that each time you laughed I felt as though a waterfall were crashing down upon my brain; I grew tired and lay down on the sofa. You came over to me and pulled me by the hand. I seem to recall your saying, "Look how he's stretched himself out!" And—that moment is vivid in my memory—it was like a powerful current flowing through my whole body. I wanted to embrace you, fall upon your neck and cry. But I couldn't in front of the others. And when you pulled away

from me, my whole body shuddered, as if in a fever. A great lightness overpowered me; my head was empty and I felt only the current, forever frozen inside me. . . . That night when I got home to my room, I felt that I was no longer alone or isolated—and I was happy. But the feeling was only temporary, and many, many times I wanted to say something to you but I couldn't.

You no doubt remember last summer at Shvues, when we went for a walk together just outside the city. We left our companions to themselves and walked ahead, just the two of us. Suddenly you ran up onto a little hillock. You were very pretty then, young and fresh and full of life. You stood there like a tree in full bloom.

I remember your face, your hair and the last rays of sunlight that played on them, your eyes that looked with such softness and longing at a small house standing far in the distance; how they sparkled, bathed in light. I remember the look that you gave me and how you suddenly jumped down from the hillock with outstretched arms . . . at that moment I wanted to run toward you, embrace you. But I was too late: the others had caught up with us. Something always prevented me; that feeling always died in my heart before it had a chance to come out into the bright world.

On your departure, as I accompanied you to the train station, I thought the whole time about doing something—but I held my tongue. I didn't know what to say. A few minutes before the train started to move, I felt that everything would stay the same as always. I dreaded the moment when you would disappear and there would be nothing but an empty space before my eyes. I thought something would happen, that I would cry, or laugh, or scream . . . and I came home with an empty heart.

I don't know what's wrong with me; I'm starting to get dizzy. I hear people speak about love, hate, jealousy, and various other things. Sometimes I think that it's all just talk, that they are not sincere, that really there is no such thing as love, or hate, or jealousy, or anything like that. There are only thousands of different ephemeral emotions, which bear no resemblance to each other. It is only the individual who changes from one minute to the next. And when I think like that, I feel better. In those moments I feel that I'm better than the others, a feeling of pride that I have carried for many years. Then I say to myself, I can't live because I'm clever, because my eyes are open. It only happens rarely though. Normally I think, "What if?" Who knows? Maybe my heart really *is* so corrupted, maybe only *my* life is so fragmented. Maybe the fault lies in the ten years I spent wandering without family or friends, without a home, without a female companion?

I'm telling you all this so that you'll know the state of my soul, so that you'll understand why I held my tongue and did not utter those few words that could have bound you to me. I said nothing because I wanted to be sure, because I did not want to lie.

If I had already loved at some point in my life, I could have compared my current feelings to those of the past and I would have known. But I had never loved, never embraced, never kissed a woman . . .

Bender suddenly stopped writing. His face contorted into an unnatural scowl, his mind reeling as it did whenever he remembered an ugly incident three years ago in another city, with a different girl whom he had treated in a similar manner to Rokhl. Once, when they were alone, he embraced her without warning, and she pushed him away, screaming: “Scoundrel!”

A few seconds passed before Bender’s head cleared, and he noted down the word three times on a scrap of paper: “scoundrel, scoundrel, scoundrel.”

He paced several times around the room before continuing the letter.

There’s one thing I know for sure. From childhood on, in moments of heightened excitement, whenever I shook with laughter, there was always one thought hiding in the corner of my mind: “If you wanted to, Bender, you could be calm.” That voice always spoke from deep inside my inner being.

So, my love, I burden you for nothing with reading my letter. Forgive me. I have to be what I am, at least for one living being, for you.

Do I desire you? Yes! How easy it is for me to answer such a question. Yes, yes, and yes! What’s more, I feel that apart from you, I have nothing, that living without you is impossible. I have no friends, no family, no trusted companion. My acquaintances distance themselves from me; there’s nothing to connect us anymore. I’m lonely, full of revulsion and disgust.

It will be good here for you, my dear. I will love you, ah, how I’ll love you! I can picture it now: We’ll sit together at lunch. I’ll stand up satisfied and agreeable and I’ll kiss your forehead, your beautiful forehead. You don’t know how deeply I can love; my heart has never been lacking.

The door opened and the maid came in to take his glass. Bender put away his pen. The maid brushed against him with her shoulder, picking up the glass, and he stared at her absentmindedly in silence.

“Would Sir like anything else?” she asked.

“Hmm.” He smiled crookedly and stood up. The maid left the room.

Bender was left alone and looked at the letter, at the sheets of paper with writing on both sides, and yawned.

He was already sure that he would not send it, that his present bout of agitation was no different from his previous ones. His tendency to philosophize and ponder was a foolish, childish habit that had poisoned his life for as long as he could remember.

“What I’ve written here to Rokhl,” he thought, “I could have said to any remotely good-looking girl. I could even have said it to the maid.”

The sheets of paper lay scattered on the table. He was afraid to read them through from beginning to end. Once again he felt overcome by exhausting thoughts, and to distract himself he lay down on his bed and started humming a Russian song. His heart wandered longingly to that female being, the subject of the song, who boated across the river with her lover one fine evening. He was intoxicated by the feelings of a full life, of joy and desire, of the health and strength with which the song was filled. In his imagination he saw the boat, sails unfurled in the wind, the stillness of the water, the evening air. He felt the strong, healthy body, a young, ruddy face . . .

But suddenly, he did not know from where, a sobering thought came into his mind.

“I don’t know what’s happening around me! I’m a fool!” he cursed himself, pacing angrily across the room. “What do I even want? What is my desire? What am I philosophizing about? I want to live. I’m tired! She wants to marry me; why turn my nose up at it? Do I not have the right to take a wife? Who am I afraid of? Who? Why?

“Lies, lies, lies,” he added angrily when he remembered the words of the letter: *I can’t live*. “Lies. I *can* live, I *can*!”

The thought that, in reality, he was incapable of living like others, that his laugh was a sort of sigh, as Rokhl had once said; that thought weighed down on his heart. He bit his lower lip in rage, and with frenetic hatred he went back to the table and started writing Rokhl an entirely different letter:

My life, my soul!

I keep reading and rereading your letter and can’t believe how happy I am. Here it is in front of me, a letter written in your own hand, your small, pretty, white hand. Oh! How much I would love it if you could see what’s happening in my heart! *You, you* are talking to *me*. I read each word, each letter, and I wonder and ask myself, am I really happy? Do you belong to me, Rokhl? And I love you, how I love you! Because it was only due to so much love—my heart was filled up to the brim—that I could not speak. I couldn’t. I didn’t want to turn the holiness of my love into something mundane. We are happy, after all! This very minute, I received your letter, and I can’t hold back my feelings. I kiss you and love you forever without end. My life and soul, I am yours, yours, yours! Imagine: after ten years of wandering without a spark of love, without a spark of life, I’ve suddenly become happy, the happiest in the world, because you belong to me, my dear love. I kiss you and press you to my heart. Tomorrow I’ll write to you at length and discuss everything in detail. My happiness has made me drunk; I’m crying, shedding tears of happiness, yours . . .

Yes, I can. The thought came through Bender’s mind as he finished reading the letter. And with the feeling of a conqueror, he leaned back in his chair, staring in front of him. The first letter lay there, put aside in the corner of the table, and it waved silently like the hunted, insulted truth, demanding that which belongs to it: the juices of life, blood and marrow.

“Well?” he asked himself. Should he send the second letter?

He read it through again and pictured how Rokhl would read it, how surprised she would be to hear such words from him, how hard it would be for her to reconcile the tone of the letter with his usual behavior, with his usual way of speaking.

He sat awhile longer in silence, tired and weary, his head empty, without a single thought.

“What will I do?” he asked himself again, and he found a new combination: bringing over the little bottle of glue, he stuck both letters together and wrote with a red pencil on both sides: “Choose!”

“A good solution,” he thought, and fearing that he would change his mind, he quickly put both letters into an envelope and went out.

The sun shone large and bright, white snowflakes circling in the wind. The shops were already starting to close up. Bender ran quickly to the end of the street toward the postbox. He opened the flap, ready to throw the letter in, when suddenly he held himself back. In his imagination he could hear the flap clapping closed, and he shuddered at the thought that he could consider doing something so irreversible.

“Even more laughable,” he said to himself, wondering why it never occurred to him that sending both letters at once was even worse, even more shameful, more pathetic and disgusting.

A girl walked past, brushing against him with her body, and he remembered what he had written about the strong current that flowed through his body when Rokhl had taken him by the hand. . . . The letter in his hand was already soaked by the melting snow. He was cold. His feet started to freeze; in his haste he had forgotten to put on his galoshes. He let go of the flap of the postbox, tore the letter to shreds, and let the wind blow the pieces in every direction. “I don’t need it. I don’t need anything, I don’t need anybody,” he mumbled to himself walking home, hunched over with quick steps.

Bender paced around in his room for a long time. Thoughts, as lead, trudged through his mind. He wasn't thinking about Rokhl anymore but taking stock of his life. Everything that went through his head, all of his thoughts and deeds, the whole ten years of his wandering, it all seemed like one long chain of pondering and philosophizing and lamenting, like something unnatural that aroused only disgust and scorn.

He wanted to drive the thoughts from his head, but they seemed to cling to his brain, running away and coming back and filling up the space like a swarm of flies that cannot be shooed away. The room was full of cigarette smoke. From outside the white rooftops looked in. The clock struck two. "I need to be in the office tomorrow morning," he thought. He stopped in the middle of the room and looked upward, letting his arms hang limp toward his feet, and said aloud, clearly and precisely, word by word, like a pupil reciting a lesson:

"And-if-I-want-I-can-be-calm . . . completely calm . . ."

His shadow, on the floor below him, aped his every movement, but remained silent.

DANIEL KENNEDY is a teacher of English and Yiddish based in Paris and a two-time Yiddish Book Center translation fellow, in 2015 and 2016. He holds an MA in American literature from University College Cork, Ireland, and teaches Yiddish online through the Bibliothèque Medem Center for Yiddish Culture in Paris. He spent his first fellowship year translating a collection of Nomberg's short stories. Kennedy's current project is Zalman Shneour's 1905 novel *A toyt: shrift fun a zelvstmerder a tiref* (*A Death: The Writings of a Delirious Suicide*), which Kennedy describes as an "avant-garde page-turner."



Blind Folye

By Froyim Kaganovski

TRANSLATED BY BEVERLY BRACHA WEINGROD

From the 1920s until World War II, the Yiddish reading public in Poland enjoyed an exceptional feast of noteworthy literature. Many of the talented authors who produced this bounty are today unknown, and their work has not yet seen the light of day in English translation. Froyim Kaganovski (1893–1958) is a prime example of just such a writer. He produced more than thirty works in fifty-four publications—books, novellas, journals, and newspapers—primarily in Yiddish and Polish. Throughout a lifetime of forced wandering between Poland and Russia, he wrote continuously and, perhaps, obsessively.

*This story is from Kaganovski's 1928 collection *Figurn* (Figures). Tales like this one provide a unique view into the bustling life of the modern, fast-changing Jewish population of Warsaw, a city that in the period between the two World Wars had the largest population of Jews of any city outside of America.*

The street still remembered Folye of thirty years ago, when he was a well-known poultry dealer at the marketplace. He was a man of importance then, and a rich man as well. He was considered a hero because of his great strength and was called

“Folye the Giant.” He could lift even the heaviest wagon up onto his shoulders. There wasn’t a single soul in or around the Iron Gates neighborhood or the marketplace who did not know Folye.

Everyone still remembers the times he came home on leave during his service with the grenadiers in Moscow. The girls of the Iron Gates threw themselves at him! And when he married Mendel the Butcher’s daughter, Rikl the Doll, the whole town was drunk for eight days running.

On Saturdays, when the young couple went strolling down the avenues, or to the park on Bagatela, or to the Eldorado Theater, the other women threw them envious glances, wishing they had such luck.

Rikl the Doll was the neighborhood beauty. She was tall and slim, rosy-faced with long, brown hair. Even at that time there was talk of the police chief being so in love with her that he would follow her around in his carriage. Young men would fight over her with knives while she looked down on the market from her balcony, flashing them her doll-like smile.

The couple lived together comfortably for a few years. They had no children, so their business grew more and more successful, and the street murmured that they lived like magnates.

In the midst of all this, Folye suddenly became ill and began to lose his sight. They desperately sought out every professor, every doctor, and every Jew with a bright idea. But nothing helped. Within a very short time, the illness drained him of his fortune.

He could soon be seen wandering in the marketplace with bandaged eyes. He seemed suddenly, overnight, to become old and thin, but he still possessed those mighty shoulders and that proud head. Rikl the Doll led him by the arm. Folye could no longer accomplish much; nevertheless, he still traded and was

able to evaluate poultry by feel and touch.

The women wept when they saw Folye on the street, and people began to reproach Rikl the Doll: “Too much of a doll to take goods to the market.”

But Rikl would not hear of doing business. As before, she appeared elegantly dressed, and her beauty tore up the street.

As for Folye, things went from bad to worse. Good friends still supported him and gathered together a few rubles. Then he went into the hospital for a long time. It was then that Rikl began to leave the house at night. There was talk of her being seen in the faraway streets, among officers and generals. A good friend who visited Folye in the hospital informed him of his wife’s affairs. Folye heard him out but remained silent, simply holding his head higher and stiffer.

But that very Saturday evening, when everyone was standing around their gates and couples were out strolling, there was suddenly a great hullabaloo, people running every which way.

Folye appeared in the street in a gray hospital gown, his eyes bandaged. He ran to and fro like a wild ox, roaring and bellowing, slippers on his feet. Scores of people ran after him. He went upstairs to the flat where he and Rikl lived. The door was locked. Rikl the Doll was not at home.

With a single stroke, he tore the door from its hinges. He felt his way around every corner. He smelled everything that was in the apartment. He detected the scent on her clothes. He tore down the chest, neared the bed, and pounced like a lion. Before anyone could stop him, he had made a complete shambles of the entire house. He shattered the chest and tore up the bedclothes. The neighborhood strongmen were called in, but even they could barely contain him.

“Let me at her! Give her to me, and I will tear her head off! Folye still lives!”

He went on cursing and ranting, determined to stay until she came home.

His good friends embraced him and tried to convince him: “Folye, let it go; forget her. God will help you; you’ll become a man again . . . and find another doll.”

After that, Folye went limp. He began to shake and sob like a child. They say that all the men wept with him when they took him back to the hospital.

From that moment on, Rikl the Doll was never seen again.

Thus began a chain of bleak years. In the beginning, some of the old dealers still remembered Folye. They would send over a basket of chickens for him to inspect, enabling him to earn a few coins. The women would deliver a bit of cooked food to his stall in the market. Little by little, however, they forgot him altogether.

But Blind Folye never forgot anyone. Even though his eyes remained in constant darkness, he always saw in his mind’s eye the whole neighborhood of the Iron Gates and the marketplace. He sensed each step, every house, every fence and corner of the place, and certainly every person. With his stick clutched tightly in his gnarled, outstretched hand and his head held high, he paced the crowded marketplace. The brightly moving world that he had lost was burrowed deep in him, astonishingly more vivid in his mind. He could recognize the voice of each and every person he had ever seen.

Amid the great clamor of the market, the loud cries and raucous noise of geese, hens, ducks, women, children, girls, and the many

Jews buying and selling, was Folye. He arrived early every morning, together with all the dealers, butchers, water carriers, and draymen. He always appeared tall and straight, with a stiff head, as if carved from wood, and a broad, pale mouth with white, solid, healthy teeth.

Only his eyes were closed and withdrawn. Small reddish slits were seen where eyes had once been. Blind Folye leaned forward on his stick with pointed, alert ears and listened.

Once, the town porter approached, bent double under a heavy load. He passed Folye and shouted, "Good morning, Folye!"

"Good morning, Leybele, you sissy!" Folye responded.

Laughter broke out among the women and children. The porter stopped, still holding the load on his back. He thrust a coin into Folye's hand. "Here, Folye, you deserve it," he said. "Since you recognized me."

Suddenly a carriage was heard rumbling over the jagged stones of the road toward Folye. Amid the noise, the wagon driver shouted down, "Folye, may the devil take your father!"

Blind Folye strained his ears, mumbled a moment, and cried out, "Motkele, you swindler! Toss me a tenner!"

And so he recognized each and every one. He never made a mistake. The crowd delighted in him and threw him its spare change.

The older dealers gossiped. "Look what can become of a man."

"If only I had what he once had."

"God punishes a man."

Children with fingers in their wide-open mouths looked with fear upon the blind man, who mumbled wordlessly as though convincing himself of something.

All around him the noise of the market, of buying and selling, resounded. Merchants praised their products to the skies. The clamor rolled on and on, like a hail of stones.

An elegant noblewoman arrived to purchase goods, and the merchants were beseeching her from all sides. A soldier with a gold stripe running down the length of his trousers followed her with two large baskets. The noblewoman intended to buy a great deal. She smiled with her bright, blue eyes. She knew that “they cheat here.” Oh, she knew!

Suddenly the blind man’s stick began to shake. He tore his head up, jolted forward, and stumbled in his haste. He lifted himself by his hands, and a loud roar was heard: “Rikl . . . Rikl . . . my wife, Rikl . . .”

A crowd boiled around them, a thick, swarming knot of people.

And in the center of it all stood the soldier with the golden trouser stripe, holding the fainting noblewoman.

BRACHA BEVERLY WEINGROD will soon self-publish *Jewish Warsaw Between the Wars*, which includes twenty of her translations of Kaganovski’s short stories, mostly drawing from his 1928 collection *Figurn*. She thanks Gilda Gordon for her help in editing. Weingrod, an accomplished teacher, lives in Jerusalem and is also the translator of *Dos Familien Kokh-Bukh*, which she published under the title *The Yiddish Family Cookbook*.



Mr. Friedkin and Shoshana: Wandering Souls on the Lower East Side

Chapter 13 of *Hibru*

By Joseph Opatoshu

TRANSLATED BY SHULAMITH Z. BERGER

The novel Hibru, by Joseph Opatoshu (1886–1954), portrays the professional and personal lives of teachers, young immigrant men from Eastern Europe who wander like lost souls in the land of opportunity, seeking a livelihood, meaning, and love. It is set on the Lower East Side of New York in the 1910s. The title refers to Hebrew schools, supplementary schools that boys attended in the afternoon after public school. The schools provided students with a Jewish education and prepared them for their bar mitzvahs.

This selection is Chapter 13, provided by the translator with the title “Mr. Friedkin and Shoshana: Wandering Souls on the Lower East Side.” It opens with Mr. Friedkin—the novel’s protagonist and the principal of a Hebrew school—in a state of agitation precipitated by his colleague Ziskind’s declaration of belief in Jesus. The chapter turns to Friedkin’s personal crisis: an unwelcome revelation by his girlfriend, Shoshana (aka Reyzele),

and her firsthand account of surviving the Kishinev pogrom.

Permission to publish the translation of this chapter of Hibru is courtesy of Dan Opatoshu, grandson of the author.

Friedkin wandered around lost in thought for several days after the scene at Ziskind's. He realized that until now he'd never let life touch him; life had passed by him like a shallow stream flowing between high shores, never jostling nor leaving a trace on him. He was sorry that he had frittered away more than half his life on nothing more than the pursuit of creature comforts. The children in school exchanged puzzled glances. They couldn't understand the change in Friedkin. He treated them politely, like adults, and the children responded and sat calmly. For the first time in years he didn't feel worn out when he dismissed the class. He walked down the steps briskly, cheerfully exchanged greetings with the teachers, and thought he was on his way to a new life.

Friedkin got ahold of a New Testament, stayed up late at night, and read it diligently. This went on for a few days. Very often, poring over the New Testament, he recited the words mechanically, without understanding the meaning, and perverse thoughts crept into his head about a Jewish Pope, Jewish cardinals, and about the missionary, Ziskind. He fantasized himself sitting on the Pope's golden throne. He knew it was impossible, yet he imagined receiving Jewish deputations regarding blood libels and issuing papal bulls to all the nations decreeing that blood libels are ugly, false accusations of ritual murder leveled against the Jews. Every time he thought about blood libels, it brought to mind the scholar Daniel Chwolson, a convert from Judaism but a great advocate for his people.

Friedkin then transformed himself from a Pope to that professor in the czar's court, determined to demonstrate the greatness of the Jews to the world. He soon grew sick and tired of the New Testament.

On top of that, Shoshana came over almost every evening, leaving him little time to think of much else. He gradually forgot about the incident with Ziskind. Shoshana's visits also grew distasteful, and he thought about how to distance himself from her. Just then the secretary of the school handed him a letter of dismissal, notifying him that he must look for another position at the end of the term. The news thoroughly unnerved him. It drove everything else out of his head, and all Friedkin could concentrate on was finding a concrete solution. He curried favor with the secretary of the school, hinted that he'd marry his daughter at any time, and wrote poison pen letters about a teacher, Green, accusing him of violating Shabbos—nothing helped. As the time for him to vacate his position grew closer, he became more despondent. He realized he had no one to pour his heart out to, that he was still a stranger in New York; he might as well have just gotten off the boat yesterday.

And here stood Shoshana with wide-open arms, desiring him just the way he was, and he grew warmer at the thought. He told himself that she was a seamstress, she could open her own place, and if it were successful he'd be set for life. Every time he contemplated breaking up with Shoshana, convinced he'd soon find a better match, she would, as if just to spite him for the thought, visit him in progressively lighter, see-through clothing. She wouldn't leave him alone, toying with him like a cat with a ball of yarn. The more she tempted him, the more he wanted to escape, but all he could manage to do in the few hours before she visited was to parade around his room all dressed up.

Shoshana came in and didn't greet him. She sat with her hat on, and like a person with something to hide, she looked down at the floor helplessly, without saying a thing.

"What's wrong, Shoshana?" Friedkin asked.

She looked at him with watery eyes, her lips trembling as though she were about to burst into tears. She bit her lower lip with her white teeth and stayed in the same position.

"Shoshana, say something, what is it?" Friedkin went to her and touched her gently on her shoulder. "Did someone hurt you?"

"Nothing; leave me alone." She twisted as though she wanted to shake off his hand and wept quietly.

"What's going on, Shoshana?" Friedkin implored her. "Why are you crying? You've got to tell me; I'm not a stranger. Did someone offend you? Why aren't you saying anything?"

She looked up, wiped her eyes, opened her mouth, and sobbed even more fiercely. Friedkin began kissing her hands, not even knowing what he was saying: "Shoshana, why are you crying? Please, tell me! *Nu*, Shoshana?"

"I can't," she said in a low voice.

"You've got to tell me!" Friedkin kept kissing her. "You mustn't be ashamed in front of me! What, am I a stranger?"

Shoshana gasped and clutched at her heart. Her head bobbed as though she were about to faint.

"Some water?" Friedkin jumped up. She nodded. Friedkin brought a glass of water, sprinkled her face, poured a bit into her mouth, and stretched her out on the bed. She came to, motioned for him to sit next to her, and asked him to loosen her corset. Friedkin unbuttoned her corset, put another pillow under her

head, and begged her to calm down. All of a sudden Shoshana got off the bed, sat down on the rocking chair, and without looking at Friedkin, just barely got out the words: "I'm pregnant."

"What?" Friedkin opened his eyes, like a calf being led to the slaughter.

"Exactly what you heard." Shoshana started crying again.

"How can you be so sure?" Friedkin drew closer.

She didn't answer, hid her face in her hands, and burst into sobs.

This time, Friedkin clenched his lips, stiffened his chin, didn't say anything, and started to pace across the room. Thousands of thoughts ran through his head in that one minute. None of the thoughts stayed with him; they flew in all directions and he suddenly felt drained. He lowered himself onto the bed, looked at her awhile with dazed eyes as though he had just woken up, and again asked, now with a smile, "You're really pregnant?"

"You don't believe me!" Her nostrils quivered and tears flowed from her eyes. "Where should I go, then? What would you have me do?"

"I don't know why you're crying." He suddenly went over to her. "It's from me, you say?"

"Who else?"

She stood wild-eyed, like a mother defending her cubs.

"I believe you, I believe you," Friedkin stammered in fear. "Why are you crying? It's my child, you say. Good! Good!"

Shoshana took a few steps toward Friedkin, looked at him as though she were thinking of saying something, put her hands dejectedly on his shoulders, laid her head on his chest, and wept quietly. Friedkin led her to the bed, sat down next to her, and

tried to comfort her. "I beg you, Shoshana, please calm down! Crying won't help at all! *Nu*, Shoshana?"

She started to wipe her eyes, leaned against Friedkin's shoulder, avoided looking at him, and was silent.

Friedkin sat forlorn. He had often daydreamed about getting married, but now the prospect felt like a rope thrust around his neck by a hidden hand, poised to suffocate him at any moment. He observed Shoshana's profile, with the delicate dark hairs on her cheek, so thin they almost curled; he felt the hot breath from her nostrils, and he shuddered. He couldn't comprehend what she wanted from him. He felt everything around him constrict and couldn't breathe, wishing he could be free from her.

"Why are you quiet?" Shoshana instinctively interrupted the silence and snuggled up to him.

"What am I supposed to say?" Friedkin shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"I see you're suffering." She ran her fingers through his thin hair, wrinkling her forehead a bit as though contemplating what to say. "You know, a man suffers more beautifully than a woman, quietly; it's truly tragic. With a woman, it's melodramatic. You know, I despise self-satisfied men with fat faces. . . . A man who chases women, a 'ladies' man,' I don't like that, that's not a man. . . I don't mean a man ought to be indifferent to women, but a man whose mission is to enjoy women and who wastes days and nights for the sake of a kiss is, in my opinion, worse than a man who is a gambler! And I promise you," Shoshana hugged Friedkin with her bare arms, "we'll have a comfortable home and the main thing is, whatever you earn will be fine! If you'll make ten dollars a week, we'll live on ten. Do you get more?"

"Of course," Friedkin answered, feeling that now they had

switched roles. “My salary from the school alone is sixteen dollars a week. With private lessons, bar mitzvahs, I can make twenty-five!”

“So we can truly save.” Shoshana’s spirits lifted. “That’ll be useful. . . . I’ve also laid away a few dollars. . . .”

They looked at each other and laughed. Shoshana kissed his eyes, brushed his ear with her lips, and whispered softly, “Tomorrow we’ll go look for rooms, all right? You’ll see how clean I’ll keep everything; every corner will be spick-and-span! Do you know how good a cook I am? I bake, too! We won’t make an official wedding; why waste money? It would be a pity! We’ll go to a rabbi and have a Jewish ceremony, with a chuppah. What do you say?” she cajoled him.

“All right,” Friedkin answered, feeling the rope being pulled tighter around his neck, and for the last time he tried to free himself. “Shoshana, how are you so sure? I mean, how do you know that—”

“That what?”

“I mean,” Friedkin stammered, “how do you know that . . . Did you ask a doctor? I mean, are you really sure you’re pregnant?”

“What am I, a little girl?” Shoshana was offended. “You’re talking, please forgive me, like a . . . Why wouldn’t I know? And I’ll tell you the truth: the first minute I felt miserable; now I’m happy. When a woman loves a man, she wants to have his child!”

Friedkin didn’t respond, just leaned his elbows on his knees, set his head in his hands in despair as though he’d suffered a tragedy, and stared into space.

Shoshana took his hand, stroked it, and clung to him, instinctively understanding that she mustn’t be lighthearted now; the mildest flirt would distress him even more. She didn’t say

anything, letting the mood grow more serious. Then she sighed deeply and began: “You know, it’s an ugly world! When I think about it, I haven’t had a minute of happiness in my life!” She looked at him for a few moments, took his hand, held it to her right cheek, then the left, let go, and became even more earnest.

“I was never a child! When I was five, after my mother died, I had to raise my two little sisters. I washed them, combed their hair, took care of the house, and whenever one of my sisters fell and hurt herself, my father would slap me. My father was a fierce man, an angry man. I never heard a good word from him. I remember it as though it happened yesterday.” Shoshana again took Friedkin’s hand. “I was seven years old. I got a new dress for Pesach, and the first day I wore it outside, it got caught on a nail and ripped terribly. Did my father ever beat me! Oy, did I hate him then. Later I survived a pogrom, hiding in a garret for over a day and a night. What do you know from that? Then the journey to the Land of Israel, with a group of orphans. . . . I’ve been through a lot!”

“Oh, that’s right, you’re from Kishinev . . .” Friedkin said.

“Yes, I lived through the first Kishinev pogrom.” Shoshana’s eyes flashed like lightning. It seemed as though she had told the story many times before, knowing it always impressed. “I lay in an attic, didn’t make a sound, and sucked on my finger. And when I got even hungrier, I took that finger out of my mouth and chewed on another. You’ll laugh, but every time I switched fingers, I felt better. My father sat in a bundle of straw. Every once in a while he stuck out his head to see how I was doing. He comforted me by saying that soon someone would send us something to eat. Strange, whenever I think of my father, I remember what his eyes looked like then—huge, terrified, like a crazy person’s. It bothered me that he discussed matters with me as though I had grown up

overnight and actually become a mother. Every time he moved around the attic, I was terrified, as though the bundle of straw were walking, not my father. And every time, I called out to him, as if to convince myself we were safe at home, that this really was my father.”

She grew silent, wiped away her tears, and was sunk in thought.

“And what happened in the end?” Friedkin had grown curious.

“What do you think!” She heaved a sigh. “At dawn, just when we decided to go down, a few hooligans came up to the attic, scattered everything, and one shoved his hand in the bundle of straw as he passed it and pulled my father out.

“I’ll never forget how he looked then. His beard had become so thin that you could count each and every hair. He avoided looking at me, ashamed, and with wide-open eyes he threw himself at the feet of the goyim, embraced their ankles, kissed them, and cried with a peculiar, piercing voice that shot needles through my entire body.

“I covered myself up more, squeezed my eyes closed, and was suddenly filled with hatred—why didn’t I attack the goyim, bite off one of their fingers? I think I pressed my eyes shut, but I still saw the goyim search him and take everything he had. A young *sheygets* punched him in the face and he fell on his knees, covered with blood. I felt like everything was exploding inside me, I so badly wanted to attack the *sheygets*. I bit my fingers and pinched my skin—how can I let a *sheygets* attack my father? I was sure that as soon as I’d stand up, someone would hit me over the head with a crowbar.

“They kept beating my father. They ripped off his clothes, wanted to know where he hid money, but he only groaned and begged them to stop. He kissed the hands that beat him, kissed

the feet that trampled him, and suddenly cried out, 'Reyzele! Reyzele! They're killing me! My daughter, they're going to murder your father.'

"For the first time, I heard my father, who'd always terrified me, crying and pleading for me, his eight-year-old daughter, to save him. I swallowed hot tears and bit my right hand until I drew blood, asking myself why didn't I get up from my spot. But the fear that I'd be beaten over my head with a crowbar stopped me dead in my tracks, and I didn't move a muscle.

"Meanwhile, a young peasant grabbed my father by his scrawny beard and started to lead him away from the attic. My father was bloody, with these wide-open eyes, and he looked so pathetic that I shrieked. I forgot that I could be killed. I couldn't bear to watch them hurt my father; I flung myself at him in one leap, twisted my arms and legs around him, and screamed, '*Tate*, don't go! Father!'

"I felt a pair of strong hands seize me, lift me up, and as I flew down to the stone floor I saw sparks in front of my eyes. . . ."

As Shoshana told the story, Friedkin gazed into her eyes, carried away by her experience, and sensed that she was gradually gaining stature in his eyes. He forgot all the issues married life entailed and wondered why he had always been so afraid of getting married. Everything looked rosy. He didn't want to think. He knew that others supported wives and children on even less money than he earned.

Friedkin's mood brightened. He complimented Shoshana and laughed. Even though he didn't want to think about anything, he pictured the meals she'd cook for him and the furniture she'd buy. He didn't quite believe that he was going to become a father so easily! What was the difference between yesterday, when he was still just a bachelor, and today? He used to lie awake in bed at

night fantasizing about his wedding, and now, suddenly, a woman confided in him that he's already as good as married, that soon he'll be a father. He looked at Shoshana, noticed her tousled hair, her black eyes, and wanted to find something similar to himself in her. Although there was no resemblance, he found some part of himself mirrored in her face when he looked into her eyes for a long time.

Late at night he escorted her home. He was happy and planned to go looking for an apartment the next day and stand under a huppah the day after.

When Shoshana entered her building, Friedkin remained outside. He listened to her walk up the steps, rest on every floor with a sigh, then close the door and lock it. And suddenly everything was still. He was tired and just stood there a while, envious that Shoshana could go to bed right away. Then he shlepped himself home.

The silent streets and the people who were hunched over scurrying here and there, disappearing into dark buildings, affected Friedkin, and his good mood gradually disappeared.

Someone came toward him from a side street. This very tall stranger walked quickly and flapped his arms like wings. Friedkin instinctively wanted to play it safe by crossing the street, but he reminded himself that he was getting married and would soon need to protect his wife. He gathered his courage, went toward the stranger, and trembled. He took another few steps, couldn't endure the tension, and started to step off the sidewalk when suddenly he became calm and his fear melted—the stranger was wearing glasses.

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Judaica at the Mendel Gottesman Library of Yeshiva University. She studied Yiddish at the Uriel Weinreich Summer Program in Yiddish Language and Culture and at Columbia University with Dr. Chava Lapin, Dr. Mordkhe Schaechter, and Dr. Sheva Zucker, and holds a master's degree in American Jewish history from Yeshiva University's Bernard Revel Graduate School. She was a 2015 translation fellow at the Yiddish Book Center. This is her first literary translation.



Coney Island, Part Three

By Victor Packer

TRANSLATED BY HENRY SAPOZNIK

“Coney Island” is one of a series of ritmish retsitatsye (rhythmic recitation) poems written by Victor Packer and performed by him live on New York radio station WLTH in the late 1930s. Never before published, the poem was transcribed from surviving broadcast disks housed at the Henry Sapoznik Yiddish Radio Archives at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress. Additional transcription help by Michael Yashinsky.

Sand and people.
People and sand.
On the sand a world of people.
On the people a sea of sand.
People dipped in sand.
People laid in sand.
People mixed in sand.
People soaked in sand.
Who is damp and
Who is dry

Who's still wet fresh from the sea
Who's all covered in mud
And who's just dirty as can be
There's no room, you'll have to stand
And forget lying down
A mattress in the sand
A world stretches out there
Whole peoples
Whole races
Whole castes
Whole tribes
There are mountains of people
All thrown together
An entire "Internationale"
Spread in every direction
And everyone lies together
With no distinctions

Mixed in the muck and mire
A man and wife wallow
Scattered among the whole stockyard
Flesh and skin
Hands and feet and feet and hands
Hips, backs, loins atop the sands
Knees and thighs and hips
Rouged cheeks
Red lips

Everything is pressed together
Everything is squeezed together
There are limbs with limbs
There are limbs near limbs
There are limbs under limbs
There are limbs on limbs
It's a clearinghouse of bones
A limb exchange

A hand gets to know a foot
While a foot ends up on a head.
An arm dukes it out with a knee
And a knee puts its foot down.
A neck kisses a stomach
And the stomach gets comfy with a rib.
A cheek meets a lip
And they make a trade.
A hand strays over a heart
And a heaaaaaaaaart
Finally finds some skin.
A mouth plants itself on an ear
But the ear is deaf to it.
An elbow surrounded
A neck like a rope
So eyes threw the elbow
A stolen glance
And eyes look

Eyes twinkle
Eyes glance
Eyes glimmer
Eyes burn
Eyes devour man and wife
Hands lay entwined
Hands lay enshrined
Around bodies
Around hips
Around limbs
Around skins

There are couples
There are groups
And lovers
And brothers
But mostly strangers lie
With others
But this one and the other
And that one and the other
One winks at the other
And they peep at each other
It's a display of bodies
A concourse of feet
Eyes appraise as they measure
Who's a dish
And who's a dog

Who leaves you wanting more
Who's a nauseating bore
There, ugliness
And charm
Have all assembled by the shore

Beauty and crudity
Go hand in hand and
Launch a united front
Right there on the sand
Lithe young women lying
Sinuous and snaky
Just beside half-ton
Bountiful ladies
Bodies hued all red and brown
Singed by the sun
While their neighbors are
Swollen like a balloon
It's an easy breezy world
Where clothes are mostly shed
Where skin is just barely covered
By a tiny piece of thread
So here lies temptation
And there, ostentation
Yet everything
Is dirt-encrusted,
Scattered, and slathered

Just try and unwind
You can literally drown
In the waves of rind from
Oranges
And bananas
And apples
Eggs
Pears
You trudge through their wrappers
And fall into disrepair

Near everyone is a sack
Filled to bursting and more
And everyone eats a portion
Or someone eats for four
Mouths work wonders, let me tell you
As they binge to beat the band
And inhale what's at hand
Sandwiches filled
With sand

Oy! do the people
Have fun and
Oy! life on the sand is fun and
Long live Coney Island!
Everything is appetizing
Nothing is forbidden
It's all easy, fine, and free

Those who want to meet someone
That'll happen one, two, three
You sidle yourself over
Reaching with your hands
Suddenly, you're good friends
There's no reason to
Be alone
No one needs to be
Forced
No one needs to be
Coerced
One thing leads to another
And everyone's nicely tanned
And laid out together.
You don't even need to talk
The eyes do all the talking
But if someone's eyes make
You want to roam
All you need to do is move
From the sand into the foam

The ocean is a pleasure
You can cavort
And laugh, too
The sea is so friendly to Jews
It isn't bothered by what you do
You go from the sand into the sea

Lively, happy and glad
At first still half-above
Then your whole body dunks under
Whole breakers
Whole waves
Soaking ribs
Soaking hips
And the water strokes, surrounds them
Like a lover his beloved
He whispers to her and splashes her
And flings her upside down
There are those who swim slowly, smoothly
And then break into a gallop
And those who swim on their back
Or on their side or belly, and there
Are those who go in headfirst with
Their feet up in the air
Those who splash and make a tumult
Those who swim all quiet and still
And the sea with its tricks
Does just what it will

There's a couple in the water
Swimming together as a pair
Then a wave gives chase
Drives them off and splits them
And now one swims alone

Thrown far out beyond the tide
 A wave drags him under and places
 A bathing beauty at his side
 He is old and she is young
 He could be her dad,
 But the ocean keeps to itself
 And pretends it doesn't care
 It throws them and it heaves them
 And propels them as a pair
 While waves beating
 Hunting
 Running
 Accompanying everyone everywhere
 Rhythmic, rhythmic
 There are bodies
 In the watery rips
 Rhythmic, rhythmic
 The cadences of hands
 And feet and hips
 Blustery lips and mouths
 Gulp for air
 And gasp there
 With a very strange sigh:

EHHHHHHHH . . . FRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR
 EHHHHHHHH . . . FRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR
 EHHHHHHHH . . . FRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR

EHHHHHHHH . . . Ahhhhhhhhhh

EHHHHHHHH . . . Ahhhhhhhhhh

EHHHHHHHH . . . Ahhhhhhhhhh

EHHHHHHHH . . . Ahhhhhhhhhh

Oh the water, dear old water

You're so clear and you're so blue

Oh the water, dear old water

Like a woman's caressing you

OY!

OY!!

OY!!!

OYYYYYYYYYY!

Suddenly all loud and clear

The sound of an old Jew way out there

Splashing himself from top to toe

OY!

OY!!

OY!!!

OYYYYYYYYYY!

Leaning and preening

In the water

He splashes his head

OY!

OY!!

OY!!!

OYYYYYYYYYY!

He moans and he groans

And rinses in a rush
And dunks and plunks himself
Like in a mikvah
As he makes the Sabbath
For himself
OY!
OY!!
OY!!!
OYYYYYYYYYY!
When he gulps and he gurgles
And he makes a holy racket
BRRRIT'SCOLD
BRRRIT'SCOLD
BRRRIT'SCOLD
BRRRIT'SCOLD
He turns this way and that
And again till he's sore
VAVAVAVAVAVVVO
No more strength, no more

HENRY SAPOZNIK is an award-winning producer and performer of traditional and popular Yiddish and American music. A child of Holocaust survivors and a native Yiddish speaker, he was one of the architects of the klezmer renewal in the 1970s and heads the Mayrent Institute for Yiddish Culture at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.



Old Town

Chapter One of *The Strong and the Weak*

By Alter Kacyzne

TRANSLATED BY MANDY COHEN AND MICHAEL CASPER

Born in Vilna in 1885, Kacyzne is best known as a dramatist and a photographer who worked for the Jewish Daily Forward, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, and S. An-ski's ethnographic expeditions. A disciple of I. L. Peretz, Kacyzne lived and breathed the theater, and he adapted An-ski's play Der dibek (The Dybbuk) for the classic 1937 Yiddish film version.

Alter Kacyzne's only novel, Shtarke un shvakhe (The Strong and the Weak), which appeared in two volumes in 1929 and 1930, presents a cross section of Jewish life in Warsaw in the early twentieth century. It weaves together the private and public lives of aspiring men and women of letters, begrudging and committed laborers, and petty traders and forestry magnates. Kacyzne is sympathetic to these characters while not shying away from exposing the contradictions and ironies of their lifestyles. Centered around one commune in Warsaw's Old Town, Kacyzne's novel, like his photography, offers a sensitive and nuanced portrait of Jewish life in Warsaw at a moment of great upheaval and possibility. In 1941, Kacyzne was beaten to death

by a Ukrainian pogromist in Tarnopil following the Nazi takeover of the city.

Here used to be the heart of Warsaw—this very labyrinth of narrow little alleys between high, gray walls. Now it's an outlying area, an ancient growth on the body of the modern city, where blood flows differently and the pulse has a different beat.

The *mokem*—as Jews call the Old Town—has its own breath, its own air that doesn't circulate with the air of the rest of Warsaw. The residents of the *mokem* also have a different look, both the Jews and the Christians. They're withered, the residents of the *mokem*, as if the dust of past generations clings to them, pressed into the folds of their clothes and the wrinkles of their faces. And they're gray. They carry with them the shadow of the tight alleys between high walls. They shuffle along the walls, along the narrow curbs, like children rubbing against their mothers' knees. The mothers—the walls—are narrow and high and their knees are swollen. They're broader at the base than above, the gray walls sliding down onto the narrow curbs in a slanted support so as not to fall over. There's not a single gate here. Narrow, arched doorways with ancient grime lead from the street into dark, arched corridors. And by day through their gloom, and in the evening by the single lantern that hangs from an arch, the archways breathe out a terror and a warning to the cramped street: Beware, people! There are witches in this world! And evil spirits linger in every corner. And terrible people, even worse than evil spirits, are concealed in their hiding places.

Niches aren't cut in the thick walls at the height of the first floor for no reason. Madonnas and saints stand in them, forged in their

eternal watch. And no matter how old and neglected the walls, the Madonnas and saints gleam with the sky-blue colors of their freshly painted clothes, wearing fresh little crowns on their heads—a reward for their eternal watchfulness.

People walk, shadows on the shadowy street. And if a beam of sun breaks through the high walls, then the whole street breaks up into sharp corners and crooked lines. It seemed the street was disintegrating. It seemed the shadow people were running as fast as they could to save themselves, in rings around the Old Marketplace, to be restored there under the bright sun.

If the Old Town is the former heart of Warsaw, then the Old Marketplace is the heart of that heart.

The Old Marketplace is a big, four-cornered box. Its walls on all four sides are high—up to five or six stories—and narrow—only three or four windows. And all the walls are gray and all so similar. But no—they are different. Each wall has its own face, with the facade of a ruined aristocrat. They are great individualists, the walls of the Old Marketplace. What holds them together there, shoulder to shoulder, pressed tight and close? With furrowed brows they stare at the mermaid sitting on her pedestal in the middle of the paved square. The Warsaw mermaid is a witch, with shameless breasts and a twisted, scaly tail. With her shield and her sword, she enchanted the old, high walls with their Madonnas, with their saints, and the old stone individualists arranged themselves in four rows and sealed the square in a box.

The square had become a giant room without a roof, a communal room for the use of the residents.

Children chase each other around the mermaid. They can't run too far—she's enchanted them too. Old women sit on the stone steps of the pedestal counting the runs in their stockings and

cursing their bad luck. One curses that her old man doesn't earn anything, the second that her old man gets drunk and beats her, and the third is jealous of both of them: her old man has long since gone to the other side.

In the summery dusk, workers leaving factories come by in their shirtsleeves, with cigarettes in their mouths, to shoot the breeze by the mermaid.

Regular people. And a regular room, only without a roof. That's why they can breathe freely.

Jews and Christians here feel closer and more at home than at other places. The walls have pressed them close together. Dire poverty oppresses everyone equally. No rich folks live in the Old Town. And the shadows of past generations bind them together with a common secret.

In the square next to the mermaid two workers stopped in the dusk. They met on their way home from work and stopped to chat.

"So, got any work?" the taller blond man asked, and not for no reason, not just to have something to say. It mattered to him if his friend had work, and especially if he wanted to work.

The friend answered, after a short hesitation. "I'm telling you, Yisroel, you know my heart really isn't in this work. What kind of business is it for me, Shayke, to paint flowered trim on houses on Franciscan Street? I'd like to trim the fat cats who live there. It sure was worth it coming to Warsaw . . ."

The blond clapped him affably on the shoulder. "Give it time. Krakow wasn't built in a day."

Side by side, you might think that only one of them was a worker—Shayke. He wore a thin shirt with pants that were made entirely of paint stains, a living palette. It was a wonder just how the guy managed to get as much paint on the back of his clothes as

on the front.

Yisroel, on the other hand, looked polished. He even wore a white collar and tie, carried a cane, and on his finger—a gold wedding ring. And he didn't just have gold on his finger. When he smiled, the sun caught his gold tooth.

“You have no patience, Shayke,” he lectured the house painter. “Warsaw is a bottomless pit. With patience and energy you'll work your way up, little by little. Have you been to Ritov's?”

“I'm just coming from his place.” Shayke looked in amazement at one of the high roofs, where a four-cornered patch of glass was set among the blackened shingles. “To hell with him. He has a girl there, a little model.”

“You went to his place looking like that?”

Shayke didn't understand the question and looked at Yisroel, surprised. Seeing that Yisroel scrutinized his paint-smeared outfit, he thought and laughed. His eyes were narrow, and when he laughed only crooked slots with thin wrinkles remained.

A real Oriental, Yisroel thought.

“You think I need to change my clothes in his honor? Not in his lifetime. Who do you think Ritov is? Not a painter like me, huh?”

“Well, there's a bit of a difference. That guy is a real big shot, a celebrity, a premier painter . . .”

“Psht, you're also bourgeois, Yisroel, as I see it. Just because he's got canvas and a studio and models, just because they write about him in the newspapers—I should change my clothes in his honor? I was working!” And Shayke, with pathos, beat his painted chest. It kicked up a thin dust, and Yisroel retreated with a smile.

“Did he look at your drawings?”

“Yes.”

“And what did he say?”

“He really liked them.” Shayke squinted like a Chinese person and gave a little scratch under his hat. “Son of a bitch said I should keep my day job.”

“And you didn’t already know that?”

“Tell me, Yisroel, is work important to me?”

Shayke’s pitiful expression implored Yisroel to relieve him of the burden of having to work. Yisroel was sympathetic toward Shayke, even with his openhearted laziness.

“Grab a trowel, you Oriental,” said Yisroel with a flick of the hand. “If you become a painter of fine art then I’ll become a dancer. Of all your talents, you should stick with whistling.”

Shayke squared his painted feet and set his hands on his hips. “What’s that supposed to mean? Have you really heard a better whistler than me?”

Gold flashed as Yisroel laughed.

“Hold on, Yisroel.” Shayke became serious and pushed his hat back on his hair. “What have you heard about my poems? When’ll I see some words in print?”

Yisroel told him that his poems would be published in a coming issue of the party paper, but Shayke didn’t back down: “When?”

“You can’t just fill party journals with poems, you understand that. They need material. Today I’m going to Shmuel for an editorial.”

Shayke had no patience. His muse didn’t wait. He already had another poem in the pocket of his multicolored pants. But go show Yisroel, who hadn’t even published the first one? No, he wouldn’t show him.

He looked up in amazement again. A flame burned in his little Chinese eyes and his lips opened in a childlike smile. A kid stood high on a roof waving a stick five times taller than himself. A rag was attached to the stick. Waved, as if enchanted. Maybe he wanted to paint the entire sky over the Old Marketplace. And maybe he waved to the setting sun to make it come back. No, the black silhouette on the roof was conducting a flock of silver pigeons. High, high they circled, sparsely, in an airy, circular ritual. Little silver flowers shadowed by red clouds. He waved down—a smattering of black little rags. He waved up—again, silver flowers. Then they burned red.

“You know, Yisroel, at our place in the village the turkeys have already gone to sleep. They gobble to one another and tell each other their nightly dreams before sleep: *Tyu-lyu! Tyu-lyu! Tyu! Lyu! Lyu-lyu-lyu!*”

Shayke whistled so accurately how the turkeys recounted their dreams that Yisroel had to laugh.

“Go get ’em, you poet! Shayke the Whistler, good night!”

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An Excerpt from “Once Upon a Time, Vilna”

By Abraham Karpinowitz

TRANSLATED BY HELEN MINTZ

Abraham Karpinowitz (1913–2004) was born in Vilna, Poland (present-day Vilnius, Lithuania). After surviving the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, he moved to Israel, where he wrote seven collections of short stories (five of them about Jewish life in Vilna), two biographies, and a play. Karpinowitz was awarded numerous prizes, including the prestigious Manger Prize (1981).

This is an excerpt from the story “Geven, geven amol Vilne,” which originally appeared in the book of the same name, published in 1997 by the I. L. Peretz Publishing House. This is its first English translation.

In Vilna I fell in love with a girl named Lyuba, another student at the Re’al Gymnasium. She was no great beauty, but very accomplished—well read and one of the best students in the class. Our love was like the raindrops that fall on a simple daisy with the same intensity as on a cultivated rose.

Ours was a true Vilna romance, with all the charm that only that city and its surroundings could offer. We took advantage of

every possible spot to kiss, embrace, and declare our passion. The well-trodden path to romance led to Trakai, where we rented a little boat, rowed to the island in the middle of the lake, and walked arm-in-arm in search of the old castle. We turned back late in the evening and ate the boiled potatoes and buttermilk we bought from the peasant who rented the boats.

The heart-throbbing moment to consummate true love arrived. We lay together on the fresh hay in a barn beside the lake. With excited fingers we searched each other's bodies for the spots to place our sweetest caresses, our spines shuddering. We were young. I drew my experience from a book called *Eighteen Karats of Virginity*, written by someone named Pitigrilli. Our generation read the book in Polish translation, gleaning bits of information about how to be men.

How to love with our hearts rather than our hands—that we didn't need to be taught. I was sure Lyuba would be my wife. We were about to finish gymnasium and made endless plans for when we completed our studies.

But my father's theater got in the way. Lyuba's parents thought the world of the theater was beneath them. To them, it was tied up with Gypsy encampments, while they had a solid income with a shop on Yatkever Street where they sold butter, cheese, and milk. Kheyfetz's Butter was an important Vilna business. All the prominent Vilna ladies shopped there because the merchandise was so clean and fresh.

Children from theater families weren't generally accepted in Vilna, especially by the upper crust. That is, except for the actor Bombe, who thumbed his nose at everyone. His son became a doctor and got the best marriage proposals.

Lyuba's father was very unhappy when he realized we had

serious plans, and he decided to get his daughter out of Vilna. Her parents had enough money to get her a foreign passport with a visa for Lebanon. From there, she'd have to be smuggled into Palestine, where she had an aunt, one of her mother's sisters. Her father tried to buy a certificate from the British for her to enter Palestine, but it was impossible at that time, and he was in a great hurry to save his daughter from the theater world. If my father had had as much money as Lyuba's, I would have followed her, but the theater always produced more plans and talk than money.

I took the separation very hard. My world was shattered. Anyone who has ever been truly in love will understand. I was very distressed when Lyuba's mother told her customers that her daughter had married an important police officer in Palestine and was living in Haifa like a countess, with two maids. My mother also took this news very hard. She really cared about Lyuba.

We couldn't say good-bye. Lyuba's entire family, including all her aunts and uncles, watched her every move.

My Vilna romance came to an end. Lyuba didn't send a single letter.

Years passed. I witnessed the entire Jewish tragedy of war, camps, and murder. The last barbed wire to curb my movement was around Internment Camp Number 68, on the island of Cypress, for illegal immigrants to Palestine. In 1949, we were released by the British and emigrated to the State of Israel.

I never let go of the dream of seeing Lyuba again. I had carried that dream through blood and fire. Upon arriving on the shores of Israel, I immediately settled in Tel Aviv, where I met other people from Vilna. People from our city always keep track of each other's

comings and goings. They told me about Lyuba's journey to Palestine and her subsequent fate.

Her aunt in Haifa had barely been able to support herself. At that time, life in Israel was very difficult. For every person with money, hundreds of young men and women arrived without a groschen. The kibbutz wasn't right for everyone. It wasn't for Lyuba. She went to work as a waitress in a soup kitchen where you could get a chunk of bread and a bowl of corn soup for a groschen. She met a young man from Salonika there. He asked her to go with him to Safed, where he'd been offered a job as a deputy policeman. She'd have her own little place. She went, got married, and had two children, a son and a daughter. I was told that Lyuba was waiting tables in a coffee shop on the main street of Safed.

I went to Safed and looked through the windows and sometimes the doors of the few coffee shops on that street. I caught sight of Lyuba through a window loaded with different kinds of pastry. Thirteen years had passed since I'd last seen her.

I went into the coffee shop. Lyuba recognized me immediately. We stood opposite each other without saying a word. A theater director would have created a touching scene for that moment—we would have embraced passionately. But life is not theater.

It took me only a moment to be cured of the dream of seeing Lyuba, that with her, I would be able to return to the Vilna of my youth. As for Lyuba, she was very excited about seeing me. She took a deep breath and threw herself at me with passionate kisses and bitter tears.

I looked at my lost love, whose kisses had so burned my lips on winter evenings between the closed butcher shops on Shavalske Street. Our kisses weren't the same in Safed, under the blazing sun, which had so mercilessly wrinkled Lyuba's neck and chin.

Lyuba told me her father had been afraid to send her anything, even after she wrote that she needed money to eat. He was sure she'd send me the money to cover my expenses to get to Palestine. She didn't write to me because she didn't have the courage to tell me she'd gotten married.

I barely heard her. I got up, preparing to return to Tel Aviv. Lyuba understood. She didn't ask when we'd see each other again.

And so my last youthful memory from Vilna, my native city, was ripped away from me.

What did they sing in my father's theater? "What has been, has been, and doesn't last. / Those times, those moments have long passed."

Once upon a time, Vilna.

***Vilna My Vilna: Stories by Abraham Karpinowitz* (translated by HELEN MINTZ) was published by Syracuse University Press in 2015. Mintz was a 2014 translation fellow at the Yiddish Book Center and has performed her one-woman shows of Jewish women's experience in Canada, the United States, Germany, and Lithuania. She would like to thank Barbara Harshav for her translation suggestions for this story.**



“To a Fellow Writer” and “Shloyme Mikhoels”

By Rachel H. Korn

TRANSLATED BY SEYMOUR LEVITAN

These poems were published in one of Rachel Korn's final volumes, Af der sharf fun a rege (The Cutting Edge of the Moment; 1972), though they originate in experiences at different times in her life.

Her poem to Shloyme Mikhoels, the great actor-director of the Moscow State Yiddish Theater, is based partly on her memories of the man from 1944, at the time of her wandering during the Second World War. It is also a vision of Mikhoels playing his most famous role, Shakespeare's Lear (whom she mistakenly conflates with Gloucester after his blinding), on the stage and then on the streets of Minsk, where he was run down and killed by Soviet law enforcement in 1948. The killing of Mikhoels marked the beginning of a series of arrests and executions that has come to be known as the liquidation of Yiddish culture in the USSR.

The poem “Tsu a khaver-shrayber” (“To a Fellow Writer”) is dated 1971. By this time, Korn saw herself as an “heiress of grief,” owing a tax of tears to all who died in the Holocaust and entrusted with the obligation to remember them. At the same

time it is a plea to a colleague requesting a poem for a forthcoming publication to pardon her for the little that she can contribute. The writer she is addressing is most likely her close friend Kadia Molodowsky, a fellow poet and the editor of the Yiddish journal Svive (Surroundings).

To a Fellow Writer

I have your letter asking me to send a poem.
Would two be better yet, or four?
My day returns tired from markets and fairs
and casts a gray shadow on the paper.

The sheets of paper, icy, white, and bare,
also wait for me to cover them with verses
and breathe on their cold, smooth surface
the breath of words nesting in narrow lines.

In dreams I often hear a voice come close,
open and pull aside the dark drapes of night,
lips long since stifled in ash
entrusting me with a name they cherish.

I've become the debtor to everything and all,
everyone on earth and beneath,
like an heiress of grief owing tax
even on the tears fated to me here.

And where are the poems? Forgive, my friend, forgive.

The thorn in the desert hasn't yet blossomed—
for now allow at least
these words
from your
Rokhl Korn.

November 1971

Shloyme Mikhoels

To the memory of the great artist, man, and Jew

“Only on your right foot,” he would say to me
where the world turned left without mercy or God,
every word an informer
for imprisonment and death.

“Only on your right foot,” and a kiss,
a fatherly kiss on the brow to ward off all lurking suspicion,
the seal on a passport of life
in the harsh time of my wandering.

“Only on your right foot,” himself a hostage,
with proud lion head and eyes full of knowing,
playing, playing a part to protect the others,
conversos and Marranos, like himself.

“Only on your right foot,” his full underlip drooping
even more and trembling
under the weight of words not said
that might seem wounded and embittered.

“Only on your right foot,” his look asking
whether I see his meaning and intent—
the high, scholarly forehead relaxes
when he sees I comprehend.

“Only on your right foot,” Mikhoels says to himself
as he makes ready to be Lear onstage—
driven out to ridicule and contempt,
a blind king without a crown or people or domain.

“Only on your right foot,” and now Shloyme the Clever
envies the weary old man
whose blindness kept him from seeing
all that his insight forces him to see.

“Only on your right foot”—did he mutter those words under his
breath,
distracted on that winter night
of evil riddles and signs
on the familiar and so-trusted streets of Minsk?

And under the cold, starless sky
did he tear the mask from his face
on the snow-covered stage
where he encountered death?

SEYMOUR LEVITAN of Vancouver was educated at the University of Pennsylvania and Simon Fraser University. His translations of Yiddish poems, stories, and memoirs have appeared in numerous anthologies and journals, and he lectures widely on both translation and Yiddish literature. He is the 2008 winner of the Louis Rosenberg Award of the Association of Canadian Jewish Studies.

***Paper Roses*, his selection and translation of Korn’s poetry, was the 1988 winner of the Robert Payne Award of the Translation Center at Columbia University. The poems here will be included in a forthcoming McGill-**

**Queen's University Press edition of Korn poems, edited by Esther Frank
and selected and translated by Levitan.**



“The Destiny of a Poem”

By Itzik Manger

TRANSLATED BY MURRAY CITRON

Itzik Manger (1900–68) was born in Romania and died in Israel. He was and remains one of the best-known twentieth-century Yiddish poets. His most productive years, as a poet and man of letters, were in Warsaw in the 1930s. He moved to Paris in 1938 and left in 1940, one step ahead of the Germans. He made his way to Marseilles, to North Africa, and then to England, where he spent the war years. In 1948 he traveled to Poland to represent PEN International at the unveiling in Warsaw of a ghetto memorial for writers. He moved to New York in 1950. This article was published in a Yiddish journal in New York, Der veker (The Awakener), in February 1960, a few months before the Eichmann trial. It reflects what Manger saw as the world’s (and the Jews’) postwar neglect of the issues of the Holocaust.

In April 1948 I flew to Warsaw. The PEN International club in London had appointed me its delegate to the unveiling of the ghetto memorial, to speak in the name of all PEN clubs about the destruction of Jewish life and of Yiddish literature.

The flight was full of bad dreams. How does Warsaw look, the city that I left so unwillingly in 1938? Whom will I meet there

now? And where will I find the words to express such sorrow and rage? For the strongest word must be dumb in the face of such a catastrophe. Perhaps say nothing. Perhaps just stand with head bowed a moment or two and let the tears speak. Just let . . .

At the Warsaw airport, a few people awaited me. Froyim Kaganovski handed me a little bouquet of flowers, and we rode through devastated streets to the one remaining hotel in Warsaw, Hotel Bristol.

When I speak of “devastated streets,” I speak of that part of the city that was outside the ghetto, for of the ghetto no streets remained—only stones and rubble, stones and rubble.

One day when Kaganovski sat with me in the hotel room he related to me the following episode:

“Once, I and a group of other Jewish writers were traveling from Warsaw to Łódź. In normal times the trip is not long. But this was not normal times. It was right after the war. Polish pogromists were still rampant. The few Jews that yet remained were too much for their eyes. Here and there, as the opportunity arose, Jews were murdered—the last Jews in Poland. It was a fearful thing to travel by train. At smaller stations, armed bands would break in, drag out every Jew on the train, and shoot each one on the spot.

“The railcar in which we were riding was full of Poles. From time to time we heard a pleasantry in Polish: a *‘proszę pani’* or a *‘przepraszam.’*

“But every time that the train got near a small station the danger grew great. Naturally we got nervous. Even pale. It could happen at that moment.

“An older Polish woman who was seated in the train car noticed how the few Jews kept going white with nerves, and she spoke up

in a raised voice: ‘Why are you afraid? You are among decent people. Polish mothers are also mothers.’ And she told us that she had not long ago read Antoni Słonimski’s Polish translation of a Yiddish poem, “*Afn veg shteyt a boym*” (“By the Road There Is a Tree”),⁶ and because of this she had emphasized that Polish mothers are also mothers.

“Hearing a friendly Polish voice in the unfamiliar Polish train, we became more comfortable. We told her that we were also Jewish writers and we knew the poet who wrote the poem. We felt that we had someone on our side on this hostile train and, chatting like this, came without any unpleasantness to Łódź.”

The whole episode moved me greatly. I said to Kaganovski that they had much reason to be thankful to Antoni Słonimski’s beautiful Polish translation of my poem, which moved one Polish heart in that unfriendly, or at least indifferent, Polish train.

“I have not yet finished,” Kaganovski interrupted me. “There is more to this story.

“Sitting right beside the older Polish lady who spoke with such feeling about your poem was a typical young Polish woman, of the sort that the Germans called ‘Aryan.’ She listened to the conversation, her face completely immobile, her eyes blue and cold. For sure not a friend to Jews—so thought the few Jewish writers in the railcar. But who cares? Is there a shortage of enemies of Jews in this car, on this train, and in Poland itself? The warmth with which the older Polish woman spoke about a Yiddish poem, about a Jewish poet, was enough for these writers.

“So, as I have told you, we came in peace to Łódź. We had a friendly parting with the older Polish lady. We didn’t even notice again the young Polish shiksa with the unfriendly face. We were just glad we had arrived.

“We exited the terminal in Łódź and breathed with relief. Then we heard someone calling: ‘Sirs! Sirs!’

“Calling us was the young blond Polish shiksa whom we had encountered on the train, the one with the stern, unfriendly face. She waved to us, walked over quickly. ‘Wait, wait.’ She was standing in front of us, out of breath. Her blue eyes were no longer cold—now, tears were shining in them. She was speaking. She spoke in a delightful Polish Yiddish.

“Just your average, ordinary story—for the twentieth century, that is. The Germans discovered that their true genius was not Beethoven, Bach, Mozart, Goethe, Hölderlin, but a nothing from a little town in Austria. Ghettos, gas chambers. A handful of Jews remained under the ruins of Poland. Among the handful—she. Thanks to a good Aryan appearance, good Aryan papers, and good Jewish money, where needed, so that Poles would keep quiet, not inform, not betray.

“After the war she decided to remain what she had pretended to be all that time: a Polish woman, an Aryan. A dead Jewish god; a murdered people. Where should she go? And now she sits on a train, hears people talk about a Jewish poet, a Yiddish poem. There are still Jewish writers in the world. Everything she had kept behind the stern Polish mask in the railcar was a pretense, an act. She wanted to tell us. *Had* to tell us. It was the first time in years that she had taken off the Polish mask. ‘You are seeing a Jewish face and Jewish tears.’

“She left us. A Yiddish poem had unveiled a Jewish face. ‘By the Road There Is a Tree.’”

It grew dark in the hotel room. There was a glass on the table. In the glass stood withering the flowers that Kaganovski had brought to me at the Warsaw airport.

A second episode was told to me by Marek Edelman, the commander of the Warsaw ghetto uprising front based near the ghetto's broom factory.

How many commanders were there in the Warsaw ghetto uprising? A person who is not knowledgeable about the Germans' strategy has the right to ask and even be confused about the matter.

The Germans so cut up the ghetto, and isolated one group of Jews from the other, that the scatterings of Jews left alive, roughly 50,000, could have no contact with each other. That way it would be easier for them to destroy one group after another when the time came for the final liquidation.

Contact was established, however, through couriers.

The commander in chief of the entire heroic uprising was Mordechai Anielewicz.

Since the broom factory district was cut off and isolated from other operations points in the ghetto, Marek Edelman became the commander there.

There is a whole literature about the Warsaw ghetto uprising. There are books written not by professional writers but by such as took part in the uprising, books "written with blood and not with ink."

It is sad that Jews do not want to read these books. Why remind themselves of the nightmares? Germans don't want to hear about such books—why remind themselves of their own infamies?

An odd paradox results. Neither the murderer nor the victim wants to be reminded.

Both want to forget. It's easier so—but dare one forget? Will history forget? Not just Jewish history, but human history?

There is today a kind of historian who is not ashamed to compare the flight of a few hundred thousand Arabs with the German mass murder of more than six million Jews—men, women, old people, babies in swaddling clothes. One fault, one scale. The same historical injustice.

Such “historians,” with their twisted accounting, convict only themselves. The accounting is false and, inevitably, obscene. It shows only that even after the six million Jewish deaths, the “historian” has a personal animus against the Jewish people.

The ash-Jew, the compelling symbol of our century, who was born in the German crematoria, comprised of billions of dust particles, wanders unseen over the world. He smiles into his long, gray ash-beard and asks: “How distant from the ash-Jew is the ash-human who will disintegrate in an ash-world?”

But let us return to Łódź, 1948.

The Germans considered Łódź a German city. As in the Sholem Aleichem story “The German,” they put up a bell at the train station, nailed up a board that said “Litzmannstadt,” and would not hear anything different.

So they treated the city with care even when fleeing it—only they murdered the Jews and burned the Jewish ghetto in the Balut district. Another “Judenrein” city in Europe.

So my heart was even more sorrowful in Łódź than in Warsaw. I wandered through the familiar streets. All the streets were here, but where were the Jews? I stopped myself at familiar houses. All the houses were here. But where were my friends? Where were they who so warmly welcomed every Jewish writer? Where were the Tsimermans, the Boymatses, the Feders, the Soloveytshes, the

Loyfers?

Where was Kalmen Kabaker? He who read only German, kissed every attractive woman's hand, and loved Yiddish theater and Jewish writers as he did life itself. Just now the old bachelor brought me to his place after a night of carousing and sharply told his huge wolfhound, "Don't you touch him—he is a great Yiddish poet."

As soon as I got up, the huge wolfhound forgot what he had been told. He would not let me out of the room until his master came home and freed me.

Where were they all, the admirers of Itshe Meyer Vaysenberg? They hung on to his every word, partied with him till the break of dawn. If he said "holiday," there would be a holiday in the middle of the week, for him, for me, and for every Jewish writer, who even without an invitation was his distinguished and welcome guest.

I wandered around the streets. Everything was real and not real. In all of that familiar and alien Łódź I was the ghost, looking for "yesterday's day," for "yesterday's reality," which will never be surpassed in beauty on God's base world.

One day on this visit, Marek Edelman approached me on a Łódź street. It was the first time in my life that I saw him. He stopped me and told me a thing that shook and bewildered me, and that had a connection to that poem of mine, but this time not in a Polish translation but rather in Yiddish, the language in which it was written.

He told me quietly, without emotion, the most emotional story I have heard in my life in connection with a poem:

"The Warsaw ghetto was fighting and bleeding. The Germans, in order to overcome the ghetto fighters, began throwing

incendiary bombs on the houses. The heat was unbearable. Thousands of Jews were burned in their houses. Our arms and ammunition were running out. Many of my group in the broom factory district had already fallen in the struggle. For the last ones there was only one way out: to escape the bunkers and make their way to the sewers, and through the sewers to the Polish side.

“For a few moments after they left the bunkers, they were confused. Houses were blazing on all sides; the whole ghetto was one conflagration. So Jerusalem must have looked when the Romans set fire to it. So Rome must have looked when Nero set fire to it.

“And just then a girl who was in our group recited your poem:

*By the road there is a tree,
Stooping and alone.
All the birds that kept the tree,
All those birds have flown . . .*

“Recited? No, not recited, barely whispered, but everyone heard. Everyone in the group felt that the birds of the tree that had flown were not just birds but rather fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, comrades, and friends. The most beautiful birds of Polish Jewry.

“They made for the sewers. Not all the group arrived. Many were lost on the way.

“Nu, and she, the girl? She was among the first to fall. She did not arrive. It seems she had said good-bye to us with the poem, and said good-bye to the world.

*All the birds that kept the tree,
All those birds have flown.”*

Marek Edelman left. For a long time I stood in the same place. In my mind I saw the last fighters of the Warsaw ghetto with pistols in their hands. I heard the unknown girl whispering the poem in the brutal light of the ghetto fires. And so she stands for me until this day: a symbol of our glorious Jewish youth in Poland.

Did she belong to a party? To which? Marek Edelman, who was a Bundist, didn't tell me. He only told about a girl with a poem. A ghetto fighter and a poem.

I thought then and I still think today about the remarkable destiny of a poem. I wrote that poem in the thirties, in memory of my mother—a plain Jewish mother, who could not read nor write but who had an ocean of love, which could become too heavy for the strongest of wings.

Now I know that the sacrifice to my mother's love was not the "dear Itzik" of the poem but rather my brother Note, who fled east during the war and perished in Uzbekistan. The lonely mound of earth in the Bukharan Jewish cemetery in Samarkand is witness.

But the poem itself belongs now to that unknown Jewish girl in the Warsaw ghetto. She sanctified it in the last minutes of her life in the blaze of the ghetto fires.

The Jewish girl and the Yiddish poem.

How is it that no German remembered Goethe's lines:

*Man should be noble,
Generous and good,
For that alone makes him different
From all the creatures we know.*

... Maybe here lies also the difference between German and Jew?

MURRAY CITRON is a grandfather and lives in Ottawa. His verse translations of Yiddish poetry have appeared in periodicals in England, Canada, and the United States. His bilingual chapbook of Itzik Manger poems was published in Ottawa.

[6](#) A famous poem by Manger in which a boy, Itzik, is prevented from flying by the ardent ministrations of his mother, who has made his wings heavy with clothing for the winter.



The Blind Man

By Itsik Kipnis

TRANSLATED BY JOSHUA SNIDER

Itzik Kipnis was born in 1896 in Slovechne, Ukraine, 150 kilometers northwest of Kiev. He grew up in a family of tanners and worked in local tanneries until 1920, when the Slovechne tanners' union sent him to study in Kiev. There he began writing children's stories. His writing includes literature for adults, including a historical novella, Khadoshim un teg (Months and Days), and a two-volume memoir, Mayn shtetele sloveshne (My Shtetl Slovechne). His writing frequently had political overtones, and he was confined in a prison camp from 1949 until 1956, after the death of Stalin.

"Der blinder" ("The Blind Man") is from A ber iz gefloygn (A Bear Took Flight), a collection of four stories by Kipnis published in 1924. Aside from the miraculous restoration of a blind man's sight, it is the least supernatural story in the collection. Still, it is not far off from the fancifulness and wonder of Andersen's and the Grimms' classic fairy tales.

here was a wife in a village who didn't have any children. Her husband was a blind man who always went around through the villages begging, and Sundays and holidays he came home. When

The came home, his wife yelled at him and was angry the whole Sunday or the whole holiday. The blind man's holidays were all ruined holidays. But he was a good man; he kept silent, drew his cap near, and waited until the holiday was over, and then he took his sack and his walking stick and went away through the villages.

The blind man came home for a holiday once with one sack of wheat meal and one of barley, his harp hanging at his side. He felt his way with his cane, and he was very happy. Then his wife came out of the door and began to scream loudly and curse. The blind man was disgraced in front of the neighbors, and he could no longer remain silent.

He said, "I have passed through all of the villages and have not encountered such an angry woman. Tell me, why do you curse so? I have brought you meal, of both wheat and barley, and money in my handkerchief."

"I do not need your money," she said. "I do not need your meal—I need a child. All of our neighbors have children, and I don't!"

"And where am I supposed to get one for you?" The blind man was ashamed.

"Steal a child and bring it to me—it's not my concern!"

The blind man went away through the villages and thought perhaps she was right. He would steal a child from somewhere. Someone who had a bunch would have one less.

He walked and walked. A boy was herding sheep in a field. The blind man sat down on a stone and began to play his harp. The sheep hastened to the blind man. The boy was very little. The blind man called to him: "Boy, boy, who is there here in the field?"

"No one," said the boy. "Only my sheep and I."

“Boy, boy,” said the blind man. “Come and get in my sack so I can bring you to my wife.”

“I will not go,” said the boy.

“Why?”

“Because I am still very little, and I am one of my mama’s. If I don’t come home, she won’t know what to think.”

“Right,” said the blind man. “Lead your sheep where you will.” And he went along farther.

A little girl was sitting and tending geese. The blind man couldn’t see. He said: “Who are you—a boy or a girl?”

“A girl.”

“And what is your name?”

“Eydele.”

“Will you get in my sack, Eydele? I want to bring you to my wife.”

“I will not go.”

“Why won’t you come?”

“Because I am still very little and one of my mama’s. If I don’t come home, she won’t know what to think.”

It was no use. The blind man left for home with an empty sack.

His wife saw him coming empty-handed, went out to meet him with a stick, and said, “You better not come in, if you don’t want me to split your head open.”

The blind man started off again.

He walked and walked, passing through many towns and little villages, and no one wanted to give him a child.

One person said, “I am needed.”

A second said, "We have no other children here."

A third said, "If you go away, blind man, we won't throw you in jail."

The blind man went away into the woods and sat down on a little hill and began to cry about what had become of him. And as he cried his eyes broke out into a warm well of tears, and he saw a shine before him.

He could see there was a forest.

He saw a bear walking, and riding upon the bear was an old man, a cold man, with a long beard braided up into braids, and he was scowling: "Blind man, you have no children! Blind man, you have no children!"

The blind man went into a rage. And he was blind no longer. He grabbed a stick and struck the old, cold man, who flew down off of the bear and rolled away. The blind man climbed upon the bear; he threw his sacks one to one side and one to the other side and let the bear roam free. Away and away, the bear led the blind man to a cave. The blind man went into the cave and saw little children sitting there crying. He asked them, "What are you doing here, children?"

These children, they related, "We have no father, nor mother. The old, cold man with a long beard braided up into braids imprisoned us here and will not let us out."

The blind man began to open the cave and said: "Whosoever wishes to may come and follow me."

The boys left, following the blind man, and the bear accompanied them to the village.

Someone informed the wife. She went out to meet them with great joy, received the blind man with the children, and led them

right into the house, and then she made a feast for the village. No one wanted to believe that the blind man could now see. So they seated the children around the table for him, let the bear roam, and began to ask him:

“Which boy is this?”

“A blond one.”

“And which one is this?”

“A redhead.”

“And where is the bear?”

“He is walking there.”

When they saw that it was true, they began to rejoice and celebrate in the feast.

My grandfather was an old person, a hundred years old and perhaps yet more. He brought a sled as a present for the bear. He was there at the feast of the great guest, the bear.

Born in Petoskey, Michigan, in 1978, JOSHUA SNIDER has been studying Germanic languages since the age of sixteen. He reads all fifteen official modern written Germanic languages and is fluent in English, German, Dutch/Flemish, and Swedish. His Mennonite grandparents' native tongue was Pennsylvania German, a language that is not dissimilar to Litvak Yiddish. Snider, who also has Native American family, has translated and published a comparative Algonquian grammar from Dutch and has published a Meskwaki (Fox) dictionary for the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., through his own Mundart Press, which is dedicated to producing language-learning materials for marginalized and endangered languages. He is currently translating the Kipnis novel *Khadoshim un teg* and is working on a Blackfoot grammar. He lives in Petoskey with his wife, Sarah, and son, Declan.





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