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Critical Essays

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“Of all the men I am the most manly”

Aspects of Gender in the Poetry of Khane Levin

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Of all the men I am the most manly.—Khane Levin—*Tsushteyer*[1]

Yiddish literature, by its very egalitarian nature, was quicker than Hebrew literature to accept women's voices. This was due in part to women's weaker facility with Hebrew and to the fact that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Yiddish poetry departed from collective subjectivity in favor of individualism, psychologism, and lyricism.[2] In addition, Yiddish poetry was more predisposed to expressions of intimate experiences than Hebrew literature, which was dominated by national-historical bombasticism. Also, Yiddish literature more readily accepted the expression of female eroticism and sexuality to the extent that it was liberated from the traditional model of femininity forged by religion and folklore. For example, in New York, the center of modern Yiddish literature, poets such as Celia Dropkin and Anna Margolin were redefining the concepts of love, death, and gender.[3] Yet the courageous, innovative female voice did not only come from poetry written in the United States. As a result of the Russian Revolution, subversive women's poetry, including works that tackled gender issues, existed for a while in Europe too.

The most eminent proponent of the blossoming creativity of female Jews affected by the Russian revolution was the Kharkov-based writer, communist, and feminist Khane Levin.[4] She was the first woman in Soviet Russia to broach

the problems of modern women's identity in her work. Unfortunately, even today, her artistic accomplishments are only known within a small circle of scholars.[5] Furthermore, not only was she on the margins of the androcentric canon of Yiddish literature, she has also been excluded from the current reclaimed canon of Yiddish women writers.[6] In this chapter, I would like to correct that situation. Since Levin's life constitutes an important context for reading her texts, I start with a brief biography.[7]

Khane Levin was born in Ekaterinoslav (currently Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine) on May 3, 1900, the third of seven children. Before the revolution, around 48,000 Jews lived in Ekaterinoslav, which was at the time an important center of Jewish culture. Khane's father, Shaya Levin, who died in 1941, was a gravedigger. He is remembered by his family as a very devout Jew. Scant information is available on Khane's mother, Sofia, née Grynberg, who died either in 1954 or 1953. Khane attended Russian and Jewish schools, and before the revolution, she worked as a dressmaker, as well as in a shop. She began writing poems at an early age. First, she wrote in Russian, and then, persuaded by Leyb Naydus, she started to write in Yiddish. The timing suggests that she must already have been writing in 1915 when Naydus was in Ekaterinoslav. This pattern was a regular occurrence. Female poets would often begin by writing in languages other than Yiddish, and only following the intervention of a Yiddishist, a writer occupying a place in their lives, such as a brother, husband, or lover, did they decide to develop their talent in Yiddish.

The opportunity to be printed, meanwhile, often came from their connections with editors and publishers.[8] Reading the short autobiographies contained in Ezra Korman's *Yidishe dikhterins*, one is struck by the role the women ascribe to their “patrons” who introduced them to Yiddish poetry.[9] If one studies their private lives, it becomes clear how much relations with men influenced the chance of being published. Female writers, not treated as equal partners in the male-run presses, were usually pushed into the *froyen-vinkl* [women's corner]; they could expect protectionism more than actual recognition of the merits and significance of their work. Levin's own début came in 1918 on the pages of the St. Petersburg publication *Folks blat*. Her poems were also included by Peretz Markish in his anthology *Trep*, published in Ekaterinoslav in 1921. During the civil war in Russia, she joined the Red Army, where, according to her family, she was the partner of the commissar, who died in 1922. This relationship produced a child who may have died very early or who may have been still-born. After the revolution, she studied at the Teaching Seminary and briefly worked in Jewish schools. Between the wars, Levin lived in Kharkov, which at the time was an important site of Yiddish culture.

She was given an apartment at *Slovo* [Word], a house for writers where Leib Kvitko and Perets Markish also lodged. Levin became friendly with Kvitko and Markish, as well as with Itzik Feffer. They were all regular guests at her home. Her life partner was the famous actor Adolf Vinogradsky, who went by the stage name Dolya Vinogradsky. Following the common trend in revolutionary circles, the couple did not formalize their relationship.

Levin's most important volume of poetry, *Tsushteyer* [Contribution], was published in 1929 in Kharkov. The volume features a series of pieces entitled "Froy" [Woman], as well as "Eyne vi asakh andere" [One Like Many Others], a series about the experiences of a female soldier. Before the outbreak of the Soviet-German war, she published four more poetry collections: *Oyg oyf oyg* [Eye to Eye], 1933; *Kleynikaytn* [Trifles], 1933; *Di yingere fun mir* [Younger Than I], 1934; and *Eygns* [Own], 1941. Like Kadya Molodowsky, Levin was an accomplished Yiddish poet in terms of the number of her publications. Additionally, Levin issued six books for children and numerous short stories. In 1939–1940, she studied at the Foreign Languages Institute in Moscow. She survived the war in Buzuluk, which is within the Orenburg region. In 1945, she lived in Moscow, but afterwards she moved to Kharkov permanently. Following the war, like many others, she sought refuge from the rigid norms imposed on art and literature by the political system by writing children's literature. She published poetry for children in Ukrainian and Russian. Her closest writer friends were arrested in connection with the campaign against Jewish intellectuals and activists of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and murdered on Stalin's orders in 1952. Levin was afraid that she would share the same fate. Although she continued to publish in the Moscow-based *Sovetish heymland*, she remained outside mainstream Yiddish literary life. She died on January 19, 1969.

In this chapter, I use a gender perspective to explore those motifs in Levin's work in which she redefines the Jewish female identity in the context of social and customary changes brought by the October Revolution. I examine those aspects of Levin's oeuvre that make her an original and innovative poet and distinguish her work from Soviet Yiddish literature. This is not, therefore, a presentation of her whole corpus. I omit her children literature, short stories, and folk poems. Instead, I select works that contain universal elements, are relevant for today, and illustrate her greatest artistic achievements.

Mother

The issue of the trauma of wartime experiences from 1917 to 1921 is central to "Froy," Levin's feminist manifesto. That work concentrates on the

problem of being a woman who is unable to carry a baby to term and give birth to it.[10] This extremely powerful work, which opens her début poetry collection, is a cry for the rights of women, whose bodies always become spoils in times of historical uncertainties. Levin writes of the rapes carried out by men and of the massacres of pregnant women. Not satisfied with a description of events from the observer's point of view, such accounts from pogroms have a long tradition in Jewish poetry, Levin, in striving for subjectivity, makes one of the victims of the male barbarism the subject of the poem:

> Before whom,
> before whom am I to bare my pain?
> No longer can I silently suck on my wound!—
> Each night I dream of women,
> and each bewails a child.
>
> Who will share with me my cares?
> Who will relieve me in this hard world?
> Each night I dream of women,
> Pulled by their hair to the door...
> Women thrown on tables.
> Their knees pulled apart by strange hands.—
>
> Every moment thrown on the rubbish pile
> are bits of children's and women's bodies—terror and shame...
>
> It is hard,
> but I am ashamed to disappoint,
> because my country is beautiful
> and the joy of a festive morning
> awakes in my country—
> ears full of grain,
> but for me
> and for my fate
> empty...
>
> I too ploughed and sowed,
> for myself
> the ear
> I toiled hard.
> It should not be so,
> It should not happen so,
> that the mother's body becomes a coffin for the child![11]

This poem reaches a shocking strength of expression by introducing an almost naturalistic description of the terrorizing of women by tearing babies from their wombs. Their tragedy is described in two respects: first, the loss of a child, and second, taking away that element of humanity that is shame and the opportunity to have a say in the fate of one's own body. Levin evokes the

world of nature, the grain, full of ears, which brings to mind a woman's pregnancy. The child growing in the women is affectionately described as an ear. The motif of ploughing and sowing are metaphors often used for fertilization. Here, the woman herself is ploughed and sowed, becoming "soil" for the new life. The man does not appear as the one making the decision about conception. The woman has "toiled" to grow a person inside herself. Yet this hardship turns out to be in vain; her body has become a coffin for the baby. The women in this tragedy have become entirely alone. Their husbands are blind to the rapes carried out on their own wives, finding an effective anaesthetic in alcohol. They do not preserve the memory of the babies killed in the womb. Women, on the contrary, have their bodies marked by the stamp of tragedy, retaining a memory of the death caused in them. Levin speaks brutally of the tragedy that may be understood only by women who have experienced the death of another person in their own live bodies:

> Our husbands have grown used to seeing us with our lords,
> they drink all night with a tab till morning,—blind.
> But the naive female body cannot forget
> the simple joy of the growing baby.
>
> Every particle of my body is full of wild despair and lament,
> the pain chokes me—I have no strength left.
> I was called upon to be the mother of the enlightened generation,
> and I am given—its autopsy in my belly.[12]

A woman emerges from such a traumatic experience mutilated, no longer able to treat relations with a man as before, anxious about and fearing sex: "A pair of joined lips causes me pain, / unease strikes, like night sweats thick as honey."[13] At the end of the poem, Levin changes her strategy, moving from an individual subject to a collective one. She speaks in the name of women who are given the chance to demand their own rights. As a result of the revolution that shook the former social order, a crack appeared in the patriarchal history of humanity. The foundations of the system of subordination of one sex to the other seemed for a moment to be shaken. Of course, one must stand up to men for the rights of women and mothers. It is necessary to make the most of the moment and "cast off the burden of our sex":

> We all have a pass,
> For a moment we are
> outlaws from obedience to our sex.
> The lioness comes to the lion at the time of love,
> the vixen comes to the fox for rights-of-women and mothers
> and we—
> chosen from generations—calling ourselves "man and woman,"

> at the body's cage
> cast off the burden
> of our sex.[14]

Levin's poem breaks all the taboos associated with maternity. Moreover, the figure of the woman-mother serving in the 1920s as a target in anti-feminist discourse becomes an active participant in feminist rebellion and the main subject of its efforts.

The issue of single motherhood is an important theme in Levin's poetry. One poem, "Kinder zaynen kleyn, vos konen kinder visn" [Children Are Small, What Could They Know], is a record of a man splitting with and abandoning a woman and their young daughter after finding a new partner. The child is familiar with this situation from the lives of her friends, but now has to face up to the fact that this has happened to her. She realizes this when the father only comes in the evening to visit his old home and abandoned family. The drama of the situation is heightened by the child's naive statements and questions:

> Vita's daddy bought a new mummy.
> A whole new mummy on a new street.
> And now he just visits Vita's mummy. [...]
> Does daddy live at work now? Does he sleep in the factory? [...]
> How can daddy live on a different street?
> He's daddy, how can he be a guest?[15]

From the child's perspective, the change in her parents' relationship is an incomprehensible part of the games grown-ups play, an absurdity at odds with reason that shatters the order in the world. The tragedy of the child, and at the same time of the mother, unable to do anything to change the course of events and protect her child from unhappiness, is emphasized by the ironic verse recurring in the poem like a refrain: "The years of childhood bliss, what could children understand." The stereotype of carefree childhood is unmasked as false, as the child, as yet not protected by the armour of experience, is all the more defenseless in becoming the victim of the affairs of the father, who has "bought a whole new mummy." The childish language exposes the brutal truth about the "modern" relations between men and women based on free love. The poem finishes with the moving image of the daughter and mother, all the closer to one another as they are united by shared unhappiness:

> She nestles her warm body to her mother,
> To mother's cheeks, to mother's mouth.
> I will always, always love you more and more!
> What twaddle, silly, go to sleep sooner,

because father will be angry,
But the fond words have lost their power,
And the child weeps ever louder, despairing in the night [...]
Blonde and grey hairs are plaited.
They weep, like two women, left just the same.
And at the foot of the bed quietly looks on
a little rabbit with stitched-on eyes,
with its sewn mouth it sucks on a carrot
and is not moved by any little, trembling tear.[16]

Other poems by Levin, for example, "Shuld" [Guilt], describe the struggle of the woman and mother in the reality of daily life after breaking up, when she has to meet the challenge of fulfilling both roles, mother and father, which turns out not to be entirely possible:

Nobody should think,
that time heals wounds,
women once left still weep,
and I too weep every night
Not because sometimes
I cannot sleep at your cradle,
but I always want to lull you,
comfort my lonely fortune.
Meanwhile you need my love,
you bear my name,
Upon myself I take it
to be mother and father.
Only your childish voice torments me,
when I hear and see—
to every strange man you say Daddy,
you cuddle up to others' knees.
Do I caress you little,
in tenderness I do not cease,
I can do everything,
but one thing—not,
I cannot bring back your father.
This is why I feel guilt
under your pure gaze,
to every strange man you say Daddy,
you cuddle up to others' knees.
Nobody should think,
that time heals wounds,
when children miss their fathers,
mothers weep at night.[17]

The presence of the child makes it impossible to submit to the passage of time and forget about the man with whom there was once a connection. Since the child is a continual manifestation of its father, for the woman, the relationship with him cannot become just part of the past. The child's longing for her father still keeps the wound of the breakup fresh, and even worse, it awakes a feeling of guilt in the woman, regret that she cannot give the child its father. The woman's loneliness is heightened by the feeling of the child's being alone.

Levin's motherhood poems offer insights into the huge gulf dividing the male and female experience of parenting, specifically, men's lack of access to the bodily dimension of pregnancy, when one's body becomes a cradle for another, and woman's inability to reconcile the tragedy of the loss of a child to the consequences of broken relationships and the woman's lot, raising the "fruit" of the meeting of woman and man.

Clothes

Another important subject in Levin's poetry is the generational conflict between the traditional, small-town Jewish women's identity and the modern identification of the woman living in the rhythm of the big city, the combatant with political and feminist ideas. One manifestation of this conflict, depicting women's changing relationship with their own corporality, is the motif of differences in the way mothers and their daughters dress.

Clothes are a significant social and cultural code.[18] Changes in clothing are an important vector in revolutions in standards and social changes. Traditional historical narratives treated fashion, the world of silks and fineries, in a marginal manner, yet in *belles lettres*, the status of the choice of clothing is preserved as a system of identifying signs. The type and change in clothing played a particular role in Jewish culture. During the Diaspora, Jews were on the one hand dressed by non-Jews with signs of their identity, for example, pointed hats, intended to counteract contacts between Jews and Christians, and on the other hand, Jews kept themselves distinct by maintaining their own unique style of attire. Furthermore, clothing is regulated by Jewish religious law and by tradition. Jewish religious law forbids imitation of *chukas hagoyim* [non-Jewish clothes]. Today, generally recognizable are, above all, male Jewish wear, such as *tallitot* [ritual prayer shawls]; *tallit katan* [under-waistcoats with tassels]; *yarmulkes* [headcoverings that form a whole system of distinguishing marks for the various branches of Judaism]; and Hassidic coats, white stockings, and *shtreimlech* [fur caps]. Yiddish prose is dominated by descriptions of men symbolically changing from Jewish clothes to the so-called European style, with the protagonists cutting their sidelocks, shaving their beards, and

shedding their coats as manifestations of their social aspirations and changes in worldview.

Sheytlekh [women's wigs] and bonnets concealing, depending on their degree of orthodoxy, either the shaven heads of married women or their cut hair, are now less commonly associated as an element of traditional Jewish dress. This no doubt results from the marginalized role of women in Judaism and androcentric description of men's clothing as a synecdoche of the entire Jewish community. An excellent portrayal of the simplified approach in which universal equals male may be found in an excerpt concerning Jewish clothing in the memorial book dedicated to Pińczów, Poland:

> Jews in Poland dressed like the Polish nobility, but by the 15th century like burghers. At the time when Poles were changing their dress (robes) to European clothes, Jews were forbidden to dress in the same way, and they remained with the old style of bourgeois clothing. With time, such clothes became a tradition among Jews, and the long gabardine began to function as a normal Jewish outfit. The Jews from Pińczów, who had come from Bohemia and Moravia, in the 16th and 17th centuries, wore bekishe[19] and sheepskin jackets, and at the front tales-kotn[20] and arbekanfes.[21] On the head, a hat.[22]

There is not a single word in this passage on the traditional clothing of Jewish women. This leads to a linguistic exclusion by which the expression "Jews in Poland" refers only to the male half of Jewish inhabitants. Notably, the description of clothes distinguishing a Jewish woman refers especially to her marital status. For example, her traditional attire makes it clear if she is single, married, widow, or *agunah*.[23] This was related to the social role, particularly of wife and mother, designated to her.

The motif of dress, closely related to the issues of corporality, held an important place in the work of female Yiddish poets, often appearing in the moment of confrontation of the traditional lifestyle of mothers and modernity of their daughters. The ideal of *tsnue*, the virtuous woman, the model of womanhood ordained by traditional Judaism, provides the context for this intergenerational dialogue. Anka Grupińska describes "the ideal Jewish woman" as "modest, silent and hard-working, patient, obedient to God and subordinate to her husband, unaware of her needs, not remembering herself."[24] Furthermore, the contemporary *tsnue* from the ultra-Orthodox quarter of Jerusalem dresses "in a black scarf fitting tightly to her smooth (shaven) head, black stockings, a dark blouse carefully buttoned up to her neck and at the wrists."[25] Shedding the headscarf or wig, taking off the thick stockings, or pulling up the sleeves has the same status as cutting sidelocks or exchanging the long coat for a tailcoat and the fur cap for a bowler.

The young woman in Levin's poetry looks at the elements of her mother's dress as attributes of virtuousness, respected but rejected. Levin's poem "Kleyder" [Dresses] is a clear rebellion against covering up, swathing, or hiding the female Jewish body with the intention of preventing its beauty from attracting male gaze and tempting males to touch. The young woman's dresses alienate her from her mother's world; they do not carry information about belonging to the Jewish world, and furthermore their rather unfeminine cut erases the divide between the sexes, which is also forbidden by religious law[26]:

> In my short dresses,
> with no collar and no sleeves,
> as smooth, simple, as men's shirts,
> in my mother's eyes I look
> wild and strange,
> embarrassed, she looks away from me,
> and stares at the floor.[27]

Both women watch each other. The mother is embarrassed by her daughter's body. The roles are somehow reversed; the mother is less experienced in terms of corporality and less accustomed to female sexuality than her daughter. She is uneasy and shocked to look at a body that she gave birth to:

> Mother glances at my young slender body,
> Embarrassed she looks with aversion and pain.[28]

The daughter analyzes her mother's dress, which becomes the carrier of signs of the sexual potential of the Jewish woman, reduced to a procreative function. The thick creases hide the contours of the body bring to mind babies' cradles, and at the same time, they are filled with snow, symbolizing the embers of the body, cooled and frozen by virtuousness:

> they are wide, long,
> arranged into thick creases—
> each crease—a cradle filled with snow.[29]

The tips of the shoes that appear from under the edge of the mother's dress contain encrypted information about the borders of the world they traverse, namely "from the market to the porch in counted steps." The horizon of the mother's world is marked out by the home and the marketplace. These feet, dressed in plimsolls, are the busiest part of her figure. They are compared with "heads of mice," which have to work quickly but "unhurriedly." What does an "unhurried run" mean? The mother's hurry is different from that of her daughter. It is not chaotic, but ordered; the mother's plimsolls are bustling, but they walk circles like "the hands of an old clock." In the mother's world,

time runs in circles; everything has its time. The old clock marking the run of mummy's plimsolls is the rhythm of life ordered according to Jewish tradition; it ticks off the "home hours," because home is the mother's universe.

Entirely different is the hurry of the daughter; she must be "nimble" to manage to jump into a rushing tram or car. The daughter explains the customs of her modern world, unknown to her mother, as if to a child:

> Dear mum!
> Every morning
> there's this custom here—a certain time
> when I have to free my step and speed up,
> for me alone it will not wait
> the tram, or car.
> The car is strict—
> I must be agile
> so that sometimes I can run
> and jump into it.[30]

The daughter cannot restrain her body with dresses in the style of her mother; they do not suit the pace of the city.

Yet it is not only external reality that forces one to throw off the long, respectable dresses, there is pressure from the inside too. The young woman does not want to put out the fire of her desires. She rejects modesty and shame, wanting to burn in the flame of desire without restrictions and the boundaries of moderation and caution, even if this brings with it the risk of loss, of burning out:

> My dear mum,
> my old mum!
> What shall we do with your dresses,
> you tell me.
>
> With your long dresses
> and with my lustful hands
> which I stretch towards the sun—
> without the manacles of sleeves.
> I'll leave them
> naked,
> brown,
> black,—[...][31]

This does not mean, however, that she eliminates the aspect of her body's fertility. As she says, "Nobody ever caught the sun. / And the sun will not catch me!" She counts on the fact that she too might become a mother, but the child she bears will be the fruit of her passion, burnt by the sun of the lust of its mother's body:

> If I have a child—
> If I should have one child—
> a daughter, or son—
> let it be black
> with lips full of red.
> still in its mother's body
> soaked with the sun![32]

In this poem, the freeing of the arms from the manacles of the sleeves appears; the bare arms become a symbol of sexual freedom in women's Yiddish poetry. We may ask why the poet's attention is concentrated on the arms. We may seek the reasons in the role of female arms, emphasized in Judaism and deriving from its patriarchal order. The Talmud, giving the reasons for removing from women the privilege and obligation to study the Torah, explains that the wisdom of a woman lies in her hands,[33] not her head. This is another incarnation of the archetype of the woman as spinner; her vocation is weaving.[34] The roots of this are biblical. In the extract from the Book of Proverbs describing *eshet khayil*, a woman of valour, crucial for the model of Jewish womanhood, the activity of her hands is stressed:

> A woman of valour, who can find?
> far beyond pearls is her value [...]
> She seeks out wool and linen
> and her **hands** work willingly [...]
> She considers a field and buys it,
> from the fruit of her **handiwork** she plants a vineyard.
> She girds her loins with might
> and strengthens her **arms** [...]
> She puts her **hand** to the distaff,
> and her **palms** support the spindle.
> She spreads out her **palm** to the poor
> and extends her **hands** to the destitute.[35]

In Levin's poetry, clothes are not used only as a pretext for presenting intergenerational dialogue and showing the distancing from the traditional world of the mother. They also remain an expression of the quest for a definition of the woman's own sexuality. The protagonist of Levin's poems balances between elements of male and female identity, and the expression of this becomes her clothes and shoes—for example, her heels. High heels have become a symbol of a woman's sex appeal. The protagonist rejects feminine shoes with heels in favor of a wide shoe with a flat heel, allowing her to move in an "anti-feminine" way. While the rhythm in which she lives makes her dispense with graceful movement, her walk becomes the expression of the new

roles that the modern woman wants to fulfil. "Eylndik un menerish" explores that sentiment:

> Hasty and manly is my walk,
> the flat heel of a wide shoe.
> My walk is brisk,
> my pace quick,
> in the day of all the men I am the manliest:
> Deftly I bear the load of the city,
> Stiffly it sounds—my hasty walk.[36]

However, being "the manliest of all the man" is scrupulously staged, to an extent constituting a performance constructed for daily use, a battle with "natural" womanhood, with the still present legacy of the mother forming the female identity:

> Ever better I recognise myself
> and every time
> I paint myself
> a new print.
> Even the cigar, which so harms
> the corners of my mouth,
> is there because
> I am ashamed to look like myself
> and like my mother's wedding veil.[37]

The masculine cigar, a Freudian phallic symbol, also a marker of strength and power, becomes the antithesis of the mother's wedding veil. The mother's veil, with all the weight of its gender background, is the quintessence of Jewish womanhood. Jewish girls were traditionally raised with marriage in mind. While still in the cradle, the baby would be sung lullabies by her mother about her ideal future. Whereas a boy was wished that he would grow up to be a *talmud khokhem*, the epitome of good wishes for a daughter were the images of her future fiancé. For an adult woman in the patriarchal system of traditional Judaism there was no other social role, guaranteeing acceptance and respect, than the function of wife and mother. The young woman from Levin's poem feels in herself the presence of the instilled model of womanhood, but learns to recognise herself. However, this self-awareness leads her to a capable, deliberate creation of herself, despite the gender circumstances. In this poem, the veil forms a kind of mirror. The woman feels that under the masculine "print," which she lends herself, her face still shows through. The wedding veil is also a symbol of modesty and innocence, which is developed in the next part of the poem:

> I cover my face to no one,
> my arms are bare
> along the street they glide.
> By day anybody can take me by the naked arm,—
> I am ashamed to show them my anger.[38]

Referring to the veil that closes the previous stanza, the woman declares, "I cover my face to no one," which, in the context of the next verses, is a confession of rejection of the *tsnue* model and, like in "Kleyder," the naked arms become a manifestation of this. The bare arms are again a symbol of freedom, and their "gliding," lifted like wings, is also emphasized. But while social custom, manifested in ways including physical proximity, removal of barriers and bodily distance, and ease of touch, arouses in the woman aversion and anger, she is unable to show this. That would be at odds with the modernity for which she stands. The day is the time of masculinity, yet by night Levin's protagonist wants to set free her femininity muffled in the hard, manly self-image created in the day:

> But at night,
> when there is no one to please,
> I so desire for you to tell me:
> —Yours
> And let it seem wild to you
> let it seem strange to you,
> notice how womanly-delicate
> are the tips of my shirt.[39]

At night, she wants her partner to perceive in her delicateness, femininity, not to be entirely deceived by her man's shirt, but to see under it her woman's body. The "tips of my shirt" may be interpreted as the tips of the collar, but also as the nipples pointing through the shirt. She knows that, in the new form of relations shaped in revolutionary circles, this may seem strange and too primitive, but in the night sexual freedom, understood also as a lack of steady relationships burdened by the duty of fidelity and exclusivity, ceases to be the longed-for victory of the social revolution. In the woman, there awakes then a desire for the feeling of mutual belonging. She wants to shed the cocoon of masculinity:

> I am so tired
> with the hard, manly day.
> The night is heated
> the night is dark
> and I am still a woman.[40]

Privacy, intimacy, and sexual desires, shown as attributes of the night, arouse the feminine aspects of identity.

In the four-part poem "Nekht" [Nights], Levin further deepens the contrast between the masculine day and the night, as under its cover the woman wants to again become a little girl in her relationship with her lover, exude an atmosphere of subtlety, tenderness spiced up with infantilizing. She writes:

> My dear,
> do you want to listen to me?
> Is it true that the night entreats you with caresses?
> The silence keeps you sweet, like a lamb....
>
> Today I want to be a little girl again,
> a grain of joy,
> on your frowning lips
> a sunny-rabbits smile
> I will let out without a mirror.
>
> Did you think that with my plaits
> I'd cut off my girlish subtlety?
> Oh, you....[41]

Here the symbol of the change in the use of the "masculine" day—that is, the world of the struggle for universal ideas—is cutting off the plaits. Incidentally, in the earliest photographs that have survived of her, Levin has her hair cut very short.

Soldier Woman

The clearest transgression of gender roles in Levin's poetry is the motif of the Jewish woman soldier. When reading her series of soldier poems, we need to remember that Yiddish literature did not have a tradition of battle poetry and did not develop protagonists who were heroic in the European conception.[42] Alien to it was the ideal of gallant patriotism, the expression of which was death on the battlefield. This was of course connected to the existence of the Jewish nation in the Diaspora, which lacked its own army. Although so-called historical songs were written describing the havoc of war and the pogroms, the songs were from the perspective of the victims, emphasizing their martyrdom.[43] In the nineteenth century, when Jews were conscripted by force into the tsarist army, the songs of recruits became popular. These songs, written in a lamenting tone, portrayed going to the army as the loss of one's own identity.[44] The protagonist of Khane Levin's poetry, a volunteer female soldier, breaks taboos in two ways: as a Jew and as a woman.[45] The essential prop in Levin's war poetry is a rifle, which functions in various

contexts of meaning. It becomes the main symbol of departure from the Jewish world. The poem "Tsushteyer" describes a meeting with the mother on their ancestors' burial mound, where the mother bewails not the dead, but her living daughter, screaming at her in despair, "Who do you take after? Not after me, not after Dad. After a goy, after a *shikse*![46] Our daughter is playing with a rifle!"[47] Here, the rifle is an object from outside of Jewish reality. To the mother, firing the rifle is like cutting oneself off from the heritage of the ancestors, alienation. The daughter does not try to soothe her mother's despair. On the contrary, she makes the iconoclastic declaration on the family grave:

> Mother, long live the earth!
> I can also saddle a horse
> with a goy. Like a *shikse*
> I kissed in the bushes.
> The world is burning and the girl is glowing
> They give me a cold rifle.
> They envelop me—two hot arms.
> Like a vagrant, like a goy
> on a horse...
> at the front ... in the fire.[48]

The soldier's experience is interwoven in Levin's poetry with entry into the world of sexuality. In the army, the old prohibitions and norms cease to apply as rituals and conventions are put aside, and one goes with the voice of impulse, longing. The war strips the body of all secrets. On the one hand, through the death and massacre visible everywhere, and on the other, through the physical proximity of men's and women's bodies. In "Eyne vi asakh andere" [One Like Many Others], Levin presents the resting army by writing "they are not heroes, not knights,"[49] and after the battle they begin to tell obscenities about women, such as "brothers, I have a wife—oh ho ho! What a rascal, how she sings! And her breasts...—oh! like this, like this they are!," "Everyone panting ... hungry for women,"[50] the poet summarizes. In these conditions, death and eroticism form an inseparable whole, and the lover of the protagonist of the war series, who may be treated as the poet's alter ego, when he wants to make love, leads her among the graves amid the moss, and nearby:

> A harmonica screeches in the field.
> Some soldier-boy dances happy and well,
> The slaughtered calves smell alarmingly,
> Of phlegm, wormwood, and blood.[51]

In the next part of this poem, the rifle, itself, is an undoubtedly masculine attribute of power, possessing the characteristics of a phallic symbol. When the couple are lying next to one another, the declaration occurs:

Empty in the body and the hearts,
She is disgusted by her own breasts.
She is disgusted by the rifle, black,—
Damp from the grass and the kisses...[52]

In the game of love, the young girl is rather passive. It is she who is led and kissed; she looks at the sky and the moon and recalls the story of Rachel, daughter of Laban, who when leaving her father's home with Jacob, secretly stole her father's idols and hid them under her saddle. When Laban caught up with the escapees and demanded the return of the idols, Jacob, not knowing about Rachel's deed, warned that if his father-in-law should find the stolen idols on somebody's person, the perpetrator would die.[53] However, Rachel did not allow her camel to be searched, citing menstrual indisposition, though according to the rabbinical interpretation she died when giving birth to her next child, Benjamin, as a result of Jacob's words, and was buried by the road.[54] Levin refers to this story in her poem describing the evening embraces on the front line:

Rachel shamed her male saddle,
And under it hid the house idols
This is why she died on the road,
Her trail—split in two...[55]

In Levin's poetry, Rachel's conduct takes on a doubly symbolic meaning. First, it is an expression of the impossibility of completing cutting oneself off from the world in which one grew up, with the desire to keep something of value from the family home. Second, in refusing to come down from the camel because of menstruation, Rachel becomes a symbol of the model of womanhood defined in categories of weakness, powerlessness, and delicateness, but also impurity. Often these two motifs are developed in Levin's poetry: the problem, in the face of the revolution, of breaking off from the values instilled in the Jewish home, and issues of the dilemma between femininity and masculinity understood from the point of view of gender.[56] She is well aware that the social revolution has permitted women to enter male roles and to sit on the male saddle, as the verses on Laban's daughter describe. And that is why in "Di vig" [The Cradle], Levin writes, "You have made me the same as a man in the yoke of the sword and the rifle."[57] In spite of this, though, she remains in the yoke of womanhood. After the war, she faces the challenge of being a mother, and several verses later in the same poem declares, "I love my child, yet heavy for me is the cradle."[58] It is hard for her to meet the challenges of normal motherhood when she has the feeling that she has given birth to the country in which she lives:

The girl made her contribution
to the world borne of her blood and flesh.[59]

She is torn between her home, symbolizing the woman's space, and the male reconstruction of the country, between her love for her child and that for the homeland, and between being a mother and being a citizen. "Di vig" continues:

My country,
my Soviet country!
You stand above me,
so huge,
so bright,
still I break away from my doorstep
and my mother's heart
I leave
on the handle of my door.[60]

This leads to a gender aspiration. She wraps her masculine relationship with her country in her feminine corporality:

My country,
my Soviet country!
You swelled high like a man
in the delicate mother's body,
in the mother's tissue!...
Like a man I break
Amid your brightness
And remain on the doorstep...—
Still I must be a mother,
Must be a woman.[61]

The transgression turns out to be not quite possible, and Levin's protagonist is in spite of everything the heir of Rachel, who under her men's saddle, kept the idols of femininity.

Lover

Levin's poetry is also courageous and bold in erotic themes. She portrays the sexual revolution that took place during the wave of socio-political changes. Her poems are expressions of the quest for redefinition of one's own sexuality. She describes the longing for "ordinariness," which is the desire to find a partner before whom a woman will not be ashamed to show her feelings and who will father the child for whom she yearns. However, in this ordinariness from which the "mother's wedding veil" shows through is to be based on the principles of equality and freedom. From "Prost" [Simply]:

I am like my mother—
It hurts me—I weep.
I love—I want a child from you.
But in the fortune of the four walls of your world I will not be imprisoned,—
I too have a separate
key to the door.

For me awaits the street.
for me awaits work.
And equally with you I pay
the world a debt.
And if needs be—
You know—
I can die
far from those I love.
far from my quiet yard!

And if needs be—
You know—
my teeth and lips
the reeking dressing
will take.[62]

This expected partnership in the relationship with the man is not meant to be a gift or a favor, but thoroughly "developed." The modern woman has already left the space of the home that belonged to her for centuries, and now she works just the same and may fall in battle just the same. As a result, there is no argument for denying her right to a "separate key to the door" or for subordinating her life to the man's priorities. Yet what is terrifying in the new reality, freed from conventions, is the woman's possible treatment as a sexual object for a night. The sexual revolution has brought with it the model of casual relationships, associating it with prostitution. Understood here, it would seem, as sexual contacts are deprived of feelings and bonds:

Why does it happen so,
as it happens,
that the woman's flesh becomes a shelter
for making it through the night?
The bodies of women, like apples
munched lecherously,
lie like rubbish
on every road and path...

It hurts me and I weep
who should I be ashamed to?
Who will tell me, that a rest
I have not honestly earned?
Now,

at rest,
I demand the debt of my womanhood—
the debt of a mother's rights
and of the father of my child.[63]

In the new, post-revolutionary reality, however, thinking about a steady relationship might be treated as a lack of progressiveness, a legacy of the bourgeois mentality against whose conventions the social revolution and the changes in social mores it brought were rebelling. The woman from Levin's poem confesses that the trappings of romantic love have become outdated, passé, but she has within herself the desire for a steady relationship, although she knows that this exposes her to ridicule and incomprehension. From "Zay dokh nit keyn kind" [Don't Be a Child]:

Don't be a child,
Who will laugh at you?
Is it truly a disgrace for a man—
to enter the house
and do nothing bad to her?

Explain to me,
whom can it harm
that some night
is not used in a night-time way?
Don't be angry,
don't call me "bourgeois"—
I just want to grasp,
what I so far don't understand.

Perhaps someone will be bored by the song
of the moon and the roses,
but is it truly a disgrace—
to search for this one in hundreds, a thousand,
search for this one
and for this one to be a woman?[64]

This does not mean, however, that we do not find the record of many sexual experiences and a variety of partners in Levin's poetry. In one of her poems, "Trink ikh vayn" [I Drink Wine], there is even an indication of looking for affection in the arms of both men and women:

And that my heart is a pitcher of joy
I knelt down,—
whether it be men, or women—
I love all, all are close.[65]

In "Nekht," she attempts to convey the dynamic of a woman and man coming together by building a quivering, panting atmosphere, in which the

nature of the experience is the blending of activeness and passivity, distancing and nearing, fullness and longing, and lack and fulfilment:

I stroke your hair,
I envelop you,—
fullness in my heart,
on my lips silence.
I explain nothing,—
I ponder.
It is night.

Quietly I laugh,
quietly I call.
I do not see you,
I look for you—
I find your neck
and throat.
I am hot—
I worry,
I leave,
I come back,
I lie still without strength. Surrendered.
It is night...[66]

Sometimes these are sexual encounters for just one night, leaving behind shame and hurt, like in verse IV of the Nekht poems. In this description of a nocturnal encounter with a man another strategy has been chosen, concentrating on a detail, the pillowcases:

There's a kind of hot night,
and at night—heated pleasures,
why did we break out in joy?—
For heady wine and honey!
You said:
in the courtyard the dog will bark,
but the dog—you remember—did not bark.
It put its head in my lap,
quite normal, rustic, calm.
You remember how happy you were?—
Without yapping the dog greeted me...
You led me by the hand
like a big—small child.
You said:
—The pillowcase is clean,
lie down,
rest,
rest...
You put the pillow down for me

and arranged it under my head.
There's a kind of hot night,
and at night—heated pleasures.
And we broke out in the joy
of heady wine and honey!

On the pillow remained a stain,
a stain, of blood, or wine.
I left your room
and never returned.
You will not call me to you again,
and I will not come alone.
I am ashamed now to meet
a simple rustic dog.[67]

This poem is based on an ambiguity of the dog and the stain. On a clean pillowcase put on for the lover, a red stain remains. The stain could be wine, the symbol of amorous pleasures, or blood, the symbol of the suffering and pain left in the woman by the chance nature of this meeting, the pain that her body will also be "munched lecherously,"[68] and will become just "a way of making it through the night"[69] as Levin writes elsewhere. A similar ambiguity is represented by the dog. In one way, the dog is a normal, friendly guardian of the house, but in another, at the end of the poem, the words about the dog, "I am ashamed now to meet / a simple rustic dog,"[70] may refer contemptuously to the man who for only one night put a clean pillow under her head and who never again came calling.

The repeated verses on breaking into "joy of heady wine and honey" evoke the metaphor of love from the *Song of Songs*, in which the combination of honey and wine has an unequivocally erotic meaning, with the image of the intercourse of the bride and groom described as an entry to the garden, associated with consumption of honey and wine:

I went into my garden, my sister, the bride,
I found my myrrh with my balsam,
I ate my slice with my honey,
I drank my wine with my milk.
Eat, my friends,
drink and get drunk on my love![71]

In his superb analysis of *Song of Songs*, Othmar Keel shows the deeply culturally rooted meaning of shared consumption of honey and wine by a man and woman as a metaphor of the bliss of physical love; honey is the sweet aspect of love, and wine is the daze caused by it. Keel cites other ancient texts that introduce honey and wine into their description of the closeness of lovers.

For example, in the Sumerian song of love, the delights of the honey-scented bed are described like this:

> My brother led me to his house,
> he laid me on the honey-scented bed,
> my beloved, sweet, clutched to my heart
> after many, one after the next touches with the tongue,
> one after another, my brother,
> he with the most beautiful face, did this fifty times.[72]

And on the Old Babylonian plate depicting the sexual act, during which the woman drinks wine, we see the following inscription, which in a frank way shows the connotations of wine and love:

> My God! Sweet is the drink of the landlady,
> Like her heady drink sweet is the vulva,
> sweet is the drink
> like her labia, so sweet is her vulva,
> sweet is her drink.[73]

Levin therefore combines in her description of the intercourse of the woman and the man archetypal images with contemporary details such as the white pillowcase, obtaining a dichotomous situation of an object in which the area of enjoying pleasures is a temporary break from the real order of reality, after which the person is again condemned to solitude. For a brief moment, the desired model of mythical unity and closeness to another person is realized, but afterwards, there is a return to strangeness and distance and from the honey and wine remains only a stain on the pillowcase, a sign of suffering, disgrace, or tainting. For centuries, the connotation of a red stain on the sheets was as a symbol of loss of virginity, a sign of the wedding night.

The steady relationship, the longing for which appears as a motif in Levin's poetry, ultimately also brings disappointment in the form of the inevitable alienation and distancing oneself from partners, which results in aversion to bodily contacts:

> I drink wine,
> but no longer that one.
> Again joy,
> yet much smaller.
> I sing songs, like before,
> but my dear is far away.
> No,
> not far,
> quite close to me,—
> he drinks wine and sings,
> on my table he lies,
> but his gaze is far and distant.
> I cease to worry about it—
> I have new,
> fresh,
> arms.
> Late at night from the street
> another visits me.
> My heart is a pitcher of joy.
> I am ready to embrace anyone.
> I sing loud, even louder,
> Let him see and long again.
> And that my heart is a pitcher of joy
> I knelt down,—
> whether it be men, or women—
> I love all, all are close.
> Only to that one,
> the most strange—
> I fear
> to fix my gaze.
> I hug
> the wall,
> let it not touch my hand.
> I turn up my collar around my neck,
> for he once embraced it.
>
> First-born, first-born, I am your wife.
> Your pain rests in my flesh...[74]

This poem exudes the whole scale of often contradictory feelings that the woman harbors in relation to her partner, of whom she calls herself his wife. The poem ranges from longing and the desire to arouse jealousy, to anger, searching for joy in infidelity, to fear, aversion, which do not, though, exclude the feeling of a profound connection and corporeal belonging. This poem too refers to the symbolism of wine, playing with the meanings of wine as a drink and wine as a metaphor for amorous pleasures. The statement at the beginning, "I drink wine, but no longer that one," turns out to be a confession on the new "other" partner who gives the freshness of his arms and allows her to sing the songs of love. The joy of the relationship "on the side" is partial, though: to an extent it only serves to arouse longing in the regular partner. The alienation of the one who ought to be closest to her pushes the woman into the arms of men and women, because her heart is—and here again the metaphor referring to wine—a pitcher of joy, which must have an outlet. This brings with it the growth of barriers, distance in relations with her husband, who, however, in the culmination of the piece is ultimately called "first-born,"

someone who still continues to have priority. Just as the mother cannot renounce the bodily bonds with the child in her womb, a bodily symbiosis exists with the man; his frustrations pass through her body, maturing like the fetus inside her.

Conclusion

In her poetic credo "Di shure, vos mir libn" [The Verse That We Like], Khane Levin expressed the hope that her poems might find an audience to whom some aspect of her oeuvre would speak and who might open her books:

I know you are not thunderous
and you are not resounding, my words,
but maybe you will reach someone—
in joy or in sorrow.
The beating of the heart
too is only heard,
when to someone's breast
you press your ear.
The mute bird's cry
of the amazing falling bird
arouses in us fear
and does not allow the eyes to know sleep.
Childishly tangled words,
tiny tears falling from the lashes,
how often do they chain us to the spot
and throw us on our knees.
Behind the mute bird's cry,
behind the childish joy, the mother's tears—
behind all of this I have directed
every drop of blood in my veins.
Honest joy and unfeigned suffering
from myself and from you I always demanded.
Be not like cold mirrors,
my verses!...
Everything I say,
I say from the depths of my heart,
These are my only treasures,
my own.
I wish for this one happiness,
I wish for this one joy,
that for some man, child, woman old or young
one of my poems,
just one verse,
one word
shall become so near and dear,

that this book will open itself
with the verse that is sought.
Not dead,
not blind,
not praising is this book.
It feels, it knows....[75]

Unfortunately, Levin's books have stayed closed. Her poetry is marginalized within women's Yiddish literature, as well as within Yiddish literature, which itself occupies a peripheral place in the world literary canon. She therefore suffers a triple marginalization. To date, her writings have not enjoyed the same attention, for example as those of Celia Dropkin, Anna Margolin, or Kadya Molodowsky, whose works have been translated into English and have thus acquired a wider readership. This may be the result of the political and territorial circumstances that placed her works outside of the main current of research on Yiddish literature. The lack of attention, however, is not due to the artistic value of her writing, the excellence of which was perceived immediately upon publication of her début volume. In the magazine *Di royte velt* [The Red World] in 1929, Yekhezkl Dobrushin wrote that the standard of the collection *Tsushteyer* placed it among the most outstanding achievements of Soviet Jewish poetry.[76] He stressed that what distinguished Levin's poetry from other contemporary Yiddish poetry was the very clearly marked—in an innovative, original way—female subjectivity that bonded all Levin's works together. As he writes, "Khane Levin's book *Tsushteyer* is a monolith devoted to one and the same *froyen-frage* [women's issue], or rather *mame-frage* [mother's issue], the subject of the woman in contemporary Soviet reality."[77] The entirely new element introduced by Levin's poetry to Jewish Soviet poetry is, according to Dobrushin, the attitude to corporality, which he terms "love for the body."[78] Summarizing, he describes Levin's works as poetry of protest and suffering, but he quickly adds that it is also full of faith and optimism. This assurance of the optimistic meaning of Levin's work is of course made in respect to the particular conditions the poet was writing under—in a system in which every poem was judged according to the categories of the political ideology, and where an accusation of creating works lacking the required trends could lead to denial of an artist's living, arrest, or even execution. Critical texts written by the authorities of the time, Dobrushin's among them, did not just, as is usually the case, influence the development and reception of an author's work, but also its very existence. An accusation of pessimism was a serious charge since faith in the glorious socialist future was compulsory. That is why Dobrushin, clearly positive in his attitude to Khane Levin and her

poems, attempted to extract the elements that matched the optimism that the system dictated. He did, though, accuse her of excessive saturation of certain poetic extracts with personal sorrow, yet ultimately his verdict brings salvation. He writes that "Khane Levin portrays the set of experiences and women's issues in an optimistic light, which comes from the processes of reconstruction thanks to which we have now achieved the transformation of the woman into a creative person of work with equal rights."[79] I think that this part of the review shows clearly the restrictions that she had to face to keep the female aspect of her work from dominating the asexual "person of work," how much care she had to take to prevent the difficult challenges of modern womanhood, the painful experiences from drowning out the youthful optimism which, though without doubt present in her work, is not obvious, but tangled in the baggage of suffering and doubts. Reading Levin's poems and collections that were published after 1929, we see that the passion, rebellion, and pugnacity that were fully revealed in the first collection are somewhat muted. This was no doubt influenced by the intensifying repressiveness of the system, as well as the efficient method of Soviet nationalization of creative output through guaranteeing of a job and a set of privileges for subordinated artists and writers. Remember that in the 1930s Khane lived in an artists' house, collecting a regular fee, which made both her and her family's existence dependent on her published works being ideologically acceptable.

This review by Dobrushin also reveals a certain specter that hangs over the reception of Khane Levin, namely that the Jewish Soviet literary elite soon became androcentric,[80] with Itzik Feffer, Perets Markish, and Leib Kvitko[81] as the canonical artists; their work was treated as a kind of template. Despite his praise for her invention and innovativeness, Dobrushin had to discern in it influences of the poetic style of Feffer, the rhythm of Markish, and the worldview of Kvitko. Ultimately they were seen as those who defined Soviet Yiddish poetry, and even today there is a cult around them, overshadowing such creative personalities as Khane Levin. A distinct and sad confirmation, but also a depiction of certain mechanisms of this dominance of the classics is given by the recollections of Levin's daughter, Eda Vinogradsky. When I discovered that Levin's daughter had published a commemorative text, I approached it with high hopes, counting on an interesting contribution to the poet's biography, but above all a source on the poet deriving from the closest person to her, who could remember her from before the war, the daughter's account of her mother. How great was my disappointment, though, when in the article entitled "Поэты моего детства" [Poets of My Childhood], I found recollections of Kvitko, Markish, and Feffer. As Vinogradsky notes, they were "friends of my

mother, the poet Khane Levin, beginning her creative journey together with them."[82] Despite the existence of so many analyzes and memorial papers on these three, Levin's daughter devotes her whole essay to them. Only by reading between the lines may a few biographical facts be teased out. Why does Vinogradsky not write about her mother? She wanted to write about what she thought was important and of significance for everyone, specifically, the canonical authors. Having lived day to day with her mother, Eda does not perceive the need to share her recollections of her. She only relays what she remembers from the visits to their home of the "great poets," for, as she writes in her last sentences, "They were the giants of Jewish poetry of the 20th century. They were known not only in our country, but around the world. Our nation can be proud that it gave us poets of this magnitude."[83] Yet sometimes giants block the view of the horizon. My overarching goal in this chapter is to remove from the shadow of the giants Levin's legacy to Yiddish poetry.

Notes

Vadim Levin and William Vinogradsky, the living descendants of Khane Levin, kindly gave permission to publish her poems.

1. Khane Levin, *Tsushteyer* (Ukraine: Melukhe-farlag fun Ukraine, 1929), 14.

2. See Dan Miron, "Why Was There No Women's Poetry in Hebrew Before 1920," in *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature*, ed. Naomi B. Sokoloff, Anne Lapidus Lerner, and Anita Norich (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 65–91. There were of course female Hebrew poets, such as Rachel Morpurgo (1790–1871) and Rachel Bluwstein (1890–1931), but here I am interested in modern women's poetry, which in 1928 was extensive enough for Ezra Korman to publish *Yidishe dikhterins*: *antologye* (Shikago: L. M. Shtayn, 1928).

3. On Celia Dropkin, see Janet Hadda, "The Eyes Have It: Celia Dropkin's Love Poetry," in *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature*, ed. Naomi B. Sokoloff, Anne Lapidus Lerner, and Anita Norich (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 93–112 and Agnieszka Legutko, "Cyrkowa dama—poezja Celii Dropkin czytana z perspektywy genderowej," in *Nieme dusze? Kobiety w kulturze* jidysz, ed. Joanna Lisek (Wrocław: Wudawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2010), 207–242. On Anna Margolin, see Abraham Novershtern, "'Who Would Have Believed That a Bronze Statue Can Weep': The Poetry of Anna Margolin," *Prooftexts* 10: 3 (1990): 435–468.

4. On Jewish literary life in Kharkov, see Gennady Estraikh, "The Kharkiv Yiddish Literary World, 1920s–mid–1930s," *East European Jewish Affairs* 32, no. 2 (2002): 70–88. Estraikh mentions Levin in his volume.

5. A short biographical note on Khane Levin may be found in Chaim Beyder, *Этюды о еврейских писателях* (Kiev: Izdat of "Spirit i litera," 2003), 170; she is also mentioned in Nachman Mayzel, *Dos yidishe shafn un der yidisher shrayber in Sovetnfarband* (Nyu york: Ikuf, 1959).

6. Evidence of this is the omission of Levin's poems from Barnett Zumoff's bilingual English-Yiddish anthology of women's poetry *Songs to a Moonstruck Lady: Women in*

Yiddish Poetry (Toronto: TSAR Publication in association with the Dora Teitelboim Center for Yiddish Culture, 2005).

7. My thanks go to Vadim Levin and William Vinogradsky for helping to establish the details of Levin's life for me.

8. Norma Fain Pratt, "Culture and Radical Politics: Yiddish Women Writers, 1890–1940," *American Jewish History* 70 (1980): 81–82.

9. See Ezra Korman, *Yidishe dikhterins: antologye* (Shikago: L. M. Shtayn, 1928).

10. On matriarchs in Yiddish poetry, see Kathryn Hellerstein, "The Metamorphosis of the Matriarchs in Modern Yiddish Poetry," in *Yiddish Language and Culture Then and Now*, ed. Leonard Jay Greenspoon (Omaha: Creighton University Press, 1998), 201–231. Also see Joanna Lisek, "Jidisze mame—ciało i mit" [Yidishe Mame—The Body and the Myth], *Tsvishn* 3 (2010): 4–11.

11. Levin, *Tsushteyer*, 7–8. Unless noted otherwise, all works were translated by Joanna Lisek.

12. Ibid., 8.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., 8–9.

15. Khane Levin, *Eygns* (Kiev: Melukhe-farlag, 1941), 58–59.

16. Ibid., 60–61.

17. Ibid., 64–65.

18. For more on the motif of dress in Yiddish women's poetry, see Joanna Lisek, "Peruka, chodaki i jedwab. Poetyckie sukienki w jidyszowej szafie," *RitaBaum* 17 (2011): 18–23.

19. *Bekishe* is a type of men's coat lined with fur, cut at the waist and decorated on the chest, reaching down below the knees. It served as clothing for traveling and hunting.

20. *Tales kotn* is a type of waistcoat sewn from two straight pieces of white linen or woollen cloth put on over the head and tied at the sides, on the four edges of which tzitzit are attached.

21. *Arbekanfes* is an undergarment covering the chest and upper part of the back. The name is used interchangeably with *tales kotn*, but here it is a separate item of dress.

22. Mordechai Shinar, *Sefer-Zikaron le-ḳehilat Pints'ev: in Pinṭshey ṭogṭ shoyn nishṭ* (Tel Aviv: Irgun Yots'e Pinṭshey be-Yiśra'el uba-tefutsot, 1970), 42.

23. *Agunah* refers to a woman whose husband has left without a divorce or a woman whose husband is missing.

24. Anka Grupińska, *Najtrudniej jest spotkać Lilit* (Kraków: Wydawn Austeria, 2008), 124; on traditional dress among ultra-Orthodox women see Sima Zalcberg, "'Grace Is Deceitful and Beauty Is Vain': How Hassidic Women Cope with the Requirement of Shaving One's Head and Wearing a Black Kerchief," *Gender Issues* 24:4 (September 2007): 13–34.

25. Grupińska, *Najtrudniej jest spotkać Lilit*, 188.

26. Deut. 22: 5.

27. Levin, *Tsushteyer*, 16.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid., 17.

30. Ibid., 17–18.

31. Ibid., 18.

32. Ibid.

33. Jerusalem Talmud, Sotah 3: 16 a; see Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law: The Essential Texts, Their History, & Their Relevance for Today* (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), here: *Study of Torah*, 29–41.

34. This does not mean that there were no female Jewish scholars of the Holy Scriptures. For their names, see Emily Taitz, Sondra Henry, and Cheryl Tallan, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Women: 600 B.C.E–1900 C.E.* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003). The issue of the ban on women studying the Torah was itself discussed. Eminent rabbis often had well-educated daughters. It is not the exceptional person who may be remembered and discovered that is the issue here, but rather certain general cultural mechanisms. On woman's weaving, see also Exodus 35:25.

35. Proverbs 31, 10–31.

36. Levin, *Tsushteyer*, 14.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid., 14–15.

39. Ibid., 15.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid., 35.

42. See Ken Frieden, *Classic Yiddish Fiction: Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

43. See Jean Baumgarten and Jerold C. Frakes, *Introduction to Old Yiddish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 328–341.

44. See Shaul M. Ginzburg and Pesach S. Marek, *Еврейскія народыя пѣсни въ Рассіи* (Saint Petersburg: Voskhod, 1901), 283–302.

45. Interestingly, Yiddish dictionaries do not give the feminine form of the word for soldier, *zelner*.

46. A *shikse* is a non-Jewish girl.

47. Levin, *Tsushteyer*, 123.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid., 74.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.,75.

52. Ibid., 75–76.

53. Moses 31: 30–35.

54. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, Vol. 1, Project Gutenberg, http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext98/1lotj10.txt.

55. Levin, *Tsushteyer*, 76.

56. On intergenerational dialogue in women's poetry in Yiddish, see Kathryn Hellerstein, "The Metamorphosis of the Matriarchs in Modern Yiddish Poetry," in *Yiddish Language and Culture Then & Now*, ed. Leonard Jay Greenspoon (Omaha: Creighton University Press, 1998), 201–231.

57. Levin, *Tsushteyer*, 19.

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid., 124.

60. Ibid., 19–20.

61. Ibid., 20.

62. Ibid., 11.

63. Ibid., 12.

64. Ibid., 13.

65. Ibid., 30.

66. Ibid., 34.

67. Ibid., 37–38.
68. Ibid., 11.
69. Ibid.
70. Ibid., 38.
71. Song of Songs 5: 1.
72. Quoted in Othmar Keel and Bolesław Mrozewicz, *Pieśń nad Pieśniami: biblijna pieśń o miłości* (Poznań: Zysk i S-ka, 1997), 176.
73. Ibid., 195.
74. Levin, *Tsushteyer*, 29–30.
75. Levin, *Eygns*, 3–4.
76. See Yekhezkl Dobrushin, "Undz Tsushteyer [vegn Khane Levins lider-buch]," *Di royte velt* 11–12 (1929): 181–189.
77. Ibid., 182.
78. Ibid., 186.
79. Ibid., 189.
80. A clear example is the chapter "Soviet Yiddish Literature," in Sol Liptzin, *A History of Yiddish Literature* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1972). In that chapter, of the almost 30 writers described, there is not a single woman.
81. This of course did not save them from execution if they were seen as enemies of the system.
82. Eda Vinogradskaya, "Поэты моего детства" [Poets of My Childhood], *Вестник народного университета еврейской культуры* No. 6 (2000): 181.
83. Ibid., 189.