

פאקן טרעגער  
**Pakn  
Treger**  
Magazine of the  
Yiddish Book Center

**A Collection  
of Newly  
Translated  
Yiddish  
Works  
by Women  
Writers**



**2017 TRANSLATION ISSUE**

This digital anthology  
has been made  
possible by  
Dr. Joann Halpern  
in memory of  
Ariel Halpern.



# Table of Contents

## **A Tale**

*by Soreh Ayzn, translated by Hinde Ena Burstin*

## **The Librarians**

*by Rachel Auerbach, translated by Seymour Levitan*

## **Springtime Back Home and Seems It Had to Be**

*by Rokhl Korn, translated by Miriam Isaacs*

## **Freeways**

*by Brooche Coodley, translated by Miri Koral*

## **A Seder in the Taiga**

*by Yenta Mash, translated by Ellen Cassedy*

## **High Doorsteps**

*by Shira Gorshman, translated by Faith Jones*

## **I Have Seen**

*by Rosa Nevadovska, translated by Merle Bachman*

## **Untitled (from *My Days*)**

*by Bertha Kling, translated by Leah Zazulyer*

## **Operating Room**

*by Rokhl Korn, translated by Murray Citron*

## **Does It Mean I Long for You**

*by Malka Locker, translated by Ri Turner*

## **Acacias Bloom**

*by Dvoyre Fogel, translated by Anastasiya Lyubas*

# Introduction

Immediately after we published last year's *Pakn Treger Translation Issue*, we received an email from one of our readers, a longtime member of the Yiddish Book Center. I'm paraphrasing, but the email went something like this: "Where were the women writers?"

I wrote back with an explanation: we had very few submissions of works by women. Many of the *translators* who submitted to the issue were women; indeed, the issue featured more female translators than male translators. But with very few submissions of texts written by women, it wasn't surprising that we only published two (a poem and a story) in the last issue.

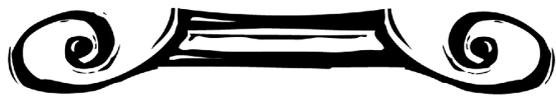
I realized while composing the email that the problem was larger than the small number of submissions. Women regularly translate writing by men, but men hardly ever seem to translate writing by women. As a sometime translator, I knew that I was guilty myself. Not once had I ever attempted to translate a poem or story or essay written by a woman. Later I attended a conference on gender and Yiddish literature. The scholars were equally divided between men and women, but almost all of the papers were about books written by men. Again I realized that the problem cut deeper. I could name many Yiddish women poets. I have even written about several. But I had read very few short stories or novels written in Yiddish by women, and I couldn't even name more than a few. Their stories and novels were rarely on the syllabi of courses I'd taken, and I had rarely sought out their fiction to read for pleasure. If we wanted to encourage more scholarship about and more translation of books written by women, then we had to start at the beginning. We had to encourage the act of reading.

We are pleased to present this special *Pakn Treger Translation Issue* devoted to writing by women. It contains poetry, prose poetry, fiction, and memoir. The two short stories thrust the reader into the Soviet Union and the challenges of scarcity. They depict people struggling to live—to eat, to raise their children—as well as struggling to live as Jews. Likewise, the memoir describes the struggle to survive spiritually in the Warsaw Ghetto and the heroic efforts of librarians to distribute books to Jewish children. The poetry describes a wealth of personal experiences without shying away from communal responsibilities. In one, "Freeways," the poet, in tones reminiscent of Holocaust poetry, describes the destruction of her neighborhood in Los Angeles, the destruction of her community, to make space for a highway.

This issue helps to address the relative scarcity of translations of Yiddish women writers. We also hope that it inspires the reader to continue reading works by women. There are several important translation anthologies of writing by women: *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers* (1994), *Arguing the Storm: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers* (2007), and *The Exile Book of Yiddish Women Writers* (2013). You can find wonderful and challenging short stories by women

in our *Pakn Treger* anthology *The Abandoned Book and Other Yiddish Stories* (2016). More on Yiddish women poets can also be found in Faith Jones's article in the fall 2016 *Pakn Treger*, "Problematic, Fraught, Confusing, Paralyzing—and Fantastic," about a 1927 anthology of Yiddish women's poetry, and in Kathryn Hellerstein's *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish, 1586–1987* (2014).

—Eitan Kensky  
*Director of Collections Initiatives*



# A Tale

By Soreh Ayzn

TRANSLATED BY HINDE ENA BURSTIN

Let us play together like this,  
I will be a moon-child,  
You—a Northern wind so wild.

You'll embrace me  
And we'll race free  
On your white-winged horse, we'll fly.  
See—white blossoms floating, falling  
Just like snowflakes from the sky.

Let us play together like this,  
I'll be a sun ray, young and small,  
You—a foaming waterfall.  
I will spark and flash and sway  
I will spray you as I please.  
—Let me stay and dream a while  
Tinkling with my piano keys.

*Soreh Ayzn was born in 1910 in Ponevezh, in the Kovne (Kaunas) province of Lithuania. Little is known of her home or family life. She completed a Hebrew gimnazye (the European equivalent of secondary school and junior college) in Ponevezh before studying at the Kovne Hebrew Teacher's Seminary and at a Lithuanian university. Her first book, Meydl lider (Girlhood Poems), was published in Kovne in 1937.*

*Ayzn arrived in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1938. There she taught at the Talmud Toyre, an elementary school established and run by the Jewish community to provide a free education for financially disadvantaged children. Ayzn later settled in Cape Town, where her second book of Yiddish poems, Geklibene lider un poemes (Selected Poems and Odes), was published in 1965 by the South African Yiddish Cultural Federation. Ayzn had little money and no relatives, so her later years, residing in a boardinghouse, were both difficult and lonely. She died in March 1982.*

*Ayzn's poems cover many themes, ranging from love and longing, women's life cycles, elegies, and odes to her birthplace, Kovne, and to the African landscape. Her voice was considered mellifluous—softly spoken, with beautiful enunciation. Ayzn's lyrical tone and attention to aesthetics earned her an important place in South African Yiddish literature. She was a sensuous writer who crafted sounds skillfully, utilizing clever wordplay and internal rhymes to great effect.*



# The Librarians

By Rachel Auerbach

TRANSLATED BY SEYMOUR LEVITAN

*As a writer, Rachel Auerbach (Rokhl Oyerbakh) is best known for her memoirs of the Warsaw Ghetto. Shortly after the German occupation of Poland, she joined historian Emanuel Ringelblum's secret Oyneg Shabes group, which was dedicated to documenting daily life in the ghetto. When Ringelblum asked her to establish and manage a folkskikh, a soup kitchen for refugees, she chronicled her experiences on what she called "the front lines of hunger" and composed a monograph on the subject that was included in the Ringelblum Archive. In 1943, she escaped to the "Aryan side" of Warsaw, where she continued to record what she knew of her wide network of friends and colleagues in the cultural community—the writers, artists, musicians, and actors who perished—and to set down what she had witnessed during the "action," the great roundup and deportation of the ghetto population in the summer of 1942. After the war she was founder and, for a long time, director of the Gvies eydes (oral testimony) section of the Yad Vashem memorial.*

*Auerbach wrote and published in Polish, Hebrew, and Yiddish. Her last two works in Yiddish, memoirs published in the 1970s, incorporated passages from her earlier writing but with a new evaluation of her experiences in the ghetto. During the war she felt despair about the real usefulness of the soup kitchens, but from the perspective of her later years, she saw their great communal and moral value as a part of the immense Jewish effort of resistance.*

*It is clear that she saw the librarians in exactly those terms—that in this place, under these circumstances, Leyb Shur and Bashe Berman were determined to sustain the psychic energy and communal identity of the ghetto. "The Librarians" is a chapter from Auerbach's 1974 memoir Varshever tsavoes (Warsaw Testaments).*

**T**hey were two: Leyb Shur, founder of the Vilna publishing house Tomor, the unrecognized saint of the world of Yiddish books, and Bashe Berman, later known as "Pani Basia"<sup>1</sup> when she worked with the organization that helped Jews hiding on the Aryan side.

Bashe Berman had been a librarian at the Koszikowa Street branch of the Warsaw Public Library. Books in Yiddish had been her particular interest even before the war, and under the auspices of Cekabe,<sup>2</sup> she published a work titled *A Numbering System for the Yiddish Libraries of Warsaw*. In the ghetto she and Leyb Shur

took on a special assignment.

Other Jewish volunteer workers in the ghetto racked their brains to provide clothes, bread, and shelter for the ever-larger hordes of impoverished, homeless Jews. Bashe Berman and Leyb Shur were concerned with providing psychological nourishment. They were the first to realize how important books would be in the struggle against despair.

It may seem absurd to say that people needed books when they had nothing to eat and their lives were so uncertain. And yet it was altogether different, both for Jews and non-Jews. There has rarely been such a mass hunger for books as there was in Poland during the German occupation, a hunger stirred partly by the impulse to forget the constant danger, the melancholy reality; partly by the drive to release psychic energies, to strengthen one's fearfully oppressed sense of self.

And what applies to grown-ups applies even more emphatically to children. Especially to the Jewish child in the ghetto.

The ghetto child, robbed of the world—the river, the green trees, freedom of movement—could win all this back through the magic of the printed word.

\* \* \*

**B**oth Bashe Berman and Leyb Shur began their work as early as 1940.

In the very first months of the occupation a regulation was issued forbidding Jews to use the public libraries. By spring 1940 all public, and most private, lending libraries in the Jewish quarter were closed. Jewish Warsaw, which before the war had fifty libraries with over a quarter of a million books, was left without reading material. Illegally and unofficially, however, the Jewish community immediately began to fight the psychic impoverishment the enemy thought to impose by separating them from books.

Leyb Shur began by gathering together the partly dispersed “Grosser” library. He obtained—I don't recall how—a mandate to do this work. In addition, he began to gather gifts from private individuals. With the undeflectable determination of a Litvak, the devotion and fanaticism of a true idealist, he threw himself into his work, and within the first months after the ghetto was enclosed, perhaps even before that, Shur was not only collecting books in his briefcase but he was also delivering them to his “subscribers.” He provided quite a large number of people with books on loan.

His second dream—a shyer, more secret one—was to publish at least one book in the ghetto, an edition of a few copies done on a typewriter to be published in typescript by the firm Tomor.

In spring 1941 the Judenrat<sup>3</sup> was empowered to grant permits to lending libraries, limiting them to Yiddish and Polish books. Leyb Shur worked on obtaining a permit to take over the treasure of books in the Lebn lending library on Dzielna Street. It had been shut down before the war by the Polish government on suspicion of serving as a front for communist activities. As if in defiance, this locked local with its huge collection of books survived the bombs and fires of 1939.

By then Shur was weak and thin, with yellow cushions under his eyes—the first signs of abscesses from hunger. Yet Shur didn't look for a way of making a living or receiving financial support from the leaders of the Judenrat or the (Jewish) Self-Help Agency.<sup>4</sup> If a friend offered him a packet of food from a Joint<sup>5</sup> warehouse, he took it. If the writer of these lines invited him into the folk kitchen for a bowl of soup,<sup>6</sup> he came in and ate. But he never spoke about his situation. All his time and thoughts were devoted to his dream: despite everything, at *this* time and in *these* circumstances to establish a great Jewish library.

And this dream started to come true.

He collected the books in a three-room apartment on Leszno 56 that he shared with his colleague, Borukh Makhlis, a former printer for the Warsaw Yiddish daily *Moment*. In Makhlis he had a sworn friend and assistant in his activities. Shur called a library card a book's "birth certificate" and had his own system of cataloging. With immense dedication, the two of them cataloged dozens of volumes daily, glued on the appropriate numbers and check-out slips, and transformed random heaps of partly injured books into a well-ordered cultural treasure, full of the world's wisdom and knowledge. Every wall of all three rooms of their apartment was clothed from floor to ceiling with shelves, of which every board and every screw was the fruit of endless chasing around, requests, special favors, gifts, and subsidies.

A selection of books had been put into order and set out on the shelves, and some chosen individuals were already able to come and borrow or exchange a book. I was among them. One day I left the kitchen on Leszno 40 a bit earlier than usual and stopped at Leszno 56 to wish Shur a mazel-tov for his achievement. We very much needed to encourage each other in those days and weeks before the terror—a time of talk, rumor, new proclamations, and nightly murders of listed persons—for that was their (the Nazis') tactic: to terrorize and murder and at the same time to offer concessions, issue passes, and lull our wakefulness for the already-determined murderous attacks.

\* \* \*

**N**ot all the boxes were unpacked. Shur and Makhlis weren't yet finished with their inventory and sorting of the books; they hadn't yet managed to plan the quiet—perhaps secret—opening celebration, which they'd decided despite everything to hold, at least as a symbolic gesture; the officially sanctioned ghetto lending library hadn't yet begun to function as a public institution when the deportations began.

Leyb Shur was a first-class printer and mechanic. Despite his age and gray hair he might have gotten a job working on machines in one shop<sup>7</sup> or another. But he didn't make the effort to do so. Disregarding the turmoil and their worry for themselves and their families, his friends tried to set things up for him, but Shur didn't respond to these offers.

August 5, the fifteenth day of the "action." On that day all residents of Leszno Street not employed by the Többens firm<sup>8</sup> were required to vacate their apartments

because all of Leszno, from Zelazne to Karmalicka, was now to be used exclusively as workshops and living quarters for Többens workers.

Early that Wednesday morning Shur's colleague and friend Makhlis got up while it was still practically dark. He went to the kitchen, put a light under the teakettle, set out the glasses on the table, and only then called Shur. Not getting an answer, he went to Shur's room to wake him and saw him standing by one of the bookcases, an unusually high one, with his head thrown back, looking up. Once again he didn't answer, and when Makhlis came closer, he saw what had happened: Shur had hung himself.

Terribly shaken, Makhlis ran to me a few buildings away at Leszno 66. He banged his head on the doorposts, weeping and yelling. He knew of my genuine friendship with Shur and his daily visits to the kitchen. I have to confess that I failed to measure up to his expectations. I didn't go with him to Shur's funeral or help him find someone who would possibly take the books. The hour of the "action" had come. Leszno might be blockaded at any moment. What could we do for a friend after his death if we hadn't been able to help him while he was alive?

That was the way we were in those days. The most terrifying events were our daily bread, and we responded with monotonous dullness. Sunk in a kind of psychotic narcosis, we suffered bloody horrors and reacted with a hardly noticeable tremor to the deepest cuts into the living body, to the loss of our identity.

There were people who were amazed to hear that Shur had taken his own life. They were jealous that he had found the courage to do it. They understood it was partly that he broke because of his library, which he couldn't have transferred to another place. Yet they considered the step he took a proud and courageous act. "Such an old man, such a white dove, and he did it?" They were jealous that he already had it behind him, the ugly useless struggle.

\* \* \*

**W**ho accompanied Shur to his eternal rest? Was anyone at the burial? What happened to Borukh Makhlis, his friend? I never saw him again or heard anything about either of them after that.

The newly billeted Többens slaves who moved into the apartment of the two printer friends didn't waste much time worrying about the problem that had perhaps driven Shur from the world—how to evacuate the library. They made short work of the books—got rid of them through the windows directly onto the piles of garbage below. In fact, there were too many books even for the garbage cans and garbage heaps of the three courtyards of Leszno 56. So the books lay there in the rain and the dust, in all the farthest corners.

After quite a long while, in the course of August and the first days of September—up to the time when the rest of the ghetto Jews were marched out to the great selection—the caretakers of our kitchen at Leszno 40, Joseph Erlich and his new friend, would take a handcart to go for flour from the mill at Leszno 56, and every time they went, they brought back whole heaps of books. And so Yiddish books began to pile up underfoot in the kitchen at Leszno 40 as well.

Waiting for coffee or a bowl of soup, the Többens slaves would take a book in hand, stroke the cover, flip the pages, look into it, and lay it aside with a sigh. They were no longer able to invite anyone even to a moment of forgetfulness, these abandoned books in the hands of these people abandoned by God.

\* \* \*

**B**ut setting aside for the time being the days that were the beginning of the end of the ghetto, I want to tell what Bashe Berman accomplished and afterward lost.

Winter and summer 1940. Bashe was working with groups that provided clothing to the refugees. Others collected clothing and bedclothes. Bashe collected books for the refugee children. And so that it would look more legitimate, this was called a project of gathering toys and storybooks. Children of families who lived in the city before the war had their own storybooks. A book exchange was organized among well-to-do households, and certain building committees had children's corners. The most unfairly treated and unfortunate was the child of the refugee points<sup>9</sup>—the orphaned, exiled child of the children's houses.

Like Leyb Shur, Bashe Berman carried a valise full of books with her and provided homeless children with books from her wandering library.

November 1940: the ghetto was being readied. The Public Library, Bashe's former employer, had to evacuate its quarters at Leszno 67. Bashe made efforts in the name of Centos<sup>10</sup> to obtain this local. She legalized it as part of the organization for children's get-togethers, which was run successfully by Klima Fussverk (later well known on the Aryan side as "Bagusza").

Bashe's work had to be disguised. The two rooms were decorated with frescoes of paper cutouts. Dolls, toy animals, and a variety of other toys were set out on the shelves. On the tables there were picture books with colored illustrations. All of this to give the institution a less serious, more playful appearance, to make it seem that much less than it was. Under this cover there was a treasure of children's literature in Yiddish and Polish. The books came from the same sources that Shur had found. In fact Shur himself was one of the most important contributors. He regularly separated out of his collection the material that was suited to children and youth.

"We have to help Bashe," he would exclaim. "We have to help her!" He encouraged Bashe's activities heart and soul and spread the word about the children's library.

Another warm friend and supporter of Bashe's work was the well-known child psychologist Rosa Simkhovitch. When she died in the fall of 1940, the children's library was named after her.

\* \* \*

**T**he library at Leszno 67 flourished.

In a short time it reached more than seven hundred child subscribers. Often the children weren't used to reading Yiddish or didn't know the Hebrew

alphabet at all. Bashe had her own method of winning them over to Yiddish books.

She would lend them two books each—one in Polish, the other in Yiddish. For many of the children, the Yiddish books were a revelation, a key to their moods. Some developed an exceptional love of stories in Yiddish.

From time to time the library organized readings from Yiddish books by the children themselves, and there were lectures about Yiddish literature for assimilated teachers. The patriots of Yiddish culture would meet here at modest get-togethers. We felt so close to each other in this home for Jewish children and Yiddish books. It was here I last saw Rosa Simkhovitch before she died and Menakhem Linder the last time before he was shot. I can still hear him humming along to the tune of “Don and Donna” as it was being performed at the children’s library.

Bashe’s most important assistants were the children themselves: Shulamis Bratshteyn, the seventeen-year-old daughter of a well-known Włocławek community volunteer and friend of YIVO, and the even-younger girls, Tobtshe Keytel, Royzele Shvartsberg, and Paula Blazer. One was thirteen, the other two fifteen.

Whenever Bashe mentioned their names after the war, her face lit with a sad smile. Even after they died, she smiled when she thought of them—they were so sweet, young, and full of charm.

\* \* \*

**T**he most important work of the library was to provide reading matter to the poorest and least-fortunate children. This included the children in the dormitories, half dormitories, and hospitals established during the war and even the children in quarantine, where families suffering from typhus would be held for weeks at a time. These were the tragic curiosities of ghetto life reflected through the prism of a children’s library.

For sanitary reasons, Bashe put together special loan packages for the children at the refugee points. Among other such packages, she had a special set of books for children who suffered from scabies.

Despite all the efforts of their teachers and caregivers, the children at some of the refugee points lived in frightful circumstances. Most of them had nothing warm to put on in the winter, no boots. There was no fuel to warm the rooms. But read they did, these children! They sent delegates outfitted in the few warm things that belonged to everyone to exchange books.

They would come on stipulated days—children with the characteristic look and bad smell of the refugee points, most of them with the shaved heads of the eternal sanitary inspections that plagued these institutions, with faces already showing signs of abscessed cushions under their eyes. They came with endless practicality and seriousness to “take care of” books, stretching their skinny arms out for books, the precious remedy to their dire need.

At certain refugee points where the children couldn’t read on their own because of the cold in the unheated rooms, collective readings would be organized. Bashe would remind the caregiver of the half dormitory on Wolnosc 16, Przepiorka, that

it was time for a reading. The teacher read and the children huddled close to each other under the covers, and with longing in their faces they listened to a story about a journey, an adventure that took place under a faraway sky in the warm lands of Asia or Africa.

One famous client of Basia's was a passionate book swallower named Meyerl. Once he returned a book with lice crawling around on the pages. No one at the library got angry at Meyerl for this. He certainly wasn't to blame that there were lice crawling on his book just as there were on his starved body. It was simply clear that the library had to find a way to disinfect books.

\* \* \*

**A**s it turned out, the books of the children's library played a role at the time of the actions.

Bashe told me after the war that even in the first days of the roundups there were children who wouldn't give up borrowing books. They came to Leszno 67 during lending hours to exchange books. And so the library served its clients one more time—for the last time. Among them was a little girl named Simtshe, who was very bold. She wasn't afraid to go out on the streets. "My father works at Töb-bens!" she boasted, and showed an identity card.

What these identity cards were worth, we know. The books that were taken out on that day were never returned. How many of them were packed into the small bundles prepared for the children to take on the trip "to the east"? How many of them later lay scattered around on the ground at Treblinka, along with the daily and holiday prayer books in the large rucksacks?

I see as if he were before me now a boy during one of the blockades on Leszno. His father has been in jail for weeks. His mother has decided to travel "willingly" to the *Umschlagplatz*<sup>1</sup> with her child, hoping to get to relatives in Brześć, and she is gathering provisions for the trip from the neighbors in the courtyard of Leszno 66. All around there is the uproar, the bizarre madness of a blockade. But the twelve-year-old boy, immersed in his newly discovered worlds, lost and swept away, is standing in the corner of the courtyard, not hearing or seeing what is happening around him. He is reading a tattered book with a red binding.

1 "Pani Basia": Mrs. Basia (Polish). Bashe Berman and her husband escaped from the ghetto in September 1942 and helped establish an undercover organization that assisted Jews hiding on the "Aryan side," i.e., in occupied Warsaw outside the ghetto walls.

2 *CEntrala KAs BEzprocentowych* (Cekabe) was a Jewish credit union that offered interest-free loans.

3 Judenrat: Jewish council set up by the Germans to administer the ghetto.

4 (Jewish) Self-Help Agency (*Juedische Sociale Selbsthilfe*): agency that took welfare collections, organized soup kitchens, and provided other assistance to the ghetto populace.

5 Joint: Joint Distribution Committee, founded in the United States at the outbreak of World War I to aid

Jews in Palestine. It later provided assistance to European Jewish refugees.

6 Folk kitchens: soup kitchens serving minimal portions of soup once a day.

7 Shop: ghetto workplace established by the Germans to support their war effort.

8 Többens firm: one of the most important of the ghetto shops. “Action”: *Aktion* (German), roundup of the ghetto populace for systematic selection and forced deportation.

9 Points: mass living quarters for homeless refugees.

10 Centos (*Centrale Opieki nad Sierotami*): center for assistance to orphan children.

11 *Umschlagplatz*: transshipment station, railroad siding first used for unloading officially sanctioned provisions for the ghetto, later used as a collection point for deportations “east”—to Treblinka and other camps of the Lublin district.



# Springtime Back Home and Seems It Had to Be

By Rokhl Korn

TRANSLATED BY MIRIAM ISAACS

## Springtime Back Home

The first rays of daylight slice the streets open,  
still fragrant with fresh bread.

In the east, the ripe fruit of the sky splits open  
parted by that glowing red seed.

The last shadows of the night  
curl up behind the alleyways,  
like the clothes of a wanderer, who after a long voyage  
has brought his longing to harbor.

The green swords of irises  
spear upward into the spring sky,  
which drops down in soft, gray clouds  
as if wanting to make some ancient dream come true,  
an age-old dream of the earth  
conquering the high heavens.

The trees are armed with the dynamite  
of folded blossoms,  
awaiting the first signal,  
set off by sunbeams.

The early morning plays  
its gentle ringing melody  
on the golden violin strings  
of a flying bee  
seeking the heart of the tree.

The first sour-cherry blossom

unfurled,  
immodest,  
wrinkled,  
like a girl's white dress at playtime,  
snagged at the seam,  
a white dream.

*May 1941, Przemysl*

# Seems It Had to Be

Seems it had to be that I should,  
with a sole shirt on my body,  
a last pair of torn shoes on my feet,  
roam thousands of miles over a friendless wilderness.

Every doorstep and entryway greets me with suspicion,  
nor will I have the familiarity of home, warm walls,  
no fire in the kitchen prepared for me,  
nor the smile of a mother turned toward me.

Let the bare plank, that is both bed and pillow,  
be harder than a rock under my head  
so that even blue dreams elude me,  
reaching up, like a golden ladder, to the distant plain of the sky.

It seems it ought to have been so,  
that behind me fires would burn road and bridge.  
Let my glance, if it struggles to look back  
turn me into a pillar of salt.

May it come to dust and may it come to ash,  
All the work and toil of my years  
But let me be, with every new poem,  
like you, my God, with each spring, reborn.

*September 1941, Ufa*

*Rokhl Korn was born in Galicia, Poland, in 1898, and began publishing poems there at the age of 21. Her family fled to Vienna during World War I. When Korn returned to Poland, she became affiliated with Tsushtayer, a Yiddish literary journal. In the 1920s and 1930s she published two poetry collections and a book of short stories. In 1941, she was evacuated to Uzbekistan and later Moscow. She wrote all through the war, and the poems published here first appeared in a 1948 issue of Heym un heymlozikayt, a journal in Buenos Aires; they were all written during the war years. At the war's end she returned briefly to Poland and then to Sweden, where she was invited to a PEN conference. She settled in Montreal in 1948, where she continued her literary activities until her death in 1982.*



# Freeways

By Broche Coodley

TRANSLATED BY MIRI KORAL

The pensive palms no longer rustle  
on my street  
and birds won't be returning  
to cheer the dawns.

A faster tempo replaced the rhythm  
of soft footfalls with a key of dissonance,  
driving streets of sprouting earth  
into far-flung, sprawling lanes  
that confront you alien and hard.

On the spot where a row of houses  
had found their true place—  
iron bridges span  
chasing the tête-à-tête chatter of birds  
to far-off paths.

. . . The distances grow no closer,  
but the closeness escapes to afar . . .

Its tranquility sundered—  
my street stays lost  
in its being-not-being fate  
in its displaced disruption  
and its automobile chaos din.

How can I witness its extermination—  
where shadows of the past yet remain,  
the footprints of my strolls erased there  
where in quiet times  
I confided to the gloaming  
my struggles and dismay?

O, street of my youthful hopes  
only you know how much sorrow

I was destined to bear  
seeking comfort in words,  
even before . . .  
when I found the courage to spin a word,  
still afraid  
of shaming my stanzas.

Your pathways  
led my child to school—  
and there later with my child's child  
I played hide-and-seek.

From their nests  
in the oleander tree and rosebush  
that stood at my window,  
the birds twittered "amen"  
to every line of a poem . . .

Years have passed,  
but still I hear an echo  
of the cool thoughtful words  
of Lamed Shapiro,  
an occasional guest:  
"Until when, Brokhe,  
will you stay on San Benito Street  
and where do you get such a thirst  
for writing? . . .

The highways seethe,  
cars roar,  
bridges vault—  
my street is trapped in chaos's grip.  
Perhaps it will be gladdened  
that I have summoned it up.

*Kheshbn #13, 1958*

*Broche Coodley was born in Podol, Russia, in 1893, emigrated to the United States in 1912, and was living in Los Angeles by the 1930s. She was a frequent contributor to the Yiddish journal Kheshbn during its early years (the 1940s and*

'50s) and published three volumes of poetry: *Uzorn* (Patterns; 1931), *Midber un marantsn* (Desert and Oranges; 1946), and *Nit af broyt aley*n (Not on Bread Alone; 1971). The time and place of her death is uncertain.



# A Seder in the Taiga

By Yenta Mash

TRANSLATED BY ELLEN CASSEDY

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

*“A Seder in the Taiga,” published as “A seyder in der tayge” in her 2007 collection Mit der letster hakofe (The Last Time Around), is the story of a unique Passover meal consumed in the Soviet gulag by a group of women prisoners. Substituting a pine cone for the egg on the seder plate, they rework the traditional ritual to reflect with tart humor on their difficult circumstances.*

**I**t was the only time in my life when everyone at the Passover table was thinking only about the Haggadah, not the matzo balls—perhaps because there wasn’t a whiff of a matzo ball to be found.

That year in Siberia, spring arrived a few weeks earlier than expected. Here and there, the Ob began to thaw. We had to stop crossing the river by sled, and even walking on the ice became risky, so we stayed home and waited to be able to make it over by boat. This waiting was no small problem. Of course we were accustomed to waiting, but it’s one thing to wait when you’re getting your daily bread ration or have a few potatoes, beets, or turnips on hand—and quite another when your cupboard is completely bare, and the few “prosperous” Siberians in the area, the old-time settlers, can’t be persuaded to part with the smallest crumb, no matter what you offer. Everyone’s reserves were running low. People wouldn’t risk taking food out of their own mouths for all the money in the world.

As if that weren’t enough, God sent us yet another affliction—not one from the Haggadah but a Siberian one. The heavy layers of snow that had built up during the long winter caused the chimney of the bakery in Krasnoye to collapse. This, alas, was the only large-scale bakery in the area. It provided bread to villages and settlements for miles around. What were we to do? Three times a day, we gobbled down whatever meager nourishment we could put our hands on. We gathered mushrooms in the forest and ate them with the wild garlic the Siberians called *kol-ba*, and before we’d swallowed the last spoonful we were hungry again.

Two weeks passed like this, and then came word from Krasnoye, where the

village council and our commandant were located, saying that if we sent them two strong young men with sleds, they would give us the sacks of flour we were owed for the two weeks. After that . . . God willing, the bakery would soon be back in operation.

The entire district turned out to send off the expedition. Everyone had a suggestion, a word of advice, a blessing. The journey would be difficult, as the road was not smooth but full of puddles, so that even empty sleds were hard to move. A week passed before we saw them come crawling back, inching along with the help of those who'd been sent to meet them.

In this way the Lord provided us with matzo for Passover. The non-Jews made potato dumplings they called *kletski*, as well as *zateriukhes*, which they devoured with a thin potato soup, and since it was the day before Passover, the Jewish women used our portion to bake matzo.

Baking matzo—how impressive that sounds. It wasn't egg matzo, and it certainly wasn't made according to the traditional rules. The dough kept falling apart under the rolling pin, and the matzos came out tiny, each no bigger than a yawn, but they were matzos all the same. Also, they were the color of clay. Nonetheless, they were very tasty. Where is it written that matzos must be crisp and pale? Our matzos certainly filled the bill for a Siberian "bread of affliction."

All the Jewish families from our section and the one next to ours came to the seder, and there was matzo for everyone. My mother led the ceremony. Since we had no Haggadahs, she proposed that we celebrate the seder in a new way. Year after year, she said, we'd conducted the seder according to the rules laid down by the scholars of old, but this year, by necessity, we'd add our own twist. We would not ask the Four Questions, first of all because there was no one to ask them of, and second because once we began asking we wouldn't be done till morning. Our questions weren't actually questions anyway—they were complaints, directed at God. For example, why on this day do we not eat leavened bread? Very simple. Because the bakery in Krasnoye isn't operating. And maror? We have more bitter herbs than we need; we've all eaten *kolba* till we're green in the face. As for dipping, we're drowning in a sea of tears, and when it comes to reclining, we're up to our necks in the middle of nowhere.

We were slaves in Egypt, my mother said, and today we're slaves of Stalin, exiled to hard labor in the Siberian taiga, without rights and without the slightest hope of rescue.

Why, my mother continued, should we listen to what Eliezer said thousands of years ago about the exodus from Egypt, or quote from the words of Reb Berl or Reb Shmerl, when right here at the table, Aunt Gitl and Madam Glazer, Madam Gurevitz and Sonya Shmukler, Sheyndl Gelman and Madam Schwartzman can tell us about how their homes were destroyed in the dark of night and their families torn asunder without a why or wherefore? Let each of us tell how we used to live in our little towns, upholding our Jewish traditions and our humanity, caring for the poor, distributing challah for Shabbat and matzos for Passover, providing dowries to needy brides and help to the destitute. Yet even so, the Lord sent his messenger

to condemn us to wander and suffer in the Siberian taiga.

If we had been exiled and not separated from the men—*dayeynu!* That would have been misery enough! But no, the cup of suffering had to be drained to the very dregs. The men were separated from us and sent to the slave labor camps in the Urals while the women and children were condemned to die in the taiga.

Our sins, my mother said, must have been great indeed to cause the Lord to pour out his wrath upon us. Great indeed to cause him to send down the plagues upon us rather than upon our oppressors. And speaking of wrath, why, Lord, are You always full of wrath, and why must You always be visiting Your wrath on someone? After all, it was You who created the world that turned out the way it did. You have only Yourself to blame.

Everyone agreed. We all contributed our share to the unwritten Siberian Haggadah until the hour grew late and we noticed the seder plate that had been sitting on the table like a poor bride dressed in borrowed finery. A boiled potato scrounged up from somewhere, a bone from God knows what animal, a pine cone in place of an egg, berries instead of haroseth, and a big heap of maror—*kolba*, of course. Everyone at the table shared in the bounty, we said a blessing, and the meal was served. We finished up with strong tea brewed from dried lingonberry leaves, and then we sang. We put our own special stamp on the songs. We ended the “Who knows one?” song partway through, right after the Four Matriarchs, so as to give pride of place to the “*Khad-gadye*,” in which the cat devours the goat, the dog bites the cat, the stick beats the dog, and so on and so on—one big outpouring of pain and suffering without any attempt to make peace, just killing and burning and devouring on all sides, until finally the Angel of Death kills the slaughterer, at which point God finally realizes that things have gone too far and steps in to end the massacre.

Isn't it remarkable, my mother said, what people can take pleasure in, what they can believe in, in times of need? We tell ourselves a terrible story, we slap on a happy ending—and praised be the Lord, *leoylem-voed*, forever. We repeat the story generation after generation and cling like drowning people to the hope that the same God who led our forefathers out of Egypt will also rescue us from here, *bim-heyre-beyemeynu*, speedily in our days, amen!

None of us wanted to think that this seder might be our last. But by the next year, my mother was no longer alive, and other women from our town of Zguritse had also died before their time. They lie buried in the Siberian earth for eternity. We never had any more matzos, not even miraculous ones, and never again did we feel a desire to celebrate another seder in Siberia.



# High Doorsteps

By Shira Gorshman

TRANSLATED BY FAITH JONES

*Born in 1905 in Lithuania, Shira Gorshman did not begin writing until the late 1930s. By then she had lived in Palestine and Crimea, serving as a member of workers' collectives in both locales. In Moscow she married the artist Mendel Gorshman and began writing as a response to the creative life there. She continued writing steadily until her death in Israel in 2001, often reflecting on the vulnerability and tenacity of Jewish life in different historical settings. She particularly investigated women's roles in Jewish and Soviet cultures and the impact of world events, such as the Holocaust and Jewish settlement in Palestine, on the communist ideals she continued to hold dear, even as she despaired of ever seeing them truly put into practice.*

*"High Doorsteps" takes us into the world of Soviet labor communes. These utopian enterprises were not free of the power relations they sought to overturn; in this story Gorshman shows, through a gendered lens, how both resistance and solidarity are needed to create a more just world.*

**T**he landowner's enormous house had made it through the revolution with the windows unbroken, the knobs and hinges still attached to the thick oak doors; but the commune's young members used just two rooms and the kitchen.

The house was intact but appeared empty and abandoned. You couldn't see the painted floors through the layers of dust. A cloudy, green-pink color bloomed on the windowpanes. The corners of the ceilings were matted with cobwebs. Wind blew in freely through the doors, lifting up the thin green mattresses and sniffing the old leggings underneath, then flew back out to the breezy steppe.

When they left for the quarry in the morning, they didn't bother locking the door. It wasn't that they were careless or forgot. Nobody was going to take their few possessions. The only really useful items were secured. The big pot was concealed in the stove and the table was nailed to the wall. The empty kitchen cupboards no longer needed the heavy, old locks that had done their best to keep the landowner's pantry safe. The wooden spoon, the military dishes, and the two tin pails were carried to the quarry.

There was no variation from routine. For breakfast they ate anchovies on bread. For dinner, a thin millet porridge or groats, which they called "shrapnel." Quarry work was hard, even though the soft Crimean stone was made of seashells and you

could see it like wood. In recent weeks they were finding it hard to work together. Berkovitch had temporarily taken over for the chairman. Berkovitch found more and more of his work was urging the comrades on.

“If we let the kasha burn, the whole revolution suffers! Don’t you know the chairman has gone specifically to find us help? Are we going to let everything go to the dogs because of some food? We’re getting a housekeeper soon. They won’t send just anyone. We just have to be patient. If we keep bungling, we won’t get a single house built before fall! What kind of beginning would that be? There’s nothing else to discuss.”

In any event, the comrades were more astonished and disappointed than relieved.

She arrived with a bulging bag in her right hand, her left hand supporting the bundle hanging in a sling from her left shoulder.

Berkovitch looked over the new arrival and read carefully through the paper she presented to him. He said, “Oh, good. The Yevpatoria party committee knows what we need. What is your name?”

“Golda. He’s Yulik,” she said, blushing as she unwrapped the package in the sling.

The men looked at the tiny, pale pink cheeks, the eyes as blue as his mother’s. They couldn’t stop looking at him. Berkovitch smiled.

“Lovely. Yulik—is Yulik. As for you, we’ll soon find out what you’re all about. Here is the key to the pantry. Go to it! There’s a sack of barley groats in there if the mice haven’t got to them first. Some vegetables should be delivered today. Did you get a ride from the station?”

“With a team of four horses,” Golda answered, looking in surprise at her new key.

“What time did you leave Yevpatoria?”

“Four a.m. I was impatient to get started,” Golda answered, watching as the men started streaming out the door.

“That’s just what we need—a bunch of diapers!” Elik remarked as they left, speaking loudly to be heard over the banging of the pails.

“Perhaps Yulik’s maker didn’t like diapers either,” Berkovitch remarked sadly.

“Is it not just as Zarathustra said? Sire a baby, and get out as fast as you can!” Arele joked. They burst out laughing and walked a little faster.

Golda, with her baby on her hip, went from room to room trying to understand why they had chosen to live in the two rooms farthest from the kitchen. By tomorrow she would have the house arranged differently. She hadn’t heard the men’s banter, but if she had it would not have surprised her. The party secretary in Yevpatoria had said almost the same things: “Do you have any idea how much you’ll have to do? Plant a garden, wash diapers, cook food for all the comrades?”

“I can manage all that. The baby won’t be a burden to anybody,” Golda had said.

The party secretary allowed it but gave her a warning. “No funny business! There’s nothing but men out there. This is a carefully chosen crew.”

“I’m not a fool. Funny business is never a good idea. My baby is nobody’s business but mine,” Golda answered tartly.

She stood now in the kitchen of the carefully chosen, looking at their empty cupboards. She found the barley and quickly made a thin soup. She fed Yulik and herself, put a fire under the huge pot that she had filled with water, and went outside. She didn’t have to wander far to find what she needed. There was wormwood growing nearby. She made several brooms so she could use some for the walls and ceilings and others for the floors. She scrubbed out all the rooms, finally cleaning out the one at the very end for herself. She settled Yulik in there. Since the rooms all led from one into the next, this meant she could keep him in there and herself out of sight, at least until Yulik learned how to climb over the high doorsteps.

She opened all the windows, brought the mattresses outside, and threw out the old leggings.

Yulik’s fierce wail made its way through the house, echoing sharply off the high ceilings. Golda, busy sweeping off the walls, murmured, “Those aren’t pearls of wisdom falling from your lips . . .” and continued with her work. When the walls, sleeping planks, and floors were spotless, she gathered up the aired-out mattresses and put one on the floor of her own room, where Yulik was now fast asleep. She laid out a yellow diaper and swaddled him in it. She kissed his little tush. He had cried himself into a deep slumber, and her kisses didn’t wake him up. She rummaged in her bag for her satin skirt and covered Yulik with it.

She went back to the kitchen. All the surfaces gradually revealed their colors. You could tell what wood the table was made of; the metal doorknobs and hinges sparkled, polished with a crumbled piece of a clay brick. Everything was in order by the time Yulik woke up from his nap. Golda gave both him and herself a quick wash, then put on a dark blue tunic with an angled, standing collar and the skirt she had covered Yulik with for his nap.

When the commune’s men returned from the quarry, they only stepped inside the door before they stopped, barely recognizing their home. The house smelled clean and fresh, with a faint scent of wormwood. They looked silently around, each in turn. They gradually drifted through the kitchen to the dining room. Arele was the first to regain his voice.

“Dialectical materialism teaches us that floors are painted just before the working class goes to hell in a handbasket . . .”

“Stop goofing around,” Elik interrupted.

“What are you so upset about? You’re the one who was complaining about diapers,” said Vitke, who was usually quiet. He was going to remind Elik of something else but clammed up when he caught sight of Golda.

“For tonight, you’ll have to lend me a mattress,” Golda said, looking around at the men. “I’ve already pulled up some hay to make my own, and it’s drying now.”

“Everything here is yours,” said Berkovitch, smiling and spreading his arms wide as if the house were full of beautiful things.

“Not mine but *ours*,” Golda remarked, going quietly to her room at the far end of the house.

It was late that night when Shimen returned from Yevpatoria. He brought with him a big barrel of live flounder, oil, millet, and barley flour. When the men awoke before dawn the next morning, breakfast was ready for them. A bowl of kasha stood at each place; fried fish lay on the upturned pot lid in the center of the table. Both large pails were filled with flatbreads to take along for lunch.

As she saw the men out that morning, she told them, “From now on, we’ll eat at six o’clock every evening. Please don’t be late. I can’t promise, but I’m going to try to make gefilte fish tonight, if I can grind the nicks out of the hatchet.”

At the quarry the commune members couldn’t stop talking about Golda. Yankl chewed his flatbread thoughtfully and was moved to share his opinion. He was the one they called “the leaden bird.”

“Golda has had her share of troubles; that’s why she works so hard!”

Borekh cut him off. “You haven’t had a life of luxury either, but you’re perfectly happy to let the next guy over pull out three stones in the time it takes you to pull out one!”

“Agreed. A lazybones doesn’t come out ahead. But I’ve never seen anything like her. She’s a dynamo. How does she get it all done?” Berkovitch wondered.

“Things are going to be different now!” exclaimed Munye happily. He had sat silent until now, but his gray eyes were narrow and gleamed like the blade of a new knife.

“I wish you good luck, but be careful! And that’s enough jaw-flapping anyway,” Berkovitch said, then yelled, “Let’s get some rocks out of this quarry!”

The talk stopped. Then the only sounds were gasps for air and the dull thud of stones as the commune’s workers piled them up in regular, square heaps.

Golda planted her garden behind the house. Soon the men had green onions and spring radishes to take with their lunch. Golda was busy from dawn to dusk. If the delivery of produce was delayed, she would pick up Yulik and run to the farm across the way, never returning empty-handed. She was friendly, comradely, but restrained. After work on Friday, each commune member found clean, mended clothes waiting for him along with freshly cut pieces of soap beside their basins of steaming hot water. Yulik’s little body was covered in blue bruises even though Golda padded the high doorsteps with scraps of old quilted jackets to keep him from hurting himself.

Sometimes one of her comrades would say, “How does this all get done? How do you get through all this work so quickly?” She would answer, “We need to give a

communal thanks to the stove for being big enough to handle everything!”

She wasn't wrong. Pretty much as soon as the fire was going in the stove, the food was cooked and ready for the rest of the day. Golda put on two huge pots of kasha with two tins of anchovies. She never used up their oil supply because she would save the grease from the tins of fish. Sometimes she would take a skinny piece of bread and dunk it in the fish oil, sprinkle some salt on it, and give it to Yulik to chew on. He grew so healthy on this diet that he stopped needing to nurse. The extra weight made it hard for him to get up over the doorsteps, which was no bad thing either.

Once when Shimen brought the produce he also brought Golda a heavy clay toy on thin legs. Golda stared at it trying to figure out what it could be. “Not a camel, not a lion, not a buffalo, not a horse . . . oh, it's a deer!”

“Zarathustra agrees,” Arele said, making a pair of horns for the deer out of matchsticks.

Yulik loved his toy. He didn't even try to climb over the doorsteps now. Golda would find him napping peacefully on one of the quilted jackets, the toy in his arms.

There was more free time now. The commune members would walk to the nearby farms after dinner—even Golda, when she had time. She carried Yulik and got the chance to chat with the local women. She already knew some of them, and one, Zara, was becoming a friend. Zara had been to the commune one day and seen Golda's bed but said nothing. A few days later she returned with a pillow and a blanket. Golda insisted it wasn't necessary, and even that she would strain her neck since she wasn't used to pillows, but Zara wouldn't take them back.

And it came to pass that shortly thereafter, the pillows and blanket witnessed the most extraordinary event.

**G**olda's days were filled with labor. Hands worked, feet moved, the mind ticked over. Occasionally she took Yulik out to the steppe to watch the birds rise suddenly from their hidden nests among the grass, or to look up at seagulls that had flown all the way from the sea. They were watching one day when a seagull dove to snatch up a lizard, then flew away screaming shrilly, as if the lizard had attacked the seagull and not the other way around. “Nothing new there: the butcher screams for help,” she mused, letting her thoughts drift. “Just like from two bodies you most often make a third body and almost never make one soul. That's just the way it is.” She was grateful that her new comrades were men of few words, quiet and reserved. It didn't offend her when Berkovitch said, as he often did, “Take a break, Golda dear. I'll look after Yulik.” She would hand over Yulik and think, “You can't learn to be a leader. You've either got it or you don't.”

And it was just then—once Golda had navigated the choppy waters and learned to live in a house full of strangers, from time to time even looking in the last broken mirror in the house to check she hadn't aged too much from all her troubles—that one more trouble came to find her.

Golda was sleeping as she always did, deeply and restfully, the way the young sleep when they're bone-tired. She woke suddenly, feeling constricted. She tried to sit up. Strong arms, hot breath, and crude words pushed her back down.

“Stop fighting. You're not a schoolgirl.”

Hands wandered over her body; hot, heaving breaths pushed their way into her terrified mouth . . . She gathered her strength and bit down hard on the thing that disgusted her most.

He slid weakly off the bed. Golda grabbed Yulik and jumped over the body on the floor. Standing in the middle of the room she began spitting out words, which reverberated like an avalanche in the soft silence of the night. “You animal! You vile beast! Get out! Get out!” She screamed the words from her wide-open mouth, sobbing. She pulled Yulik more tightly to her breast.

In the morning Golda did her work, as always. She said not a word to anyone, looked at no one, stood stiff and grim. As the men were leaving for work, she saw them head off for the quarry, all except Munye. He walked the other way, toward town and the train station. She understood then. Her comrades had seen clearly, and rendered their verdict.



# I Have Seen

By Rosa Nevadovska

TRANSLATED BY MERLE BACHMAN

I have seen the radiant dazzle  
Of the hour before the stars ascend.  
I have seen, at the height of day, its end—  
And thought of beginnings and vanishings.

I have stood astonished: around me  
Heavenly bodies shimmered and dimmed,  
And a wind, with a light touch  
Spoke to the world in a gesture of silence

*“I Have Seen” reflects an important aspect of Rosa Nevadovska’s work, in which the speaker presents herself as alone in nature and privy to a kind of mystical experience.*

*Rosa Nevadovska (1890–1971), a poet from Białystok, immigrated to the United States in 1928. She was married briefly and gave birth to a daughter, who died at the age of two during a winter in Moscow, where the poet lived from 1914 until the end of World War I. In the United States, Nevadovska was a writer and journalist, traveling, lecturing, and residing in various cities, from New York to Venice, California. She published one volume of poems in her lifetime: *Azoy vi ikh bin* (As I Am; 1936). After her death, her family discovered scores of unpublished poems, which were published as *Lider mayne* (My Poetry; 1974). “I Have Seen” appears in this volume.*



# Untitled

**From *My Days* (1952)**

By Bertha Kling

TRANSLATED BY LEAH ZAZULYER

Wind, you weeping wind,  
why do you come to frighten me?  
My children are already asleep;  
I beg you not to wake them.  
Winds, long ago,  
cried like you do;  
go, bring them back from there,  
and let us rest here in peace.

*Bertha Kling was born around 1885 in Nowogrodek (then White Russia) and died in New York City in 1978. An orphan, she lived for a time in Germany before arriving in the United States in 1899. Her poetry was published widely in newspapers and journals, and three volumes of her poetry were published during her time in New York. Along with her husband Yehiel, Kling maintained an open salon-like house, where she welcomed and helped other Yiddish writers. She is mentioned warmly in the papers of Zishe Landau, Melech Ravitch, Ruven Iceland, and other New York-based Yiddish literary figures. Although Kling wrote at a time when overtly feminist work was not in fashion, her writing is dominated by women's issues, including motherhood, marriage, and domesticity. While her poems are characterized by modesty in thought, action, and expectations with regard to all her relationships, these apparently pious and self-effacing poems also have an underlying tone of sensuality and emotional intensity. These conflicting undercurrents heighten the tension in her work and create a link between her love of God and her exploration of love in the broadest sense of the word. To date, only four of her poems have been translated.*



# Operating Room

By Rokhl Korn

TRANSLATED BY MURRAY CITRON

Why so much light,  
Why so bright?  
All the lamps are lit  
As if a big simhah  
Was waiting for us.  
The glare  
Stabs in the eyes  
And bleaches the hair.

And they dress you up,  
Pure in holiday white,  
A sacrifice, a still life,  
Ready for the knife.

The day ends here with its bother.  
Will there be another?  
Who knows?

It's so still around, you hear how a breath  
Is frozen in the emptiness of air,  
And how a pulse swallows the last drops of life  
On the narrow bridge  
Between here and there.

Or has my childhood come back to me  
From old forgotten days,  
With Purim-dance and Purim-plays?  
Now look at them coming  
In white coats and masks that show only their eyes,  
All in disguise.

I try to guess, to make out  
Whose mug is hidden behind the mask,  
Chaim Moshe's, or Sender's, or the butcher's son, Abie?

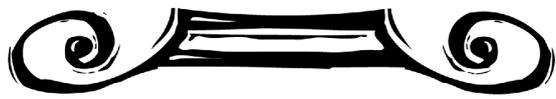
And maybe it's Death?  
Or is it Life, maybe, maybe?

A sharp sound of steel on glass,  
A shears, a pincer, a saw—  
The stillness snaps with a crash.

Only not to see, not to hear  
The grate of metal on glass.  
I am still the boss  
Of slowpokes who blunder.  
I can make, where I lie,  
One last, dogged cry:  
Put me under, put me under!  
Let me loose from this flesh,  
At which are aimed  
The point of a knife,  
The teeth of a saw.  
Someone takes pity,  
Someone has heard  
My cry—  
I sink deeper and deeper  
As if for me  
The dark earth had torn  
Her insides open.

A cataract closes  
The world over me.  
The lamps that burn bright,  
The windows and walls  
Inherit from me.  
I am somewhere myself  
On the other side of night.

*Rokhl Korn was born in 1898 in East Galicia, Poland. She was a highly regarded Yiddish writer in prewar Poland, surviving the war by escaping to the Soviet Union but losing most of her family. After the war she made her way back to Poland and then to Montreal, where she built a family and continued a distinguished literary career, still in Yiddish.*



# Does It Mean I Long for You

By Malka Locker

TRANSLATED BY RI TURNER

Does it mean I long for you,  
If a stranger's step outside  
Conjures up for me your stride?

Does it mean I hear your call,  
If I withdraw into my shell  
Yet music haunts me, still and all?

Does it mean it's you I love,  
If I see you by my door  
And hide myself from all that's yours?

*Malka Locker was born in 1887 in Kitev, Galicia (present-day Ukraine). In 1910, she married her cousin Berl Locker, who became a Zionist leader, and traveled with him to cities around the world. Locker did not begin writing poetry until the age of forty-two, when a friend who was impressed by the poetic quality of her letters suggested that she try. Over the following decades, she published over six volumes of poetry, including one in German. She also was active as a literary critic, particularly of French poetry. She died in Jerusalem in 1990, at the age of 103.*

*Locker's work received some attention from critics writing in the Yiddish press, particularly in the 1930s, when she first emerged onto the scene. Many of her writings were later translated into Hebrew and French. To date, very little of her work has been translated into English.*

*This poem is from Locker's second poetry collection, *Du (You)*. The book's epigraph—"Where can I find You / And where can I not find You?"—is taken from Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev's song/prayer "A dudele" and highlights the book's theme: the love that inhabits the blurry borderland between eros and prayer.*



# Acacias Bloom

By Dvoyre Fogel

TRANSLATED BY ANASTASIYA LYUBAS

*Dvoyre Fogel (Dvora Vogel) (1900–1942) was a Yiddish modernist writer, philosopher, art critic, and translator. She was a “wandering star” who inhabited interstitial spaces not only between Polish modernism and the Yiddish modernist renaissance movement in Eastern Europe and North America but also between genres of artistic expression. Her illuminating writing style has qualities akin to painting and the plastic arts. Fogel’s collection of prose montage, Acacias Bloom, was first published in Yiddish (1935) and then in Polish (1936). The collection transplants experiments in the genres of photography, film, and painting into the literary medium. The translated excerpts are from “Flower Shops with Azaleas,” one of three parts in the Acacias Bloom collection. The montage pieces create an interplay of colors, geometric shapes, and other visual sensations. They are based on the logic of simultaneity in juxtaposed impressions: the round shape of blooming azaleas in a flower shop, for example, or the rectangle as the shape of a soldier’s march.*

## 1. Streets and Sky

**T**hat day, streets reflected the sky. And the sky was gray and warm. And when the sky is gray, the streets are matte and sweet, like a warm gray sea.

The people who found themselves on the street that day were dying for some kind of encounter. And finally, an awkward and inexplicable longing emerged to immerse themselves in an elaborate novel, even an old-fashioned one.

Surely, the novel had to open with the following sentences: “That day . . .” and “In the gray clarity of a day with streets like gray seas, [the calendar date comes here], a man in a gray coat and a black bowler hat strolled along L. Street, reflecting on his life up to that point . . .”

The novel had to start in that style and everything in the novel had to begin with a similar effect, since there is demand for that now. And the novel would recount the course that life could take and how fates are made out of nothing: out of blue air, tacky boredom, and a single banal encounter.

And like a matter still not settled—though it has been experienced for many years—a long-forgotten sentence began to gnaw: “How does one live?” The question was just as banal as it was before, as ignorant of its own banality as it was the first time.

Meanwhile, on the streets as gray as the sea, the new romance of ordinary life had begun, as yet unnoticed by the many passersby.

The streets in that novel smelled of elasticity, of glass, and of walking. They smelled, also, of something unusual: the hardness and roundness of objects.

In those streets of that novel, the sticky space hardened into things of unusual kinds: spheres and flat planes, mostly gray and white.

The appearance of dense canvases of white space is treated like an event. Walls occur in this novel, thick like longing and the sweltering heat. Walls: whiter than in reality, melancholy white or hard white.

And there are surfaces—spherical, square, and rectangular (in everyday nomenclature: furniture, dresses, pavement, and figures).

And so the first chapter of the novel begins more or less in this way: “In gray skies, walls rise, smooth like satin. Walls rise, similar to lacquer or paper. Figures walk the streets, figures taken from the novel called *Life*”.

#### 4. Spring and Hat Boxes

Meanwhile, spring surged with canvases of lush greenery, which later, upon closer observation, split into fingerlike lilac leaves, unassuming and similar to human hearts.

A sea of greenery surged in front of the windows of houses and streetcars. Approaching noon, it swelled like a sea of gray water only to calm with noon’s arrival, and it froze into a clump of greenness in the evening.

And in this way the second month of sticky buds and blue air passed.

At that moment—although also now, as usual, for essentially no clear purpose—people decided to “live.” And everyone understood that word “life.”

And one started to prepare for the days when the heat blooms like a round, stiff glass flower just as one prepares for a long-awaited encounter.

So people treated the event of greenery as an encounter with life itself, which was—how typical of that time—represented by lacquered and helpless heat and unheard-of possibilities, as was typical.

But just as usual, this event took on an unexpected, if banal, course, namely: suddenly all the sidewalks and squares were covered with the flaxen cardboard and paper of hat boxes from women’s millinery shops, just like the pink petals of chestnut trees cover the gray streets of June.

On the sidewalks and squares spun female torsos: ancient torsos without eyes for the waves of lush greenery and for the multitudes of miscellaneous delicate things, which were happening all around and which were to change shortly.

That which was within people’s power was being done: they made arrangements to receive what had been prepared for life. And it turned out that porcelain

torsos with breasts are capable of receiving life properly only if they are wearing new, as-yet-unworn clothes. But the fashion that year, 1933, was to use thick, direct materials in which one could still sense the lust-aesthetic of raw materials. But for colors: warm chrome and matte; contemplative sienna.

On this occasion, perhaps for the first time, people discovered the incomprehensible but indubitable effect of as-yet-unused elastic materials. It was noted that they helped to forget decaying things, which nothing could help anymore.

So, for that reason, they could help one live.

## 6. Rainy Days

**T**hen came a series of rainy days. According to the calendar, the days were supposed to be as though composed of yellow lacquer, which sticks to the fingers and to the soul, and of incomprehensible vastness, when everything takes on an unexpected meaning.

But this year a shabby and dense grayness enveloped the days. And once again one needed to lean against the dazzling wall of posters as if pretending to wait for someone with whom one had arranged a meeting, although there was no one to wait for.

And certain afternoons and evenings were just like in an old-fashioned hit song where one “waits forever, waits again, without knowing what one is waiting for.”

These were unmistakable words, which recalled the sticky and resigned odor of dresses worn until threadbare. And which recalled the withered and helpless situations that one bears in the soul: one cannot live.

But on those rainy days in 1933, people rehabilitated the thing and the fatalism, which was occurring to people at that moment. And as usual, when things were already so banal, an event happened so far removed from life it was as if it were altogether fictional.

It was also noted then that even the figure of heroic life, which had been associated for some time with the figure and melody of a rectangle, now bore a drop of melancholy in the gray elongation of its lines. Perhaps life requires a drop of melancholy?

And so unexpected possibilities became stories of “broken hearts,” of “streets that want nothing more” and “waiting for life.” It was as if all of that belonged to life now.

During those days, gray from the rain, a tango with the following lyrics played every evening for the whole month in the Femina bar: “It is all, or nothing at all . . .”

## 7. Flower Shops with Azaleas

In the city of blue grayness and five million legs, there are also shops with huge, flat, spherical flowers.

Azaleas in the flower shop on the Boulevard Montparnasse in Paris are perfect. Their color is like that of salmon or oranges; in fact, they reflect a hundred shades of lox or round oranges.

Azaleas from the Boulevard Montparnasse in Paris no longer need the drawn-out and contemplative fragrances of ordinary flowers. They could be made of satin, odorless brass: they have poured their whole soul into the color, which is full of sad experiences, like brass itself.

This event takes place in the summer of 1933, at the same time as the other events described here.

A great sadness suddenly passes through the bustling Boulevard Montparnasse, a brass sea of melancholy. It seeps—no one knows how—from the shop filled with azaleas.

The day is gray, one in a series of gray days. People search for hard objects to hold in their hands; they search for distinct and unambiguous events. And this thing, which is taking place here at the azalea shop, in fact, completely resembles something known for a long time, a usual thing, but for a long time one could not remember where this dull and colorless burden had come from. Until suddenly one knows that what is happening now on the Boulevard Montparnasse always happens when a thing is settled and when nothing can be done about it anymore.

In front of the shop with the brass azaleas that have no fragrance, as if they had tried on all possible fragrances, life suddenly becomes like a long, gray stretch where everything is already settled and everything that was supposed to happen has already passed.

And suddenly, perfect things and sweet encounters and elegant azaleas the color of lox become unbearable. And suddenly houses, formless and too large, fill with things and people. One desires “missed opportunities” and “failed romances” and “unhappy loves.”

The weeds of longing grow and spread, longing for things full of coarse solitude and for the bleary burdock leaves of unrest.

And like a grotesque tagline of a pulp novel, the following sentences form: “Among perfect things there is no longer a place for life. . . . This is where abandonment and sadness come from, which goes hand in hand with every nice thing. That’s why people need a bit of raw disorder and abandonment in life in general . . .”

And who would have thought that these far-reaching conclusions would have stemmed from unimportant azaleas, as if made of sad brass?

Yet that’s how life works: the most meaningless things remind us of the most important things in life.

## 8. Soldiers March On

**T**hat summer, which came at last, was unusual and inconsistent with the calendar.

It started and went by without yellow heat, without butterflies and the birds of summer. And yet it happened. It could be recognized from the green of the trees, which grew darker. Later, from the spotty yellowing of the chestnut trees.

Such a summer was hard to reckon with: people allowed the leaves to darken and yellow again, and the “hearts” (what an old-fashioned word) got over missed opportunities.

And yet a few weeks ago, as happens every year at this time, people had decided to “live.” And now it was as if this decision were absolutely obliterated from memory. And people wished for nothing and did everything without conviction, not engaging fully, as if unsure of what had to be done at this moment and how to proceed.

Later, on a particular day, an odd urgency: to accomplish everything that belonged to life.

And it was formulated in exactly that way: “to figure out life.”

And into this atmosphere of catastrophic excitement an event entered. It unambiguously expressed that the world stood, nevertheless, on its ancient, predetermined, and well-ground place, and that it was always possible to “come back to life.”

\* \* \*

**S**oldiers march in the streets. They march in big rectangles of blue grayness, the gray of a warm November day without sun. They have soldiers’ uniforms. On their coats: precisely four polished buttons.

Attention: now the left leg goes up. Next: the right one. Each leg returns to the pavement forming a rigid, right angle with the street. And it transpired as if the soldiers were contemplating something very important with their feet, perhaps the flat, angular event of this march of large, blue rectangles composed from the soldiers’ uniforms.

On a particular predetermined day, otherwise the same as all other days, in the same place, the blue rectangle gushed with a coarse fountain of voices: for the most part, they sang a tango adapted to the rhythm of a march.

That syllogism of marching was no more or less significant than any other event. And it comes as no surprise that it can be treated with the full, sweet resignation that life deserves: as a self-explanatory thing.

And so one does not know what can become important in life. Each matter can differ from what it is supposed to be; it can become important: that rectangle of soldiers helped with “coming back to life.” To some extent, the whole process resembled everyday life.

Jasmine, acacias, and finally linden bloomed in turn.

And once again there was too little of life, just as before, when happiness determines its measure. This is what the blue rectangle of soldiers accomplished. It played the role of joy that summer, devoid of heats and flies.

## 9. Ships Carry Gold

Everything that has taken place so far happened in the summer of 1933 in the following way.

Everything was authentic. And as important to people as life, although the world was then full of events belonging to a quite different series and order.

These events contained the fate of matter. In fact—and it could not be defined otherwise—it was about regulating the helpless matter that had been bearing on people's fate. From time to time the weeds of disorder overgrew the world, and then strange and blind need descends on people: the needs to rearrange and rework, to regulate life. Such a time had come.

At first the event took such shape.

Under the shabby door of a house in the Biedermeier style, 28 Skarbkovska Street, the unemployed wait. On every first and fifteenth day of the month, they come one by one, in alphabetical order. They go up the wooden, winding, worn-out stairs. They wait awhile. They wait through an uncountable period of time, the time until life can be seized.

Meanwhile, kings of oil, coal, and matches do not know what to do with these sticky materials. There are too many things in the world for them, and also nothing to be done with the surplus stock.

Then something happens that illustrates to what extent something can become more important than what it usually is and how it pertains to life—as in the case of Parisian azaleas and marching soldiers.

At that time it turned out that somehow, for some period, dirty stacks of commodities had drowned out the world's supply of gold. At that time, the country of America, a landscape of concentration and balance, started to take away its gold from the unbridled and wanton, soft and pathetic Europe.

*Berengaria*, *Georgic*, and three other ships sailed from the ports. One insane ship was even called *Manhattan*. Nobody pays attention to nameless transportation. In that whole incident, what may turn out to be of most importance was the landscape of red gold over the cobalt of the sea, full of incomprehensible yet definitive contents.

The sticky residue of days spent processing the shabby and fat, expressionless and filthy matter of life still permeates the unemployed near the Biedermeier door. The pearls on foreign women sprayed with Paris Twilight perfume, yet full of the tacky and flat odor of boredom and bitterness, rigid like a burdock leaf.

It is, apparently, still not important to the planned epic of life and waits, and it waits until everything excessive is resolved. However, the thing that will happen shortly is angular.

It comes shortly. It takes on a shape of nagging longing for gray noise, for the helpless sweetness of flat things, for the full roundness and mild melancholy of rectangular objects.

Then there will be no more time for the questions “Why?” and “For whom?”

## **21. Second Commentary**

**T**his is not yet a novel we feel passionate about, in a sudden and sweet way. It is precisely the beginning of the year, a day of gray skies and streets like seas and skies.

Yet in this way life has to be dealt with in every future novel: as a chronicle where everything belongs and where there is no plot development.

The chronicle knows no events that would be more important than others. Here everything is important and necessary in the same measure.

The chronicle does not single out the sharp contours of tragic experiences or blocks of resignation. Hence the monotony, hence that sometimes unbearable repetition.

Life is like a chronicle: a block, anonymous and unpretentious. Only upon closer examination can the sticky and wanton mass of life be divided into singular fates and particular details. Just like in June or July, one divides the block of green into individual stems and leaves.

At any point, life can be put on hold and then picked up: like a chronicle of the year, interrupted in the month of November, made from copper brass, sad and fantastical, “like life itself.”



# Translator Biographies

HINDE ENA BURSTIN is a native Yiddish speaker who is passionate about her *mame loshn*. She is a Yiddish writer, translator, researcher, educator, and activist. Her Yiddish writing and translations have been published and performed in the United States, Canada, France, Israel, and Australia. She is dedicated to uncovering forgotten voices of Yiddish women poets and is currently completing her PhD on Yiddish women poets of the 1920s. She is the coordinator of the Jacob Kronhill Program in Yiddish Language and Culture at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, where she is also a lecturer of Yiddish language, literature, and culture.

\* \* \*

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

*Paper Roses*, his selection and translation of Rokhl Korn's poetry, won the Robert Payne Award from Columbia University's Translation Center in 1988. The following translations will be included in a forthcoming McGill-Queen's University Press edition of the selected poems of Rokhl Korn, edited by Esther Frank and selected and translated by Levitan.

\* \* \*

MIRIAM ISAACS, a linguist with a PhD from Cornell University, specializes in Yiddish language and culture and has taught the subjects at the University of Maryland. She has written about the uses of Yiddish by Hasidim and helped develop a Holocaust song archive at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies. Isaacs has published numerous articles and taught internationally. In 2014 she received a Fulbright award in Sweden. She is currently finishing a book on Polish Jewish survivors in Central Asia and working on a literary translation of poet Rokhl Korn for the Yiddish Book Center.

\* \* \*

MIRI KORAL has a passion for Yiddish that she has been exercising for twenty years as an educator, translator, prize-winning bilingual writer, and international speaker. She is the continuing lecturer in Yiddish at UCLA and the founding director of the California Institute for Yiddish Culture and Language, known for its Yiddish cultural and educational programming. Her original works and translations have appeared in *Pakn Treger*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Kheshbn*, *Forward/Forverts*, *Di Tsukunft*, and *Step by Step: Contemporary Yiddish Poetry*. Her most recent book-length translation is a biography of Jacob Dinezon. With degrees from Barnard College and Columbia University, Ms. Koral had a longstanding career in environmental planning before devoting herself to Yiddish.

\* \* \*

ELLEN CASSEDDY's translation of stories by Yenta Mash won the first 2016 PEN/Heim grant awarded for a work translated from Yiddish. She was a translation fellow at the Center in 2015–16. She and Yermiyahu Ahron Taub are the cotranslators of *Oedipus in Brooklyn and Other Stories by Blume Lempel* (Mandel Vilar Press/Dryad Press, 2016); the manuscript won the Yiddish Book Center's 2012 translation prize. Her translations have appeared in *Yiddisher Zoo* (Czulent Association, 2016), *Beautiful as the Moon, Radiant as the Stars* (Warner, 2003), and numerous journals. She is the author of *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (University of Nebraska Press, 2012). Her website is [www.ellencassedy.com](http://www.ellencassedy.com).

\* \* \*

FAITH JONES is a librarian and adjunct professor of library science in Vancouver, Canada. She researches Yiddish culture with a focus on women's history and was a 2015 translation fellow. She is a frequent contributor to *Pakn Treger*.

\* \* \*

MERLE L. BACHMAN is a published poet and associate professor of English at Spalding University in Louisville, Kentucky, where she also directs the BFA in creative writing. Bachman's efforts as a Yiddish translator began with her critical volume *Recovering Yiddishland: Threshold Moments in American Literature* (Syracuse UP, 2008). She was a translation fellow at the Yiddish Book Center in 2015–16, where she translated Rosa Nevadovska's poetry.

\* \* \*

LEAH ZAZULYER is an English-language poet and translator of Yiddish literature. Her book *As Long as We Are Not Alone*, a biography of Israel Emiot that includes a collection of his poems in English translation, is forthcoming from Tiger Bark Press.

\* \* \*

MURRAY CITRON is a grandfather who lives in Ottawa. He spoke Yiddish and English interchangeably as a child but lost his Yiddish when he went away to school. Lately he has been recovering the Yiddish necessary to read Yiddish literature. His translations have appeared in periodicals in England, Canada, and the United States.

\* \* \*

RI J. TURNER is an MA student in Yiddish literature at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. She is a three-time alumna of the Uriel Weinreich Summer Program at the YIVO Institute in New York and was a Yiddish Book Center translation fellow in 2014. Her translations and original writing, in both English and Yiddish, have appeared in the *Forward/Forverts*, *Afn shvel*, *In geveb*, and elsewhere.

\* \* \*

ANASTASIYA LYUBAS is a PhD candidate in comparative literature at Binghamton University, where she is at work on her dissertation "Language and Plasticity in Debora Vogel's Poetics." Anastasiya is also currently a Yiddish Book Center translation fellow.



# Pakn Treger

**Aaron Lansky** Editor

**Lisa Newman** Executive Editor

**Maureen Turner** Managing Editor

**Eitan Kensky** Translation Editor

**Sadie Gold-Shapiro** Translation Managing Editor

**Greg Lauzon** Copy Editor

**Alexander Isley Inc.** Art Direction and Design

**Dan Page** Cover Illustration

**Bill Russell** Interior Illustrations

Support for *Pakn Treger* comes from

**The David Berg Foundation**

**The Joseph and Marion Brechner Fund for Jewish Cultural Reporting**

**The Charles Corfield Fund for *Pakn Treger***

**The Kaplen Fund for *Pakn Treger***

**The Mark Pinson Fund for *Pakn Treger***

Copyright in each translation is held by the translator.

“A Seder in the Taiga” appeared originally as “*A seyder in der tayge*” in Mash’s collection “*Mit der letster hakofe,*” (*The Last Time Around*), Tel Aviv: H. Leivick Farlag, 2007.

A special thanks goes to Malka Locker’s great-nephew Chaim Zins and family for permission to publish a translation of her poem “Does It Mean I Long for You?”

