

To Dive into the Self

The Svive of Blume Lempel

ELLEN CASSEDY *and*
YERMIYAHU AHRON TAUB

One dives into the self—
and behold—a svive.

Malka Heifetz Tussman
in a letter to Blume Lempel¹

The word *svive* means environment or atmosphere and connotes fellowship and connection, suggesting a place where one belongs, a home. Over the course of her life, Blume Lempel (1907–1999) experienced multiple dislocations and upheavals.² As her friend and colleague, the Yiddish poet Malka Heifetz Tussman (1893–1987), eloquently expresses, the home or *svive* that Lempel came to inhabit was a portable one of her own making. The unconventional personal milieu that she created for herself was grounded in a fierce sense of self and included a distinctive and multi-faceted role within the world of postwar Yiddish letters. Out of this self-made *svive* came a profoundly original oeuvre, distinct in its unusually bold and diverse set of subjects centered on women's experiences, its radically experimental narrative strategy, and its dazzlingly poetic prose style.

Born in Galicia, Lempel spent her early adulthood in Paris and fled to safety in New York just before the outbreak of World War II. Once settled in the United States, she was one of a very few writers who continued writing in Yiddish into the 1990s. Although the small and shrinking Yiddish literary world had its limitations and frustrations, in many ways it served her well. Her short stories, which are the focus of this essay, were published in Yiddish

periodicals on several continents. Many of them were collected in two volumes: *A rege fun emes* [A Moment of Truth], published by I.L. Peretz Publishing House (Tel Aviv) in 1981; and *Balade fun a kholem* [Ballad of a Dream], published by Israel Book Publishing House (Tel Aviv) in 1986. She received numerous prizes, and despite the shattering of Yiddish culture during her lifetime, she maintained long-lasting and mutually sustaining literary friendships with other Yiddish writers around the world.

Women's lives and women's points of view are central to the great majority of Lempel's short stories. Her work not only plumbs her own life, which spans a wide range of places, eras, and cultures, but it also imagines a remarkably wide range of characters and occurrences far outside her own experience. Although the subject of the Holocaust is deeply embedded in her work, she does not confine herself to this theme. Some stories explore the consciousness of characters with seemingly ordinary lives. Others describe characters living on society's margins, including troubled refugees and survivors. A number of stories deal with subjects that many other writers of her time considered taboo, such as abortion, incest, and rape. Lempel's fiction not only opens a window into past eras of twentieth-century Jewish life, especially women's lives, but also provides acute and enduring insights into the human condition.

Lempel's work is characterized by lyrical powers of empathy, sharp and often satirical observations, and an unorthodox approach to narrative that she perfected in defiance of literary convention. Mirroring the uprooted situations of her protagonists, many of Lempel's stories lack orderly plot progression, transitions, conventional pacing, and clearly delineated endings. Full of restless flashbacks and unsettling imagery, they roam from place to place and from era to era, moving between present and past, Old World and New, and dream and reality. The fractured, disrupted, and unresolved narratives convey with stark clarity the enduring effects of the forces of historical upheaval on the individual.

From Galicia to New York

Lempel experienced those forces first-hand. Born Blume Leye Pfeffer during the first decade of the twentieth century, she was raised in what she described as "a white-washed room by the banks of a river that had no name."³ Her birthplace was Khorostkiv, known as Chorostków in Polish and Khorostkiv in Yiddish, in Galicia; it was a region of shifting nationality. The town belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire before World War I, to Poland between the two wars, and to Soviet Ukraine after World War II.

Blume's father, Abramshe, was a butcher, "a simple person" with a black beard—so strong, she recalled, that "he could carry a calf on his shoulders from the slaughterhouse to the butcher shop," a distance of nearly a mile. Her mother, Pesye, was blond and blue-eyed, with translucent pale skin. She read novels, subscribed to a newspaper from the nearby city of Lviv, and was considered cultured by the townspeople.⁴ Although Blume's older brother, Yisroel (1899–1944),⁵ received a formal education, her own schooling was sporadic. For a few years she attended a religious school for girls and a Hebrew folk school, and at times a tutor came to the house, but as she later recalled in an interview with the Yiddish scholar and journalist Itzik Gottesman, "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."⁶

"In Poland I didn't write at all," she remembered. "I only dreamed of writing."⁷ As she dreamed, she stored up observations that would later appear in her work. Her childhood self remained accessible to her all her life as "the girl who was, the girl whose tides ebb and flow on my sandy shores to this day."⁸ Characters based on girlhood memories appear in vivid relief. Aunt Rokhl sits at her machine "sewing bridal garments for other women's weddings. She sews and sews, until white begins to show in her jet-black braids."⁹ Zosye, "the bookkeeper's pampered daughter, is riding her bicycle, her windblown hair as blond as the furniture in her father's parlor."¹⁰ A blind beggar sits in the market square "on a low stool with her petticoat touching the ground, a brass cross dangling on her bosom, and a string of beads in her hand."¹¹ Here is "Reyzye Paltiels with her gold tooth, the tooth through which she filtered her rippling octaves. Reyzye was the only girl in town who could sing 'Aida' with all the frills and trills, like a real diva."¹² And here is Grandma, "a little woman of few words. She scurried about the house as quiet as a hen, even pecking like a chicken at her meager crusts of bread, which she hid in the pocket of her velvet underskirt."¹³

For a time, the world of Blume's childhood seemed safe and secure. As the first-person narrator in "Even the Heavens Tell Lies" puts it:

Enclosed within my father's words and my mother's tears, the world came to me as a completed picture, and I accepted its preordained colors and nuances as part of the natural order. Just as the sun rose every morning behind our barn and set every evening behind the tree that my father pointed out with his finger, so I stayed within the picture frame, walking in the light, avoiding the shadows, never straying beyond the borders. The house where I was born and grew up was my personal fortress.... When my father shut the gate every evening, I was certain that nothing bad would befall me.¹⁴

When Blume was twelve years old, however, the comforting sense of order began to crumble. Her mother died of a heart ailment, and her father quickly remarried. Blume was pressed into service as a housekeeper and nursemaid for the new couple and their young child. Her brother Yisroel, eight years her senior, who had become involved in militant communist activity,¹⁵ was caught and imprisoned, and then escaped and went into hiding. Lempel remembered the police arriving at the house in the middle of the night to search for him, ordering everyone out of bed and stabbing into the mattresses while cursing the “filthy Jews.”¹⁶

Yisroel fled to France, and in 1929, at twenty-two years old, Blume, too, left Khorostkiv, intending to become a pioneer in Palestine. On the way, she stopped off in Paris to visit her brother, who had settled in the Jewish immigrant neighborhood of Belleville. Captivated by the city, Blume abandoned her pioneer plans. She attended night school and read books in French and Yiddish. Here, against all odds, her dream of becoming a writer began to take shape. Her brother urged her to abandon her literary ambitions—only an educated person could write, he maintained. And her living situation made writing difficult. As she recalled:

We all lived in one room—my brother, his wife, their two children and I. My bed was shoved under their bed. The children slept together in another bed. A table, a few chairs—it was horrible. Not a place where you wanted to write or where you could write. There was nowhere to put down a piece of paper.¹⁷

Nonetheless, she did write, mostly love poems and short stories, in Yiddish, and she began to show her work to others. On one occasion, a Yiddish journalist

invited me to his home so that I could read him my stories—he couldn’t decipher my handwriting. After I read a page or two, he proposed to me. He was on his way to Argentina, and if I agreed to marry him, he said, we could help each other. This incident set back my belief in a writing career.¹⁸

To make a living, she first found employment sewing handbags and then took a job in the fur industry, where she met Lemel (Leon) Lempel (1911–1986). The couple married and two children, Paul (1935–) and Yolande (1937–), were born. The Paris years were exceptionally happy ones for Lempel. Once again she took mental notes that later found a place in her fiction. “When one is young in Paris,” she wrote years later in her story “The Victim,”

the city seethes and storms every month of the year. Storms rage on the street, in the house, on the boulevards and in the alleys, and especially in Montmartre—storms of artists, athletes, and professional idlers, revolutionaries, fascists, and partisans for every imaginable cause.¹⁹

In 1939, as Hitler's power grew, Leon became convinced that the family needed to escape from Europe. He managed to secure immigration papers from the American consulate, and the Lempels sailed for New York. Before they left, Blume burned all of her writings.²⁰

New York Debut

Blume loved her adopted city and intended to return there.²¹ In the end, however, the Lempels settled permanently in New York, first in an apartment in Brooklyn and later, in 1950, in a house in Long Beach, on Long Island, not far from the sea. Here, once again Lempel began to write, and, for the first time, to publish. Her first published story, "Muter un tokhter" [Mother and Daughter], appeared in *Der tog*, a Yiddish daily newspaper, in 1943 under the pseudonym Rokhl Halperin, her aunt's name.²² A few years later, Lempel forged a connection with the *Morgn fraybayt*, a Communist Yiddish daily. The editor, Paul (Peysekh) Novick (1891–1989), presented her with the Yiddish typewriter that she used for the rest of her life.²³ In 1947, the paper serialized *Tsvishn tsvey veltn* [Between Two Worlds], her sweeping, panoramic novel of Paris between the world wars. In this early work, many of Lempel's powers of characterization and description are on display, along with her interest in taboo themes. Amid a vast cast of characters and multiple plot lines, a romance between a Jewish woman and a Nazi takes center stage. Flashbacks into the *shtetl* past punctuate an evocation of the increasingly anti-Semitic terrain of the 1930s, along with finely tuned observations of Parisian high society and compassionate portraits of the marginal and downtrodden. Some of this material Lempel later reworked in short stories. In 1954, the Philosophical Library, a small New York press, published the novel in English translation as *Storm Over Paris*, under the name Blanche Lempel.

After this promising literary debut, however, Lempel's writing career went dormant. Her responsibilities increased at home when her aunt Rokhl moved in with the family, a third child, Steven (1945¹), was born, and Leon's young nephew, Michael Klahr (1937–1998), who had been orphaned during the Holocaust, joined the family in 1946. As before, although she did not write during this period, Lempel gathered impressions for later use. In "The Death of My Aunt," she draws upon Rokhl's life story, illuminating her psyche from one angle after another in a typically disjointed narrative that jumps from modern-day New York City to prewar Poland, from bedtime story to passionate romance, from old age confusion to girlhood dreams. Although the narrator's failure to reach the old woman's bedside in time to ease her passing

causes her great anguish, Lempel grants her aunt a kind of immortality by bringing her to life on the page. The story ends on a transcendent note:

I freed the imprisoned soul, which then rose, fluttering softly, and wafted away to the exalted place for which it was destined, leaving behind the body as a gift for Mother Earth.²⁴

“Cousin Claude” tells the story of the adopted orphan nephew from the point of view of the family’s young daughter, who watches from the pier as at the end of the gangplank, a little boy appeared with a black beret pulled over his ears. He wore short pants and no socks. Instead of a shirt, a torn sweater covered his narrow shoulders, from which a brown backpack hung open and empty.²⁵

Claude’s adjustment to his new country, with its new language, a new family, and a new school proves difficult. He and the narrator grow increasingly awkward with each other as they reach adolescence. After leaving home, he becomes an accomplished artist. Years later, the narrator is moved to learn that just as his arrival is forever sealed into her consciousness, so, too, he has never forgotten his first glimpse of her from the deck of the ship. The bond between the two is fragile but unbroken:

Her two thin braids tied with red ribbons and her two frightened eyes took up more than half of her face. She was looking at a ship in the port, and her ribbons were reaching out toward it. They came close, very close, but they never quite touched the ship.²⁶

Even more than her family responsibilities, however, it was the devastating news from across the Atlantic that brought Lempel’s literary output to a standstill. Back in Khorostkiv, she learned that her father’s wife and their young son had been seized and killed by the Nazis, after which her father had set fire to the family home and hanged himself. On the day before liberation, her beloved brother Yisroel, who had joined the French Resistance, was arrested and shot in Lyon, leaving a wife and two sons.²⁷ Describing her state of mind during this period, Lempel later said, “When our great Holocaust with its vast cruelty was revealed ... I was catapulted into a deep despair. The past was a graveyard; the future without meaning.”²⁸ Increasingly despondent, she again began to burn her work. “I needed to write,” she recalled, “but I couldn’t. I didn’t have time to write. It was a strain to write. And for whom should I write? Tomorrow another Hitler would come, or another Stalin, and burn everything, lay everything to waste.”²⁹

Finally she stopped writing altogether. “I sat paralyzed within a self-imposed prison,” she said later. “The years went by, many desolate, fruitless years.”³⁰

Rebirth from the Ashes

Then came a turning point. A friend who wrote Yiddish fiction, Reyzl Glass Fenster (1909–?), suggested that she dedicate herself to writing about the cataclysmic destruction that was consuming her. The unexpected proposal “opened a psychological door,” Lempel said later:

Before my eyes stood my annihilated people, encircled by flames, without an exit. I accompanied them in the sealed train cars, trudged with them on the death marches. Their ashes were reborn before me. I saw them in their humiliation, in their dejection, and I felt I must speak for those who could no longer speak, feel for those who could no longer feel, immerse myself in their un-lived lives, their sorrows, their joys, their struggle and their death.³¹

Lempel had found her calling. Just as she spoke of the dead rising up from the ashes within her imagination, so her own work—burned more than once by her own hand—experienced a rebirth. In the wake of catastrophe, she had come to understand, “we, the survivors, must write the reality, paint it, immortalize it in stone, engrave it in people’s minds—so that such a disaster will never again be possible.”³²

Having left Europe on the eve of World War II, Lempel had not personally experienced the terror of the roundups, mass executions, and concentration camps. Accordingly, while her work was to provide glimpses of these horrors, they would not be her central subject. Alexander Spiegelblatt, a writer and editor associated with *Di goldene keyt* [The Golden Chain], the preeminent Yiddish literary journal published in Tel Aviv, wrote:

She does not attempt to record the horrors of the Holocaust years in the manner of those Jewish writers who witnessed those events firsthand. Blume Lempel needed to find other dimensions for her encounter with the Holocaust.... In her stories, the gruesome deeds of the murderers are almost always mentioned only incidentally. It is not about them that she wants to tell.³³

As Spiegelblatt understood, Lempel’s subject was not primarily the annihilation but its aftermath, not the annihilated themselves but “the survivors, the broken people who attempt after the war to establish a new link to life, and who through it all remain broken.”³⁴ Lempel shared in the bereavement, loss, and profound trauma that afflicted these “broken people” and devoted herself to expressing the experience of displacement, flight, and adaptation, and the special burden of remembrance and retribution, grief and guilt, carried by the living.

Lempel started writing once again. As she embraced her new literary mission and undertook to reinvent herself as a writer, her creativity began to flow.

It was a while before she began to seek publication, however. "My writing seemed to me a personal matter," she said later, "a mute exchange of feelings, from them to me and from me to them, the slaughtered, the burned, those suffocated in mass graves, the sacred martyrs of human evil." It was another friend from the world of Yiddish letters who persuaded her to share her new work. "One fine day I happened to run into the poet Chaim Plotkin [1910–1996]," she later recalled. "It was he who took me by the hand and led me back onto the literary path."³⁵ In the late 1960s, her poems in English and Yiddish began appearing regularly in small English-language literary publications and in Yiddish journals. Over the next two-and-a-half decades, her short stories were published in Yiddish publications around the world, including *Di zikh*, *Naye tsaytung*, and *Yisroel shtime* in Tel Aviv, as well as the New York publications *Zayn*, *Tsukunft*, *Undzer eygn vort*, *Yidishe kultur*, *Forverts*, *Yidisher kemfer*, and *Algemayner dzhurnal*, and *Khezbhn* (Los Angeles), *Letste naves* (Australia), *Undzer veg* (Paris), and *Dorem afrike* (Johannesburg, South Africa).

"I like to start at the end..."

The short stories that constitute the core of Lempel's oeuvre are characterized by boldly unconventional narrative techniques, a daring range of subject matter, and a highly original style. Lempel's narratives do not follow traditional formulae; instead, they seem raw and fractured. Some resemble collages, whose carefully arranged fragments reverberate against one another. Many make use of modernist or surreal techniques such as jarring juxtapositions, dream symbolism, flashbacks, free association, and frequent crossings of the border between fantasy and reality. "I like to start at the end and work backward," Lempel said. "Or start in the middle. Or begin with some strange subject and then change the character entirely and start all over again."³⁶ Adding to the turmoil, she sometimes switches tenses or even changes from third-person to first-person narration in the middle of a passage.

Lempel's narrative strategy was ideally suited to the task she set for herself. The drama in her stories consists not in how the plot moves from point A to point B, but rather in how she forces the reader to experience jaggedness and disjunction. "The narrative element is not central in Blume Lempel's stories," Spiegelblatt wrote. "For her, what is essential is the pondering, the seeking, the getting to the bottom of things, the constant drive to attain 'the moment of truth.'"³⁷

Thus, the boundaries between the real and the unreal can be fragile and permeable. Vast cosmic landscapes rub up against domestic scenes. Deep

abysses, birds of prey, bags of bones, and acts of suicide keep company with cups of coffee at the kitchen table and cozy Sabbath meals. Multiple time periods co-exist on a single page. As Yonia Fain (1914–), an artist and Yiddish writer in New York, comments in a 1986 letter to Lempel:

Throughout the 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.³⁸

In the story “Yosemite Park,” for example, as the narrator steps off a tour bus in front of the awe-inspiring Bridal Veil waterfall with her camera and binoculars, she is overtaken by a memory from the Old World: “From underneath the ruins of time a bride stepped forth, a refined young woman with flaming red hair.” As the narrator explains, “Sometimes a present-day experience becomes entangled with a long-forgotten event that once affected me. When past and present meet, the flash of their collision lights up the vanished time in full color.” In the folkloric tale that unwinds, complete with its own bridal veil, the sound of a shofar resounding in the hills of the Old World mingles with the honking of the bus driver’s horn.³⁹

Abrupt, dizzying shifts from the everyday to the celestial characterize “My Friend Ben,” a story of a flirtation between two middle-aged protagonists. One morning, Ben drops in on the narrator and sits down at the piano and

sound merges with sound, spiraling into a storm of emotions. The music ferments and overflows into my bloodstream and I absorb it into my being.

Inside her solitary cell, the Persona forgets about her chains and rises on fantasy-wings. Clad in a tunic threaded with gold, she dances wantonly before an ethereal vision who swells, takes form, and becomes flesh and blood, his narrow hips swaying before her in velvet and silk. Limbs outstretched, he dances with menacing drama. The music froths and foams. Snorting bulls thunder into the arena.⁴⁰

A moment later, the two friends are seated at the kitchen table with coffee and strawberries, and the narrator is attempting, not entirely successfully, to tamp down Ben’s smoldering passion by asking after his pets.

Not only Lempel’s narrative strategies but her range of subjects, settings, and characters is extraordinary for Yiddish fiction. Many of her stories open a window on the Old World, yet for Lempel, her Eastern European roots are not the primary focus but rather one landscape among others. Along with deeply felt accounts drawing upon her Galician childhood, she vividly evokes a wide array of other times and places and the life experiences of people—

especially women—with very different life experiences, offering insight into aspects of Jewish experience and women's experience close to our time.

In several stories set in prewar or wartime Paris, for example, we meet women who are depicted with unfailing empathy even as they stray outside the norms of their Jewish community. In "Her Last Dance," Simone Bonmar-chais, the Jewish mistress of the chief of police, navigates the glittering, perilous world of Nazi-occupied Paris with a primal insistence on survival—until the moment when she drops her carefully constructed mask.⁴¹ In "A Moment of Truth," Lily Brown marries a sadistic Nazi doctor, then denounces him.⁴² And in "The Rendezvous," the protagonist stands trial for murdering her Nazi lover.⁴³ All of these stories display Lempel's gift for portraying women armed with few resources who are forced to make life-altering decisions.

Contemporary American settings characterize many of Lempel's stories, though here, too, she often reaches far beyond her own experience to explore the lives and psyches of women very different from herself. "The Bag Lady of Seventh Avenue" takes us to the ladies' room in New York City's Penn Station, where the narrator, a suburban train commuter, forms a bond with a homeless woman. Characteristically for Lempel, it is an empathic but unusual bond: "I found myself thinking of bizarre gifts for her," the narrator says: "feathers from the bird that hides its head in the sand, bouquets of desert flowers, miniature seashells, each shell a tower reaching for the heavens."⁴⁴ "Pachysandra" introduces us to the anguish of a deeply religious African American woman who tells a lie to save a life and then waits for God to punish her for her sin.⁴⁵ "A Little Song for a Jewish Soul" takes us to a Long Island synagogue, where the narrator is surprised when a young gentile folksinger shows up to say *kaddish* for his deceased girlfriend. Typical of Lempel, the narrator is haunted by the suffering of the unknown young woman who has died. "As night fell, her sad Jewish eyes looked out at me from the dark windowpanes."⁴⁶ She cannot rest until she has imagined the young woman's life and death and paid her own tribute to her memory.

Sometimes faced with impossible choices, Lempel's women largely resist grand, heroic action. Yet neither are they defined by passivity. Rather, they engage in a restless struggle with memory, shifts in consciousness, and thorny choices. They struggle to confront the madness of history and sometimes to fend off the oncoming madness of the self. In "Even the Heavens Tell Lies," a woman who has been deeply scarred by the Holocaust tells us:

When I crossed the ocean, I carried with me the habit of speaking to the shadows, and it became my way of life.... I live on the sidelines, like a stranger in my own world. I live with the snakes and scorpions, with the black leeches in my brain, in my blood.⁴⁷

This protagonist finds consolation in naming the flowers in her garden after friends and family members lost in the Holocaust. The protagonist in "Waiting for the Ragman," too, wrestles with the burden of a lost world:

After all these years, I'm still lugging the past behind me—the house, the street, the village, the town.... I take up my load of memories and begin to cast off the yesterdays that weigh so heavily on the present.... I'm still waiting for the ragman to come, to take the heavy pack from my bowed shoulders and toss it into his wagon.⁴⁸

Often, Lempel's women are propelled by their encounter with powerful natural forces, which can be feverish and erotically tinged or full of horror. A common image is of a horrifying void. "The Power of a Melody," for example, opens with a wasteland:

Far, far away, in the regions of the world where all is encased in ice, there is no marking of time. No seasons, no renewal and no withering away—only a vast, enshrouded world where frost and snow and primeval winds go unrecorded in any chronology. There, where all paths come to an end, the footsteps of eternity make no imprint in the void.⁴⁹

In "En Route to Divorce," Phyllis Shtromvaser leaves her husband. Of Phyllis, Lempel writes, "she went into his arms as if into a castle, and she went out as if from a prison." Phyllis is on her way to Reno when she looks out the window of the plane "into a world of sheer oblivion, a world untouched by human hands, unchanged since the six days of creation.... All around stretched a blue transparent void." Phyllis has been looking forward to the freedom promised by the women's liberation movement. Yet now the emptiness outside the window seems like a mirror of her own unraveling life. The "world without doors, without locks, fences, or borders" seems less like a welcome opportunity to express herself than a terrifying void.⁵⁰

As this passage and other occasional references make clear, Lempel was aware of the women's movement of the 1970s and sympathized with women, like Phyllis, whose lives were transformed by it. Because women's lives, women's consciousness, and women's strong sense of self were so central to Lempel's work, one could characterize her as a feminist writer. Yet most likely the label would have made her uncomfortable. There is no evidence that she associated herself with the feminist movement, and it appears that she arrived at her woman-centered literary perspective on her own.

Although the natural world is a source of terror to Phyllis, other protagonists find there a welcome dwelling-place, often in unusual ways. They form profound bonds with cats, with a monkey in the zoo, even, on more than one occasion, with an insect. In "Neighbors Over the Fence," for example, a cautious

cross-cultural friendship between a Jewish woman and her widowed Italian neighbor blossoms when Mrs. Zagretti knocks on Betty's door to discuss the death of a housefly she has come to treasure as a soulmate. She feels for the fly, the last of its kind, and senses—correctly—that Betty will understand.⁵¹

In "Even the Heavens Tell Lies," the protagonist hides in the forest to escape persecution during the Holocaust, becoming one with her environment:

The darkness that had once frightened me became my protector, sheltering and hiding me and revealing my secret to no one. The wind mingled my scent with the smells of the forest. The rain washed away my footprints. I followed the animals and kept away from people. The wind brought me the smell of berries, a dead bird, the rotten carcass of a half-devoured creature. Under cover of night, propelled by hunger, I pursued these scents. The forest took me in without tears, without words, receiving me with an impersonal indifference, a naked, frank, and savage truth. For the worm in the grass, the rabbit in the thicket, the tree, the star, the nuts, and for me: one and the same truth.⁵²

The theme of hiding, particularly in the natural world, recurs frequently in Lempel's work. Perhaps it sprang in part from her sense of having a hidden identity as a Yiddish writer disguised as a suburban housewife, a woman apart with an inner life all her own. Central to that inner life, and that of many of her protagonists, is the enduring trauma of the Holocaust. Sudden glimpses of the *khurbn* are an important element of many stories. "Yosemite Park," for example, unexpectedly ends with the tears of the Old World bride ascending

into the clouds, where they mingled with the tears of all the incinerated brides that rose with the smoke from the chimneys of Auschwitz. Thus joined together, they drifted over sea and shore, suspended in the veil of eternity.⁵³

"A Snowstorm in Summerland," which describes a married couple's road trip to Florida, also ends with Holocaust imagery—the onus of history carried by the survivors—as the two settle into their room at the Holiday Inn:

The bed is made up with white pillows and woolen blankets. Under the pink lampshade on the night table, two candies are waiting to gladden the heart. Reluctant to enjoy all these good things, I stand at the window. I see the distant forest from which there was no escape. I see the faces of loved ones and the faces of strangers. I want to bow my head to the ground and beg forgiveness from the bones that were denied a proper burial.⁵⁴

For Lempel, the Holocaust was sometimes obscured, as if behind a cloud, but never distant, a primal event whose devastating impact could never be escaped.

Like several other stories, "A Snowstorm in Summerland" offers a wry portrait of married life, with the grumpy, practical-minded husband serving

as the foil for the wife, who is absorbed in her dreams, memories, and imagination. Many other stories, however, explore far more daring terrain.

"The Debt," for example, opens with an image of a young woman lying "face up on the operating table. Her upper body was firmly secured with plastic straps, her knees up, her bare legs spread."⁵⁵ Lempel's unflinching description of the abortion blends straightforward description with poetic and deeply personal imagery to powerful effect. In the words of the Yiddish scholar Sheva Zucker, Lempel "is always ... pulling back the veil that covers hidden sexual desires, unsaid words, and unrealized dreams...."⁵⁶

"The Little Red Umbrella," for example, introduces us to the erotic imaginings of a middle-aged woman as she anticipates a blind date:

The rendezvous with the poet came like a jolt from the very heart of life, awakening the butterflies from their lethargic dozing. White silk wings hovered in the air. The studio apartment, which a moment before had been cold and dark, brightened with an ethereal light. The walls began to sing again.⁵⁷

In "Even the Heavens Tell Lies," we share the erotic sensations of a breast-feeding mother:

When the sky is blue, the gladiolus laughs with my cousin Gitl's sensuous mirth. Her pink goblet with its red rim reminds me of Gitl's half-parted lips, always eager to be fruitful and multiply. At twenty she was already the mother of two sets of twins. Whenever she was nursing a child, her mind would flood with intoxicating notions. She kept her grey eyes lowered, ashamed to raise them lest her thoughts be revealed. Perhaps she asked God to forgive her for feeling such hot lust for her husband.⁵⁸

And in "The Death of My Aunt," an elderly woman calls upon her religious faith as a shield to protect her from her erotic fantasies:

"Rokhele, darling, open the window, I'm dying for you!" His red-hot eyes burn holes in the windowpane. I cover my face. I don't want to look at him. I don't want to see the net he's spreading for me. I grab the holy book lying on the table. All the virtues of my mother and father come to my aid. And even though I don't turn around, I feel that he's still there—so sad, so forlorn.⁵⁹

In its cool precision and its audacious subject matter, "Oedipus in Brooklyn" surpasses all of these stories. Having been turned down by Avrom Sutzkever, the editor of *Di goldene keyt*, who considered it too shocking to publish,⁶⁰ the story appeared for the first and only time in the collection *A rege fun emes*. Lempel retells the ancient legend from the point of view of a contemporary Jewish mother who becomes involved in a sexual relationship with her blind son. Her matter-of-fact narration vibrates against an eroticized natural landscape as the two move inexorably toward their doom. In Lempel's

hands, the plot is thoroughly believable. As one critic put it, “the quiet, understated tone she employs even in describing shocking scenes”⁶¹ binds our sympathies to the characters even as they step into forbidden territory:

Danny opened the door of his mother’s room, felt his way to her side, and patted the blanket. He had dreamed that a man was in bed with her....

Frightened, Sylvia encircled him with her bare arms and tried to soothe him.⁶²

Along with her experimentation with time and tense and her unconventional subject matter, Lempel’s¹ poetic use of language, too, was distinctive. For all of her rule-breaking as a writer, her words, in her stories no less than in her poems, were chosen with painstaking precision. Many readers commented on the poetic power of her prose. Her fellow Yiddish writer Malka Heifetz Tussman wrote, “I don’t see the word ‘poem’ on top of [“My Friend Ben”]. Nonetheless, I see your story as a poem—maybe four or five poems.... Yes, you are a poet.”⁶³ Another colleague, Chava Rosenfarb (1923–2011), agreed. “I admire the beauty and austerity of your language,” she wrote. “You are so economical, careful not to waste a single word.”⁶⁴

Examples of Lempel’s poetic prose abound. In “Waiting for the Ragman,” for example, a characteristic passage is packed with dense, idiosyncratic imagery, as the narrator engages playfully and emotionally with an animated natural world:

The young Passover sun liked to play with the colored glasses that stood on the sideboard in honor of the holiday.... As I lifted my hands in the air, the beams rained down over my head like a golden raisin wine that began to ferment inside me. Unheard tones resounded from the deep. The sun recorded these unwritten notes, and I myself composed the lyrics: promise-words for tomorrow, for later, for next Passover when I would be a child again.⁶⁵

In “The Debt,” the young woman lying in bed in the abortion clinic refuses a pill for her pain and instead escapes into “the green meadow of her youth,” where Lempel creates a dazzling blend of splendor and menace, as well as beauty and violence:

[T]he girl playing with pieces of broken glass ... finds a miraculous splinter that reveals a wondrous world of red and green and blue. Strings of beads, green pearls. The nettles sparkle like seven suns and the stones in the road are golden coins.

The blond peasant boy from across the river sticks out his foot to trip her and snatches away the magic shard.... The boy has smashed the magic glass, stomped it to pieces.⁶⁶

With their exceptionally wide range of subject matter, locales, characters, and eras, Lempel’s stories never feel repetitive; the specific drama of each

protagonist is always compelling. Yet with their recurring narrative elements, themes, and style, they cohere into a unified whole. Chava Rosenfarb wrote that she experienced *Balade fun a kholem*, Lempel's second collection, not as a series of separate stories but as "a kind of original, sweeping novel that encompasses the life of our generation."⁶⁷

The Sive of Yiddish Letters

For Lempel, writing in Yiddish was a carefully considered choice that brought both costs and benefits. Although spoken in Jewish communities around the world, Yiddish was never the dominant language of any country. After World War II, the Yiddish literary world lost its European core and was dispersed on several continents. Over the course of Lempel's career, it grew increasingly marginal, with a smaller and smaller readership. Yet the Yiddish literary world also worked to Lempel's advantage and helped her talent to flower.

Although she spoke English at home with her husband and children and published some of her poems in that language, Lempel felt the Yiddish language to be an essential part of her literary vocation. "Yiddish is in my bones," she wrote. And furthermore, as she notes:

when I hear my mother's "Oy!" I lift my eyes to heaven and hear God answering me in Yiddish. The birds, real and imagined, speak Yiddish, and the wind at my window speaks Yiddish—because I speak Yiddish, think Yiddish. My father and mother, my sisters and brothers, my murdered people seek revenge in Yiddish.⁶⁸

Writing in Yiddish enabled Lempel to preserve her connection to her perished people as a whole. It was also a means of sustaining her particular tie to her adored brother. In Paris before the war, Yisroel had discouraged her from writing. Now, from beyond the grave, he functioned as her muse:

My older brother, who watches over me, tells me what to write in Yiddish. I can't very well tell him not to speak in the language of exile.... Now he watches over me, directing my stories from beyond the grave with a sure touch. This is how it was. This is what happened. So must it be recorded.... You survived to bring back those who were annihilated. You must speak in their tongue, point with their fingers....⁶⁹

Like others who wrote in *mame-loshn*, the Jewish "mother tongue," after World War II, Lempel often felt isolated. "I have no one," she told Gottesman in 1985.⁷⁰ She asserted that she rarely participated in Yiddish cultural activities in New York, citing the difficulty of traveling to the city from her home in suburban Long Island. It seems likely, however, that the distance was more

than a matter of geography and that her isolation was, at least in part, her own choice. "She isolated herself," her granddaughter recalled. "When you're that deep into your internal world—she could have been in Times Square and she would have been isolated."⁷¹ Thus, although her work itself was characterized by unusually intimate portraits of human consciousness, as a person Lempel remained private, even somewhat reclusive. As she put it:

To this day, I hide my literary existence under my apron. If you asked my neighbors about my writing, they'd look at you and think you were crazy. Even people who have lived here for 25 years don't know.

Writing for me is a private matter, separate even from my own family. I don't like to write when my husband is in the house. It presses on me—I'm not free. Free is only when I know I'm alone. Then I'm free to write what I want.⁷²

In her personal life, Lempel kept her literary identity separate from those around her. Writing in Yiddish meant that her children, her neighbors, mainstream writers, and the public at large were unable to read her work. As a writer, she frequently concealed the details of her personal life. For instance, her correspondence includes letters from several editors pressing for information about who she was and where she had come from. To reviewers, too, her identity was often a mystery. Some speculated incorrectly that she had survived a concentration camp or that she was a young woman.

Lempel's carefully guarded persona, it appears, freed her to "dive into the self." Isolation, in part a matter of circumstance and in part deliberately sought, afforded her the liberty to pursue her own idiosyncratic vision, her *dybbuk*.⁷³ Deeply faithful to her own path, she did not feel part of a literary "school" or trend in any language. Asked about writers who had shaped her, Lempel could not cite any. "I feel I don't borrow from anyone," she said.⁷⁴ In response to a query from Spiegelblatt, who wondered about her artistic, philosophical, or psychological influences, she mentioned Sigmund Freud and the philosophers Spinoza and Bergson, but only in passing. "I've taken a look here and there," she said, "but not more than that."⁷⁵ Critics sometimes drew parallels between Lempel and other writers, such as Dovid Bergelson and Lamed Shapiro,⁷⁶ but all agreed that she was difficult to categorize and that reading her work was an experience like none other.

Yet, although Lempel profited from isolation when it suited her, in many ways the Yiddish literary world was a true *svive* that offered her support, fame, and companionship. In 1970, as her mature creative period began to develop, she was fortunate to win the support of Abraham Sutzkever, who was renowned in the world of Yiddish letters as a poet, as a cultural hero for rescuing treasured Jewish texts in the Vilna Ghetto during World War II, and as

the founder and editor of the leading Yiddish literary journal, *Di goldene keyt*, which was published in Tel Aviv. Sutzkever's encouragement and guidance were profoundly important to many postwar Yiddish writers. He and Lempel corresponded for many years. After receiving her first letter of acceptance from *Di goldene keyt*, Lempel recalled:

I still remember how surprised I was at the warm answer. I remember even that it was a cold, cloudy winter day, but for me spring gardens burst into the most beautiful bloom.... The energy that I had conserved in my youth came out from under my apron.⁷⁷

While another editor might have tried to rein Lempel in, smooth out her rough edges, or tame her bold choices, Sutzkever never did. Instead, he was deeply affirming of her individuality:

You have your own words, your own observations, your own madness, which you scoop out from within yourself like shovelfuls of hot coals.... Your talent is not an ordinary one—of that I am sure.⁷⁸

"I write not for my readers but for myself," Lempel responded. "I write for the dybbuk that is seeking a transformation through me."⁷⁹ Sutzkever wrote back without delay. "For that dybbuk must you write!" he urged. "You must write for yourself and for me and for that chosen reader whom every true talent brings into being through the magnetic power of the work itself. Sincerely and with much belief in you...."⁸⁰

From the very beginning, Sutzkever held Lempel to the highest standards:

I detect in your creativity a burning impatience. And because your very real talent interests me, allow me to say this: you must be more patient, must deliberate over every line.

Your prose is in essence poetic, and therefore it must be pure and careful, like pure poetry.... There are writers—and perhaps great ones at that—for whom the power of the writing is in the prose itself. For you, the power of the prose is in the poetry. Every drop is as important as the rushing current.

I write this to you because I believe strongly in your talent. But to talent must be added another talent—the talent to steer the talent.⁸¹

He also urged her to "keep writing in Yiddish. You have a Yiddish heart, not an English one."⁸²

Sutzkever's encouragement played a central role in sustaining Lempel's commitment to her writing. As her career progressed, she found other literary figures who also provided significant support. In 1979, she hired Binem Heller (1908–1998), a distinguished Yiddish poet in Tel Aviv, to shepherd *A rege fun emes* to publication. Over a period of two years, Heller in Tel Aviv and Lempel

in Long Beach, New York collaborated. Heller negotiated terms with Peretz Publishing House in Tel Aviv and suggested the stories that should and should not be included in the collection. He urged Lempel to include even her most daring stories, ones that had been rejected, including "Oedipus in Brooklyn," which Sutzkever himself had turned down. He suggested new titles for several stories, proofread the manuscript, and oversaw the cover design, printing, and binding. His regular expressions of admiration no doubt provided important sustenance to Lempel. "You are one of the best and most original storytellers in Yiddish," he wrote in a letter.⁸³

Lempel's *Balade fun a kholem* entailed a similar collaboration, this time with the Tel Aviv poet, I.Z. Shargel (1905–?), who served as a volunteer adviser and editor to Israel Book Publishing House. Once again, a warm correspondence developed, as Shargel read every story, suggested word changes, and sent Lempel his own books for her comments.

Both volumes received glowing reviews in Yiddish newspapers and magazines in New York, Israel, and Australia. "The sound and the style were new and surprising for Yiddish literature," wrote Alexander Spiegelblatt. "One immediately recognized an expert literary talent ... that conveyed Jewish fate in the years after the Holocaust ... in a unique and deeply personal manner..."⁸⁴ "A consummate master of poetic narrative," wrote Yonah Berkman in Melbourne, Australia.⁸⁵ "An original and remarkable writer ... a great achievement," wrote Eliahu Shulman in New York's *Forverts*.⁸⁶

An impressive string of literary prizes followed. Lempel received the YKUF Prize for Literature awarded by the *Yiddisher kultur farband* (Jewish Culture Association, New York, 1981); the I. J. Segal Prize awarded by the Jewish Public Library in Montreal (1983); the Osher Schuchinski Prize awarded by the Atran Center of the Congress for Jewish Culture (New York, 1985); and the Chaim Zhitlowsky Prize for Literature (New York, 1989).

From the 1960s through the early 1990s, when she was in her late eighties, tirelessly and successfully Lempel submitted her work to publications all over the world. Often a single story was published more than once. In addition, Lempel's arrangement with the publishers of her two books required her to handle the distribution and the orders herself.⁸⁷ Although she claimed to despise this aspect of the writing life,⁸⁸ she devoted herself to the task with great seriousness. Within her personal papers, lists of addresses, orders, and correspondence with critics and fans throughout the world are carefully filed. Some were renowned Yiddish literary figures; others were simply individual readers.

As a result of these efforts, her work became known throughout the Yiddish

literary network, and other writers began to seek her out. Much like the regulars at the cafés of Vilna or Warsaw in earlier eras, the diminishing ranks of Yiddish writers in the second half of the twentieth century sustained one another. On occasion, Lempel attended meetings of Yiddish writers in New York. For some years, she met regularly with the New York writer Nosn Brusilov (1892–1977). She vacationed in Florida with members of the Montreal Yiddish community. On occasion, she met face-to-face with individual Yiddish writers in New York, Montreal, Paris, and Israel. And she conducted a voluminous correspondence. The warmth and liveliness of the letters she received, preserved within her papers, make clear that she invested considerable energy in her epistolary friendships. A particularly intimate friend and frequent correspondent was Chava Rosenfarb, of Montreal, who introduced herself to Lempel through a letter in 1982. “I’ve been reading your work in *Di Goldene keyt*,” she wrote. “I feel very close to your way of writing, to your style. Who are you?”⁸⁹ The two women exchanged regular letters until 1990, critiquing each other’s work, revealing their struggles with writing and publishing, sharing their views of other writers, and offering news about their families. Malka Heifetz Tussman, who lived in Berkeley, California, also forged a warm and supportive friendship with Lempel despite the many miles separating the pair.

Old age did not slow Lempel’s creative output. When her husband Leon died in 1986, she wrote in a poem that she felt “like a mummy/ wrapped in tears/ silent” with “nothing more to tell/ nothing more to say.”⁹⁰ In fact, however, she had not finished telling. “Pastorale,” a story published in 1988, is a poignant depiction of an elderly woman with an ailing husband, a precise evocation of the grumpy exchanges at the breakfast table, the husband’s methodical raking of autumn leaves, the understated but dreaded approach of mortality:

Now I’m knitting a sweater for my husband. I’m in no hurry. An unbidden voice whispers that I should take my time. As long as I knit, I hold the Angel of Death at bay.⁹¹

Lempel’s stories and poems continued to be published in the 1990s. On October 20, 1999, she died of cardiac arrest in her Long Beach home at the age of 93. An article in the *Forverts* stated:

With the passing of Blume Lempel, Yiddish literature has lost one of its most remarkable women writers, whose number today is already terribly meager.... An empty spot has opened in the galaxy of talented women Yiddish writers. Alas, it is not clear who can take her place.⁹²

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In a 1981 letter, the celebrated Yiddish writer Chaim Grade (1910–1982) noted how sad it was that Lempel's talent had flowered so late, at a moment in history when few could read her words in the original. But perhaps, he said, this was inevitable. Lempel belonged to her time and no other:

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....⁹³

Although she sometimes claimed to write only for herself, and although she was committed to the language of her murdered people, Lempel sometimes expressed frustration with her situation as a Yiddish writer. She yearned for a larger readership. World languages like English, she wrote in a letter to the Yiddish poet Osher Jaime Schuchinski, "have readers young and old. Everything gets reviewed. Among us, on the other hand, there is talk only of Sholem Aleichem, Mendele [Moykher Sforim], and [I.L.] Peretz. No one knows about the living writers."⁹⁴

Lempel made repeated attempts to reach out to English-language readers, with mixed success. Having seen her novel published by a small publisher in 1954, Lempel unsuccessfully submitted the manuscript to a major literary agency in the 1970s, hoping for republication. Some of her poetry was published in English. She hired translators to translate some of her short stories, a few of which were published in the Jewish magazines *Bridges* and *Midstream*. She tried, without success, to find a publisher for an English-language collection of her stories. Late in her life, her story "Correspondents" appeared in English in *Found Treasures*, the groundbreaking English-language anthology of Yiddish women writers published in 1994. No doubt she would have been gratified to know of other English-language anthologies published in the years since her death, including *Beautiful as the Moon, Radiant as the Stars: Jewish Women in Yiddish Stories* (2003); *Arguing with the Storm: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers* (2008); and *The Exile Book of Yiddish Women Writers* (2013).⁹⁵ In years to come, as new generations of readers encounter Lempel's work, whether in the original Yiddish or in translation, they will have the opportunity to step into her *svive*. As they do, they will be richly rewarded.

Notes

1. Letter to Blume Lempel from Malka Heifetz Tussman (1893–1987), January 23, 1975, BL's papers, courtesy of Paul Lempel.
2. Lempel sometimes stated her date of birth as 1910. Her obituary in the *Forverts* and her son Paul assert it was 1907. "Blume Lempl [sic], a modernistishe yidishe shray-

- berin," by Sore-Rokhl Schachter, *Forverts* November 5, 1999. Interview with Paul Lempel, Eastchester, New York, July 26, 2008.
3. One-page autobiography written for acceptance of the Chaim Zhitlowsky Foundation award, dated December 17, 1989, BL's personal papers.
 4. From "*En Commemoration*, for the children and children's children of Israel and Chaye Pfeffer," BL's personal papers.
 5. Dates provided by Robert Pfeffer, Yisroel Pfeffer's son, email communication to the authors, January 20, 2012.
 6. Videotaped interview with Blume Lempel conducted by Dr. Itzik Gottesman, Long Beach, NY, 1985. Courtesy of Itzik Gottesman.
 7. Ibid.
 8. Blume Lempel, "Dos vartn afn shmatilnik" [Waiting for the Ragman], in *Balade fun a kholem* (Tel Aviv: Farlag I. L. Peretz, 1981), 153. All translations are by Ellen Cassedy and Yermiyahu Ahron Taub and will appear in their forthcoming collection.
 9. Blume Lempel, "Der toyt fun mayn mume" [The Death of My Aunt], in Blume Lempel, *A rege fun emes* (Tel Aviv: Farlag yisroel bukh, 1986), 48. All translations are by Ellen Cassedy and Yermiyahu Ahron Taub and will appear in their forthcoming collection.
 10. Lempel, "Images on a Blank Canvas," in *Rege*, 70.
 11. Lempel, "Waiting for the Ragman," in *Balade*, 151.
 12. Lempel, "Even the Heavens Tell Lies," in *Rege*, 23.
 13. Lempel, "Waiting for the Ragman," in *Balade*, 157.
 14. Lempel, "Even the Heavens Tell Lies," in *Rege*, 20.
 15. Pfeffer, e-mail, 2012.
 16. Troim Katz Handler, interview, Long Beach, New York, June 7, 1992. Courtesy of Troim Katz Handler. Also see Troim Katz Handler, "Blume Lempel," in *Jewish Women's Archive: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, Jewish Women's Archive, March 1, 2009, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/lempe-blume>.
 17. Gottesman, interview, 1985.
 18. Ibid.
 19. Lempel, "The Victim," in *Balade*, 63.
 20. Gottesman, interview, 1985.
 21. Ibid.
 22. *Der tog*, 12/2-3/43. Cited in Berl Kagan, *Leksikon fun yidishe shraybers* (Nyu york: Ra'aya Elman-Cohen, 1986). Also cited in notes, March 9, 1982, BL's personal papers.
 23. Gottesman, interview, 1985.
 24. Lempel, "The Death of My Aunt," in *Rege*, 55.
 25. Lempel, "Cousin Claude," *Rege*, in 194.
 26. Ibid., 201.
 27. Gottesman, interview, 1985.
 28. Acceptance speech, YKUF Prize, May 31, 1981, BL's personal papers. YKUF, the *Yidisher kultur farband* [Jewish Culture Association] was founded in Paris in 1937, then later moved to New York and operated until 2006.
 29. Gottesman, interview, 1985.
 30. Acceptance speech, YKUF Prize, May 31, 1981.
 31. Ibid.
 32. Ibid.
 33. Alexander Spiegelblatt, "Durkh a shparune," review, *Di goldene keyt* 106 (1981): 196.

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34. Ibid., 198.
35. Acceptance speech, YKUF Prize, May 31, 1981. Plotkin was a New York poet born in Poland.
36. Gottesman, interview, 1985.
37. Spiegelblatt, "Durkh a shparune," 196.
38. Letter from Yoni Fain to BL, July 27, 1986, BL's personal papers.
39. Lempel, "Yosemite Park," in *Balade*, 249 and 248.
40. Lempel, "My Friend Ben," in *Rege*, 150.
41. Lempel, "Her Last Dance," in *Balade*, 135–147.
42. Lempel, "A Moment of Truth," in *Rege*, 115–130.
43. Lempel, "The Rendezvous," in *Balade*, 11–22.
44. Lempel, "The Bag Lady of Seventh Avenue," in *Balade*, 91.
45. Lempel, "Pachysandra," in *Rege*, 29–36.
46. Lempel, "A Little Song for a Jewish Soul," in *Balade*, 172.
47. Lempel, "Even the Heavens Tell Lies," in *Rege*, 26.
48. Lempel, "Waiting for the Ragman," in *Balade*, 148.
49. Lempel, "The Power of a Melody," in *Rege*, 242.
50. Lempel, "En Route to Divorce," in *Balade*, 102, 94, and 96.
51. Lempel, "Neighbors Over the Fence," in *Rege*, 101–108.
52. Lempel, "Even the Heavens Tell Lies," in *Rege*, 22.
53. Lempel, "Yosemite Park," in *Balade*, 254.
54. Lempel, "A Snowstorm in Summerland," in *Balade*, 212.
55. Lempel, "The Debt," in *Rege*, 109.
56. Sore-Rokhl Schaechter, obituary, *Forverts*, November 5, 1999.
57. Lempel, "The Little Red Umbrella," in *Balade*, 125.
58. Lempel, "Even the Heavens Tell Lies," in *Rege*, 27.
59. Lempel, "The Death of My Aunt," in *Rege*, 53.
60. Sutzkever's letter to BL, August 22, 1971, stated: "It is a very strong story—perhaps too sensational, too shocking in its theme," BL's personal papers.
61. Hertz Kalles (1905–1988), remarks at I.J. Segal Prize ceremony, October 1983, in Montreal, BL's personal papers.
62. Lempel, "Oedipus in Brooklyn," in *Rege*, 174.
63. Letter from Malka Heifetz Tussman, May 26, 1973, BL's personal papers.
64. Letter from Chava Rosenfarb, May 16, 1986, BL's personal papers.
65. Lempel, "Waiting for the Ragman," in *Balade*, 160.
66. Lempel, "The Debt," in *Rege*, 114.
67. Letter from Chava Rosenfarb, 1986.
68. Blume Lempel, "The Fate of the Yiddish Writer," *Yidishe kultur* 48 (November–December 1986): 20.
69. Ibid.
70. Gottesman, interview, 1985.
71. Interview with Vivien Krieger, New York, NY, July, 25, 2008.
72. Gottesman, interview, 1985.
73. In the Jewish tradition, a *dybbuk* is the wandering soul of a dead person residing within the body of a living individual.
74. Handler, *Jewish Women's Archive*, 1992.
75. Letter to Spiegelblatt, October 27, 1982, BL's personal papers.
76. Kalles, remarks, 1983.
77. Letter to Spiegelblatt, BL's personal papers.

78. Sutzkever to BL May 4, 1974, BL's personal papers.
79. BL to Sutzkever, May 29, 1974, BL's personal papers.
80. Sutzkever to BL, June 7, 1974, BL's personal papers.
81. Sutzkever to BL, June 16, 1971, BL's personal papers.
82. Sutzkever to BL, June 24, 1977, BL's personal papers.
83. Heller to BL, November 1, 1979, BL's personal papers.
84. Letter to Spiegelblatt, BL's personal papers.
85. Yonah Berkman, "A Rege fun emes," review, *Letste naves* (July 5, 1981): 8.
86. Eliahu Shulman, "A merkverdike zamlung dertseylungen," review, *Forverts*, March 22, 1981, 11.
87. Lempel, "The Fate of the Yiddish Writer," 22.
88. Gottesman, interview, 1985.
89. Rosenfarb to BL, September 22, 1982, BL's personal papers.
90. Blume Lempel, "Widowhood," *Di tsukunft* 93: 1-2 (Jan/Feb 1987): 22.
91. Blume Lempel, "Pastorale," *Di tsukunft* 95: 4 (Nov/Dec 1990): 36.
92. Mordkhe Bauman, "Blume Lempel, di shrayberin un der mentsh," *Forverts*, December 3, 1999.
93. Letter from Chaim Grade, August 3, 1981, BL's personal papers.
94. Letter from Osher Schuchinsky, April 12, 1987, quoting BL's letter to him, February 16-17, 1987, BL's personal papers.
95. Frieda Forman, Ethel Raicus, Sarah Silberstein Swartz, and Margie Wolf, *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1994); Sandra Bark, *Beautiful as the Moon, Radiant as the Stars: Jewish Women in Yiddish Stories* (New York: Warner Books, 2003); Rhea Tregobov, *Arguing with the Storm: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers* (New York: Feminist Press, 2008); and Frieda Johles Forman and Sam Blatt, *The Exile Book of Yiddish Women Writers* (Holstein, Ontario: Exile Editions, 2013).