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Everyday Jews: Scenes from a Vanished Life

by Yehoshue Perle

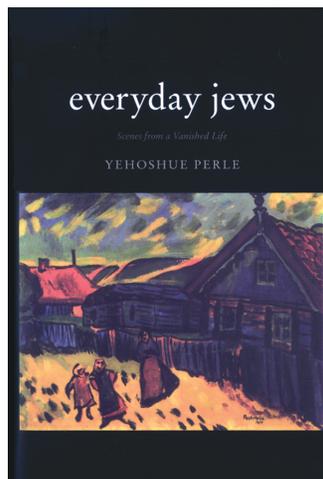
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ESSAY BY JOSH LAMBERT

One of the fascinating things about nostalgia is how well it ages. While science fiction can turn to kitsch in as little as a decade, personal histories often grow richer, and more valuable, with the passage of time.

Take, for example, Yehoshue Perle's autobiographical Yiddish novel, *Yidn fun a gants yor*. When the book – which was recently translated into English as *Everyday Jews* – first appeared in Warsaw back in 1935, it already bore a subtitle reflecting its focus on the past, its more or less Proustian *recherche du temps perdu*. “*A bukh fun a fargangen lebn*,” Perle called it, which has been rendered as “Scenes from a Vanished Life” by the novel's translators. This subtitle was apt in the '30s, as the book details a year in the life of a family much like Perle's at the end of the nineteenth century, and attempts to recreate in fiction the lost world of the author's impoverished childhood. In 2007, though, the phrase resonates even more forcefully than Perle could have intended, as the quotidian Jewish existence in small-town Poland that the novel captures did not, of course, “vanish” naturally. Rather, the Nazis blotted out that life, exterminated it and its memory – along with Perle himself, who was gassed at Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1943.

Notwithstanding the author's tragic fate, *Yidn fun a gants yor* is especially precious as a representation of pre-war Polish life that isn't overshadowed by the Holocaust. This doesn't mean that the book is a bundle of joy; on the contrary, *Everyday Jews* eschews sentimentality in its account of its protagonist's parents, half-siblings, and various relations. Twelve-year-old Mendl, the novel's narrator, is the



sort of spirited kid one imagines being pals with Sholem Aleichem's Motl, with David Grossman's Momik, maybe even with Jonathan Safran Foer's Oskar, but, like them, he lives among adults in agonizing circumstances. Too young to understand – Mendl is, pointedly, not yet bar mitzvah, and so, according to religious principle, not yet religiously responsible for his actions – he's old enough to be painfully aware of the *tsuris* around him.

The book begins with the sudden death of Mendl's half-brother, Moyshe, his mother's

“youngest, and handsomest, son by her first husband,” who, at the age of 18, already held a decent job with a local book-binder. At the start, then, Perle introduces a crucial motif: no matter how beloved a person may be, no matter how many prayers are said or sacrifices made on his or her behalf, anyone can disappear at a moment's notice. It's a sad truism that's not surprising to find emphasized in the work of an author whose wife hung herself in 1926, leaving no note.

Out-of-nowhere tragedies recur insistently throughout the novel. Mendl's buddy, Yankl – a wiseguy with the ladies, and a surprisingly skilled actor in a Purim play (“he looked resplendent,” Mendl reports, in disbelief) – gets caught *in flagrante delicto* with the non-Jewish neighbor's daughter, and disappears for good to Warsaw, without so much as a *zay gezunt*. With as little warning, Mendl's sweet-tempered grandfather passes away in the spring: “Who would have expected, at a time of such blue mornings, that Grandpa would die?” Mendl reflects. “I always thought that [he] ... would be the last one in town to die. Now he lay on the floor, long and narrow, like a fish on its back.”

These losses cast a pall over Mendl's childhood, but, as in the recent works of Philip Roth, in Perle's novel death and sex function in delicate counterpoint: it is during Moyshe's funeral, for instance, that the family maid first pulls Mendl into bed so as to warm him up – with her lips. Unlike Roth's

aging heroes, though, who know exactly what turns them on, preteen Mendl finds his initiation into eros downright bewildering: “I couldn’t figure out what was happening,” he remarks, under the covers with the maid, “except that I wanted the pain to last as long as possible.”

He has reason to hesitate. In Mendl’s community, sexuality poses genuine threats. One winter day, the boy discovers his half-sister Toybe, “lying there in the red snow, torn in two, both legs naked, sticking up like two logs” after a miscarriage or failed abortion. Mendl’s instincts warn him to steer clear of Dobrele, a local prostitute “just returned from Buenos Aires” – the world capital of Jewish prostitution at the time – but he can’t elude Hodl, a forty-year-old boarder in his parents’ home. A fierce Mrs. Robinson, and by today’s standards a pedophile, Hodl tempts Mendl with oranges, grapes, and walnuts, and eventually gropes the child, commanding him, “Whatever I want, you’ll do!” When he fights back – “I turned my head and sank my teeth into Hodl’s leg,” he says – she calls him a “dirty son of a bitch” and hurls a candlestick at him.

Even outside of these abuses, that Mendl finds love and sex scary seems inevitable given the paucity of role models he has for comfortable adult relationships. Most of the novel follows the comings and goings, unrequited desires, missed opportunities, and desperate mistakes of the boy’s half-brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts. Mendl’s parents, meanwhile, brought together under false pretenses, are a colossal failure as a couple. His father, a humble and illiterate hay-merchant, longs to live among peasants, while his mother, a fan of sensational fiction and a graceful dancer, yearns for the drawing rooms of Warsaw and the comfortable home she shared with her previous husband. As much as Mendl is pushed and pulled by friends and adolescent urges, his biggest challenge is being caught between his parents’ contradictory perspectives.

Perle devotes equal attention to the religious customs upheld by Mendl’s father and to the rapidly changing cultural opportunities attracting his mother. In doing so, he presents a richly Jewish but rapidly transforming community in which religious texts and traditional practices are ripe for creative reinterpretation. Mendl’s friend Yankl frames his lust for a non-Jewish girl as a retelling of the story of Boaz and Ruth, while Mendl hears rumors that the neighborhood whore “loudly say[s] her prayers” (in Yiddish, “*leyent zi hoikh krias-shma*”) with the “wealthy landowners” who visit her.

The spectacular collision of tradition and modernity was a natural subject for Perle, who, by the time he wrote *Yidn*, had long since left his small hometown of Radom and established himself in interwar Warsaw, then the international center of Jewish culture and politics. As David G. Roskies recounts in his essential introduction to the volume, Perle had published a novella drawing upon his work as a bank’s assistant bookkeeper, and then, following his wife’s suicide, turned in despair to churning out trashy serialized melodramas under a pseudonym consisting of three asterisks in a downward-pointing triangle. For these efforts, he had been branded a “pornographer,” but he remained committed to Jewish practice even while his fellow Yiddish writers embraced secularism.

Alongside its exploration of cultural ferment, the novel also registers the linguistic diversity encountered by its protagonist, interspersing highly idiomatic Yiddish with more than the usual dose of phrases in Hebrew, Russian, and Polish. As in the other excellent volumes in the New Yiddish Library series (a joint venture of Yale University Press, the Fund for the Translation of Jewish Literature, and the National Yiddish Book Center), the novel’s translators and editor rise to the challenge of communicating and contextualizing the variety of Perle’s Yiddish without misrepresenting his style. The text mobilizes all the tricks of the translator’s trade – often explaining terms contextually, relying on a glossary for lengthier notes, sometimes allowing a term to pass untranslated, occasionally reworking a sentence or omitting a clause to avoid awkwardness – resulting in a readable and evocative English rendition of a lost Yiddish classic.

Epic in its portrayal of ordinary Polish Jews at the turn of the century, the novel manages at the same time to be an extraordinarily deft and nuanced portrait of the artist as a *yingl*. Comparable in scope and richness to contemporaneous American masterpieces which represent the dawning consciousness of a young man – not just Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep* (1934), but also Daniel Fuchs’ *Summer in Williamsburg* (1934) and perhaps even James T. Farrell’s *Young Lonigan* (1932) – *Everyday Jews* offers both a universal story of *bildung* and a window into the daily lives of our great-grandfathers. It’s some small consolation for the horrific losses of the twentieth century that even as that “vanished life” recedes further into the inaccessible past, we can still discover astonishing books, like this one, that honestly memorialize it. JR

EXCERPT

First, sweaty and sunburnt from a week in the fields, we soaped ourselves thoroughly at our peasant-landlord's pump. Then, cleansed and rid of six days of Gentile existence, we set out for the mowed meadow to celebrate the Sabbath. On one side, the growing wheat swayed gently, on the other, the woods were falling into dark slumber. Our Sabbath table was a patch of field, between forest and wheat.

Mother spread an old tablecloth on the ground and lit the Sabbath candles, tiny, thin ones, stuck into four hollowed potatoes, over which she recited the blessings, not standing up, as at home, but sitting on the ground, her feet tucked under her. In the open field, surrounded by a black, star-studded sky, Mother's candle-lighting seemed even more special than at home.

Father's prayers welcoming in the Sabbath also took on a different air. There he stood, tall and broad-shouldered, his waist girdled as befitting a pious Jew, his face turned to the dark forest, chanting into its depths, "O come let us sing before the Lord," and "Come my friend, to meet the bride, let us welcome the Sabbath." (PAGES 247–248) JR

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) Who do you find more sympathetic: Mendl's mother or his father? Why?
- 2) Would you characterize Mendl's family as religious? What role do Jewish traditions – holidays, prayer, foods, etc. – play in Mendl's life?
- 3) One of the ways to read this novel is as tracking Mendl's education, both in school (first at a kheyder and then at the *shkole*) and outside of it. What lessons does Mendl learn, and where does he learn them?
- 4) In what ways does the novel's portrait of Jewish life in Poland before the Holocaust resemble or differ from the way you've imagined that time and place, or the way you've seen it represented in other books? Does knowing Perle's own tragic story influence the way you think about this novel?
- 5) Thinking about his cousins and their talents, Mendl at one point notes, "Aunt Naomi's Mendl could sing. Morkhe-Mendl's Reyzl loved flowers. What special thing did I have?" Do you see any indication, in the novel, of Mendl's abilities? What sort of person do you think Mendl will be when he grows up?
- 6) David G. Roskies' introduction notes that when Perle's novel first appeared, Isaac Bashevis Singer found it "too bleak to be psychologically credible" and called Mendl's home "*umheymlekh*, forbidding." Do you agree?
- 7) The characters, and especially Mendl's mother, are constantly talking and thinking about Warsaw. What does that city represent to them?
- 8) What about the novel's plot and characters grounds it in a specific time and place? What about it is universal? JR

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