

YIDDISH BOOK CENTER
2018 Great Jewish Books Book Club Video Conference
Oedipus in Brooklyn by Blume Lempel
with Ellen Cassedy and Yermiyahu Ahron Taub
June 28, 2018
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JESSICA PARKER: Okay, so it's now 8:00, and hello, everyone. Welcome to our second video conference of the 2018 Book Club. Thank you for your careful reading, your thoughtful comments, and your insightful perceptions in our Facebook group and via e-mail. I'm so glad that you're all joining us this evening.

I'm Jessica Parker, the coordinator for the Great Jewish Books Book Club. And, I'm just going to mute a couple people in the meantime. Sorry about that. In just a moment, I'm going to introduce our featured guests, *Oedipus in Brooklyn* translators Ellen Cassedy and Yermiyahu Ahron Taub. But first I want to tell you about the structure for this evening.

All participants will be muted to prevent excessive background noise. Ellen and Yermiyahu will start with a 15-minute introduction, and then we'll open it up to questions for about 45 minutes. You can ask them questions by typing in the chat box.

To access the chat box, hover over the bottom of your Zoom window. You should see a speech bubble with "chat" written underneath it. Click on that speech bubble to open the chat window. You'll be able to send messages privately to individuals, or to everyone. Please address your questions to everyone, not just the speakers. It's helpful for me, and the rest of the group, to be able to see them. Also, Ellen and Yermiyahu are in different locations and if you just send them to one, the other can't see them, and they're both going to be choosing questions. They will also be repeating the questions for our members who will be watching the video recording after the fact and won't have access to the chat box.

I will be posting the video recording to Vimeo and sharing the link with all of you as soon as possible. Rest assured that no one's video, other than mine and the speakers', will be part of the recording, so feel free to have your webcam on, you're not being recorded.

In addition, we are offering live captioning for this video conference. If you would like to see the closed captions, again hover over the bottom of your Zoom window. You should see an icon

that says “CC,” which stands for “closed captioning.” To turn them on, click on that “CC” icon. To turn them off, click on the “CC” icon again. There is a 4- to 5-second lag time with the captions as a result of the software integration and the fact that it's being live-captioned. So, thank you, Heidi. And, if you use the closed captioning, I'm keen to receive your feedback afterwards, so please do call or email me to let me know about your experience.

And, if you're having a technical difficulty or issue this evening, please send a private chat message to me, I'm Jessica Parker, brackets, Yiddish Book Center in the chat options. You can email me at bookclub@yiddishbookcenter.org, or call me at 413-256-4900, extension 131. I'll be muting myself, so it won't be interrupting the rest of the webinar.

So, without further ado, I would like to introduce our speakers.

Ellen Cassedy is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust*, a prize-winning account of her journey into her family past in Lithuania, and how Lithuania today is encountering its Jewish cultural history. Ellen was a fellow in the Yiddish Book Center's Translation Program in 2016, where she translated a collection of short stories by the late Yiddish writer Yenta Mash. That collection will be published this fall by Northern Illinois University Press, entitled *On the Landing*. And, it's available for pre-order now. Ellen joins us tonight from New York City.

And, Yermiyahu Ahron Taub is the author of *Prodigal Children in the House of G-d: Stories* (2018), and six books of poetry, including *A Mouse Among Tottering Skyscrapers: Selected Yiddish Poems*, “Preparing to Dance: New Yiddish Songs,” a CD of nine of his Yiddish poems set to music, which was released in 2014. His short stories have appeared in publications such as *Hamilton Stone Review*, *JewishFiction.net*, *Penshaft: New Yiddish Writing*, and *Verdad Magazine*. A 2018-2019 Yiddish Book Center Translation Fellow, Yermiyahu is translating three memoirs by Rachmil Bryks right now. Yermiyahu joins us tonight from Washington, D.C.

So, thank you both. It's a pleasure to have you. And now I will unmute you both, and turn it over to you. Just give me one moment. Apologies. Please.

ELLEN CASSEDY: Okay. So, I'm Ellen Cassedy, and it's really a pleasure to join all of you tonight. Really looking forward to hearing what you have to say about this amazing writer, Blume Lempel.

And, by the way, Blume Lempel died in 1999, we never met her, but when we met some of her heirs, they pronounced the name “Lem-PELL,” not “Lempl,” so that's what we do, too.

So, how did it happen that we got ourselves connected to this writer and these stories? It began years ago, when my mother died fairly young, and I decided that I would study Yiddish as a memorial to her.

My mother was Jewish, unlike my father, which is where the name Cassedy comes from, in case

you were wondering, and she grew up around Yiddish. She didn't actually speak the language but she would sprinkle a word here and a word there into her conversation and after she died I found myself missing those little hints of Yiddish.

So, I decided to start studying Yiddish and it was both as a memorial to her and as a way to find a home within Jewish culture. I started studying Yiddish in Philadelphia and my first teacher was a man named Max Rosenfeld, who was a native speaker and he himself was a translator, too. And, early on, I told him that I wanted to try my hand at translating. And he went straight to his bookshelf and he pulled off the shelf a little gray volume by Blume Lempel, and he showed me that she had inscribed it to him personally. And here's the inscription in the book.

And then I met Yermiyahu at our monthly Yiddish reading group in Washington, D.C., where I lived at the time, and we opened up this little gray volume and started to read, and we were completely blown away by what we found. It was really unique writing, experimental, taboo-defying, and lyrical. And we didn't think we had ever seen anything like it in any language. So, we wondered, who was this woman? Where did she come from? What was it all about? How did she arrive on this planet?

So, we went hunting, and we looked for people who had known her and we started looking for her papers, and we found a whole trove of her papers in someone's attic.

And now Yermiyahu will tell you a little about himself and about what we found out about Blume Lempel and her life.

YERMIYAHU AHRON TAUB: Thank you, Ellen. And thank you to Jessica Parker and the entire YBC team for making all this possible. Special thanks to Eitan Kensky, Miranda Cooper, and Jessica for that amazing reference collection on Blume on the YBC website. It's really an amazing resource.

So, I, too, have a Philadelphia connection. I grew up in an ultra-Orthodox Jewish family, surrounded by Jewish languages, including Yiddish. I intensively studied Yiddish as an adult. And, I've been involved in the Yiddish culture as a writer, poet, translator, and reader for over 25 years. And now to Blume.

Blume Lempel was born Blume Pfeffer, Blume Leye Pfeffer, in 1907 in a shtetl, called Khorostkov, in what was then Galicia, later Poland, and now Ukraine, in what she described as "a white-washed room by the banks of a river that had no name." She never had much of a formal education. She was pretty much self-taught. In later years, she said, "My father believed that all a girl needed to know was how to cook a pot of food, sew a patch, and milk a cow. In Poland," she said, "I didn't write at all. I only dreamed of writing." But as she dreamed, she stored up observations that would later appear in her work.

All her life, her childhood self remained accessible to her -- as "the girl whose tides ebb and flow on my sandy shores to this day."

By the way, just wave if you can't hear me. This technology is new to me, so just give a shout out.

For a time, Blume's childhood world seemed safe and secure. But when she was 12, her mother died of a heart ailment, and when her father remarried, Blume was pressed into service as a housekeeper and nursemaid for him and his new wife and their young child. In the meanwhile, her brother Yisroel, whom she adored, had been imprisoned for militant Communist activity and escaped and fled to France. In 1929, at age 22, Blume, also, left Khorostkov.

Her plan was to become a pioneer in Palestine, but on the way, she stopped off in Paris to visit Yisroel, who'd settled in the Jewish immigrant neighborhood of Belleville, there in Paris. Blume fell in love with the City of Light. She abandoned her pioneer Palestine plans—try saying that a thousand times—and found a job in a fur factory, where she met her husband, Lemel Lempel. They started a family. And her dream of becoming a writer began to take shape. She began writing poems and meeting other Yiddish writers.

Blume lived in Paris for 10 years, and had every intention of making it her permanent home. But then came Hitler. As World War II began, in 1939, the family was extremely fortunate to be able to flee to New York. Blume reached out to the New York Yiddish literary scene, and began to publish -- a novel and short stories. Then the news from Europe began to trickle in.

She learned that back in her hometown, her father's wife and their young son had been seized and killed by the Nazis, that her father had then set fire to the family home and hanged himself, and that on the day before the liberation of France, her beloved brother, Yisroel, who had joined the Resistance, had been arrested and shot, leaving behind a wife and two sons. As Blume later said, she “was catapulted into a deep despair. The past was a graveyard; the future without meaning.” Years passed -- desolate, hopeless years. She began to burn her work.

But then came a turning point. She had two friends, Yiddish writers, who suggested that she take her despair over the Holocaust and really make it her subject, make it her own, to put her despair into words, to put it down on paper. And that idea, she said, “opened a psychological door.” At that point, she was in her 40s. She opened that door in her own psyche, and the stories just came pouring out.

She was fortunate to have the support of an illustrious mentor, Avrom Sutzkever. Sutzkever was renowned throughout the world of Yiddish letters as a poet, as a rescuer of treasured Jewish texts in the Vilna Ghetto during World War II, and as the editor of the leading Yiddish literary journal *Di goldene keyt*, *The Golden Chain*, which was published in Tel Aviv. Another editor might have tried to rein Lempel in, to smooth out her rough edges, to tame her bold choices, but Sutzkever never did. Instead, he wrote to her: “You have your own words, your own observations, which you scoop out from within yourself like shovelfuls of hot coals.”

And this was just what she needed. Sutzkever and Lempel corresponded for 20 years. He sent

her letters with his own drawings. Although Sutzkever published many of Lempel's stories, he wouldn't touch "Oedipus in Brooklyn." He considered it too shocking. Maybe he was right.

In addition to Sutzkever, Lempel received support from many Yiddish writers, including Malka Heifetz Tussman, Yonia Fain, Chava Rosenfarb, and Chaim Grade. Grade wrote to her how it was sad that her talent had flowered so late, at a moment in history when so few could read her words in the original. Perhaps this was inevitable, he said. Lempel belonged to her time and no other. He wrote to her as follows: "It is enough to make one weep, that you appeared in our literature at a time when so few good readers remained. But perhaps it could not have been otherwise. Perhaps your magical, sweet, lyrical tone could not have come into being any earlier than our autumn years. You are a modern writer in the most beautiful sense."

The painter and writer Yonia Fain wrote to her as follows: "Throughout [your] stories, time undulates, not measured or divided into past, present, and future. As long as we are alive, we carry all times within ourselves simultaneously. And who knows for sure what is fact and what is dream? And who can say with certainty how much arrival there is in going away, and how much going away in arriving? These and many other questions are woven in a natural way into your work."

Lempel's work was published in Yiddish journals all over the world -- in Tel Aviv; New York; Los Angeles; Melbourne, Australia; Paris; and South Africa. Because even after the Holocaust, Yiddish literature flourished all over the world, and Yiddish readers, who maybe before the war would have gone down to the local café in Eastern Europe to drink tea, have some chat, share their work with one another, after the war were scattered all over the world. They forged connections, through long distance, through these journals and through writing letters.

Lempel won several Yiddish literary awards, and she published two volumes of short stories. These are the two volumes that form the bulk of the stories in our translated collection. We also included the story "Pastorale" and the essay "The Fate of the Yiddish Writer," which were published in literary journals.

And now I'm going to turn it back to Ellen, who's going to speak about Lempel's body of work itself.

ELLEN CASSEDY: Okay. Thank you, Yermiyahu. I'm just going to say just a few minutes about the work itself. So, as you know, throughout the 150-year history of modern Yiddish literature, most of the works that were published were written by men. But it turns out that women, too, were prolific writers in Yiddish, and in recent years, thanks in large part to the Yiddish Book Center, more and more of that work is being brought up from the deep and published. So, we're seeing more of what the body of women's work was in Yiddish, but as I say, Blume Lempel was one of a kind.

As translators, we found her work so, so poetic and so rich and so dense and so idiosyncratic that we had to work very hard to capture her unique rhythms and her unique tone. She's a little

unhinged you probably noticed and that was a challenge for us. things about her work.

So, let me say three

The first one, which I'm sure you noticed right away, is, starting on page 1, is that the narratives in her work do not move smoothly from Point A to Point B. They can be jagged, they can be disjointed, they can be hard to follow, and kind of crazy. We thought about this for a long time, and we decided that this jaggedness is actually a carefully considered literary choice, a reflection of the disruptions in Lempel's own life and in the experiences of her characters, so it's an ingenious way to convey the unsettled and restless existence that she had experienced and that her characters experienced.

So, in all of her stories, you find her imagination moving back and forth freely between dream and reality. Sometimes you don't know whether you're in a dream or whether you're in real life, between past and present. Just about every story includes multiple venues. These stories do not stay still. We're in Israel, then we're in Poland. Then we're back in Israel. We're in Brooklyn, then we're in South Carolina, then we are abruptly back in Brooklyn.

And, in one of the stories, called "Yosemite Park," which takes place in Yosemite National Park, the narrator says this: "Sometimes a present-day experience becomes entangled with a long-forgotten event that once affected me. When past and present meet, the flash of the collision lights up the vanished era in full color."

So, I think that's a very important clue to Lempel's writing. Again and again, she'll take seemingly disparate and unconnected elements and put them together, sort of like constructing a collage, or a carefully assembled mosaic, and these disparate elements collide and produce light, and illuminate new truths. So, disjointed narratives.

The second aspect of Lempel's stories that is impossible to miss is that in nearly every story, women are front and center. Often women who are living on the margins of society.

So, we meet two women forging a friendship in the ladies' room at Penn Station. We meet a mother and son who are living with the squirrels, hiding from the Nazis in the forest. We meet an anti-Nazi spy who conceals herself behind a mask of carefully glamorous makeup. We meet a young woman who's lying on the table in an abortion clinic. A woman flying to Reno for a divorce. A middle-aged woman who's transported by erotic fantasies as she prepares for a blind date. A deeply religious African-American woman who is tormented by guilt after she tells a lie to save her son's life.

And, of course, there's the most taboo-defying story of all, "Oedipus in Brooklyn," the one we selected as our title story, about a contemporary Jewish woman, living in Brooklyn, who becomes involved in a sexual relationship with her son.

The sheer range of Lempel's subjects and settings is huge, and that's very unusual for Yiddish writers.

There's a scholar named Jessica Kirzane and she has written a very insightful review of this collection, which you can see on the website that Jessica Parker put together on the Yiddish Book Center site. Jessica Kirzane notes that what unites these stories, despite their huge range of settings is their "intimate portrayal of the emotional and psychological experience of knowing that human beings are capable of horrifying acts of violence, and trying to live with that knowledge."

So, you have the disjointed narrative, you have the women in many different places, and this leads me to my third and last point about Lempel's work, something that Yermiyahu touched on: the seeming contradiction that Lempel was an intensely private person, her neighbors didn't know that she was a writer, her children couldn't read her work, probably just as well. She was a bit of a recluse, but at the same time, she fiercely needed to communicate, to write, to speak, to speak to us.

And Jessica Kirzane, says further: "The stories seem to bear the privacy of intimate thought that the author is hesitant to share with the world, and a sense of an urgent mission to make the most private experiences known, so that writing and reading become acts of survival in the midst of the unspeakable, the inexpressible."

So, you have these two opposite impulses—the urge to keep things private, and the urge to share very intimate things with the world, because the very act of writing these stories, and the act of reading them, helps us to survive the most unthinkable things.

So, finally, Yermiyahu and I learned from Lempel's letters that she always dreamed of having an English-language readership. For the most part, that didn't happen during her lifetime. But now, we're so honored to help that unrealized dream come true.

So, do take a look at the resources that Jessica Parker compiled for you on the website, and now we look forward to hearing from you.

YERMIYAHU AHRON TAUB: So, I think I'm supposed to step in and screen some questions? But I actually don't see any questions. Has anyone sent in questions yet? If you haven't, please do.

Ah, there's one, and it's from Jessica Parker. Yeah, this question is: Why did you choose "Oedipus in Brooklyn" as the title?

So as Ellen alluded to, and I think, yeah, as I also said, Sutzkever turned down "Oedipus in Brooklyn." He wouldn't publish it. But it was included in her collections. She was really proud of it. We felt that it was one of her most taboo-breaking, defiant, daring, artistically-accomplished stories, and for that reason—and, yeah, for that reason we chose to include it, kind of as a way of celebrating her courage, her daring as a writer, her insistence on bringing out her truth, and we felt that it was an important way to kind of celebrate those aspects of herself.

We also liked the play of invoking the classical Oedipus with the kind of intimacy and familiarity of Brooklyn, and that tension was kind of present throughout Blume's work, where she takes something strange and juxtaposes it with two people sitting down having coffee. She'll invoke the cosmos and nature and, you know, the eons and eons of time, and still talk about getting the laundry done. So, it gives her work a kind of freshness, a kind of power. And, somehow, that title seemed catchy. It's also fairly easy to remember, I think. But, Ellen, you might want to add something to that.

ELLEN CASSEDY: Yes, I agree with everything you said, and, also, it kind of gets your attention, I have to say.

I'd like to take up the next question, which is, somebody asked: "There's a lot of autobiographical material in these stories, and the question is: To what extent did Lempel use her own life as a source in her fiction?" And I think that's a really excellent question, and one that was posed by many of her editors and readers over the years.

We have looked through her correspondence, and we find editors saying: "So, you lived through the Holocaust. So, where were you?" And so on. And, in fact, she didn't, and so there's a lot of invention in these stories, and however, I think she gets so close to the experience of hiding in a forest, or the experience of having lost a son and yearning for that little boy, that I think it's easy to think: "Well, she must have lived through those experiences." But, in fact, what she did live through was the experience of being a Survivor, and somebody who was off to the side of the most terrible cataclysm of the 20th century, and did not see it face-to-face, did not witness it, but lived with the burden of that for the rest of her life, and I think she carries that burden.

I think you see traces of that all through her work, and so it's sort of like she invents an idiosyncratic language through which she filters the scenes and characters in her stories, and the emotion is very, very much her, but the actual experiences themselves, not all of them actually were experienced by her.

She didn't get divorced. She, you know, did not hide in the forest. She never -- she did not go to Israel at the time when, as a young person when her friend was -- committed suicide -- those things were invented. She was not the mistress of a Nazi officer in Paris.

But, she was somebody who was very accustomed to hiding, and I think you see that theme of hiding over and over in her work, so that...you...she's not clear about what's really her and what isn't. She's really in there but not the exact experiences.

YERMIYAHU AHRON TAUB: Yeah, just to play off on that, I thought some of the invented brother felt very autobiographical about her brother Yisroel and the authorities coming in and tearing up the house, looking for him, for his militant activity. Some of that felt, given what we know about Yisroel, some of that felt a little more autobiographical. Also, the death of my aunt, about her aunt Rokhl, again we're conjecturing. I mean, obviously it's fictionalized but her aunt

did come to stay and it was in Brooklyn, so some of that also felt a little more autobiographical.

I think some of the invocations of the shtetl were...yeah, again, we're guessing. Possibly "Cousin Claude" was based on, Ellen, help me out, who was the relative, the cousin?

ELLEN CASSEDY: Well, the family adopted an orphan who was a nephew of Blume's husband who was left surviving after the war and he came over, I'm sure in a ship like that described in the story "Cousin Claude," and he joined the family. I think it's so interesting that she chose to tell that story from the point of view of one of the kids in the family, not herself, not the mother. And she really gets down into some very painful and intimate feelings that the arrival of this cousin must have evoked in the other children in the family.

YERMIYAHU AHRON TAUB: Yeah.

The next question is: Is there any information about her marriage to Lemel? Was it a happy union?

Hmmm, I think so? Well, they didn't get divorced. Yeah, I mean, we don't know that much about the marriage. My sense is that he did support her. He did allow her to write, "allow."

I don't know how much of it he actually read or understood or was engaged with. I don't know if he was engaged with her as an artist. I do believe he helped her finance the publication of some of the volumes, possibly both. And I think they presented like a happy couple, but, Ellen, you might want to add to that.

ELLEN CASSEDY: Well, I would direct your attention to the stories "My Friend Ben" and "A Snowstorm in Summerland," which talk a little about...and also "Cousin Claude." There's little hints of a husband there. Rather grumpy thoughts, I would say. And the...I think "Snowstorm in Summerland" is a wonderful little gem that talks about this really grumpy, argumentative couple driving to Florida for the winter, and they get caught in a snowstorm, and the husband is kind of just scolding the wife, you know, "You're such a daydreamer. You're always thinking about poetry. Why don't you pay attention to the road?" and so on. And my guess is that those comments were things she had probably heard.

We also...I would like to urge you to read, or look at, a transcript of a video of Lempel. She's sitting in her backyard, speaking in Yiddish to an interviewer, Itzik Gottesman, and there's an English translation, as well. And she says that she can't write a word when her husband is in the house. She has to have complete solitude, and when he's around, she just feels constricted, and she just...she has to wait for him to leave before she can begin expressing herself. So, I think it was probably a complicated relationship, would be my guess.

I would like to bring up somebody's question here. "Her children couldn't read her work, maybe that was a good thing. Were they curious about their mother's writing? And do you think her writing is cathartic and supposed to be painful for the reader?"

I think -- I don't know whether the children were curious, and the reason I said "a good thing," is, I don't know, how would you feel if your mother, if you were a son and your mother had written a story called "Oedipus in Brooklyn" when you were in your 30s? Yeah, it's very loaded, sensitive material that I think is full of pain, and I think it was definitely cathartic for her to write, not just to vent, but to shape this material into something that was really artistic and that communicated so much about who she was, how she felt, what she had been through, to her readers, so I think that was maybe something that she didn't want to share with her children.

We've spent a lot of time thinking about why she wrote in Yiddish, even though she spoke English, and she also could speak and write French. She continued writing in Yiddish and was one of the very few writers to continue doing that all the way up through the 1990s and that was a choice that connected her to her past, to her brother, to those she had lost, and also, I think was something that possibly gave her a kind of shield from the people around her, the people she knew, and gave her that sense of privacy and aloneness that she needed to express herself.

YERMIYAHU AHRON TAUB: This next one says -- this is from Michael? Yeah. "I've only read a small portion of the stories. I read a few I did not care for and especially did not like 'Oedipus,' sorry. Does anyone recommend some of the other stories to read?"

Well... [Laughter]

I mean, these are stories that we all, you know, we all loved and we culled them down from two volumes. There were a whole lot more, so we had a lot of back and forth about the merits of each. And we recognized that some were more daring, some were more demanding literarily on the reader.

I mean, I think, as a whole, I really hope that her stories enter, you know, this thing called the Jewish canon because I really do feel like they were that worthy. I felt like "The Death of My Aunt" was really extraordinary, the kind of emotional intensity of it, the kind of haunting imagery. I feel like "Even the Heavens Tell Lies" was amazing. "Pastorale" was really powerful. So, yeah, I mean, I think you kind of have to go through all of them.

Some of them might speak to you more than others, but we sort of feel strongly about all these. One person wrote to us about she liked "A Yiddish Poet in Paris" the most. That felt to me like the most conventional, in some ways, like, maybe harkening back to Zola or 19th-century realist tradition, and maybe that would be a good one for you to check out.

Ellen?

ELLEN CASSEDY: Yeah, it's hard to find a story that is not twisted and painful, so I think that she interweaves beauty into a sense of menace and danger and dread and you can't pull them apart, so this is strong stuff and it's not for everybody, so I can understand why one would be

turned off by “Oedipus in Brooklyn” or any of the stories, really. But I found them very mesmerizing.

I'd like to move on to another question, which is that somebody went looking for her novel, which is called *Between Two Worlds*. It was translated into English in 1954, I believe, and in there, you can see two of the Paris stories in an early form, as our reader points out.

And the reader, the participant here in the Book Club, was struck by how her short stories are very unlike this work, this novel, and says that she thought the novel wasn't as good, and did we agree, and why was that?

And I do agree. I think that the novel is kind of cartoonish, whereas you cannot say that about her stories, and the novel was written before what I might call her breakdown, after she found out about -- really absorbed the reality of the Holocaust, and Yermiyahu talked about how she spent several years really in a bleak depression and, coming out of that, she was urged by her friends: Take a new tack, turn over a new leaf. Don't try to write an exciting, dramatic novel. Write from the heart. Write about how you're feeling now.

And so, then what came out was these very jagged, these very crazy, one reader here is talking about PTSD. I think that I would agree with that. And so, we're seeing this very raw material come out, and I think it's more arresting literature than the novel, so I would agree with you there.

So, somebody says that she could sympathize with both of the twin sisters in that story, and that she could sympathize with both of their opposite attitudes, and so could the author, and that came through, that they were sort of two sides to the same coin, and I agree with that. I think that's a very good observation, that one sister was filled with rage, and a desire for vengeance after the Holocaust, and the other was a quiet soul who lived a quiet life and was kind of devoting herself to keeping body and soul together in a sort of very modest way, and they were twins. They were two sides of the same coin, I would agree with that.

Ahron, did you want to --

YERMIYAHU AHRON TAUB: This next question is: “As translators, how did you set the tone for the work? Did you emphasize putting forth the true Yiddish word meanings and how Lempel sounds in Yiddish? Or did you allow yourselves more freedom by expressing meaning over writing style?”

So that's a really interesting question, and I think it kind of gets at the heart of our creative process, our translation process, which had challenges, but I think ultimately in the end it was really fruitful.

I think I was kind of a little more wanting to stick closer to the text, but Ellen, you correct me if you see this differently. And Ellen was like: “Well, it has to work in English.” So, we had a lot of

back and forth around that. And, I think in the end, we came up with something that both honored the original Yiddish, but also made sure that it worked in English.

We tried to keep the kind of lyrical flow of her language. We didn't try to mess too much with her sentence structure. We just tried to make sure that it worked in English.

There was always the question of, you know, what to transliterate versus what to translate. "Shabbos," "Sabbath." In general, we tried to make it as accessible to the reader as possible. But, yeah, in some cases, like for example, in dialogue, where "Shabbos" appeared, I think we used "Shabbos" in dialogue but not in the actual text. There wasn't that much dialogue in the stories. There's some, but -- so, yeah, that's what I have to say about that. Over to you, Ellen.

ELLEN CASSEDY: Yeah, and somebody's asked us to give an example. Let me think. I know that we spent hours sitting at my dining room table fussing over every single word and we came at this from very different standpoints. I grew up in a household where there was a stack of dictionaries in the dining room, and we rarely got through a meal without consulting at least one of them, and sort of the nooks and crannies of English were really, really valued in my family of origin. My mother was a writer, and we just -- we could go off forever talking about usage and spelling and ungrammatical things that our teacher had said that day and so on.

Whereas Yermiyahu had grown up in a, you know, steeped in Jewish languages, and so this made for a very vibrant connection between us, and, you know, I think something that the Yiddish Book Center Translation Program is very, very good at is sort of yanking you away from the original language and really pounding into your head that your loyalty must be to your English-language readers. That's your target language, is really where you belong, and so, for example, the workshop leaders in the program often don't know Yiddish. They're expert translators in another language, and so if you feel like saying, "Oh, yeah, I know what you're talking about, this Yiddish usage," no, that doesn't fly with these instructors, so it really forces you to really, really ask yourself, "Does this work for an English-language reader?"

I wish I could think of an example. But, for example, if you -- you have to tear yourself away from just translating word-by-word-by-word, and I feel that it's an actual triumph if you can express an idea where what was a verb has become a noun or an adjective, and if you really can kind of dance with the English language, that's what you want to be able to do, to feel that you're writing in English, but you're channeling this other writer.

YERMIYAHU AHRON TAUB: Yeah, and I actually find that it takes sometimes, like, three or four sittings to actually get the Yiddish out of your English translation, and yet still convey the Yiddish. Like, I'll go back and I'll see things like, you know, in the Yiddish, it will say "*gey ton epes*," "go do something." In English, do you need that "go"? Do you really need it?

In Yiddish, there will be "*zikh aleyh*," like "she herself," this emphazier "*zikh*." In English, do you need that "herself"? You know, there are all these things that are very common in Yiddish that in English you really don't need them. And in fact, they kind of feel like Yiddish signifiers. It

takes a really long time to get rid of those, like, to really make it into a flowing English. Sometimes I don't even see it. Like, yeah, like, I don't even see it and actually having a workshop leader who doesn't know Yiddish can be really helpful because they're bringing their critical outsider-ness to the text and they'll think of things, you know, like, I think we had the word in my recent workshop, the text had the word "*palats*," so I translated as "palace." And his name is Bill. Bill Johnson said, "Well, in English 'palace' is really for a king, for royalty." And so then we debated about whether to use "mansion" or "manor house" or all these other things.

What was the other thing? Oh, in some plays I translated recently someone really objected—I translated "*bobe*" as "granny," and people felt like a Jew would never use the word "granny." She really objected strongly. She felt like it should be "grandma" and I tried to remember, like why did I pick "granny" as opposed to "grandma"? And I think I was trying to convey some kind of archaism, like another era, not quite archaic but another era so all those decisions, literally, come into play every line, every text, every sentence, they're always being struggled over, negotiated. How much is too much?

What was another objection? "*Mincha*," someone said, which I translated as "afternoon service." Someone in that audience really objected to that. Like, they felt it was just too clunky to use afternoon service, and that I should have used "*Mincha*," and then comma, "afternoon service." Anyway, people have very strong opinions about these things.

ELLEN CASSEDY: These are the big questions. Yes, this is where it gets really fun.

What we did was we read through the whole -- both of her collections, and we made our selection of what we thought were the best ones, the ones we wanted to include, and then we fought that out, and then we fought out the question of who would take the first crack at each one. And once we did have a draft, then that draft would go to the other person, and then we would literally sit there and go through every single word, every single phrase, every line, and it was just fantastic to just get down in the dirt of the English language, pulling it over from Yiddish was wonderful.

So as far as footnotes go, footnotes are kind of frowned upon in literary work. Some writers use a glossary. I don't think we ended up doing that.

I tend to think -- and people sometimes say that Yiddish has a reputation for being untranslatable. I've heard one writer say that, in fact, that's really not true at all, and where that came from was that a lot of us grew up with people who had come over from the Old Country, and their English never really got that great, and so when you ask them, "Well, what does '*schlemiel*' mean?" Or "*bupkes*," or some other word, they couldn't really put it into words, they couldn't really give you the full meaning of that word in English but it's not because nobody could have but they couldn't because their English wasn't good enough and so from that we got this idea that Yiddish is just so expressive and has so many feelings and things, it just could not be put into words.

Well, as translators, I think we really don't believe that and we believe that you can put those concepts into English words and that's the challenge, and that's what's so great about it.

YERMIYAHU AHRON TAUB: Someone says, I think it might have been Bialik, "Reading translation is like kissing the bride through the veil." And, we say to that, well, but then think about the veil, think about the lace of the veil. Think about the quality of the veil. I mean, you can have a great veil, so, yes, it's not the original, but it can be amazing in its own way. And, you're shining a spotlight on an author. You're bringing an author out to a wider audience. You're creating a tension around an author who otherwise would not have had that. So, yes, it's not the original, but what an amazing act the art of translation is.

ELLEN CASSEDY: And I think, Yermiyahu, you yourself once said to me that it's all translation, that writing itself is translation. It's taking your own experiences, your own whatever yourself and putting it down on paper, or whatever we use these days, screen, and that that in itself is an act of translation and then to get that work over into the mind of a reader or many different readers is also kind of crossing. So, it's not all that different from literature, in general.

Let me see. Somebody brought up the point that the work left her breathless. Seemed like such unique work of creative genius, incredible, required days to digest emotionally.

A number of people have said that: Don't read these stories all at once, don't try to. Read one, and let it sink in, and then go back when you're ready for more, and that this participant also said that she just wanted to wait a few days for the next story to lengthen the richness of the experience. She says that they were almost like prose poetry, and is her poetry style similar and have you translated any of her poetry?

Prose poetry, I definitely agree with that. I think that she really makes every word count, and that's what poets do. And she also, I think she has a -- she has sort of a private vocabulary of certain images that come back again and again, like glittering gems and facets of jewels with light coming through them, and snakes in the grass and so on, these things come in and out again and again.

Her poetry, we looked at some of it, and it's not the same. I don't know if you would feel the same, Yermiyahu, but as far as I was concerned, it's not particularly sensuous, and it's not elaborated the way her prose is. It doesn't feel like rich and layered as much as more spare, I would say. Would you agree with that?

YERMIYAHU AHRON TAUB: I would agree with that, yes, absolutely. I just want to go back to the footnotes question. I feel like in this text, footnotes weren't really that necessary. But in the work I'm doing now, as a fellow at the Yiddish Book Center, there's a whole lot of things that could -- that need something. Like, maybe it's not a footnote, maybe it's a glossary, as Ellen said, but you're looking at, you know, tons of Jewish religious terms, Jewish religious texts, Jewish religious customs, and then also Polish history.

So, who was the Premier of Poland and who was the Governor and who was the leader of the army? And what region did Jews flee to? And why was this important? There's just a lot. There's a lot of history, culture, religion, and so I'm going to need to strategize. My mentor in the program says she's not a big fan of footnotes for translation, but if you've got glossary and the reader needs to constantly go to the back of the book, is that kind of like too arduous a reading experience?

So, these are all things that come into play. As a translator, yes, you could say well, people could just Google it, but you really want to keep people in the text. You want to keep them immersed in this world that you and the author have been creating together, and if somebody has to go look something up in Wikipedia or Google, the spell can be broken.

So, I think the question of footnote is tricky, and I think it depends on the text, and what the text needs. Actually, now that I recall, one of the readers of this said, you know, his students wouldn't know who Maria Callas was. They just don't -- students today just don't have that knowledge. To me, Maria Callas seems like general knowledge, like you wouldn't have to. So those are all things that come into play.

ELLEN CASSEDY: Yeah, I mean, I think that always happens, as "*di goldene keyt*," "the golden chain" stretches on, passed from generation to generation and there always things that get left behind and new things that are revised.

Let me talk about that question a little bit in the next thing, the work I worked on at the Translation Program which is the work of Yenta Mash, and she was a writer who was born a little later than Lempel, not too far away, like, maybe 20 miles away in a place that's now in the Ukraine, and she died in 2013 in Israel.

So, her -- she was born there. She was then exiled to Siberia. She then came back to what became Soviet Moldavia, now Moldova, and she then immigrated to Israel in the 1970s, so it's a huge, huge range of places that she lived in over the course of almost a century.

So, in that, there's a lot of friction of different cultures. She's always arriving at a new place or leaving that place and going to another place and dealing with a new language and assimilating, and trying to cope with a whole new place, and new laws and new this and new that, new regimes. And so, it's, it's -- she's a very different writer from Blume Lempel, and her writing is much more sort of straightforward, thank God, and traditional, while she's jerking you around from this place to that place.

But -- so one of the questions was: There's a lot of history there that most people aren't going to know, so one thing I decided to do was to move the introduction, which has a lot of this history and explains where she's coming from, to the end of the book. So instead of having to plow through that at the beginning, the reader is just immersed immediately in this very evocative story about a young woman coming back from Siberia and going back to her town,

which has been destroyed during World War II, and I just felt that getting involved in the actual writing, and what was compelling about the literature, was really what was most important.

And the reader isn't going to understand everything, but I just felt like, okay, read it, and then you can find out the answers to some of these questions. You're always welcome to flip to the back of the book, if you want, but I really devoted myself to keeping a reader on the page and in that place, and I think one of the things that her characters are always going through was not understanding: What was this person saying? And what's happening? What am I supposed to do next?

And so, I thought: It's okay for readers to be a little, at sea a little bit. That actually adds to the experience a little, so I didn't use footnotes and I used some foreign words in there, words that were foreign to the characters, and sometimes just left them that way. And I think that gives a flavor of what the characters were going through.

YERMIYAHU AHRON TAUB: Well, one of the things we did was we left all the French as French, because the French appeared in Yiddish, in Yiddish letters. So, I mean, that's another important thing to remember, is that, you know, English was her third language. It's Yiddish, French, and then English. So -- well, arguably she had some Hebrew too from religious life, and that kind of leaving that kind of taste of otherness, and actually I think Leah Friedman wrote about this in her essay where the French becomes "the Other," it's kind of one of her narrative devices, and the dominant language actually given the language of the speaker becomes the Other, so it's kind of this subversion of the Yiddish speaker's relationship to the dominant language.

Someone mentioned if you publish a Kindle version, things like that can be hyperlinked.

Yeah, that is very true. And that is something to think about. Certainly electronic text, there's a lot of things that can happen.

I actually think footnotes are interesting to me, because it's a way of getting into the mind of the translator. It's a way of seeing what the translator thought was important for the reader. It's interesting to see how the translator structured the footnote, how the translator distilled the key points of a certain concept.

So, for example, the character in one of the memoirs, Rachmil Bryks, he meets a Bundist. So, do we assume that general readers know what a Bundist is? I feel like people in this audience, on this webinar do. Who knows in whose hands this book will fall? So, yeah, eventually he or she will find their way to what a Bundist means but you might, you know, want to explain that.

ELLEN CASSEDY: For a change of pace, someone asked about the story "Neighbors Over the Fence," and whether that's a happy story or an extremely lonely story, and what do we think?

I think there's a definite connection between the two neighbors that's made, which is very touching. Maybe they connect over their loneliness, maybe? That they share their experience

of loneliness, and that is a connection between the two of them, so you get both the loneliness and the connection at the same time. There's definitely a lot of loneliness in there, but I think even the way it ends, you know, "Go along, Ms. Zagretti. We'll talk again another time." They're going to talk again.

YERMIYAHU AHRON TAUB: That was actually one of the most hopeful first stories, I thought. Are we stopping? Are we going over?

ELLEN CASSEDY: Where's Jessica?

JESSICA PARKER: I'm here. Sorry. Hi. I would say we should wrap up by 9:15, so maybe 10 more minutes of questions, and then I'll do a quick wrap-up for the last 5.

ELLEN CASSEDY: Okay. Somebody talks about how just a little footnote about what the word Bundist means is not enough, but I think that's why you read that book, to find out more about a Bundist and if it's not really central to the theme of the book, well, then, find that out another way, would be my view.

YERMIYAHU AHRON TAUB: Okay. Yeah, it's not central. It's not unimportant, but I wouldn't say it's central. He happens to meet him on the road as he's fleeing the approaching Germans. So...

ELLEN CASSEDY: So, somebody has asked, has said that French gets retained in the text in English-language text but not Yiddish so French is a more powerful language than Yiddish and a more privileged language and so is there a case to be made that keeping more of the Yiddish flavor and some of the Yiddish words in the text is a good idea? And also, to indicate the language mixing that's typical among Yiddish speakers? Because Yiddish speakers always knew other languages, too. They were always living among people who were speaking different languages so it was always one language among many. So, to honor both that mixing and honor Yiddish itself, a case can be made that you should keep some of that favor.

I feel that -- I think we thought of Blume Lempel as kind of a world writer, or a member of a sophisticated literary class, or group, more than some writers whose intent is really to give you that flavor. Like, Sholem Aleichem would be a great example of somebody who just wants to pile it on and tell you exactly what it felt like in that shtetl, and, of course, had a more universal view and perspective, as well, but just giving you that delicious sense of the shtetl was really what he was about.

And, I don't think that was true about Lempel. It's true in a few stories. I particularly love the story "Waiting for the Rag Man," where the little girl, waiting for her mother for most of the story, and pressing her nose up against the window pane waiting for her mother to come home and dreaming and looking out into the darkness and so on, and that really gives you a sense of shtetl life, but many, many of the stories that's not what they're about. They're about the big city, they're about Paris, they're about New York, Yosemite Park, or Brooklyn, and they're not intended to carry you into that small town.

So, I think it depends. I think a case can definitely be made about some literature and I didn't feel it so much about this literature.

YERMIYAHU AHRON TAUB: Yeah, I would agree with that. I would always want to think about: Is there a way of conveying the flavor, the atmosphere that is in English? Is there a way to convey those concepts, but in English, without having to resort -- To me, throw a sprinkling in for color seems like a very obvious crutch. Again, I wouldn't say never, but I would say sparingly. You really want this to work in English. You want this to work as an English-language text. You want to transport the reader and convey Yiddishness without necessarily, you know, bludgeoning you with, like, fun Yiddish terms.

Yeah, I just -- it would not be my first choice. I think in some cases it's needed, and some cases it could be enriching, but I think -- I mean, maybe if it was, yes, specifically talking about the immigrant experience and the struggle of the immigrant to master languages, or moving between two languages, where it's really honing in on that struggle, then it might be useful and I would also look to the author as a guide. Like in Yiddish writing you'll often see English words in Yiddish letters. The author is trying to tell you something.

The book I'm translating now, there's a ton of Polish in Yiddish letters, like in Hebrew letters, so that's a message. What is the author trying to convey there? In those cases, I would listen. I would try to follow the author, take the lead of the author.

ELLEN CASSEDY: So maybe we could end with just taking up maybe one story and some of the questions that have come up about that.

The story about her invented brother, "The Imagined Brother," is one that I think to me seemed the most like what somebody said about PTSD, where the story just -- it's so abrupt. First, you're going along pretty standardly, and people are knocking at the door. The brother is in hiding. He's escaping. And then there's this, just, break at the end where it just spirals off into a kind of a fairytale about his girlfriend and her torture at the hands of some bandits and so on, and it's just jangling and kind of crazy, kind of insane.

And I guess I felt that the pain of her yearning for her brother, who she had idolized, and her having lost him was expressed in this very dark thing where it starts out sort of in the mindset of a little girl and then it progresses on into real horror.

YERMIYAHU AHRON TAUB: Yeah, I don't think -- I mean, again, we're just hypothesizing but I don't think she ever fully recovered from that loss, especially so close to liberation. I think that was one of the central traumas. I mean, she had so many. Her father, her mother dying young, she was really -- she really had to rebuild herself from the ashes, so many ashes, like, personal ashes, the ashes of her people, and just kind of insist on finding her way into art as a way out of trauma, as a way out of such cataclysmic loss.

And she insisted on her way. She insisted on sitting by that window and the typewriter when her husband left the house, and finding her way into -- I don't know if "healing" is the right word, but a kind of wholeness, a kind of fullness, insisting on her place, despite her reclusiveness in Yiddish literature, in getting her word out. She was fiercely committed to getting her writing out. As much as she hated self-promotion, we found in her papers lists of all the people she sent her books to.

Someone asked if she got any negative -- if there was some negative feedback. She didn't save too much of it. She got a lot of really high-powered fan mail, I mean Malka Heifetz Tussman. She corresponded with Chava Rosenfarb for many years, they became close friends. We've already talked about Yonia Fain, Chaim Grade. There were others. She worked with some really important editors on getting her books out. Binem Heller, the great poet, Yakov Shargel, so, she really forged connections and people saw her. I met Alexander Spiegelblatt before he died in Israel and talked to him about this project and he just could not stop singing her praises. He remembered her strongly, he remembered getting her submissions and she was, she really was adored. She really was celebrated in the Yiddish world and so it's just -- yeah, it's just so exciting to bring this out to others.

ELLEN CASSEDY: Amen. Thank you for these wonderful questions. Very stimulating to us, and feel free to be in touch with both of us. Our websites are -- you know, you can reach us there, and do look at the resource sheet that Jessica put together, because it's just chock-full of wonderful, wonderful things.

JESSICA PARKER: Thank you both so much. This has been an incredible asset to our Book Club this year.

You know, to be honest, when we selected it, we weren't sure what people would make of it, and we're just so thrilled at the level of engagement around it and how many people have genuinely loved it and also genuinely disliked it, but really gave it a try and learned something from it in the process, and to hear from the inside about the process of translation is remarkably valuable, and from my point of view, I just want to share that I call my grandmother "Granny," so it is something that some Jews do.

ELLEN CASSEDY: Do you have an English background?

JESSICA PARKER: South African, so maybe --

ELLEN CASSEDY: British, British Empire.

JESSICA PARKER: Exactly, British Empire. I'm Canadian, so my Granny is "Granny." And I like footnotes, so now you have my opinion.

But I want to thank Ellen Cassidy and Yermiyahu Ahron Taub for sharing so much of their time and expertise, including sharing the interview excerpt of Blume Lempel with Itzik Gottesman.

They were the ones who got that to me, provided me with English transcripts, sorry, a Yiddish transcript and an English translation. I worked with an additional translator. I tried to put all the pieces together. I sent it back to Ellen for more feedback, so there was crowdsourcing translation even on that interview excerpt, and I didn't even know that that existed. Well, I read that note actually in the notes to the book so I was distantly aware of it but thank you for making that accessible.

Thank you all for being here. To Heidi for the expert live-captioning. As mentioned, the recording of the video conference this evening, including the live-captioning, will be posted online shortly, hopefully tonight. And I will send out the link as soon as I've done so.

Our next selection mailed out earlier this week. I know some of you have already received it, you should receive your copy by July 20th, at the latest. We try to make sure we have the maximum amount of time in case the mail system fails us. In this case the mail system seems to be moving on at an unbelievable pace.

And, we're going to start reading together on Monday, July 23rd. Details about the video conference for that book are to come. And have a good evening, or morning, or daytime, or whatever it is where you are. And thank you again for joining us. See you soon.

YERMIYAHU AHRON TAUB: Thank you!

ELLEN CASSEDY: Thank you!

JESSICA PARKER: Thank you both.

YERMIYAHU AHRON TAUB: Bye.

ELLEN CASSEDY: Bye!

[End of video conference]

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