BLOG

The 2087th Question or When Silence Is the Only Answer

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Zusman Kiselgof, member of S. An-ski's ethnographic expedition, recording folklore in Kremenets, Russian Empire (now in Ukraine), 1912. (YIVO)

INTRODUCTION

This essay is adapted from my keynote address at the Literature Intra Student-Faculty Forum (CLIFF) Conference sponsored by the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (March 15 – 16, 2019). That year's theme was "Cartographies of Silence." I am grateful to the organizing committee for giving me the opportunity to explore this theme specifically in relation to my writing and activism on behalf of the Yiddish language and Yiddish women's culture. Thank you to the CLIFF organizers: Duygu Ergun, Grace Hobbs, Genta Nishku, Shalmali Jadhav and Shira Schwartz.

*A note from the editors: Thank you also to Sandra Chiritescu for her help with recording the poetry in this piece. Sandra also recorded an interview with Irena Klepfisz for *Vaybertaytsh*. You can listen to the episode here.

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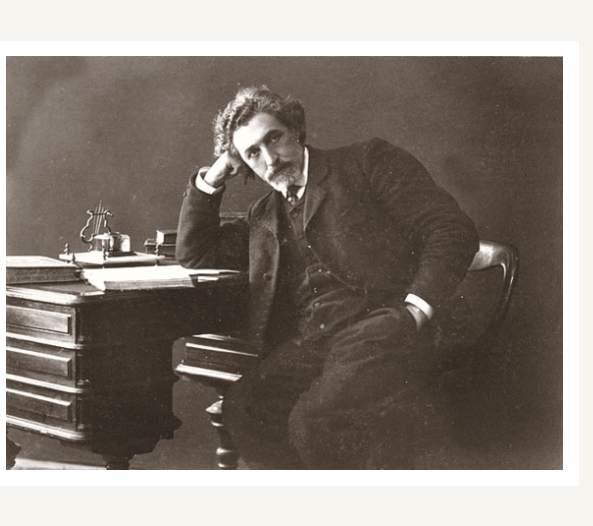
1. SHLOYME ZANVL RAPPOPORT

During the last decade of the 19th century, Shloyme Zanvl Rappoport, a Russian Jew and follower of the *haskole*/Jewish enlightenment, embraced the *narodnik*/populist and socialist movements in Russia and at the same time began exploring the anthropology and folklore of Russia's poverty-stricken peasants. His studies did not include the nearly five million equally poverty-stricken Jews living in the Russian Empire because--like the non-Jewish Russian intellectuals of that time--Rappoport did not consider Jews to be Russians. Jews were not even viewed as a people, but simply people apart, separated not only by religion, dress, and a corrupted vulgar language (Yiddish), but also by geography--allowed to live only in a prescribed area known as the Pale of Settlement.

Yet, a decade later, through a very complicated process involving interactions with secular but not assimilated Jews of various political persuasions, Rappoport ultimately came to believe that the Jews living in the hundreds of Russian *shtetlekh* of the Pale were indeed *a people* with a culture at least as rich as that of their Russian peasant neighbors. Rappoport had now come to view their Yiddish culture as worthy not only of study and documentation, but also as a critical source and bridge for Jews in maintaining a viable secular Jewish identity, one expressed and affirmed outside of religious practice and ritual. He came to recognize their traditions--religious, social, folkloric, musical, artistic, storied, and rooted in the Yiddish language--as the fabric of a Jewish culture that would immunize secular Ashkenazi Jews like himself against assimilation. These realizations led Rappoport to re-evaluate both the Yiddish language and the lives of its speakers and, with the help of colleagues, to begin planning for expeditions to over two hundred *shtetlekh* in the Pale in order to record the beliefs and practices of their inhabitants. The investigation would proceed through orderly interviews conducted according to a detailed questionnaire designed by Rappoport and his collaborators. The questions and answers--cemented by the Yiddish language--would make visible the rich Yiddish culture of Jewish Eastern European life.

Rappoport also came to believe this work was urgent because the *shtetlekh* were dying and would disappear all together as Jews, escaping pogroms or seeking better economic opportunities, moved to larger urban areas or immigrated to other countries. And so in 1912 his plan was put into action and he and his cohorts conducted interviews in more than sixty *shtetlekh* before they were stopped in 1914 by the start of the First World War. Two years after the wars' end, at the age of 57, Rappoport died of a heart attack and the project was never completed.[1]



Shloyme Zanvl Rappoport, or Sh. An-Sky, circa 1910.

Today Shloyme Zanvl Rappoport is better known as Sh. An-Sky, the author of the *The Dybbuk*, the classic Yiddish play of ambiguous sexual longings, possession, and exorcism--based on some of the folktales that An-Sky heard during his expeditions--a play he first composed in Russian, but later himself translated into Yiddish. Even students of Yiddish, however, are often less familiar with An-Sky's Jewish anthropology, ethnography, and folklore collections, or his monumental work: the questionnaire used in the interviews and titled *Dos yidishe etnografishe program*/The Jewish Ethnographic Program.

The scope of the questionnaire is reflected in its five sections, each representing a stage of life. It begins with "The Child: From Conception until the *Kheyder* " and then continues with "From the *Kheyder* to the Wedding," "The Wedding," "Family Life" and finally ends, of course, with "Death." These five sections also include 55 subsections. One need only to read the first question to understand the extraordinary details of An-Sky's questionnaire. In "The Child: From Conception until the *Kheyder*" and under the subheading of "Pregnancy," Question 1 asks:

אב אA AB

וואָס פֿאַר אַ פֿאָרשטעלונג איז פֿאַראַן וועגן דער נשמה פֿון אַ מענטש איידער זי קומט אַרייַן אין גוף?	What beliefs are there about a person's soul before it enters the body?

[2]The questionnaire then proceeds to pose 2086 additional questions about Jewish perceptions and beliefs seemingly connected to every event in a Jewish man and woman's life cycle. In the final section "Death," under the subheading "Heaven," the *Etnografishe program* concludes with Question 2087:

אב אA AB

וואָס פֿאַר אַ לעבן וועט זייַן נאָך תחית המתים?	What kind of life will there be after the Resurrection of the Dead?

In the 1910s, fearing the disappearance of the *shtetl*'s traditional way of life, An-Sky had had no way of knowing how painful this final question would be just twenty-five years later when Jewish life across Europe was almost completely physically obliterated together with the Yiddish-rooted life of hundreds of Eastern European *shtetlekh*. He had no way of knowing that one day the only answer to this last 2087th question--as well as the 2086 that preceded it--would be silence.

2. KADIA MOLODOWSKY

Kadia Molodowsky was born in the *shtetl* Byaroza in 1894, in the same decade when An-Sky was trying to transform himself into a Russian intellectual. In 1913 when An-Sky was already leading excursions and holding interviews in the Pale, Molodowsky, like many Jews, left the *shtetl* of her birth for the big city, in her case Warsaw, the city where my father Michał was born in that same year. During the next decades, Molodowsky taught in Warsaw's Yiddish *folkshules*/secular schools, began publishing her poetry, and by the early 1930s had established herself among Yiddish readers on both sides of the Atlantic as a prominent Yiddish poet. In 1935, when my parents, Różka and Michał, were considering marriage and imagining their future in Poland, Molodowsky immigrated to the United States. With the exception of four years, she lived the rest of her life within New York's Yiddish social and literary *svive*/milieu. She died in 1974.

I don't know for a fact that Kadia Molodowsky was familiar with An-Sky's *Etnografishe program* and its 2087 questions, though I believe she had to have been, given her intense engagement with Yiddish intellectuals and culture. In any case, she was familiar with the subjects of many of An-Sky's questions because she knew and understood traditional *shtetl* life both from personal experience and from her education. Like An-Sky, she feared for its continuity, but for very different reasons.

Kadia Molodowsky

In New York in the fall of 1946, barely a year after *der khurbn*/the destruction, Molodowsky wrote a story titled "*Oys*/Gone."[3] This short and rather simple story takes place in both the United States and in Europe and follows the main character, Seymour Shtuker, a hard-working clockmaker living in New Jersey, as he prepares and then embarks on yearly summer trips to his birthplace, his beloved *shtetl* Ogrodovke. In addition to his sister, Seymour has many relatives in Ogrodovke and he enjoys filling his suitcases with gifts for his family and friends. On his trips he proves himself a stereotypical Jewish immigrant of the 1930s showing off his American success, but a success that he genuinely wants to share and that keeps him balanced and satisfied.

אב אA AB

די דרייַ וואָכן וואָס סימור שטוקער פֿלעגט פֿאַרברענגען אין אָגראָדאָווקע, האָט ער געפֿילט אַז ער איז גוט באַוואָרנט אויף דער וועלט: מיט צוויי היימען, איינע דאָ, און איינע אין ניו דזשיזי. וואָס עס פֿעלט אים אין איין היים, האָט ער אין דער צווייטער. אמת דער מהלך צווישן זיי איז אַ ביסל געוועזן צו ווייַט, אָבער דערפֿאַר איז מען אַ גרעסערער גאַסט ווען מען מאַכט אַ לענגערע נסיעה (68).	During the three weeks Seymour Shtuker spent in Ogrodovke, he felt very secure in the world: he had two homes, one here and one in New Jersey. What he didn't have in one home, he had in the other. True the distance between them was a little too far -- but then, a longer journey makes one a more important guest. (32)

Sometime during the war, Seymour Shtuker learns that the Germans had burned Ogrodovke to the ground and that there were no survivors. At this point, time stops for Seymour Shutker. Though the hands of the clocks in his shop keep moving,

אב אA AB

...סימור שטוקער ווייס – עס איז גאָרנישט. ער און זיי וועלן ערגעץ מער ניט קומען. עס איז אַן אויסדאַכטעניש (69).	...Seymor Shtuker knows -- it is nothing. He and they are going nowhere. It's only an illusion. (33)

The past has disappeared. Seymour Shtuker knows that *der balagole* who always greeted him at the railroad station, the old coachman with the squeaky wagon, is gone. Malodowsky's story ends with the single sentence:

אב אA AB

און אַפֿילו ווען סימור שטוקער זאָל מאַכן אַ נסיעה קיין אייראָפּע, און קומען אויף דער באַן־סטאַציע, וועט אַפֿילו ניט זייַן ווער עס זאָל אים פֿירן אויף די חורבות (69).	And even if Seymour Shtuker were to travel to Europe and arrive at the train station, there would be no one to take him to the ruins. (33)

Thus the reader is left with an image of Seymour Shtuker standing before the destroyed *shtetl* with no person or voice to greet him, no sound, not even the squeaking of the *balagole*'s wagon. Complete silence.

3. BREAKING SILENCE: TRANSLATION

In 1946 when Kadia Molodowsky was imagining Seymour Shtuker, I was five years old and, together with my mother Różka and other Polish Jewish survivors and members of the Jewish Labor Bund, was settling into a communal house outside of Stockholm, Sweden. The only language I spoke was Polish; everyone else spoke both Polish and Yiddish (which I understood, but did not speak). A few months later, I began attending school and quickly became fluent in Swedish. Then in 1949 at the age of eight, before I was able to finish second grade, I immigrated with my mother to the U.S. and began attending public school and an afternoon *shule*--both were in my Bronx neighborhood--thus initiating the process by which I was expected to master both English and Yiddish.

Photo of Melanie Kaye/Krantowitz (left) and Irena Klepfisz (right), co-editors of *The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology*

More than thirty-five years later, in the 1980s, I was living in New York as an unemployed former academic and as an out Jewish lesbian activist in the Second Wave and the lesbian/feminist movements. During this period, I was thinking, writing, and beginning to speak publically about *yidishe veltlekhkayt*/secular Jewish identity. At the same time, together with Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, I was gathering materials on what would eventually become *The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology* (1986). And I was beginning to translate the fiction of Yiddish women writers. Two of those translations were included in *The Tribe of Dina* and another, Molodowsky's 1946 story "*Oys/Gone*" about Seymour Shtuker, was published in an 1988 issue of the lefty, secular magazine *Jewish Currents*.

In the early 1980s, my interest in translating Yiddish women's texts was fairly new. Though I'd been given a strong secular Yiddish education alongside my American schooling, had even done post-doctoral work in Yiddish, the language had been "inactive" in my life for many years. As is well known, before bilingualism and multiculturalism became mostly acceptable in the United States, the message from the American mainstream was that all languages other than English were unimportant--even embarrassing--in the lives of well adjusted, upwardly mobile immigrants, and I got the message loud and clear. I had focused my doctorate on Victorian Literature and had taught in a university English department. I had no idea how or where Yiddish belonged in my life and no one else seemed able to provide me with a useful answer. For me, Yiddish began to shrink with disuse.

But then my attitude changed and it changed for many reasons. A trip to Poland in 1983 made me absorb for the first time the full *historical* meaning of *der khurbn*/the destruction and of the loss of Molodowsky's and my parents' Warsaw and all the *shtetlekh* to which An-Sky had become so committed. I also started to absorb the fact that the survivors who had nurtured me in the Bronx--ardent Yiddishists and members of the socialist Jewish Labor Bund and in whose politics and secularism I was firmly grounded--were not going to live forever. I had come to recognize that with Yiddish fading in the U.S., *veltlekhkayt*, Yiddish-based secularism, was barely understood or even acknowledged as a "legitimate" or "authentic" form of Jewish identity. As my point of view towards various issues shifted, I was finally forced to admit to myself that if I valued Yiddish culture, I would have to take some responsibility for keeping it alive.[4]

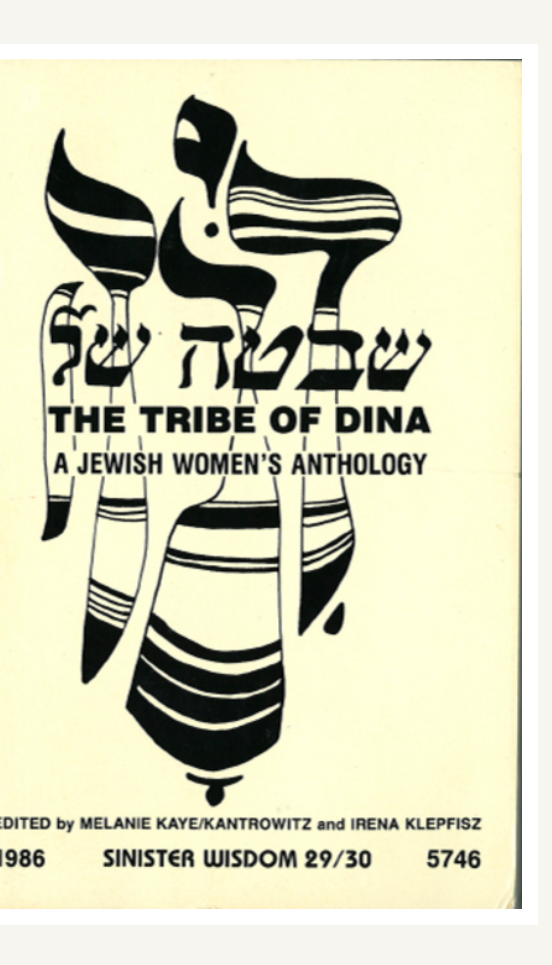
This understanding was further sharpened by my feminist perspective and activism and further strengthened by Jewish feminists who identified as Ashkenazi secular Jews, and hearing of my background, had turned to me with questions I had no idea how to answer: *I'm a secular Jew with Eastern European roots--how can I express and manifest my secular identity if I don't know Yiddish?* Or: *I'm a secular Ashkenazi feminist--who are my intellectual, artistic, politically activist Yiddish foremothers? What did they believe? What did they achieve? How can I connect with them?* As I would discover later, these questions were echoes of the feeling Molodowsky attributed to Seymour Shtuker: the sense of having two homes, one here and one somewhere back there in Eastern Europe. But unlike Shtuker's attachment, these women had no direct memory of that other home, their connections having been long forgotten or at some point deliberately severed. Echoing Seymour Shtuker's feelings at the end of Molodowsky's story, these women felt lost and incomplete as Jews.

The questions posed by these women were *part* of my motivation to start thinking, first, about the role Yiddish culture might play in an English language setting, and, second, about the need to identify Yiddish women's texts. I want to emphasize the word "part" because my research was not simply altruistic. I felt a lack in myself, a void. Before I could possibly begin educating others, I needed to fill a void that my feminism and coming out had made uncomfortably apparent. I was shocked to realize that despite all my years of studying Yiddish and Yiddish culture, I had not read a single Yiddish prose work by a woman. Complete silence. And so, after my 1983 trip to Poland I started poking around and searching through the archives of institutions and *leksikons* in order to identify prominent women in Eastern European Jewish life.[5]

I had already heard of (but not read) Molodowsky because she was a well known and honored poet among secular Yiddish readers. Many of my mother's friends could still recite her children's poetry learned in their Warsaw *folkshules* before the war. What I did not know until I started my research, however, was that Molodowsky also wrote short stories and novels and that she had founded and, for almost two decades, edited an influential Yiddish literary journal, *Svive*/Milieu, the only Yiddish literary magazine ever to be published and edited by a woman. It was during this period that I came across Molodowsky's short story collection, *A shtub mit zibn fentster*/A house with seven windows, which included the Seymour Shtuker story.

Having found her fiction, I could now report Kadia Molodowsky's name and describe her reputation. Unfortunately, it was apparent almost immediately that this did not have much meaning if women were unable to read her work. By the 1980s there did exist a significant body of translated Yiddish literature. But the title of Irving Howe's famous work, *World of Our Fathers,* embodied the problem and explained the silence. Omitted from my Yiddish education, women were inevitably absent from collections of existing translated Yiddish literary anthologies and histories. As a result, I once wrote that the frustration I kept hearing in one form or another from women wanting to connect with their Yiddish roots was best expressed as: "Mother, mother, I want to follow in your footsteps, but I can't understand a word that you're saying."[6]

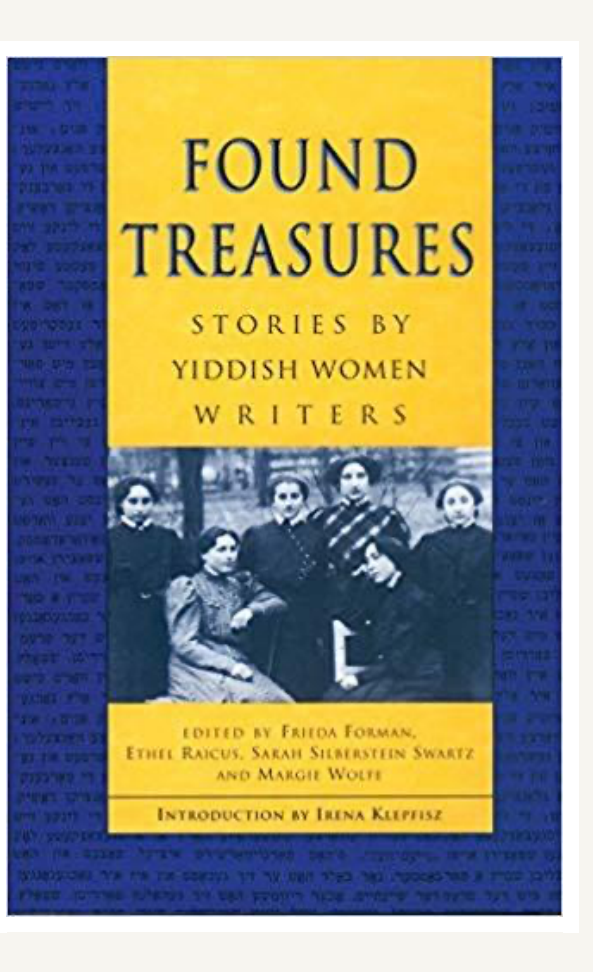
Their frustration became an important motivation for promoting the translation of Yiddish women's texts. I thought it important that Jewish women who identified with the hundreds-year-old Yiddish *yerushe*/legacy but who did not know the language, be able to establish a relationship through English translation. A small step towards that goal was our inclusion in *The Tribe of Dina* (1986) of my first two translations of women prose writers. One was Fradel Schtok's story *"Opgeshnitene hor*/The Shorn Head" from her collection *Ertseylungen/Stories* published here in the U.S. in 1919. These stories alternated in settings between the life Schtok had left in Europe (as in "The Shorn Head") and the urban immigrant life here in America. The second, *"Der farlorener shabes*/The lost *shabes"* was from Molodowsky's *A shtub mit zibn fentster.* Like "*Oys*," many of her other stories also echoed the theme of the "two homes." I was pleased that *The Tribe of Dina* could feature two Yiddish women writers whose fiction was unknown among non-Yiddish readers and all but forgotten or ignored by well read Yiddishists. We were challenging the silence.



The Tribe of Dina, (Monteplier, VT: Sinister Wisdom. 1986), first edition.

In the 1980s and 1990s other feminists also took up the cause of identifying and translating women's Yiddish prose texts. Many of these women had Yiddish backgrounds and worked individually or collectively within new feminist structures and institutions (e.g. journals, newspapers, reading groups and *shmuez krayzn*/conversation circles) established during the Second Wave. Inside academia, feminists who had knowledge of Yiddish struggled to create and teach translations within Women's Studies and Jewish Studies Departments. Other women began studying Yiddish in colleges and universities and Yiddish-based institutions like YIVO, the Workmen's Circle, and the National Yiddish Book Center. Some became fluent and began creating their own contemporary Yiddish texts; still others went on to research and translate Yiddish women prose writers and to expand the canon.[7]

As a result, in less than three decades, Yiddish women's prose writing has moved from being completely invisible or dismissed as inferior to becoming accessible and valued as part of our Yiddish cultural legacy. Yiddish women's prose is now, finally, considered a worthy field of study and exploration within traditional academic departments. During this period and since the publication of *Found Treasures* in 1994, four other anthologies in English--not all only of women writers--have been published. To date *30 Yiddish women prose writers* have been identified and some of their work translated. These collections of stories, memoirs, novel excerpts and children stories, reflect Jewish women's involvement and contribution to Yiddish Jewish culture in the 20th century.[8] Not surprisingly, their subjects include political activism (socialism, anarchism, Zionism), coming of age, work and family, immigration, romance, assimilation and passing, the Holocaust and its aftermath, and support and criticism of traditional and secular Jewish life. In addition to the previously translated complete memoirs and novels of Bella Chagall, Rokhl Korn, Esther Kreitman, Puah Rakovsky, and Chava Rosenfarb, we now also have available translations of novels and single author volumes by Blume Lempel, Yenta Mash, Miriam Karpilove and Kadia Molodowsky. Individual collections of work by Lily Berger and by Devorah Vogel are currently being prepared for future publication. And this is just the beginning in breaking the silence.



4. LOST IN TRANSLATION: THE YIDDISH LANGUAGE

There were at that time (and perhaps even now) discussions among passionate Yiddishists about the role of translation in what many felt was the beginning of a Yiddish revival. By the 1980s, we were all painfully aware that *veltlekhkayt/*secular Yiddish culture, so depleted by *der khurbn*, was shrinking further into silence. The language was barely audible in post-war Europe and the Soviet Union, basically dead in Israel where it and other diaspora languages had been suppressed to strengthen modern Hebrew, and mostly abandoned by American Jews in their acculturation to American life. True, Hasidim around the world were still speaking Yiddish. But they avoided secular Yiddish material. In other words, the Yiddish that served as the medium of *veltlekhe kultur* was clearly an endangered language moving closer and closer towards annihilation. Translating Yiddish instead of teaching the language, some argued, was putting the last nail in the coffin.

I disagreed. Yiddish was certainly endangered, but translations increased interest in Yiddish culture and motivated people to take the next step and study the language. It was hard to imagine that people would study Yiddish if the culture remained alien; and the only way it could become familiar was through translation.

Yet, since that time, I have come to recognize that in certain cases a critical aspect of the original text *is* lost in translation. Most translators agree on the obvious losses in translating poetry and on the problems of translating idioms or cultural words that don't have parallel or equivalent expressions in another language. Not as frequently focused on is the issue of the loss of the language itself--especially if it is endangered like Yiddish.

In time, I came to realize that my translation of Molodowsky's story about Seymour Shtuker stripped it of a complex relationship between the story and the language in which that story was told. Writing in 1946, Molodowsky was in mourning for the Jewish life and Yiddish culture that had been destroyed in Europe, a culture which had nurtured her and to which she had dedicated her life through her teachings, writings, and editorial work. In that moment in New York, she knew that there was barely any readership left in Europe. True, there were American Jews who continued to use Yiddish, but Molodowsky's short fiction frequently reveals her disdain and despair not only for their ignorance of Eastern European values but also for their embrace of a vulgar deJudaized American life. For example, the very first "American" story in the collection, "*In a tog fun ru/*On a day of rest" (meaning *shabes/*the Sabbath), depicts a Jewish immigrant couple's weekly ritual of going not to the synagogue, but to the bank.[9] The position of the story conveys the message. In addition, all the stories set in America expose the Yiddish of American Jews as a language corrupted by English.Though she often used humor in relation to this speech, Molodowsky must have understood that children whose parents spoke only a mangled Yiddish would probably never speak it at all.

On the surface, none of this is the focus of Seymour Shtuker's story, a story of mourning and grief. Yet what my English translation inevitably omits, because it cannot do otherwise, is the story's painful irony: that the lament for the loss of Yiddish culture is expressed in Yiddish. Molodowsky is writing about the eerie silence she herself is facing and she is writing it in the very language that was disappearing simultaneously as she was writing into that silence.

This becomes evident if we substitute her name for that of Seymour Shtuker. Like the clockmaker Seymour Shtuker, Kadia Molodowsky had two homes and when the home across the ocean is destroyed, time stops. Kadia Molodowsky sees that the hands of the clocks are moving, but

אב אA AB

קאַדיע מאָלאָדאָווסקי ווייס – עס איז גאָרנישט. זי און זיי וועלן ערגעץ מער ניט קומען. עס איז אַן אויסדאַכטעניש.	Kadia Molodowsky knows -- it is nothing. She and they are going nowhere. It's only an illusion.

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[3] *"Oys"* is included in Molodowsky short story collection *A Shtub mit zibn fentster*/The house with seven windows (1957, 66-69) in which she provides dates at the end of each story; these can be assumed to be either the date of composition or first publication. *"Oys"* is dated "Nov. 3, 1946." "Gone," my translation of this story, appeared in *Jewish Currents* (July-August 1988, 31-33).

Molodowsky's world is gone, and with it, its language. In other words, this particular story is not only written in Yiddish; it is also *about* Yiddish. And that is lost in translation.

5. BREAKING THE SILENCE: BILINGUAL POETRY

While researching Ashkenazi women of Eastern Europe and promoting translations of women's cultural prose texts, I was also being prompted to think about my own poetry and began to wonder why I had written poems only in English even when they were about Jewish aspects of my life and about my family and the Holocaust. By 1982, I had published two books of poetry that contained exactly two Yiddish words. How could that be? my friend, the Chicana lesbian and Spanish bilingual writer Gloria Anzaldua, asked when we were first getting to know each other and comparing notes on our backgrounds. I had no answers besides saying that to me Yiddish was strong emotionally, but not linguistically, that I'd never spoken it on a daily basis, that my mother tongue was Polish, and that I had tremendous problems mastering English when I first arrived in the U.S.--a struggle that stretched into high school and then into college and even graduate school--and that once I finally felt fully at ease in English, I wasn't about to jeopardize my poetic skills by trying to write in another language. I had no desire and, perhaps more relevant, no linguistic ability to try to be a Yiddish poet.


Gloria Anzaldúa

But Gloria's question did push me into thinking about experimenting with ways of incorporating some Yiddish into my writing. And I found that doing so in my essays and fiction was relatively easy and satisfying. Until I got to college, I believe the only intellectual discussions that I had ever heard were those conducted in Yiddish by survivors, my mother's Bundist and politically minded friends. Words like *geshikhte, bavegung,* and *in gerangl,* had far more weight and resonance than "history," "movement," and "in struggle." I knew that *der khurbn* meant "the destruction" which evoked *der ershter un tsveyter khurbn/*the First and Second Destruction of the Temple and reflected the magnitude of our loss in a way that English words could not. The words "Holocaust" and "Shoah" simply left me cold. Similarly, the word *veltlekhkayt* meaning "secularism" had strong resonance for me with its root "*velt*" meaning "world," thus evoking the possibility of being a Jew "in the world" *in Yiddish*. So it seemed natural to weave these and other Yiddish words and phrases into my prose and hope that it would move readers closer to the Yiddish language and culture.

Picture of Fradel Schtok from *Antologye: Finf Hundert Yor Idishe Poeziye*, edited by Morris Bassin (New York: Literarisher Farlag, 1917).

But poetry was another matter. Adult artists who change their linguistic contexts usually experience great difficulties either in keeping up with their mother tongue in a foreign country or in trying to learn to use the foreign language in their art. Fradel Schtok, one of whose stories I translated for *The Tribe of Dina*, was such an artist. She was best known for being one of the first Yiddish poets to use the sonnet form. But I was actually more interested in the fact that after she published her collected Yiddish stories in 1919, she went on in 1927 to publish *in English* a novel *For Musicians Only,* a work (unfortunately) deservedly ignored by critics. When I discovered Schtok in the 1980's, her life story was still somewhat mysterious. After her English novel, she seemed to have stopped writing all together, and it was believed--erroneously--that she died in a mental institution. But I did not know that at that time. When I was considering incorporating Yiddish into my poetry, I thought a lot about Schtok and tried to imagine what she might have felt as she debated whether to use Yiddish or English. And in the end I wrote a poem in which I imagined how she would have tried to explain it to me and included the erroneous fact about her death. The poem best expresses--for me--the linguistic dilemma of the immigrant artist.

Written in Fradel's voice, it is titled "Fradel Schtok" and carries an epigram from the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz who, in the 1980s, was living in exile.

Fradel Schtok

--Language is the only homeland.

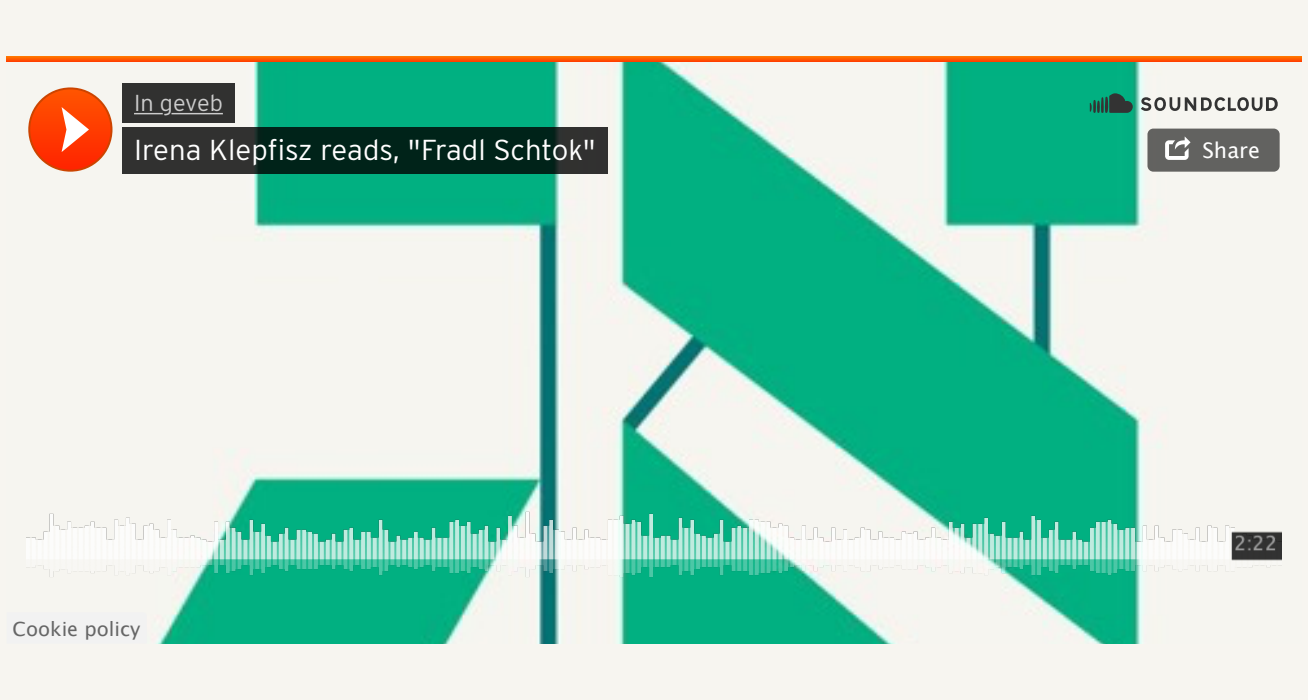
They make it sound easy: some disjointed
sentences   a few allusions   to
mankind.   But for me   it was not
so simple   more like   trying
to cover the distance   from here
to the corner   or between two sounds.

Think of it: *heym*   and   *home*   the meaning
the same   of course   exactly
but the shift   in vowel   was the ocean
in which I drowned.

I tried. I did   try.
First held with Yiddish   but you
know   it's hard.   You write   *gas*
and   *street* echoes back.
No resonance.   And--let's face it--
memory falters.
You try to keep track of the difference
like *got* and *god*   or *hoyz* and *house*
but they blur   and you start using
alley   when you mean *gesele*   or *avenue*
when it's a *bulevar.*

And before you know it
you're on   some alien path
standing   before a brick house
the doorframe   slightly familiar.
Still   you can't place it
exactly.   Passers-by   stop.
Concerned   they speak   but you've
heard   all this   before   the vowels
shifting   up and down   the subtle
change   in the guttural sounds
and now   it's nothing more
nothing   more   than   babble.
And so   you accept it.
You're lost.   This time   you really
don't know   where you are.

Land or sea   the house floats before you.
Perhaps you once sat   at that window
and it was home   and looked out
on that *street* or *gesele.*   Perhaps
it was a dead end   perhaps a short cut.
Perhaps not.
A movement by the door.   They stand there
beckoning   mouths open and close:
Come in! Come in!   I understood   it was
a welcome.   *A dank! A dank!*
I said   till I heard the lock
snap   behind me.



Irena Klepfisz reads, "Fradl Schtok"

Irena Klepfisz reads, "Fradl Schtok."

This poem about attempted bilingualism is inevitably much more about me than it is about Fradel Schtok. The lines "the shift in vowel was the ocean/ in which I drowned" expose the life-threatening danger of moving from one language to another as I have experienced it both as an immigrant and then later as a poet and committed Yiddishist.

From the start I knew that anything I did with Yiddish, whether in my poetry or essays, would be fragmentary and could only reflect how I experience and use the language. It felt easily done in prose, but almost self-defeating in poetry. For me, there is a kind non-rational, emotional rush in writing poetry--particularly in the early stages of a poem. In fact, my aim when I begin exploring a poem is to try to give up control, to see where my unconscious will lead me, to learn something new about myself and the world. I want to be taken by surprise when I look down and see what I've written. If I'm not surprised, I'm bored because I'm just transcribing, not creating. Trying *consciously* to incorporate Yiddish into a poem rooted in English is an intellectual, political decision--*if* one is not truly bilingual. And I am not. As a result, that decision forces me to stop and think just when I'm trying to let go and *not* think. Such an internal conflict makes it difficult for me to write organically.[10]

But there are other issues. When I first became aware of the enormous gaps in the culture that I had inherited, I was frustrated and angry. It was clear to me that in reclaiming *yidishkayt,* I couldn't ignore its biases and its limitations. Yiddish was not *the* language of all Jews around the world. There were other Jewish languages with rich traditions, literature, and history. Also, Yiddish secular communities and cultural institutions were never egalitarian, especially concerning gender. Thus, in reclaiming Yiddish culture, I didn't want to bow to nostalgia and be afraid to use words like sexism or patriarchy. Too often, the women who were engaged in Eastern European Jewish culture were discouraged from being full participants and activists, and, when they did act, their achievements were either not acknowledged or quickly forgotten. I didn't want to perpetuate the silence or support the amnesia. Rather, I wanted to expose them. Thus, my desire to promote *yidishkayt* and to include Yiddish in some of my poetry was--from the outset--entwined with a critique of the past.

So I went on to experiment, interweaving and mirroring or allowing context to explain the Yiddish--for I have always been determined to make any Yiddish I use intelligible to non-Yiddish speakers. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't.

Here's a poem that I think worked pretty well:

Etlekhe verter oyf mame-loshn/
A few words in the mother tongue

lemoshl: for example

di kurve   the whore
a woman who acknowledges her passions

di yidene   the Jewess   the Jewish woman
ignorant   overbearing
let's face it: every woman is one

di yente   the gossip   the busybody
who knows what's what
and is never caught off guard

di lezbianke   the one with
a roommate   though we never used
the word

dos vaybl   the wife
or the little woman

***

in der heym   at home
where she does everything to keep
yidishkayt alive

yidishkayt   a way of being
Jewish   always arguable

in mark   where she buys
di kartofl un khalah
(yes, potatoes and challah)

di kartofl   the material counter-
part of *yidishkayt*

mit tsibeles   with onion
that bring *trern tsu di oygn*
tears to her eyes   when she sees
how little it all is
veyniker un veyniker
less and less

di khalah   braided
vi ir hor far der khasene
like her hair before the wedding
when she was *aza sheyn meydl*
such a pretty girl

di lange shvartse hor
the long black hair
di lange shvartse hor

***

a froy kholmt a woman
dreams *ir ort oyf der velt*
her place in this world
un zi hot moyre   and she is afraid
so afraid of the words
kurve
yidene
yente
lezbianke
vaybl

zi kholmt   she dreams
un zi hot moyre   and she is afraid
ir ort
di velt
di heym
der mark

a meydl kholmt
a kurve kholmt
a yidene kholmt
a yente kholmt

a vaybl kholmt
di kartofl
di khalah

yidishkayt

zi kholmt
di hor
di lange shvartse hor

zi kholmt
zi kholmt
zi kholmt

Irena Klepfisz reads "Etlekhe verter oyf mame-loshn"

Irena Klepfisz reads, "*Etlekhe verter oyf mame-loshn.*"

But even when I feel most successful, I know that when I embed Yiddish, whether in my prose or in my poetry, something is lost--lost not only in translation. The Yiddish appearing in my work is not written with the Hebrew alphabet; it is transliterated. Thus, the Yiddish on the page is silent; it is only seen. There's a huge difference between reading "*Etlekhe verter"* on the page and hearing it read. The Yiddish in my poems comes alive only when it is read out loud, when it is heard. But in order to pass it on, it has to be written down--and if it is to be embedded in an English text, it must be transliterated. Over the years I've learned that much of creative work involves a variety of compromises. Transliteration is just another compromise I must accept if I want to reach non-Yiddish speakers.

We do what we can and contribute what we can. For example, I am aware that unlike me, there are contemporary Yiddish poets and songwriters such as Miryem-Khaye Siegel, Yermiyahu Ahron Taub, and Joshua Waletzky who face the same questions earlier artists faced and defy history and demographics by creating new Yiddish work which engages with our present. I am also conscious that the writers of the previous generation--like Kadia Molodowsky, Chava Rosenfarb, Rokhl Korn, Beyle Schaechter-Gottesman, or like Avrom Sutzkever, Chaim Grade, and Shmerke Kaczerginski--never wavered in their commitment to writing in Yiddish even when the silence around their decreasing readership was increasing. They anticipated and dreaded a future in which there might not be any Yiddish readers for their work, and they continued writing.

Given these younger and older passionate Yiddishists, how could I give up trying to bring Yiddish to the forefront in at least some of my writing? When I first began my Yiddish experimentation, none of this was very clear to me. But I have over the years become more consciously determined to try to offer something original to the culture that formed the basis of my Jewish identity in the hope that my work will provide it with some renewed strength. Mine is a very small contribution--and I'm not being modest here--because I have read and know the rich writing of women and men who remain unequivocally loyal to secular Yiddish literature and culture. All their writings should be made accessible through publications in the original and in translations which, it is my hope, will spur more and more readers to want to know Yiddish and thus enable them to have direct interaction with their Yiddish legacy.

Since I first learned about it, I have thought a lot about An-Sky's 2087th question from the *Dos yidishe etnografishe program*:

אב   אA   AB

וואָס פֿאַר אַ לעבן וועט זײַן נאָך תחית המתים?

What kind of life will there be after the Resurrection of the Dead?

My *veltlekhkayt*/secularism precludes any acceptance of the assumptions on which the question is based; yet, for me, there is something haunting about An-Sky's last question. I may not believe in an afterlife or in resurrections, but I do believe that cultures can be reawakened and revived in new generations. I know there's no reason Yiddish culture can't take root again and permanently break through and, given the difficulty of contemporary assessments, it may already have done so without our being aware of it. Today, there are not just writers and poets but determined Yiddishist musicians, actors, playwrights, filmmakers and museum curators, composers, journalists and editors, teachers and scholars, translators and bloggers and insistent parents who are actively engaged with Yiddish. Major festivals and conferences in New York, Montreal, Krakow, Warsaw, Melbourne, and Weimar attest to the ongoing interest in discovering older works and creating contemporary ones. They attract countless creative Yiddishists who share their visions with the rest of us. There are good reasons to be optimistic.

What remains most important, however, is that these Yiddishists are informed by an older Yiddish culture but not limited or controlled by it. They adapt and transform as they maintain their connection to the past and address our present life. For example, my own thinking about this Yiddish resurrection and bilingualism has recently become connected with the current political situation in the U.S. and, because that connection resonated for me personally, I felt moved to write the following poem. So let me now end with that poem.

Der fremder in der fremd

Gedenkst?   Do you remember
when you were   a stranger
among strangers

a fremder   *on papirn*
a stranger   without papers?

Gedenkst   *di frages*?

          those endless questions

Ver zayt ir?   *Fun vanen kumt ir?*
who are you?   where are you from?
why are you here   and not there?

ver zaynen geven ayere shkheynim?
who were your neighbors?   where was the school?
what work did you do?   what can you do here
that you couldn't   do there?

Nokh amol   for the third   fourth
                    fifth time
Ver zayt ir?   *Fun vanen kumt ir?*
who are you?   where are you from?
why are you here   and not there?

Ver iz der man?   *ver iz di froy?*
who is this man?   who is this woman?
Un di papirn?   and their papers?

un dos kind?   and this child?
did you find it here?   or bring it from there?
do you have a passport?   for him?   for her?
farn kind   that one   with the dark hair?

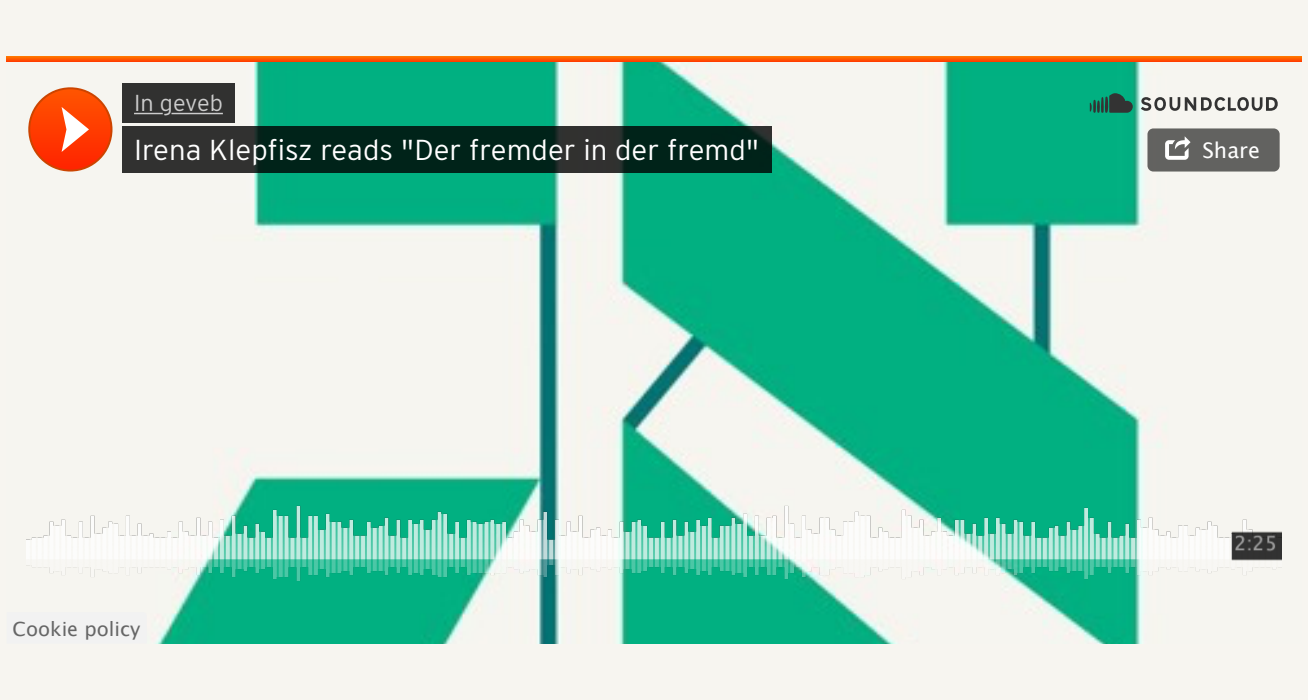
Nokh amol   for the tenth   eleventh
                    twelfth time
Ver zayt ir?   *Fun vanen kumt ir?*
who are you?   where are you from?
why are you here   and not there?

who do you know here?   who did you know there?
where will you sleep here? how did you sleep there?
                    un ayere khaloymes:
what do you dream of here?   what did you dream of there?
where will you work here? what work did you do there?
          and why can't you just   work   there?

vu iz di vize   *di grine karte*   *der pasport*
visa?   green card?   passport?
photo?   from here   and from there?   and why did you
          cut your hair?

un dos kind?   and why did you bring
this child here   and not leave it there?

Nokh amol   for the eighteenth   nineteenth
                    twentieth time
ver zayt ir?   *Fun vanen kumt ir?*
farvos zayt ir do?   *un nisht geblibn dortn?*
why are you here?   and why didn't you just stay there?



Irena Klepfisz reads "Der fremder in der fremd"

Irena Klepfisz reads "*Der fremder in der fremd*"


Irena Klepfisz, photo credit: Linda Eber

MLA STYLE

Irena Klepfisz. "The 2087th Question or When Silence Is the Only Answer." *In geveb*, January 2020: https://ingeveb.org/blog/the-2087th-question-or-when-silence-is-the-only-answer.

CHICAGO STYLE

Irena Klepfisz. "The 2087th Question or When Silence is the Only Answer." *In geveb* (January 2020): Accessed Jan 24, 2022.

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Irena Klepfisz

Irena Klepfisz is a lesbian poet, academic and activist. She is the author of *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue* (poetry, 1990) and *Dreams of an Insomniac* (essays, 1990).

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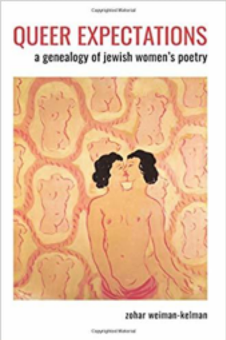

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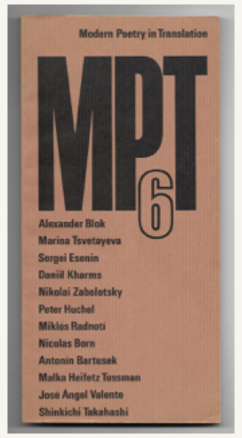
Adriana X. Jacobs



Adriana X. Jacobs on her commitment to literary translation.