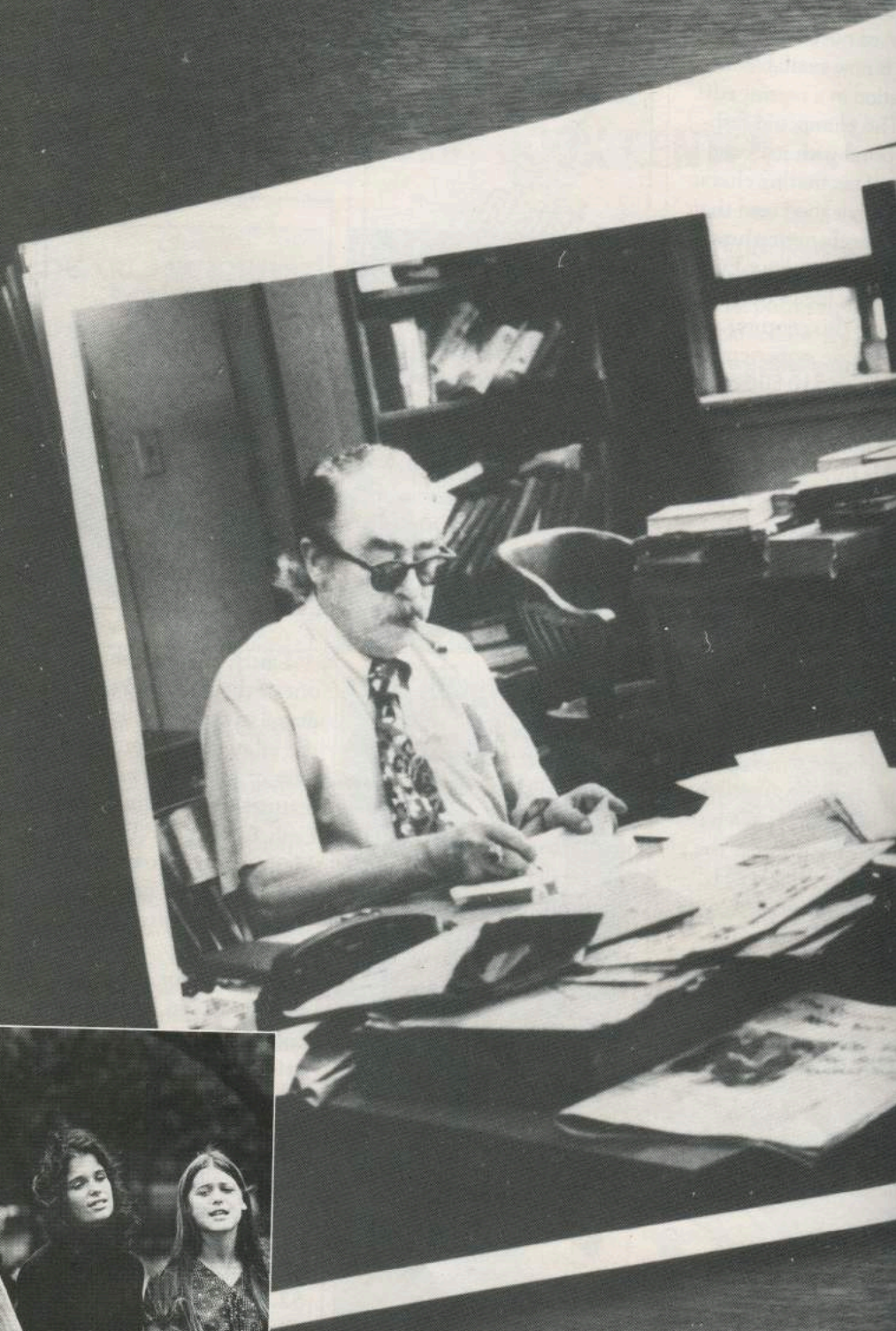
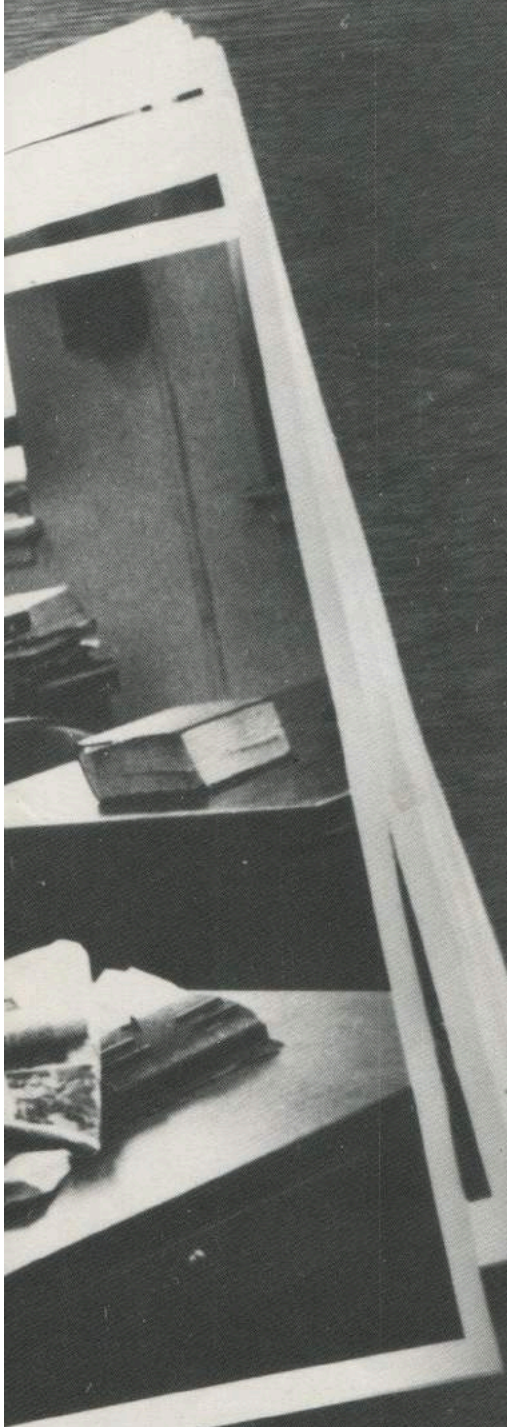


Right: Meyer Sticker, managing editor of the Jewish Daily Forward, at his desk in the old Forward Building on East Broadway in 1971. Chekow says that the editor's cigar and dark glasses and the general clutter of his office were characteristic of the atmosphere prevailing at the Forverts twenty years ago. Today the paper is published weekly, in both Yiddish and English editions, from offices on East 33rd Street; the old Forward Building, once considered the most prominent Jewish landmark of the Lower East Side, has become a Chinese cultural center.

Below: "Youth Sings Yiddish": Zalman Mlotek, Joshua Waletzky, Moyshe Rosenfeld, Khana Kliger and Betty Glaser singing in concert at Washington Square Park in 1971. Twenty-two years later, these young people are still deeply committed to Yiddish, working both personally and professionally to bring the treasures of Yiddish culture to yet another "young generation."





Famous Long Ago

YIDDISH IN NEW YORK, 1967 - 1972

Photographs by Arnold Chekow

Text by Kathryn Hellerstein

In 1990, a middle-aged Long Island lawyer named Arnold Chekow walked into the National Yiddish Book Center carrying a cardboard box filled with black-and-white photographs of dozens of Yiddish writers, actors, journalists and performers. An amateur photographer who had learned Yiddish from his immigrant parents, Chekow took the photos at various locations in New York City between 1967 and 1972. Today, these powerful images — published here for the first time — provide a deeply personal and revealing view of the later years of some of the best-known personalities of Yiddish culture in America.

Arnold Chekow is a man in his fifties who describes himself professionally as “a business lawyer.” He is also an artist who, in the late 1960s and early ’70s, took some remarkable photographs of Yiddish writers and performers in New York City. Some twenty years later, these photographs preserve the “late Indian summer” of the Yiddish culture which once flourished among immigrant Jews in America. At the same time, they foretell the resurgence of interest in Yiddish among a younger, American-born generation.

Sitting in the living room of his elegant house in Port Washington, Long Island, where he lives with his wife Natalie and their two daughters, ages 21 and 24, Arnold Chekow told me about the improbable path which had led him to produce this incomparable photographic record of Yiddish in America.

Chekow fell in love with the craft of photography at the age of 13, and has been an avid amateur photographer ever since. “Photography is a deceptively simple art form,” he said. “Anybody with a camera can push a button and take a decent picture.” The real challenge is deciding *what* to photograph. As Chekow put it, “Like an author who writes best about what he knows, the photographer takes the best pictures of something he has a feeling for.”

In the beginning, Chekow would go to the Bronx Zoo, near his parents’ home, and photograph what he calls “random subject matter” — people

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David Keith

feeding pigeons, little girls on bicycles, patterns formed by tree roots. In the early 1960s, recently married and working in Manhattan, he took photography courses with Lou Bernstein, a disciple of a philosopher of aesthetic realism named Elie Siegel, as well as other professional photographers. No matter how much technique he learned, though, Chekow still lacked a subject. Then, in the mid '60s, he came upon a reprint of Hutchins Hapgood's 1902 book, *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, a pioneering chronicle of the Jewish immigrant community of New York's Lower East Side. Like many Jews, Chekow's own immigrant parents had passed through the Lower East Side, and he hoped to capture something of the "spirit" of their lives by returning to the old neighborhood with his camera. But much had changed. There were no longer pushcart vendors hawking wares on the street, and the tenement where his grandmother first lived in America, at the corner of Essex and Delancey, had been demolished. He took pictures of Yiddish signs in the windows of Yonah Schimmel's Knish Store, Ratner's Restaurant and Katz's Delicatessen, but they felt static to him, evoking little personal resonance.

Forgotten Stars

It was on a rainy Sunday, on Second Avenue near Fourth Street, that Chekow spotted the marquee of the Anderson, one of the last of the famous Yiddish theaters. The show that afternoon was "The Poor Millionaire," starring Leo Fuchs. Tired, frustrated, bored, Chekow bought a ticket and went in. The theater was not full. The play was a cliché about a rich man trading places with a poor man. But despite the hackneyed material, Chekow was stunned by Leo Fuchs' Yiddish performance. "He made the audience laugh, he made the audience cry, and then three minutes later, if he wanted to, he made them laugh again. At one point, he reached over to the orchestra, picked up a violin, and began playing a Russian gypsy tune." A week later, Chekow returned to Second Avenue and, by luck, Leo Fuchs happened to be crossing the avenue toward him! Chekow stopped him in the middle of the street and gushed at him in Yiddish. Regarding his admirer through one partially-closed eye, Fuchs said, in English, "First of all, let's get out of the gutter." When Chekow asked the



actor for permission to photograph the performance, Fuchs arranged for him to have a box seat the following week. Chekow, ever the perfectionist, feared that the pictures he took from his seat, using available light, would be "flat." Because he wanted to give Fuchs a photograph of himself as a present, Chekow asked the actor to pose after the show for several pictures which he took with an on-camera flash. "What engaged my attention was that here was a person, an international star, the star of the show, and I had immediate access to him, by a combination of being interested in photographing what he was doing and the accessory fact that I spoke Yiddish."

The Yiddish actor Leo Fuchs at the Anderson Theater, Sunday, January 8, 1967. Referring to him as "the Jewish Danny Kaye," the photographer, Arnold Chekow, recalls: "In his dressing room, backstage, Fuchs had a photograph of himself at age 17 or 18, playing the character of an 80-year-old man with a long beard. This was an inspiration to his performance."



Above: Menashe Skulnik in "Jacobowsky and the Colonel" at the Mineola Theater in the late 1960s. Chekow says, "By that time, Skulnik was hard of hearing. His wife, Anna Roman, was in the show, too, and she helped him by giving him cues. Old as he was, his voice was still very distinctive. ... At one point in the play, the Colonel, a Polish officer, points out to Jacobowsky, the Jew, that he, too, has had to resurrect himself, pull himself out of the gutter. And Jacobowsky answers him, 'There's a difference. When I pull myself out of the gutter, a little piece of the gutter still sticks to me.'"



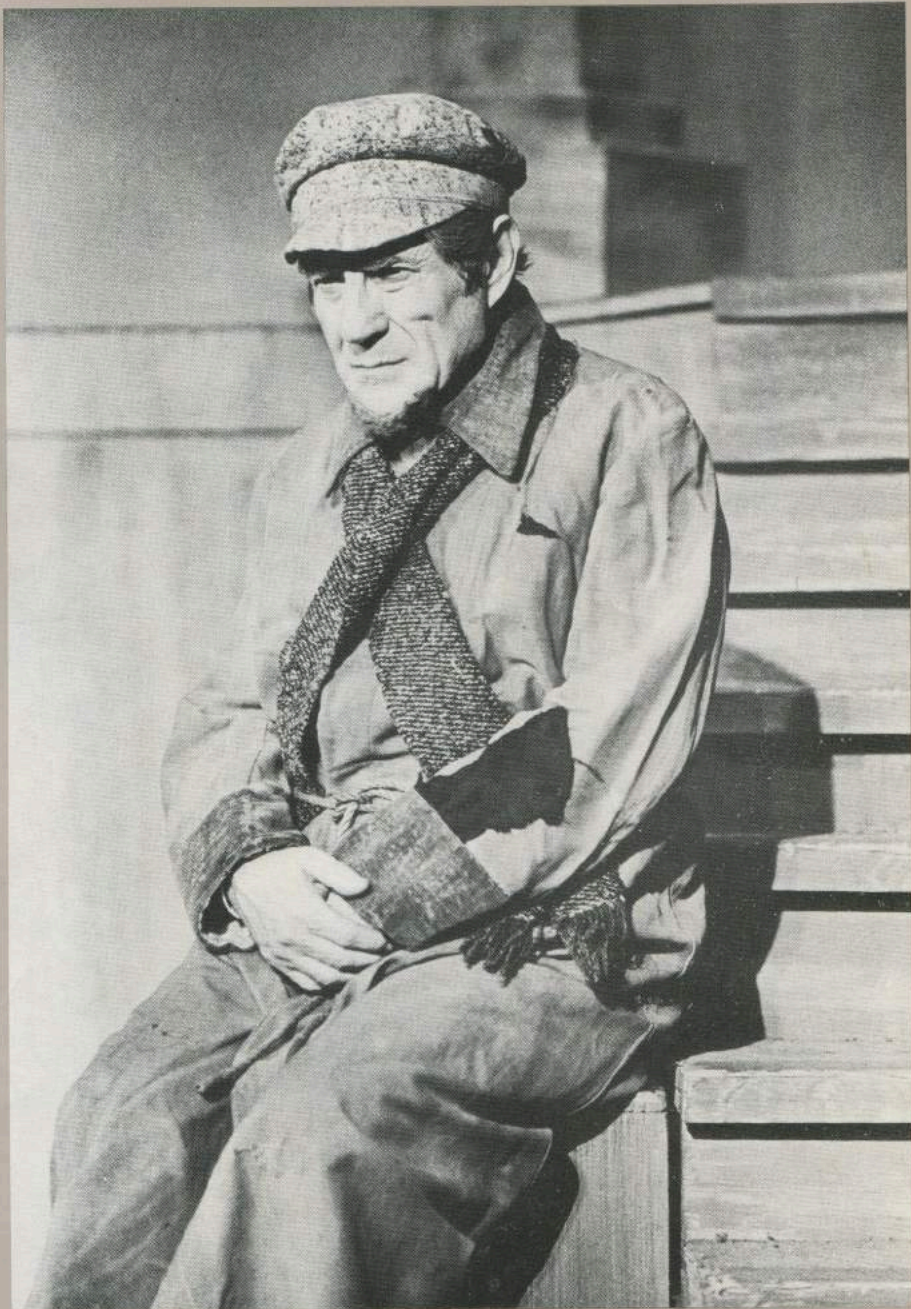
Left: Ida Kaminska, in "The Trees Die Standing," at the Roosevelt Theater. One of the most accomplished actresses of the Yiddish stage, she is perhaps best known today for her role in the feature film, "The Shop on Main Street."



Chekow had learned Yiddish at home from his parents, who came to America from Poland and Russia as young children. Although his father often spoke English to encourage the Americanization of his family, Chekow's mother and grandmother spoke primarily Yiddish with him. On Sunday mornings, while he was still in bed, his father, who subscribed to *Der Tog*, would read out loud from Yehoash's Yiddish translation of the *Tanakh*, and even today Chekow can still recite the opening verses of Genesis in Yiddish. As a boy, he also used to attend Yiddish plays at The Bronx Art Theater — despite the disapproval of his father, who objected to the plays' depictions of "an old-fashioned type of Jewish figure, black fur hats and beards." His mother, who played in a mandolin orchestra that gave annual concerts in Town Hall, had counted among her teachers a number of well-known Yiddish writers and personalities.

In the 1960s, Chekow met up with one of them, Herman Yablokoff, a noted writer, performer and singer who called himself *der payats*, the clown. When Chekow asked the actor where he performed, Yablokoff — who had just completed his two volume memoir, *Arum der velt mit yidisher teater* (*Around the World with Yiddish Theater*) — responded, "Ikh shpil nisht oft in Amerike. Ikh for iber der velt (I don't play often in America. I travel around the world)." Because there was not much of an audience for Yiddish theater at home, Yablokoff travelled regularly to Argentina and other South American countries to practice his art. What impressed Chekow about Yablokoff and other performers he photographed was their fall from great fame to relative obscurity, at least in America. "It amazed me. Some of them were such well-known personalities, but they were not getting their due, people weren't really paying attention to them."

Chekow continued to photograph many of the luminaries of the Yiddish stage: Menashe Skulnik, performing in "Jacubowsky and the Colonel," at the Mineola Theater; Ida Kaminska in "The Trees Die Standing," at the Roosevelt Theater; Jacob Ben-Ami and Sara Stabin in a dramatization of Isaac Bashevis Singer's *In My Father's Court* at the Folksbiene Playhouse; Josef Buloff playing the character Simkhe Meyer in the stage adaptation of I. J. Singer's *The*



Brothers Ashkenazi, also at the Folksbiene; Berta Gersten in "Mirele Efros." Usually, Chekow took his pictures from his seat in the theater, relying on available light, rather than a flash. This was no mean feat, for the absolute darkness of the stage behind the actor made it hard for the photographer to register the nuances of shading in the actor's face and figure. Often, when he clicked the shutter in a hushed theater, there was "a very kind and well-timed cough" in the audience to disguise the sound of the camera; Chekow calls this his wife Natalie's "contribution to my project."

In one of Chekow's favorite pictures, Jacob Ben-Ami plays Bontsha Shvayg

Above: Josef Buloff as Simkhe Meyer in "The Brothers Ashkenazi," adapted from the novel by I. J. Singer, performed at the Folksbiene Playhouse in 1971. The Folksbiene, which continues to function, is a semi-professional theater using both amateur and professional actors. "Buloff had a fair amount of fame on the English stage," Chekow recalls. "I saw him, on 42nd Street, on the West Side, in what was called Jewish Theater, an attempt to have Jewish-oriented plays in English. He was in Arthur Miller's 'The Price,' playing Gregory Solomon, the old furniture dealer, and he was phenomenal."

Left: Sara Stabin, in "The Court," based on a memoir by Isaac Bashevis Singer and performed at the Folksbiene Playhouse in 1972. Stabin appeared alongside the great Yiddish actor, Jacob Ben-Ami.



Jacob Ben-Ami in the title role of "Bontsha the Silent," adapted from I. L. Peretz's short story, at a small theater in City Island in the Bronx in the winter of 1969. "The camera hones in on Bontsha, being led up to heaven by the Angel of Death who is wearing a *shtrayml* and a white *kitl*. The shadow on the bottom of the picture is somebody's head in the seat in front of me, which, I think, adds to the picture. I'm lucky, though, that the person in front wasn't taller. He would have blocked out Bontsha's hands."

(Bontsha the Silent), the title character in a dramatic version of I. L. Peretz's satiric short story. The photograph shows Bontsha, the meekest and most downtrodden of victims, being led up to heaven by the Angel of Death, an imposing figure in his *shtrayml* and white *kitl*. At the bottom of the frame is a dim arc, formed by the shadow of somebody's head in the seat in front of the camera. Chekow kept this shadow in the picture to emphasize that it records a dramatic moment in the photographer's experience, as well as a moment in a Yiddish drama.

Chekow is deeply involved with his subjects. Speaking of Ben-Ami, Chekow showed me a tome, *The Yiddish Theater in America* by David S. Lifson (New York, 1965), to illustrate the fame that Ben-Ami, born in 1890, had once enjoyed on the Yiddish stage. "Jacob Ben-Ami was viewed as the major figure in Yiddish theater and he also crossed

over into American Jewish theater," Chekow said with amazement, the book open before him. "You can see all the plays he appeared in and the works he directed and the high-minded goals he had, for a fine, art theater in Yiddish. Yet I was able to find, in the winter of 1969, Jacob Ben-Ami playing in a very small theater in City Island, an extension of the Bronx, in the story of a fellow who, when he gets to heaven, wants only a roll and butter. And I had access to Ben-Ami, a superstar! In 1969, forty years after the great highlights of his career, his circumstances had changed. Society had changed. No longer was that kind of focus and celebrity given to performers on the Yiddish stage."

Poetry at the Y

In 1969 and 1970, Chekow photographed a series of readings by Yiddish poets held at the 92nd Street YMHA in

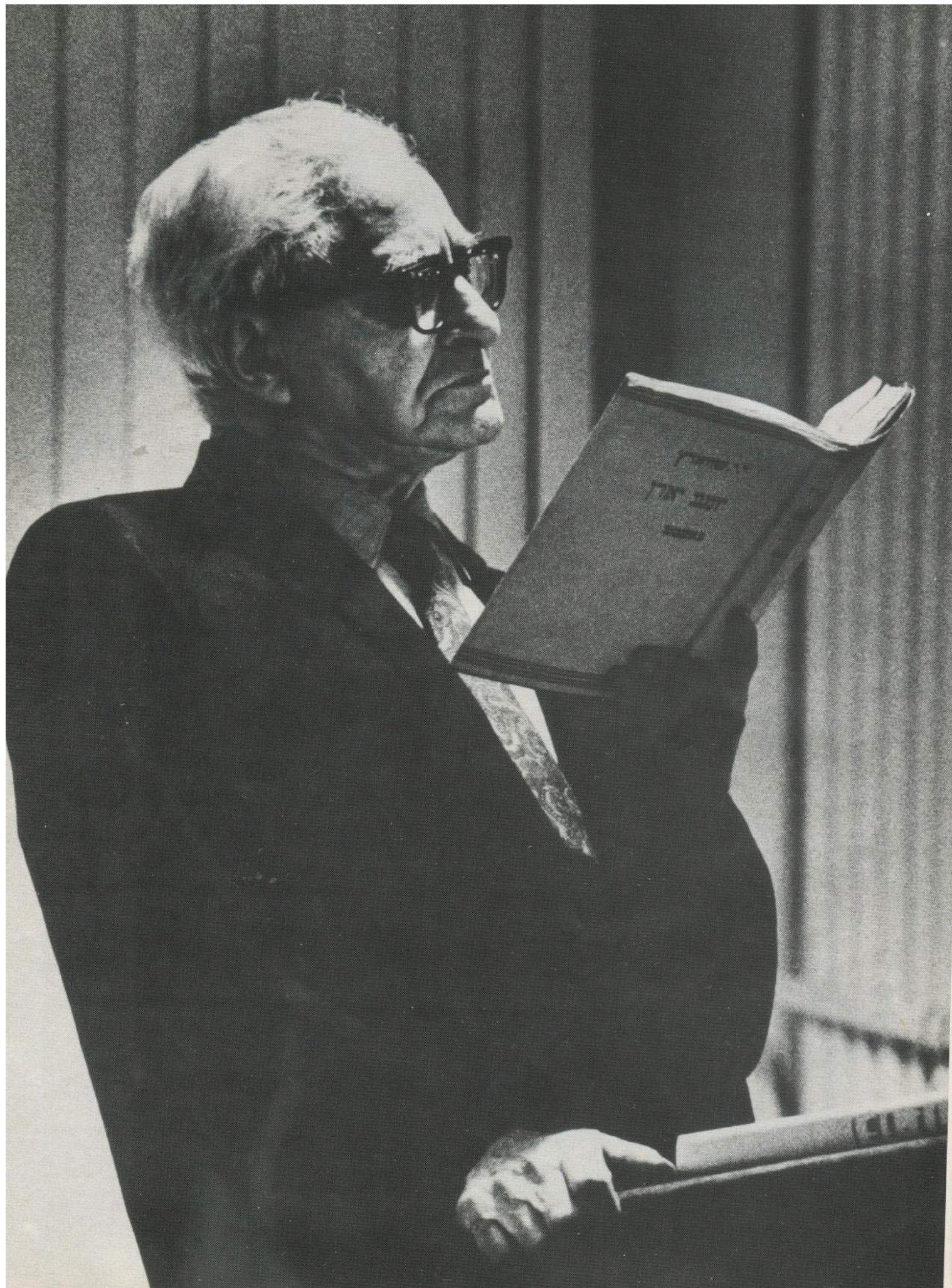


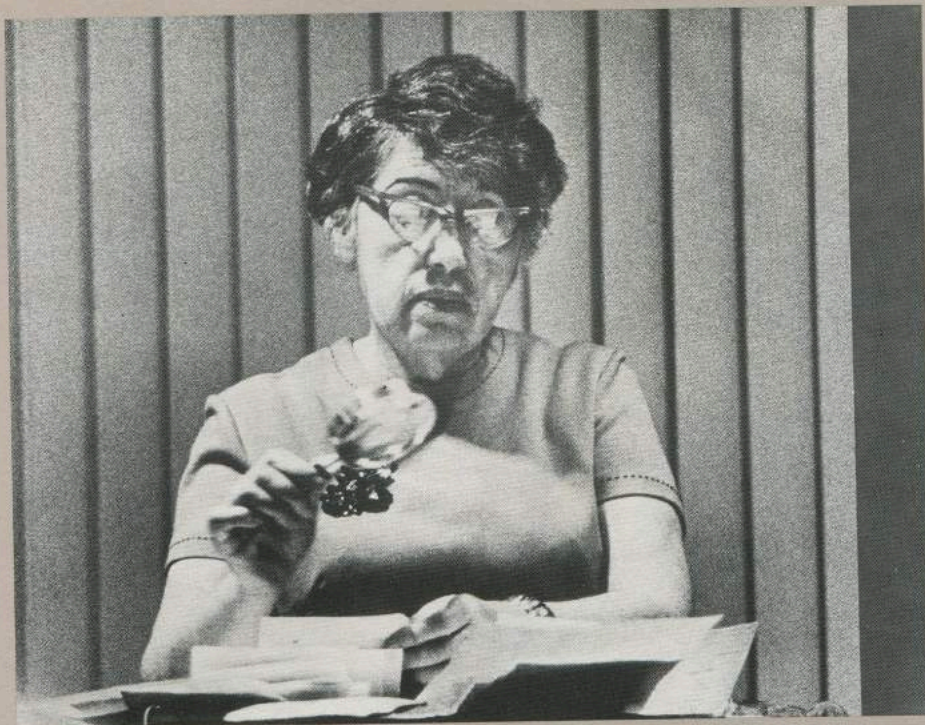
New York to commemorate the publication of the landmark anthology by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*. Chekow attended so many of the readings that he soon “developed a sense of authority. I would shmooze with the poets in Yiddish before it started, and they began to think I was part of the scene.” Often they would let Chekow adjust the blinds on the window behind the lectern, so that he could take better pictures with available light. His photographs include Eliezer Greenberg reading from his own poetry, as well as images of many of the other prominent Yiddish poets who were still alive in 1969 and 1970: Jacob Glatstein, one of the founders of *Inzikh*, the “Introspectivist” movement which changed the face of Yiddish poetry in the 1920s and ’30s; Rajzel Zychlinska, Israel Goichberg, Arnold Schwerner, Aaron Berger, the bilingual Hebrew and Yiddish poet Gabriel Preil, Mordechai Rothenberg, David Einhorn, Wolf Younin (a member of “Yung Vilna” before the War), Malka Lee, Mayer Ziml Tkatch, and Moyshe Dluznowski.

Chekow was especially intrigued with I. J. Schwartz, the author of the 1925 epic-length poem *Kentucky*, who had also translated, among many other works, Shakespeare into Yiddish. Looking at his photograph of Schwartz, Chekow remembered: “He was in his eighties here, and he stood very erect. You can see the title of the book he’s reading, *Yunge yorn* (*Young Years*)... he’s reading about his young days.” What struck Chekow most about Schwartz were the circumstances to which he had been reduced in his old age: when Chekow met him, the great poet, still a

Above: Gabriel Preil at the 92nd Street Y in 1969. A noted bilingual poet, Preil published his first poems in Yiddish in the 1920s. One of the few writers in Chekow’s photographs who is still alive, he lives today in New York City, where he publishes primarily in Hebrew.

Left: In 1969 and 1970, many of the greatest living Yiddish writers appeared on stage at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan as part of a Yiddish Poetry Series commemorating the publication of Howe and Greenberg’s groundbreaking anthology, *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*. Arnold Chekow attended almost every session and photographed many of the writers as they read their poems aloud to an appreciative audience. Among the most memorable was Jacob Glatstein, an innovative poet who fifty years earlier had been a founder of the *Inzikhists* (Introspectivists), a modernist movement that revolutionized Yiddish poetry in America.





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commanding figure on the stage of the Y, was living alone in a single rented room in a run-down neighborhood in the Bronx.

Perhaps the most striking images to come out of the Y Poetry Series are two photographs of the poet Kadya Molodowsky, who was then 75 years old. Chekow took the first photograph of her from his seat. Molodowsky sits in a chair on the stage, between Adrienne Rich and John Hollander, two younger, American poets who had contributed translations to the Howe and Greenberg anthology. Rich and Hollander, who have since become prominent lit-

erary figures in their own right, appear pensive and inward. Molodowsky, clutching her pocketbook on her lap, turns her face attentively toward the light and the speaker, beyond the frame of the picture. Chekow recalls, "There was something endearing about her, a little vulnerable. She put her purse down when she had to go to the microphone. I think the expression is *oyverbotlt* [approaching senility]. When she came back, she was a little concerned. She had forgotten where she had placed her purse." After the reading, Chekow approached Molodowsky and explained his photography project in Yiddish. He said that the pictures he took from his seat might not come out, because of his distance from the stage and the harsh lighting. The poet responded by inviting Chekow to visit her at home.

Early in the winter of 1970, Chekow went to Molodowsky's Grand Street apartment, in a high-rise complex on the Lower East Side. There, when Chekow explained that he wanted to take a picture of her that was not posed, she sat down in her winged armchair, near the window, inhaled her cigarette, and began to recite a poem. The resulting photograph shows a woman at ease, outlined by light, in the midst of reciting a word, exhaling a breath. The camera visually immortalizes the word she utters, in the wisp of smoke that rises, pale against the chair's

Above: Rajzel Zychlinska at the podium of the 92nd Street Y in 1969. A widely published lyric poet, Zychlinska survived the Holocaust and published her third book of poems in Lodz, Poland, in 1948. Chekow recalls, "I somehow didn't go up and move the blinds as I might have wanted to. They distract in this picture."

Left: I. J. Schwartz, reading from his autobiographical poem, "*Yunge yorn: poeme* (Young Years: Poem)," at the 92nd Street Y in 1969. An important member of *Di Yunge*, best known for his book-length epic poem, *Kentucky* (1925), Schwartz ended his years in relative obscurity, living hand-to-mouth in a rented room in the Bronx. [Both the original Yiddish edition and a new English translation of *Kentucky* are available from the National Yiddish Book Center.]



dark wing, in the shape that this smoke-word forms in the air.

The pictures that Chekow took at the 92nd Street Y freeze a moment of Yiddish culture in time. Most of the Yiddish writers he photographed are no longer living. But the image of Kadya Molodowsky on stage, sitting between the younger poet-translators Adrienne Rich and John Hollander, and a similar picture, where the Yiddish poet Rokhl Korn waits for her turn at the podium, between Cynthia Ozick and another translator, suggest the continuity of a *yidishkayt* inherited and transformed by a younger generation of American Jewish writers and translators in English.

Journalists and Radio Personalities

In his nostalgic search for the Lower East Side, Chekow went to the Forward Building on East Broadway in 1971. He was looking for the remains of a legendary billboard announcing the paper's name, rumored to be on top of the building and so huge that it could be seen in old photos of the New York skyline. Although he did not find the billboard on the roof, Chekow did take pictures inside the newspaper's offices. One shows the cash register, where someone has rung up 15 cents: the cost of a daily Yiddish paper in 1971. Above the cash register is a sign in Spanish: "*Se habla Yiddish!*" Another picture is a still-life of sourcebooks used by the journalists, piled helter-skelter on a desk. A third picture shows a popular writer named Shmulevitch, and yet another depicts the *Forverts'* humorist, Josef Simon Goldstein, a small, intense man, whose hair flips up rebelliously in the back. There are also pictures of the theater critic Yitskhok Perloff, a man who announced the news on WEVD, and a columnist who wrote under the pen-name Wilk. The picture that captures the world of the *Forward* best of all, ac-

Above: Mr. and Mrs. Moyshe Dluznowski, in the audience of the Yiddish Poetry Series at the 92nd Street Y. Chekow remembers, "I took a picture of him primarily because I was eavesdropping on his conversation in Yiddish as to whether the Y had indeed made the right choice of poets. There was some audience disagreement as to whether they had, in fact, overlooked some people."

Left: The Yiddish writer Kadya Molodowsky, seated on stage between the American poet-translators Adrienne Rich and John Hollander at the 92nd Street Y on November 2, 1969.



Malka Lee, seated, at a celebration in her honor in New York, probably in 1970. Lee published eight books, including poetry and children's stories. Chekow comments, "I like this picture because I had a lot of trouble printing her corsage. The harsh light on the white orchid against her black dress created an absolute contrast, and I couldn't quite get it. I like her expression, there was something interesting about it. She reminded me of my mother."

cording to Chekow, is that of Meyer Sticker, the paper's managing editor, who corrects a text with a cigar in his mouth, his tinted glasses sliding down his nose, and his desk piled high with Yiddish and English newspapers.

Chekow showed me photos of two Yiddish music festivals held in New York City parks. The first, in Central Park, featured Seymour Rexite, a Yiddish radio personality on WEVD, and his wife Miriam Kressyn, a well-known Yiddish actress. Looking at the photograph, Chekow recalled listening to Rexite as a child: "My parents always played WEVD on the radio. At that time his name was not Seymour Rexite, but *Rechtzeit*. He had a wonderful tenor voice. He had his own show on WEVD, which he always started with his theme

song, "*Ikhl vel zingen sheyne gezangen, in kesl fun sheyne lider* [I will sing lovely songs, in the kettle of lovely poems]." He was also an actor and an officer in the Hebrew Actors' Union. His wife, Miriam Kressyn, was very nicely dressed, very elegant, with modern, careful makeup. They were always around, at the Yiddish events. And of

One photo shows the cash register, where someone has rung up 15 cents: the cost of a daily Yiddish paper in 1971. Above the cash register is a sign in Spanish: "*Se habla Yiddish!*"

course, no matter how old Miriam Kressyn was, the ladies would look at her and say, 'She looks just like a teenager.' At one event, she was wearing a sailor suit. I thought this lady carried it off!"

Such prominent personalities in the Yiddish world as Rexite and Kressyn, appearing in public places like Central Park in 1970, performed for substantial though diminishing audiences. In contrast, a concert called "Youth Sings Yiddish" was staged in Washington Square Park in 1971. The participants — in their teens and early twenties — were neither famous nor professional performers. For the most part, they were college students who loved Yiddish and loved to sing Yiddish songs. Chekow's photos capture the freshness and enthusiasm of these young people. One picture shows a group of six singing in chorus: Zalman Mlotek, Josh Waletzky, Moyshe Rosenfeld, Khana Kliger, Betty Glaser, and a woman partially obscured by her fellow performers. Dressed for a sunny afternoon in shirtsleeves or patterned dresses, their hair tousled by a breeze, they hold a note in unison and gaze dreamily beyond the microphone. This photograph conveys a sense of youthful sincerity, commitment, connection. Indeed, twenty years later, the young people in the photograph are still active — as Yiddish teachers, scholars, authors, film-makers and performers — bringing Yiddish language and culture to even younger generations.

In his mission to photograph the Lower East Side, Chekow found, instead



of nostalgia or second-hand memories, a surprising number of actors, poets, journalists, and singers — people engaged creatively, vibrantly in strengthening and celebrating Yiddish language and culture. His eloquent photographs bear witness to the dignity and determination with which his subjects, many of them once famous and widely celebrated, continued to write or perform, despite declining readerships, shrinking audiences, growing obscurity and diminished personal circumstances. A young man with a camera, Chekow captured almost inadvertently the final, poignant days of an extraordinary generation. More than twenty years later, his photographs continue to speak to all of us who feel, like Chekow, that the values of Yiddish culture — of a *yidish harts*, a *yidisher kop*, a *yidishe neshome* — are not enough with us today. 📷



Above: Rokhl Korn seated on stage, between Cynthia Ozick and another translator at the Yiddish Poetry Series at the 92nd Street Y in 1969. Korn, who survived the war years in the Soviet Union, lived in Montreal during the latter part of her life. She published ten books of poems and a collection of short stories.

Left: Seymour Rexite, Yiddish radio personality and singer, and his wife, Miriam Kressyn, a well-known Yiddish actress, at a Yiddish Festival in Central Park in the early 1970s. As a child, Chekow remembers hearing Rexite's melodious tenor voice on WEVD — the Yiddish (now multilingual) New York radio station on which Rexite and Kressyn still appear.

Right: Kadya Molodowsky reciting a poem in her apartment on Grand Street during the winter of 1970. Notice how the cigarette smoke captures her word in mid-air. Born in Lithuania in 1894, Molodowsky was one of the most prolific of women writers in Yiddish. Her numerous books include novels, short stories, essays, plays and poetry, as well as several delightful books for children. She died in New York in 1975, five years after this photo was taken.

