

# ABSINTHE

WORLD LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION

## *Translating Jewish Multilingualism*

Edited by Marina Mayorski and Maya Barzilai

2019

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## A Note on Transliteration

Hebrew, Yiddish, and Ladino words were transliterated according to the Library of Congress romanization systems. In cases where words in Jewish languages appear within texts that use the Roman alphabet, we have preserved the authors' spellings. Thus, the Ladino poems written by Juan Gelman and the Yiddish words in Frida Alexandr's text were not changed to fit standard transliteration systems.

Names of places changed over the course of the twentieth century. For place of publication, we have generally used the current names—thus, Istanbul rather than Constantinople, Mumbai rather than Bombay—except for cases when the authors themselves refer to a place by a certain name, which we have chosen to preserve as they appear in the original texts.





# Marina Mayorski and Maya Barzilai

## Introduction

*Modern Jewish culture speaks with many voices.*

—Benjamin Harshav, 2007

Jewish life has always entailed the use of more than one language. Jews have lived within and alongside non-Jewish societies, usually as minorities, and maintained various channels of cross-cultural exchange, which often took the form of translation and adaptation. By the end of the nineteenth century, the period when the texts included in this volume of *Absinthe* begin to be published, Jewish communities were spread across the globe, and Jews lived and wrote in the languages of their respective communities as well as in Hebrew and in Jewish vernacular languages such as Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), Yiddish, and Judeo-Arabic. In the late eighteenth century, with the rise of the Jewish Enlightenment movement—the Haskalah—original and translated *literary* works began to appear in Hebrew and were quickly translated into these Jewish vernaculars. Proponents of the Haskalah advocated for religious, social, and cultural reform and promoted the study of European languages as well

as modern disciplines such as literature, history, and science in addition to traditional Jewish education.

As the language of the biblical corpus, Hebrew has enjoyed a high cultural and social status, and the liturgical use of Hebrew yielded a textual corpus that constituted the Jewish canon. Well into the nineteenth century, Jewish writing in spoken languages such as Yiddish and Ladino was deeply tied to the Hebrew literary canon, which originated in the scripture and included Midrash, Talmud, and other rabbinic commentaries. However, Hebrew also served as a means of communication and a medium through which Jews could express themselves and disseminate their ideas far beyond their immediate cultural and social contexts through genres such as historical writing, biography, poetry, and fiction. Since only educated members of the community had access to Hebrew texts—primarily men of certain social classes—Hebrew scripture and liturgy had to be translated into vernacular languages spoken by the wider population. Until the mid-nineteenth century, Jewish communal leaders begrudgingly accepted these translations into the spoken languages of the Jews, and constant reference to Hebrew sources was needed in order to preserve it and legitimize the translated texts. Jewish vernaculars were themselves amalgams, composed of non-Jewish majority languages, written in the Hebrew alphabet, and elements that gradually permeated from other co-territorial or colonial languages, such as Russian, Polish, Greek, Turkish, French, Italian, and English.<sup>1</sup> The languages developed by Jewish communities are inscribed with the multidirectional trajectories of Jewish migrations: Yiddish, a Germanic vernacular, testifies to the eastbound migration of Jews from Central Europe. Ladino, a Romance vernacular, originated in the Iberian Peninsula and further developed among the Sephardi Jews who were expelled from the region in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, most of whom settled in the Ottoman Empire. Judeo-Arabic dialects developed among Jews living in the Arabic-speaking world and disseminated through migration to places such

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<sup>1</sup> According to Joshua Fishman's definition, a Jewish language is one that is "phonologically, morpho-syntactically, lexico-semantically or orthographically different" from the languages of non-Jewish sociocultural networks. Fishman, "Sociology of Jewish Languages," 4.

as India and the United States. Modern Hebrew came to function as a national language for Jewish intellectuals in Central and Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century and later became the language of the State of Israel. But it, too, developed through borrowing and adapting linguistic elements from Jews' spoken languages such as Russian, Yiddish, and Arabic. The specter of migration and exile that haunts the languages that Jews developed as minority communities also underlies many of the texts in this volume, evident both in their linguistic and thematic compositions.

One of the main challenges for translators of writings by Jews in these languages lies in their inherent multilingualism and multi-layered composition. This process requires not only the translator's proficiency in several interrelated languages but also her attentiveness to the tendency to render texts into fluent, transparent English. How might the translator enable the historical and cultural resonances of both the specific language, whether Yiddish, Ladino, or Judeo-Arabic, and the society and time from which it originated to be discerned in English translation? Each of the translators who contributed to this volume approached this task differently, and their introductions offer insight both into the context that they grappled with and into their translational choices.

In recent years, increasing awareness of the historical conditions of Jewish cultures described above have led many scholars to abandon national and monolingual frameworks and approach Jewish literatures as inherently multilingual, cross-cultural, and transnational. As Lital Levy and Allison Schachter note, even though Jewish literatures were circumscribed and informed by distinct polities, they often relied on diasporic, deterritorialized modes of circulation and exchange.<sup>2</sup> The mobility of ideas, texts, and people in the modern world further urges us to view Jewish literatures as interconnected diasporic formations that ceaselessly blur linguistic, political, and cultural boundaries. However, few anthologies and even fewer studies have crossed linguistic and ethnic divides, especially between what is known as Ashkenazi and Sephardi (or Mizrahi) cultural domains.

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<sup>2</sup> Levy and Schachter, "Jewish Literature / World Literature"; and Levy and Schachter, "Non-Universal Global."

The impetus for this volume of *Absinthe* is to showcase the variety of languages and genres in which modern Jewish writers have expressed themselves. Rather than consider disparate Jewish languages and histories in isolation, we seek to bring them into conversation within an open-ended framework that explores Jewish multilingualism in the modern world. The selection of literary works featured in this issue of *Absinthe* cuts across distinctions between European and non-European literary traditions and between languages of metropolitan centers and minor languages. The multilingual narrative of Jewish modernity told through them, in seven languages, spans from the 1880s to the 2020s. Its wide geographical distribution ranges from Tel Aviv to São Paulo through Buenos Aires, Istanbul, Thessaloniki, Livorno, Warsaw, Prague, and Chicago. Each text and context exhibits different aspects of the Jewish encounter with the conditions of modern society, exemplifying the ways in which Jewish writing engages and negotiates different cultures and traditions.

The diversity of themes captured in the works collected here reflects the multifaceted nature of Jewish writing. These themes include social class, gender, immigration, religious traditions, love and marriage, and the act of writing itself. The earliest work included in this issue is an 1884 essay by Shalom Bekache (1848–1927), whose list of credentials—rabbi, butcher, author, publisher—speaks to the multifarious nature of Jewish modernization and the challenges it presented to Jewish authors. Born in Mumbai and educated in Palestine, Bekache spent most of his life as a colonial subject in the Maghreb, where he worked tirelessly to disseminate the ideas of the Jewish Enlightenment movement as well as preach adherence to Judaism through his Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic publications. Bekache’s biography alone attests to the impossibility of containing Jewish writing within a single national framework. His essay, translated from Judeo-Arabic by Avner Ofrath, explores the role of Jewish tradition in a modern world ruled by European colonial powers.

Other works in this volume touch on the questions that Bekache addresses, considering the viability of Jewishness as a modern form of identity in an age of Jewish assimilation and secularization. In the short story “The Meal before the Fast,” Hebrew author Uri Nissan

Gnessin (1879–1913) dramatizes the hardships experienced by Eastern European Jews at the turn of the twentieth century, as processes of emancipation and assimilation pushed young men and women to seek their place in modern European societies. Gnessin's story follows the reverberations of this growing intergenerational divide, a rift between traditional Jewish life and the opportunities younger Jews sought in large European cities.

Questions about Jewish identity in the modern era are also exhibited in several works in this volume that thematize Jewish languages and traditions. In the 1930s, Czech author Jiří Mordechai Langer (1894–1943) published stories that take on the form and content of the Hasidic tale. Hasidism, a populist spiritual revival movement that rose in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century, drew on the foundations of Jewish mysticism (the Kabbalah) and emphasized the significance of joy during religious worship. Denisa Glacova, who translated a text by Langer for this issue, points out that Prague Jews had very little contact with Hasidim during Langer's lifetime. But the author was drawn to this movement and its literary expressions, taking on the persona of the Hasidic storyteller for his Czech readers and transporting them to the life of the Jewish shtetl, a short time before its obliteration by the Nazis.

The fascination with Hasidism and other Jewish traditions is a distinctly modern phenomenon that calls attention to the multilayered nature of Jewish writing. Another approach to the utilization of the Jewish past and traditions is exhibited in the novella *La Agua de la Sota* by Viktor Levi (1865–1940), translated from Ladino by Nesi Altaras. Levi was a prolific writer and translator, especially of French fiction. The plot of *La Agua de la Sota* resembles many other popular melodramas, as it is composed of stories about love, betrayal, and lost babies believed to be dead. But it is set in biblical times, a background that allows the author to craft a world where Jews live as a sovereign people. The romanticized biblical setting reflects what scholars refer to as a “usable past.”<sup>3</sup> Drawing on chapters in Jewish history, these literary attempts grant the Jewish experience the

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Roskies, *Jewish Search for a Usable Past*; and Skolnik, *Jewish Pasts, German Fictions*.

noble aesthetic form it appears to deserve. In this case, the turn to the biblical “usable past” also allowed a scathing critique of rabbinic institutions, which are represented in the novella by the lecherous high priest, and underscored the vulnerability of women in traditional Jewish society.

The modern evocation of Jewish histories and traditions is also echoed in the bilingual poetry of Argentine-born author Juan Gelman (1930–2014), translated for this issue by Arianna Afsari. The poems included in *Dibaxu*, which Gelman wrote while in exile in Europe, are written in Ladino and presented alongside a Spanish translation. Gelman’s use of Ladino and its modern counterpart, Spanish, is striking considering that he was the son of Jewish emigrants from Ukraine, whose native language was presumably Yiddish. His bilingual work attests not only to the self-conscious multilingualism of his writing but also to its reflexive nature, revealed in the author’s fascination with the notion of a Jewish language. Gelman turns to Ladino as a language that can mirror and amplify his experience of exile. He uses translation to expose the rifts and dislocations endured by the individual poet and by the Jewish language itself. In doing so, Gelman blurs linguistic and ethnic boundaries between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, as he contests the normative categories that shape our understanding of the Jewish world.

Gelman’s inventive use of a Jewish language as a marker for exile and displacement calls attention to translation as a process that marks the rupture that is inherent to migration and that often accompanies the conditions that yield multilingualism. Immigrants must move not only between geographic locations but also between languages and negotiate the different parts of their identities in the process. Such experiences of migration and mediation are reflected in the Yiddish poems of Pessie Hershfeld Pomerantz (1900–1978) and Shloyme Shvarts (1907–1988), translated for this issue by Jessica Kirzane. Both poets left Eastern Europe and settled in Chicago, a locale that is underrepresented in scholarly accounts of American Jewish culture. Rendering their lives in the Midwest in the Yiddish language, their poems abound with phrases in Hebrew and bear the marks of their English-speaking environments.

The centrality of translation and the complexity of multilingualism pertaining to the immigrant experience are also reflected in the short stories of Rita Kogan (b. 1976), translated to English by Yardenne Greenspan. Kogan, who is based in Tel Aviv and writes primarily in Hebrew, was born in the Soviet Union and immigrated to Israel at age fourteen. Both “Stoneland” and “The Third Sin” relay the experiences of children—namely young girls—growing up in the Soviet Union. These coming-of-age narratives from a Russian-speaking sphere are told by Kogan in her adopted language, Hebrew, but they are marked by another language—and another culture—that persists in the immigrant’s mind. Traces of Jewish diasporic existence also reverberate in the short text by Hezy Leskly (1952–1994), an Israeli poet born to Czech-Jewish Holocaust survivors who adopts the pseudonymous persona of a fictional Czech poet. This alternative author is at the epicenter of Leskly’s enigmatic text “The Rift” (“Ha-shever”), translated from Hebrew by Adriana X. Jacobs. “The Rift” can be read as a meditation on different fractures in the author’s biography as well as his writing practice and the multiplicity of languages and cultures it draws on. The haunting sense of rupture further emerges in “Win or Lose,” the first chapter of an autobiographical novel by Yossi Sucary (b. 1959), translated from Hebrew by Maya Barzilai and Ruth Tsoffar. Through the figure of his grandmother, Emilia, who was born in Libya and survived the Holocaust before immigrating to Israel, Sucary exposes the fault lines of Israel’s “melting pot” ideology and the marginalization of Mizrahim still experienced by his generation.

The lingering multilingualism of Jewish writing is evident across the different languages and contexts that are represented in this volume. A literary account of an understudied and often forgotten chapter of Jewish history—Jewish agricultural colonies in South America—presents us with a striking example of the breadth of this phenomenon. In *Filipson: Memories of the First Jewish Colony in Rio Grande do Sul*, an excerpt of which was translated by Júlia Irion Martins, Brazilian author Frida Alexandr (1906–1972) recounts her childhood in a rural farming community founded by the Jewish Colonization Association. Written in Brazilian Portuguese, Alexandr’s memoir is shot through with remnants of Yiddish, the language



of her parents' generation, which is mostly used to denote roles of community members and familial relations between them. In a rare moment of care and compassion in the text, the narrator's mother refers to her by her Yiddish name, Freide, which means "joy." It is juxtaposed with the Brazilian name given to her by her brother—Alegria—a name that she discards, alongside the rest of her life as a "peasant girl."

Alexandr's *Filipson* is one of several examples of Jewish women's writing represented in this issue. Processes of modernization and acculturation precipitated the increasing visibility and participation of women in the public sphere. Issues of gender and women's role in society are raised time and again by men whose works are included in this volume, such as Shalom Bekache, Viktor Levi, Shemtov Revah, and Uri Nissan Gnessin. In the nineteenth century, more and more women joined literary and intellectual circles and published their own works, in different languages, narrating their perspectives and experiences. The earliest iteration of Jewish women's writing in this volume is Sara Familiant's 1894 story, "A Modern Bride and Groom," translated from Yiddish by Anita Norich. We know nothing about Familiant's life or other literary works, which, according to Norich, is not surprising given the paucity of scholarship dedicated to pre-twentieth-century Yiddish literature, especially that of women. Familiant's story addresses a facet of the Jewish encounter with modernity, especially the juncture of gender and class and the impact of new notions of romantic love replacing the traditional marriage institution that was based on socioeconomic considerations. This issue is also at the heart of *Refael and Miriam*, a Ladino novel published in Istanbul in 1910 and translated by Devi Mays. As in the case of Familiant, we have no information about the novel's author, Ben Yitzhak Saserdote, which was most likely a pseudonym of a woman writer. Here, too, the destabilizing impact of modern notions of gender, romantic love, and marriage is at the heart of the plot, as the young Jewish lovers contest what they see as an outdated social hierarchy and reject the instrumentalization of marriage for the preservation of wealth and status.

This collection of Jewish works centered on multilingualism allows us to highlight the enduring connections as well as the

productive gaps, disconnections, and excesses between different language pairs, such as Ladino and Spanish, Yiddish and English, Hebrew and Russian. It is difficult to categorize the authors included in this issue and their languages in national or cultural terms. The multilingual legacy of Jewish migration and diasporic life has become ubiquitous in modern Jewish writing, and it is evident in the enriching and disruptive presence of multiple languages and literary traditions in each of these texts. The title of this volume, *Translating Jewish Multilingualism*, thus refers both to the English translations of these texts and to the processes of translation, mediation, and hybridization encapsulated in the works themselves.

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*By the Shores of Lake  
Michigan*, poetry by Pessie  
Hershfeld Pomerantz and  
Shloyme Shvarts, 1938–39

*Translated from Yiddish by Jessica Kirzane*



## Translator's Introduction

The works in this collection showcase the vibrancy of Yiddish poetry in Chicago and its specificity to Chicago itself—to both the city and its natural surroundings, especially Lake Michigan. These poems demonstrate an attention to the cultural life of the city (the Chicago symphony, for example) and beyond (with references to Chopin and Mozart) and prove the poets to be part of a community, writing to and for one another, as well as aware of their role in broader literary traditions.

Included in this collection are a selection of poems by Pessie Hershfeld Pomerantz (1900–1978) and Shloyme Shvarts (1907–1988). Both of these poets were leaders in the Yiddish literary and cultural landscape of Chicago in the mid-twentieth century.

Pessie Hershfeld Pomerantz (who later also published under the name Pessie Pomerantz Honigbaum) was born in Kamenobrod (Kam'yanobrid), in what is now Ukraine. She and her family came to the United States and settled in Chicago in 1913, where she worked in a sweatshop while continuing to study. She first began publishing poetry in 1918, in New York–based literary journals and newspapers such as *Fraye arbeiter shtime* and *Der fraynd* as well as in Chicago publications such as *In nebl*, *Yugend*, and *Ineynem*. These latter publications were small circulation poetry journals created by the Young Chicago poets. Both Pomerantz and Shvarts were central figures in this circle, and both of their works also appear in the group's 1922 anthology *Yung shikago*. Pomerantz was married to cultural activist Israel Chaim Pomerantz, who was a leader in secular Yiddish education in Chicago, and their home served as a meeting place and salon for Chicago's Yiddish cultural scene. She published several books of poetry: *Kareln* (1926), a book of short, graceful, Haiku-like poems with a keen attention to rhythm; *Geklibene lider* (1931) and *Royter toy* (1939), which included longer poems, several of which were about her natural surroundings and the city, as well as the notion of human mortality; and *Reges fun genod, geklibene lider* (1957), which turned to the fate of the Jewish people in Europe and the nationalist project of Zionism. After her husband's sudden death in 1962, which left Pomerantz deeply bereft, the poet moved

to Miami, Florida, where she published her final book of poetry, *Fun ale mayne lider* (1969), which included several pieces mourning the loss of her husband. Literary critic Avraham Patt described her writing thus: “Pessie Hershfeld-Pomerantz’s pearls of delicate, elegant poetry approach life with a raw, crystalized grief, pierced through with, and passionately breathing in, her living soul. They drip like crystal raindrops upon the wounded world.”<sup>1</sup>

The poetry selected here is indicative of Pomerantz’s attention to the natural world and her relationship with it, as well as shot through with the sense of melancholy and loneliness that pervades her larger oeuvre. In “Lake Michigan,” the speaker reflects on seasons of visiting the lakeshore and her own smallness next to the magnificence and youth of the lake. In “At a Symphony Concert,” she is once again alone and small, observing something grand—in this case a symphony concert. While other concertgoers fade into one in the darkness, her loneliness sets her apart, and her heart vibrates alongside the orchestra as though she were taking part in it. The music moves her, and yet the “too late” cymbal crashes suggest that still the music is somehow inadequate to quell the poet’s inner turmoil.

“Winds,” though it begins with the personal “I love to stroll on Michigan Boulevard / When the winds are on the move,” extends outward to the entire city, following the winds themselves as if they become a kind of flâneur observing the city in all its angles. The winds seem to have some kind of objective stance, but the poet follows them through geographies of economic disparity, offering a social critique, as the poorest city dwellers receive the most polluted air before the wind settles down in the broad parks of the near suburbs.

“Under Seven Masks,” like “Winds” and “Lake Michigan,” is a geographically specific poem. It takes place at Waldheim Cemetery in Forest Park, at the grave of the poet’s husband, Israel Chaim Pomerantz. The titular “seven masks” evokes the New Testament story of the execution of John the Baptist, in which Salome dances before the king in a dance that Oscar Wilde interpreted as the “Dance of the Seven Veils”—an imagined, erotic Middle Eastern

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<sup>1</sup> Patt, *Likht un Shotn*, 93.

dance and striptease. Such dances were part of a dance craze known as “Salomania,” popular in Europe and the United States, which included convulsive body language as part of a high-art performance of female madness and eroticism. The figure of Salome was that of a Jewish femme fatale, a terrifyingly sexually powerful Jewish figure who reveals herself before a titillated audience.<sup>2</sup> In Pomerantz’s inverted retelling, the mourning figure is the opposite of a Salome, who does not disrobe but hides—and mourns—inside her seven layers or is even smothered by them: her deep distress is not performative but internal, and all that can be visibly seen is her biting on a blade of grass as though to quell the sobbing within her body. This sense of isolation and encounter with intense emotion while in a public space is consistent with the other poems in this collection, especially “At a Symphony Concert,” though these feelings are heightened in “Under Seven Masks” due to the specificity of the poet mourning the recent loss of her husband.

Shloyme (Selwyn) Shvarts was a pivotal figure in the Yiddish and Jewish arts scene in Chicago. Born in Kobrin, in what is now Belarus, he immigrated to the United States in 1920. He graduated from the University of Chicago, studying journalism and literature, and went on to become director of sales for Helix, Ltd., a photographic equipment store. He was widely published in Chicago-based and international Yiddish newspapers and literary journals such as *Shikago*, *Idisher kemfer*, *Veker*, *In zikh*, *Kheshbn*, and *Literarische bleter*, as well as in several anthologies. His Yiddish poetry, often inspired by jazz music—incorporating elements of literary modernism and attentive to architecture, sculpture, and music—was published in several volumes: *Bloymontik* (1938), *Amerike* (1940), *Goldener goles* (1971), *Vundn un vunder* (1975), *Brondzener mabl* (1981), and *Harbstiker fayer* (1984). Shvarts was a prominent member of the Young Chicago group of poets, and while many of those poets disbanded and left the Chicago area, he continued to be known as the “poet of Chicago,” often writing about the cityscape, the lake, and its environs. He also published widely in English under the name of Selwyn Schwartz, including five volumes of poetry—some of

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<sup>2</sup> See Alston, “Dancing Decadence.”



which are self-translations of his earlier Yiddish versions: *The Poet in Blue Minor* (1942), *Passages of Refuge* (1942), *Preface to Maturity* (1944), *Letters to My Unborn Son* (1947), and *Horn in the Dust: Poems* (1949). In addition, his work was published in several modernist poetry journals in English, such as *Circle Magazine* and *Poetry* magazine, and he was a close associate of Harriet Monroe and others involved with *Poetry*. Described as “word-drunk” and “exuberant,” his poetry in both languages is known for its emotional intensity as well as its erudite allusions.<sup>3</sup> He received honors for his poetry from the World Jewish Cultural Congress Literary Foundation and the Comité Central Israelita de México and lectured on poetry at the University of Chicago and Northwestern University. Poet and editor John Ciardi called Shvarts “as volatile as boiling ether, a poet with an amazing gift of language that no one in poetry should overlook.”<sup>4</sup>

The poems selected here highlight Shvarts’s syncretic combination of jazz music and Jewish tradition, a merging of sounds and vocabularies in the urban environment.<sup>5</sup> In “Monday Blue,” the exuberance of poetry breaks through the “towering problems” of the marketplace during the Depression to create cool, smooth beauty amid the chaos. The frosted windowpanes through which the prairie sun sets in “Prairie Suns” are reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright’s art glass, chic and modern in its approach to the natural world. In “By the Waters of Michigan,” Shvarts gestures toward the halcyon days of the Young Chicago group of poets, who—like the “*In zikh*” poets of New York—were urbane modernists assertively creating new beginnings rather than pining nostalgically for a lost and sacred past. Already, by the time Shvarts composed the poem, which appeared in his 1971 collection, those hopeful days had been shattered by the devastation of Europe’s Jewish communities, and the poets themselves had grown old and more circumspect. Moyshe Ghitzis (1894–1986), to whom the poem is dedicated, was also a member of Young Chicago—a Yiddish poet, playwright, novelist, and short story writer in Chicago.

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<sup>3</sup> Shapiro, “Poet in Search of His Heritage.”

<sup>4</sup> Heise, “Selwyn S. Schwartz.”

<sup>5</sup> The translations of “Monday Blue” and “Prairie Suns” previously appeared in *Azonal: Poetry in Translation* 1 (2020).

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# Pessie Hershfeld Pomerantz

## Lake Michigan

It's been my fate now several times  
to listen to the play of your waves,  
to behold the rhythm of your ancient tide;  
I am a splinter, just a vestige  
of a tree full with branches;  
I sit here at your sandy shores  
thinking of young, hopeful times  
with longing in my lonely silence.

My fate is to see once again  
the shimmer of your waves  
now blue, now green, now spectral gray,  
to watch a sailboat on your back adrift  
and see how your shoulders shrug, lift,  
Lake Michigan, my young friend!

## At a Symphony Concert

The spacious hall is filled with concertgoers.  
The lamps dim.  
The people seem to shed their skin, become—  
One form.  
Each face—one face.  
But I am only memory now,  
I am just—belonging.  
An orchestra warbles a storm,  
a harp sobs,  
a cello—prays with every fret,  
my heart vibrates with cries of  
clarinet.  
The cymbals crash—  
too late, *tsu shpet*.

## Winds

A band of winds sweep through you, Chicago,  
And rush Lake Michigan at you,  
I love to stroll on Michigan Boulevard  
When the winds are on the move.

Winds search and crouch in all your corners,  
Shake your walls and windowpanes,  
Drive curls of smoke and dark clouds,  
And toss handfuls of dust in your eyes.

They chase down your trains and trams  
And laugh in the faces of your halls of wealth;  
They bear the stench of your slaughterhouses  
As gifts to your poorest quarters.

In dark nights, pitch black,  
They settle comfortably in your open parks  
And whistle out symphonic elegies to you,  
Bolstering your grand city symphony.

## Under Seven Masks

Under seven masks  
my shrill voice is stifled.  
I grow quiet, small,  
gray, forlorn, and silent.  
As seedlings sprout in springtime  
I'll come to you, I swear,  
and by your earthy hill  
I'll sit in silence there.  
As I cannot moan  
and I cannot howl—  
I'll tear out a blade of grass  
and chew on it in silence.  
Since death is all around  
and I cannot wail  
perhaps the blade of grass  
will speak somehow for me.  
And if a bird should come to me  
to comfort, with its twitter,  
I will say, "Bird,  
all I feel is a quiver."



## Shloyme Shvarts

### Monday Blue

Sunday sighs away  
its sanctity.  
My neighbor's saxophone  
has ceased its t'kiah-t'ruah-shvarim shofar calls.  
Only the night's stars,  
leopard lilies on a black velvet dress,  
still hang, gentle—  
alluring.  
Tallow from the fading holy day drips into me  
like Monday blue.  
Lamplighters turn on streetlamps  
mercilessly, on—on  
like gifts bestowed at the close of Sunday's wedding.

The week greets me with pointed walls, illuminated  
colorful fir trees,  
the clamor of Santa Claus,  
announcements of a rising stock market, announcing—  
Franklin D. Roosevelt.  
Towering problems  
wrap themselves around me, problems  
steel, spiraling.  
My Monday blue rock-a-byes  
with syncopation.  
For the sky hangs above me



workaday blue  
the blue of weekday festivals.

### **Prairie Suns**

My step, my stride—with ecstasy.  
My everyday gods hang  
on gallows of accounts  
and sums.  
But my pen is a sharp plow  
that cuts through the belly of time  
and words  
tearing from me image after image—panoramic.  
Winter, the naked master  
clever and melancholy  
crawls over my freshly-papered walls.

Polished frost from distant icy horizons  
rests on my windowpane,  
sits like a Senate President.  
The chilled joy  
of lonely, chiseled faces  
accentuates the rebellious messages  
under the city bridges.  
Just today, barefoot life  
knocked on my door  
reminding me of the Golem of Prague  
revealing himself  
in midnight lightning.

Streets wander under bridges, naked  
through the breadth of the city.  
The city's corset, the train  
hangs on wires  
its slippers, the colorful ships,  
are anchored on dry land.  
Prairie suns set, shadows threaten

at the banks of Lake Michigan  
and paint the prismatic walls of the Wrigley and Tribune towers.  
The chilled joy  
of lonely, chiseled faces  
hot with frost  
red with frost.  
And on my windowpane melancholy winter paints  
barefoot life, who just today  
knocked on my door.

### **By the Waters of Michigan**

*For Moyshe Ghitzis*

1.

By the waters of Michigan we sat,  
young poets with fresh verses.  
We sang and did not weep for dead poems  
in slumbering museums.

By the young shore,  
under rays of sunlight,  
we carried our songs of songs,  
the shared lines  
of our youth,  
in a net of prayertune rain.

By the pure waters  
we sang out the summer  
with birds and wind.  
And it was full of springtime,  
the song of our beginnings.

2.

Blessed was the beginning.  
The beginning was plump and full

of bunches of grapes;  
of doves flocking together,  
of sun, stars, and poems.

And something else—  
mercury waves  
between our toes,  
the mystery of other spheres.

And then:

The purified rain falling over all the trees  
over the sprouting grasses  
around the clear shores—  
Every letter branching out from  
the goodness of all the years.

Even the loneliness was richer  
by Lake Michigan  
soothed by our young lexicon.

3.

Then  
in that beginning  
bewinged with words,  
the winds, noisy virtuosos,  
called out  
through the sparse Jewish grove  
the prayer tunes  
of our “fear not” songs,  
the lightninged awakening  
of a new summer.

(That was when Mozart  
played through heavenly roses

in my young wife's eyes  
the deep secrets of tomorrow  
in the gold of her silence.)

Right there  
in a landscape of revived branches  
we swallowed whole apples, pears,  
in the deathly hunger of existing!  
On the hunched backs of the craggy stones  
we even youthfully carved out—  
our song.

4.

And there was light . . .  
It grew bright in the tents.  
God's loving kindness warmed our eyes.  
love at the fingertips  
of spring—  
we believed.

Summer with sun in its ears  
Chopin's funeral march: it didn't rise up, didn't amount to much . . .  
The birds, by one and by two  
accompanied by sails  
kissed all the snow upon the green grasses.

And then there was—  
with a new sound on the lips,  
a passionate longing—not to ask.  
Forbidden, the river forever a reflection  
of the sky—  
which sparkled with tidy poems.

5.

The colorful shores of song and youth.

The bridegroom's time, until it fades . . .

Until, my God, the silence of your Presence—

The end of summer paints us with slaughtered colors.

*Dibaxu*, poetry by  
Juan Gelman, 1994

*Translated from Spanish by Arianna Afsari*



## Translator's Introduction

What follows is a series of English translations of Juan Gelman's (1930–2014) *Dibaxu*, a bilingual collection of twenty-nine love poems written originally in Ladino, or Judeo-Spanish ("Sefardi" in Gelman's terms), accompanied by translations into modern Spanish by the author himself. In other words, there are two translators present here: Gelman, the self-translator who moves from his adopted tongue, Ladino, back into his native Spanish, and me, the translator who carries his verses over from the Spanish translations into English.

Although not published until 1994, Gelman composed *Dibaxu* between 1983 and 1985, while exiled in Europe. A lifelong leftist political activist, the poet was banished from his native Argentina in 1975 due to his involvement with the Montoneros, a guerrilla, left-wing Peronist organization. The year 1976 ushered in a period of collective horror and pain for Gelman and his compatriots. Although Gelman managed to escape political persecution under General Jorge Rafael Videla's military dictatorship during the *Guerra sucia* (Dirty War, 1974–1983), Gelman's son, Marcelo Ariel, along with his pregnant wife, María Claudia Iruretagoyena, were disappeared and extrajudicially murdered by the military's right-wing death squads.

The multilingualism present in *Dibaxu* as well as Gelman's deliberate choice to write in Ladino and then self-translate invites a reflection on language and, specifically, on the complex relationship between language and exile. For Gelman, Ladino, the language of the Sephardim, is a tongue that exists exclusively in exile. The diasporic language of Ladino carries histories of displacement, beginning with the Edict of Expulsion of Granada in 1492, which ordered the banishment of the Jews and *Conversos* from the kingdoms of Spain's Catholic Monarchs. In his brief preface to *Dibaxu*, Gelman writes, "It was as if the extreme solitude of exile had pushed me to search for roots in language, the deepest and most exiled ones of language." This quest, spurred by the unbearable pain of his personal expulsion, follows a downward trajectory as captured by the title of the collection, *Dibaxu*, which is Ladino for "debajo" or "beneath." Gelman not



only descends, plunging into the depths of sixteenth-century Spanish to uncover its substratum, Judeo-Spanish, but his self-translation into modern Spanish insists on a movement across as well, ultimately suturing the substrata through the common theme of exile. Gelman beseeches us to listen carefully to this dialogue, which defies geographical, temporal, spatial, and linguistic boundaries, traveling between “the two sounds” of displaced voices of the far past and of Gelman’s more recent past. The slashes that complete each poem emphasize the dialogical aspect of *Dibaxu*, inviting the reader to trail the narrative voice full of longing as it weaves in and out of the bilingual verses. If we dive beneath the romantic surface of the poems, we discover allegories of exilic discourse below the ostensible sensual longing, where dreams of a distant native land and mother tongue, of loved ones disappeared, are encoded in the figure of the beloved.

The true genius of Gelman resides in his ability to craft a poetics of estrangement in order to achieve a disalienation of the self. Through a number of stylistic techniques including the feminization of masculine nouns, intentional grammatical errors in verbal conjugations, and unconventional syntax, Gelman distorts language so that his poetry may begin to articulate the ineffable and estranging violence of his world. Exile is an extreme form of alienation. The dispossessed subject is brutally confronted with the startling absence of a motherland and deafening silence of a mother tongue. In the poems of *Dibaxu*, Gelman radically distances himself from his native Spanish, his typical playground for language experimentation and grammar tricks, embracing Ladino instead as the site for his idiosyncratic poetic expression. Before he self-translates back into Spanish, the poet begins with a linguistic self-banishment, opting for the exilic tongue par excellence in order to circumvent the discourse and material violence of Argentina’s military dictatorship and regain control over the conditions of his own forced expropriation. Oddly, it is through his decision to write in Ladino, estranging himself further, that Gelman rediscovers the tenderness of language that speaks most immediately to the pain of his immense loss. Certain intrinsic aspects of Ladino such as the innate diminutives, the feminization of masculine words (“la calor” in Ladino versus “el calor” in Spanish in Poem VII), and the normalization of irregular verb constructions

all reflect hallmarks of Gelman's poetic oeuvre. The naturalization of the poet's most salient rhetorical tricks in Ladino highlights the extent of Gelman's estrangement from Spanish and his discovery of an adopted mother tongue in Ladino. This exilic language, which invites the natural expression of Gelman's previously "unnatural" rhetorical games in Spanish, becomes a repository for the most emblematic Gelmanian traits.

What is more, Gelman employs his self-translations as a method to further alienate himself from Spanish, in that his translations are virtually devoid of the idiosyncratic qualities typical of his poetry. The nondescript nature of the Spanish of his translations vacillates between the Argentine *vos* and standard *tú* forms of the second-person singular. Furthermore, Gelman observes correct verbal forms in instances where he would normally toss out the grammatical rule-book, such as in Poem XVI, where he translates "muridu" as "muerto" instead of "morido," the latter sounding both closer to the Ladino but also constituting an intentional error found frequently throughout Gelman's previous work. His self-translations, therefore, do not represent a full return or assimilation into his native Spanish. By denying the Spanish the intimacy and new expressive horizons he discovers in Ladino, the poet displaces Spanish as the privileged terrain for his poetic voice, converting it into the mirror of the Other.

Only by descending into the substrata of these Spanishes, toward the most exiled roots of language, can Gelman recover the tenderness of his motherland and his mother tongue and reject the discourse commandeered by the military junta. Through this adopted language of exile, the poet finds a type of confirmation rather than a realization regarding the power of estrangement as a return to the self.

## From *Dibaxu*

### ESCOLIO

Escribí los poemas de *dibaxu* en sefardí, de 1983 a 1985. Soy de origen judío, pero no sefardí, y supongo que eso algo tuvo que ver con el asunto. Pienso, sin embargo, que estos poemas sobre todo son la culminación o más bien el desemboque de *Citas* y *Comentarios*, dos libros que compuse en pleno exilio, en 1978 y 1979, y cuyos textos dialogan con el castellano del siglo XVI. Como si buscar el sustrato de ese castellano, sustrato a su vez del nuestro, hubiera sido mi obsesión. Como si la soledad extrema del exilio me empujara a buscar raíces en la lengua, las más profundas y exiliadas de la lengua. Yo tampoco me lo explico.

El acceso a poemas como los de Clarisse Nikoïdski, novelista en francés y poeta en sefardí, desvelaron esa necesidad que en mí dormía, sorda, dispuesta a despertar. ¿Qué necesidad? ¿Por qué dormía? ¿Por qué sorda? En cambio, sé que la sintaxis sefardí me devolvió un candor perdido y sus diminutivos, una ternura de otros tiempos que está viva y, por eso, llena de consuelo. Quizás este libro apenas sea una reflexión sobre el lenguaje desde su lugar más calcinado, la poesía.

Acompañé los textos en castellano actual no por desconfianza en la inteligencia del lector. A quien ruego que los lea en voz alta en un castellano y en el otro para escuchar, tal vez, entre los dos sonidos, algo del tiempo que tiembla y que nos da pasado desde el Cid.

J.G.

### SCHOLIUM

I wrote the poems of *dibaxu* in Sephardi, between 1983 and 1985. I am of Jewish origin, but not Sephardic, and I suppose that this had something to do with it. I think, however, that these poems are above all the culmination, or rather the confluence, of *Citas* and *Comentarios*, two books that I composed in full exile, between 1978 and 1979, and whose texts are in dialogue with the Spanish of the sixteenth century. It was as if searching for the substratum of that Spanish, substratum at the same time of our own, had been my obsession. It was as if the extreme solitude of exile had pushed me to search for roots in language, the deepest and most exiled ones of language. I don't even understand it myself.

Access to poems such as those by Clarisse Nikoïdski, novelist in French and poet in Sephardi, unveiled a necessity that lay dormant in me, deaf, ready to be awakened. What necessity? Why did it lay dormant? Why deaf? Nevertheless, I know that the syntax of Sephardi returned a lost candor to me and its diminutives, a tenderness of other times that lives on and, therefore, is full of solace. Perhaps this book is merely a reflection on language from its most scorched location, poetry.

I pair the texts with the contemporary Spanish translations not out of any lack of faith in the reader's intelligence. I beseech whoever reads these poems read them aloud in one Spanish and then in the other in order to hear, perhaps, between the two sounds, something of a time that trembles and gives us a past since *The Cid*.<sup>1</sup>

J.G.

<sup>1</sup> Given the poetic context here, Gelman's reference to *The Cid* (*El Cid*) most likely concerns *El Cantar de mio Cid* (*The Song of My Cid* or *The Poem of My Cid*), the oldest preserved Castilian epic poem. Based on a true story, it recounts the deeds and adventures of the Castilian hero Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar—commonly known as “*El Cid*”—and takes place during the period of the Reconquista, or the Reconquest of Spain. However, “*el Cid*” is left unitalicized, suggesting that Gelman could also be referring to the historical figure of *The Cid* himself.

## V

quí lindus tus ojos/  
il mirar di tus ojos más/  
y más il airi di tu mirar londji/  
nil airi stuvi buscando:

la lampa di tu sangri/  
sangri di tu solombra/  
tu solombra  
sovri mi curasón/

## V

qué lindos tus ojos/  
y más la mirada de tus ojos/  
y más el aire de tus ojos cuando lejos mirás/  
en el aire estuve buscando:

la lámpara de tu sangre/  
sangre de tu sombra/  
tu sombra  
sobre mi corazón/

## V

how lovely your eyes/  
and more so the gaze of your eyes/  
and more so the air of your eyes when  
you gaze into the distance/  
in the air I was searching for:

the lamp of your blood/  
blood of your shadow/  
your shadow  
over my heart/

## VII

la calor qui destruyi al pinser  
si destruyi pinsendu/  
la luz timbla  
in tus bezus/y

queda al caminu/queda  
al tiempu/londji/avri  
lus bezus/dexa  
yerva nil curasón quimadu/

si dispartara la yuvia  
di un páxaru  
qui aspira al mar  
nil mar/

## VII

el calor que destruye al pensar  
se destruye pensando/  
la luz tiembla  
en tus besos/y

detiene al camino/detiene  
al tiempo/lejos/abre  
los besos/deja  
hierba en el corazón quemado/

se despertó la lluvia  
de un pájaro  
que espera al mar  
en el mar/

## VII

the heat that destroys thought  
destroys itself thinking/  
the light trembles  
in your kisses/and

halts the path/halts  
time/far away/opens  
the kisses/leaves  
grass in the burnt heart/

the rain awoke  
from a bird  
that awaits the sea  
in the sea/

## VIII

nil ‘amariana aviarta  
in tus ojos abagan  
lus animalis qui ti quimaran  
adientru dil sueniu/

nunca dizin nada/  
mi dexan sinizas/y  
solu  
cun il sol/

## VIII

en la mañana abierta  
lentamente por tus ojos pasan  
los animales que te quemaron  
adentro del sueño/

nunca dicen nada/  
me dejan cenizas/y  
solo  
con el sol/

## VIII

in the open morning  
through your eyes slowly pass  
the animals that burned you  
within the dream/

they never say anything/  
they leave me ashes/and  
alone  
with the sun/

## IX

tu piede  
pisa la nochi/suavi/  
avri la yuvia/  
avri il día/

la muerte no savi nada di vos/  
tu piede teni yerva dibaxu  
y una solombra ondi scrivi  
il mar del vazío/

## IX

tu pie  
pisa la noche/leve/  
abre la lluvia/  
abre el día/

la muerte nada sabe de vos/  
tu pie tiene hierba debajo  
y una sombra donde escribe  
el mar del vacío/

## IX

your foot  
treads on the night/light/  
it opens the rain/  
it opens the day/

death knows nothing of you/  
your foot has grass beneath it  
and a shadow where it writes  
the sea of emptiness/

## X

dizis avlas cun árvulis/  
tenin folyas qui cantan  
y páxarus  
qui djuntan sol/

tu silenziu  
disparta  
lus gritus  
dil mundu/

## X

dices palabras con árboles/  
tienen hojas que cantan  
y pájaros  
que juntan sol/

tu silencio  
despierta  
los gritos  
del mundo/

## X

you speak words with trees/  
they have leaves that sing  
and birds  
that gather sun/

your silence  
awakens  
the cries  
of the world/

## XV

tu boz sta escura  
di bezus qui a mí no dieras/  
di bezus qui a mí no das/  
la nochi es polvu dest'ixiliu/

tus bezus inculgan lunas  
qui yelan mi caminu/  
timblu  
dibaxu dil sol/

## XV

tu voz está oscura  
de besos que no me diste/  
de besos que no me das/  
la noche es polvo de este exilio/

tus besos cuelgan lunas  
que hielan mi camino/  
tiemblo  
debajo del sol/

## XV

your voice is dark  
from kisses you didn't give me/  
from kisses you don't give me/  
the night is dust of this exile/

your kisses hang up moons  
that freeze my path/and  
I tremble  
beneath the sun/

## XVI

cuando mi aya muridu  
sintiré entudavía  
il batideru  
di tu saia nil vienti/

uno qui liyera istus versus  
prieguntara: “¿cómu ansi?/  
¿quí sentirás? ¿quí batideru?/  
¿quí saia?/ ¿quí vienti?”/

li dixí qui cayara/  
qui si sintara a la mesa cun mí/  
qui viviera mi vinu/  
qui scriviera istus versus:

“cuando mi aya muridu  
sintiré entudavía  
il batideru  
di tu saia nil vienti”/

## XVI

cuando esté muerto  
oiré todavía  
el temblor  
de tu saya en el viento/

alguien que leyó estos versos  
preguntó: “¿cómo así?/  
¿qué oirás? ¿qué temblor?/  
¿qué saya?/ ¿qué viento?”/

le dije que callara/  
que se sentara a mi mesa/  
que bebiera mi vino/  
que escribiera estos versos:

“cuando esté muerto  
oiré todavía  
el temblor  
de tu saya en el viento”/

## XVI

when I'm dead  
I'll still hear  
the trembling  
of your skirt in the wind/

someone who read these verses  
asked: “how's that?/  
what will you hear? what trembling?/  
what skirt? what wind?”/

I told him to hush/  
to sit at my table/  
to drink my wine/  
to write these verses:

“when I'm dead  
I'll still hear  
the trembling  
of your skirt in the wind”/

cuando mi haya morido  
mi curasón ~~ovirá~~ *Sintra*  
il batideru  
di tu vistidu nil vienti/

*(comedy)*  
~~unopserixx~~ qui liyó istos versos  
li preguntó: "¿cómo así?/  
~~¿quién zistox?~~ ¿qui curasón?/  
¿qui vienti?"/

li dixe qui ~~calidara~~ *calidara*  
qui si sintara a la mesa cun mí/  
qué ~~laxerex~~ biviera ~~vinu~~ *vinu* ~~avichadu~~  
~~qui lixerex~~ istos versos:  
*qui* /scriviera

"cuando mi haya morido/  
mi curasón ~~ovirá~~ *Sintra*  
il batideru  
di tu vistidu nil vienti"

*pmo 10/10/83*

"Poem XVI." Composed in Ladino and taken from the first original manuscript of *Dibaxu*, dated August 5, 1983. This manuscript, containing Gelman's hand-written revisions, is the first of three original drafts of *Dibaxu* housed in Princeton's special collection.

Source: Juan Gelman Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

## XVII

un vienti di separadus/  
di bezus qui no mus diéramus/  
acama il trigo di tu ventre/  
sus asusenas cun sol/

veni/  
o querré no aver nasidu/  
trayi tu agua clara/  
las ramas floreserán/

mira istu:  
soy un niniu rompidu/  
timblu nila noche  
qui cayi di mí/

## XVII

un viento de separados/  
de besos que no nos dimos/  
doblega al trigo de tu vientre/  
sus azucenas con sol/

ven/  
o querré no haber nacido/  
trae tu agua clara/  
las ramas florecerán/

mira esto:  
soy un niño roto/  
tiemblo en la noche  
que cae de mí/

## XVII

a wind of the separated/  
of kisses we didn't exchange/  
breaks the wheat of your stomach/  
its lilies with sun/

come/  
or I'll wish I was never born/  
bring your clear water/  
the branches will bloom/

look at this:  
I am a broken boy/  
I tremble in the night  
that falls from me/

## XXIV

amarti es istu:  
un avla qui va a dizer/  
un arvulicu sin folyas  
qui da solombra/

## XXIV

amarte es esto:  
una palabra que está por decir/  
un arbolito sin hojas  
que da sombra/

## XXIV

loving you is this:  
a word that's yet to be said/  
a small leafless tree  
that gives shade/



## Lenguas

Dice un poema en sefardí:  
amarti is istu:  
un avla qui va a dizer/  
un arvolicu sin folyas  
qui da solombra  
Y en castellano actual:  
amarte es esto:  
una palabra que va a decir/  
un arbolito sin hojas  
que da sombra.

---

3

**La poesía es un árbol sin hojas que da sombra.**

“Poetry is a leafless tree that gives shade.” Juan Gelman  
Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections,  
Princeton University Library.

## XXV

ista yuvia di vos  
dexe cayer pidazus di tiempu/  
pidazus d'infinitu/  
pidazus di nus mesmos/

¿es por isu qui stamus  
sin caza ni memoria?/  
¿djuntos nil pincer?/  
¿comu cuerpos al sol?/

## XXV

tu lluvia  
deja caer pedazos de tiempo/  
pedazos de infinito/  
pedazos de nosotros/

¿por eso estamos  
sin casa ni memoria?/  
¿juntos en el pensar?/  
¿cómo cuerpos al sol?/

## XXV

your rain  
lets pieces of time fall/  
pieces of infinity/  
pieces of us/

is that why we're  
without house or memory?/  
together in thought?/  
like bodies in the sun?/

## XXVI

il diseu es un animal  
todu vistidu di fuegu/  
teni patas atan largas  
qui yegan al sulvidu/

agora pinsu  
qui un paxaricu in tu boz  
arrastra  
la caza dil otonio/

## XXVI

el deseo es un animal  
todo vestido de fuego/  
tiene patas tan largas  
que llegan al olvido/

ahora pienso  
que un pajarito en tu voz  
arrastra  
la casa del otoño/

## XXVI

desire is an animal  
all dressed in fire/  
it has legs so long  
they reach oblivion/

now I think  
that a little bird in your voice  
drags  
the house of autumn/

## XXVIII

¿cómu ti yamas?/  
soy un siegu sintadu  
nil atriu di mi diseu/  
méndigu tiempu/

río di pena/  
yoro d'aligría/  
¿quí avla ti dezirá?/  
¿quí nombri ti nombrará?/

## XXVIII

¿cómo te llamas?/  
soy un ciego sentado  
en el atrio de mi deseo/  
mendigo tiempo/

río de pena/  
lloro de alegría/  
¿qué palabra te dirá?/  
¿qué nombre te nombrará?/

## XXVIII

what's your name?/  
I am a blind man seated  
at the atrium of my desire/  
I beg time/

I laugh from sorrow/  
I cry of joy/  
what word will speak you?/  
what name will name you?/

XXIX

no stan muridus lus páxarus  
di nuestrus bezus/  
stan muridus lus bezus/  
lus páxarus volan nil verdi sulvidar/

pondrí mi spantu londji/  
dibaxu dil pasadu/  
qui arde  
cayadu com'il sol/

XXIX

no están muertos los pájaros  
de nuestros besos/  
están muertos los besos/  
los pájaros vuelan en el verde olvidar/

pondré mi espanto lejos/  
debajo del pasado/  
que arde  
callado como el sol/

XXIX

the birds of our kisses  
are not dead/  
dead are the kisses/  
the birds fly in the green forgetting/

I'll put my fright far away/  
beneath the past/  
that burns  
silent like the sun/

**SYLVIA ESTELA PETTIGREW**  
**11 de julio de 1976**



no están muertos los pájaros  
de nuestros besos  
están muertos los besos  
los pájaros vuelan en el verde olivar

pondré mi espanto lejos  
debajo del pasado  
que arde  
callado como el sol

**Juan Gelman**

**Los que sobrevivimos todavía necesitamos respuestas.**  
**irakcasagrew@hotmail.com**  
**Tu hija Karina Casanova Pettigrew**

Newspaper clipping requesting information regarding the whereabouts of Sylvia Estela Pettigrew, a disappeared person. The words beneath Gelman's poem read, "We who survive still need answers. Your daughter, Karina Casanova Pettigrew." Source: Fondo Luis Mangieri, Centro de Documentación e Investigación de la Cultura de Izquierdas, CeDInCI.

“The Rift” by Hezy  
Leskly, 1992

*Translated from Hebrew by Adriana X. Jacobs*



## Translator's Introduction

Hezy Leskly (1952–1994) was an Israeli-born Hebrew poet, choreographer, and dance critic who lived most of his life in the environs of Tel Aviv, apart from a pivotal period in the Netherlands in the 1970s. These years afforded Leskly, who was openly gay, the opportunity to explore and express his sexuality without the constraints of Israeli social conventions and to develop as a poet and performance artist on his own terms. His published poetry collections include *Ha-akhbarim ve-Leah Goldberg* (The mice and Leah Goldberg, 1992), where the poem “The Rift” appears, and *Sotim yekarim* (Dear perverts, 1994), which was published shortly after his death of AIDS-related complications.

In English, the word *rift* often refers to the cracks that occur in relationships but also refers to the fissures that break open the Earth's crust, separating and reshaping continents. The title of Leskly's poem (in Hebrew “Ha-shever”) seems to allude to both meanings, in the way that the poem's dinner party risks bringing the past and present into closer proximity. This encounter is partly biographical, with the words “this room in Tel Aviv draws closer to the room in Bratislava” nodding to Leskly's Czech heritage (in 1952, Bratislava was part of the Czechoslovak Republic). But it is also imaginary since the Czech poet Milan Rozum never existed. He is one of several imaginary poets that Leskly's poems conjure, and his presence in this poem blurs the line between history and imagination, while revealing a third rift, between present and past versions of the poem. In Rozum's version, the words “fall into” anticipate the breaking away of the line “the time came to cover our faces with our palms and cry,” but the remaining “forgotten lines” migrate into the present poem like seashells found in the Appalachian Mountains.

In my translation, the line break between the present and past poems creates a fourth rift. When I first read this poem, many years ago, it instantly recalled for me the work of the Hebrew poet Avot Yeshurun (1904–1992), author of the 1974 collection *The Syrian-African Rift* (*Ha-shever ha-suri-afrikani*). Yeshurun's poems are full

of cracks, tears, rifts, and shards, of poetic lines that break away and make their way into other poems. The space in my translation, which precedes Rozum's poem, is not quite "the width of the slit of a blind," but it's just enough room for a forgotten line to get through.

## **“The Rift”**

After the nice meal and nice conversation that stretched our minds to the width of the slit of a blind and not the size of a pit you can fall into, after all of this, it was time to leave. This is the time and place to say goodbye and move on. It must happen now, before this place draws closer to another place, and this time is swallowed into another time. Now, before this room in Tel Aviv draws closer to the room in Bratislava, and this time is swallowed up by another time: 9/16/52, in the early morning, when the Czech poet Milan Rozum was born, the one who, thirty-six years after that morning, wrote these forgotten lines:

After a nice meal and nice conversation  
that stretched our minds to the width of the slit of a blind,  
and not the size of a pit  
you can fall into,

The time came to cover our faces with our palms and cry.





“Holy Reb Velvele, the Brave  
Wolf from Zbaraz” by Jiří  
Mordechai Langer, 1937

*Translated from Czech by Denisa Glacova*



## Translator's Introduction

The life of Jiří Mordechai Langer<sup>1</sup> (1894–1943) was impacted by two crucial journeys. In 1913, when he was only nineteen years old, Langer left his family in Prague and set out to Belz in Eastern Galicia to get a taste of the Hasidic life. In Belz, he changed into a different person—he turned into a Hasid. As the Hasidic influence in the Prague Jewish community was minimal until World War I (1914–18),<sup>2</sup> Langer has often been viewed as an eccentric figure, “the Dreamer of the Ghetto”<sup>3</sup> or “an enormous cockroach” from *The Metamorphosis* by his good friend Kafka.<sup>4</sup>

In 1939, Langer, who sympathized with the Zionist ideology, escaped the threat of Nazism to Mandate Palestine. It took him approximately six months to reach his final destination. He spent a freezing winter on board a ship in the waters of the frozen Danube River. As most of Langer's luggage was occupied by hundreds of books—his most precious possessions—he was not prepared for such harsh conditions. The voyage ruined his already weakened health, and he died in Tel Aviv a few years later.

Both these journeys are closely connected to the Hasidic tale “Holy Reb Velvele, the Brave Wolf from Zbaraz,” which was originally published in *Kalendář česko-židovský* (Czech-Jewish calendar) in Prague in 1937–38. The work reflects one Langer's greatest sources of inspiration—Hasidism—born from his stay among the Belz Hasidim. His interest in Hasidism is evident in the diverse genres that make up his oeuvre, including poetry, folk literature, and essays that

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<sup>1</sup> Langer used many names for his writing, including his Czech name, Jiří; his German name, Georg(o); his Hebrew name, Mordechai Dov; and various combinations of these.

<sup>2</sup> “The first documented appearance of Hasidism in Bohemia occurs after 1914, when refugees from Galicia—among them the entourage of the Belzer Rebbe—streamed into the country.” See Kieval, *Languages of Community*, 102.

<sup>3</sup> Langer, “My Brother Jiří,” xiv. Up until now, one of the main sources on Langer's life is a short memoir written by his older brother František Langer. The text “Můj bratr Jiří” was first published in Czech in 1959 as a foreword to Jiří's book *Devět bran: Chasidů tajemství*; in 1963, it was also included in František's book *Byli a bylo*.

<sup>4</sup> Langer, “Můj bratr Jiří,” xvii.

employ Freudian psychoanalysis. He is especially known for his collection of Hasidic tales *Devět bran: Chasidů tajemství* (Czech: Nine gates: Hasidic mysteries; Prague, 1937); his poetry with homoerotic and Kabbalistic motifs *Piyutim ve-shirei yedidut* (Hebrew: Odes and poems of friendship/love; Prague, 1929) and *Me'at tsori* (Hebrew: A little balm; Tel Aviv, 1943); and his psychoanalytic study *Die Erotik der Kabbala* (German: The eroticism of Kabbalah; Prague, 1923).

The story about holy Reb Velvele was supposed to serve as a teaser for Langer's second book of Hasidic tales. Unfortunately, as a result of his escape to Palestine and deteriorating health, his Czech readers have never been able to set out on another journey with Langer among his Hasidim—his second book of Hasidic tales was never published.<sup>5</sup> Thus, this excerpt has remained a solitary proof of Langer's unfulfilled intention to immerse his Czech readers anew in the Hasidic world.

Before you have a chance to read about the deeds of the holy Reb Velvele, let me just mention that the English translation of the text posed several challenges. I aimed to maintain Langer's lively and kind writing, full of diminutives that are typical for the Czech language, his style of an illusionary *skaz*, a narrative mode imitating a spontaneous talk,<sup>6</sup> and his rhymed prose in the second half of the tale. My gratitude goes to Kelsie Ehalt, who was very helpful in providing feedback and ideas for rhymes included in my translation.

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<sup>5</sup> Langer published several additional Hasidic tales in Hebrew newspapers in Palestine, but he did not publish texts in Czech again.

<sup>6</sup> Langer's attempt to create an illusion of *skaz* is first analyzed by Ondřej Pavlík in "Anyone Can Be a Narrator."

- . “My Brother Jiří.” In *Nine Gates to the Chassidic Mysteries*, by Jiří Langer, vii–xxxi. New York: David McKay, 1961.
- Pavlík, Ondřej. “Anyone Can Be a Narrator: Possibilities of Hasidic Storytelling in the Work of Jiří Mordechaj Langer.” *Slovo a Smysl: Časopis pro Mezioborová Studia* 19, no. 39 (2022): 95–106.



## “Holy Reb Velvele, the Brave Wolf from Zbarazh”

“A beautiful woman, a nice home, and nice clothes are brightening one’s mind.” It is written this way in our holy Talmud, so it certainly must be the truth of truths. But I do not know how they cherished all of this in Zbarazh, at holy Reb Velvele’s.

Their home, for example, did not abound with luxury. Perhaps, just a clock hung on the wall by the window. That was all. The entire pride of Reb Velvele’s house. In fact, a clock is not that much of a luxury. Everyone, almost everyone, has precisely the same in their dwelling. How could we know when it is time to pray or when our dear housewives should light the Shabbat candles on Friday afternoon if the clock would not tell us? No, even for us, although we’re just mere little Hasidim, a clock is not a luxury. They are of the same necessity in our life as is the prayer book or the four fringes on our *leib-tzidakel*—I mean, on our scapular. But we are all real Rothschilds compared to the holy Reb Velvele of Zbarazh. The clock was a pure treasure for him. So poor was he.

Once upon an evening, the holy Reb Velvele is sitting at home. He is sitting quietly. And the dear Hasidim are also sitting quietly. They don’t even peep, so as not to—God forbid—disturb the saint deep in contemplation. It is quiet, nice and quiet, in the tiny dim room; only the clock on the wall by the window is ticking and ticking. And in this evening’s atmosphere, a thief is walking in the street. He is marching briskly, not looking left or right. Indeed, it’s as if he doesn’t take an interest in anything today. Yet he still stops by the window of the holy Reb Velvele. He is standing here, not moving. He is probably also deep in contemplation. But as the dear thief stands here, lost in his contemplation, he can hear how inside, behind the open window, Velvele’s clock is ticking so nicely. He can’t hear anything else, nor can he see anything. Even those in the tiny room disappeared. The darkness engulfed them.

—*Aha*, he thinks, *no one’s home!*—

He tucks himself into the wall and reaches there. I mean, to the window. For he had a hankering for the clock that was ticking so nicely. But the thief’s trade is not easy. Even a thief must eat his bread by the sweat of his brow. And if, ad exemplum, our thief was



stretched on a rack, he couldn't get more stretched out than when he was reaching out to Velvele's clock that was ticking so nicely. He is stretching out to reach it, stretching out, nearly tearing his ligaments. The clock is almost within reach of his hand, but, no matter what, he cannot grasp it.

And the holy Reb Velvele sees everything, and his holy heart is filling with sorrow.

What did the holy Reb Velvele do?

The holy Reb Velvele got up soundlessly, crouched by the wall, and pushed the dear clock gently to the sinful hand. After which he turned back to the Hasidim and, under his breath, explained to them:

“So that the dear saint wouldn't have to struggle and toil so much outside!”

Saint?—Well, the thief who is already running away happily with the dear clock that was ticking so nicely. The holy Reb Velvele of Zbarazh called every person a “dear saint.” He also called the irredeemable sinners this, and he was so consistent that he even once said to an especially heartless scoundrel, “Dear saint, aren't you a great rascal!”

The holy Reb Velvele generally had some tough luck with thieves. His poor small house attracted their dark souls, as a lamp beckons mayflies in the evening. Yet the dear mayflies get their delicate wings burned by the lamp. But no thief has ever had his wings burned in the house of the holy Reb Velvele. Once, for example, the holy Reb Velvele came back home and saw that he had been burgled. The small cup with *tzimmes*—I mean with preserves—is gone. So the holy Reb Velvele started to chase the dear thieves and fortunately found them.

“Saints, hey, saints,” he was calling on them from afar, “when you eat the *tzimmes*, please, don't forget to say a blessing to our Lord God that he created such great things!”

It never crossed his mind, even in his dreams, that he could demand his own possession back from the thieves. He did not own anything anyway! Everything we have is from our God, and everything belongs to Him. This is why the holy Reb Velvele was also proclaiming out loud every evening, “If I own something—I am

relinquishing it now. May it be dirt by the road! It also doesn't belong to anyone, and everyone can pick up as much as their heart desires." Upon saying this, he began falling asleep peacefully. He knew that no one could take anything from him now. After all, he has not owned anything anyway; he relinquished everything. This is how dear wise Velvele took precautions against theft night after night.

Reb Velvele was one of five sons of the holy Reb Michel of Zlotshov. We call them the "Five Books of Moses." Such great saints they were, these holy brothers. Five books of Moses in the flesh!

Once, one of the brothers called on Velvele. Velvele was looking for odds and ends to treat his dear brother generously. But try to go on a wild goose chase without a goose! Yet, after all, dear Velvele sniffed out, with God's help, a chunk of bread somewhere; he set the table— and here he is already with a small cup of water to wash his brother's hands, since it is a great deed as is known to all. But this brother of Velvele's was also a saint, and a great one. And if Velvele served God through poverty, his brother would through *fortune*. The dear brother looks at the table and sees Velvele's salt cellar. Did I say salt cellar?—No, Velvele's salt cellar was not an ordinary one. He, the wealthy brother, had a beautiful salt cellar on his table at home, a peculiar one made from precious glass and incised. Hasidim came from far and near to look at it when someone brought it to him all the way from the distant Bohemian land. And on holidays, his table was adorned with a salt cellar made of pure crystal. But gazing at Velvele's salt cellar, his gems couldn't compare to it! It was striking, much more striking. Actually, it was not even a salt cellar. It was a shard. A broken wooden spoon without a handle. That was Velvele's salt cellar. A saltuary.

"What a great saint is this our Velvele," his brother is pondering quietly. "He lives in grinding poverty, yet he can still serve God so faithfully! Who am I compared to him? I am not even worthy to be the heel of his shoe . . ."

Velvele sees his brother, lost in thought, staring at his salt cellar, almost enviously. He didn't even notice that Velvele had been standing above him with a cup of water to wash his hands for half an hour. The dear brother is watching and watching Velvele's salt cellar; he cannot take his eyes off it.

Velvele quivered. And he says, “Dearest brother, please, take my salt cellar. Quickly, take it! I would be happy to give it to you . . . Just that you, for God’s sake, do not sin here against the tenth commandment: You shall not covet . . . anything that is your neighbor’s!”

The holy Reb Velvele called everyone “dear saint,” but once, actually, he did not. It was in Lviv. He had just arrived from Lublin and all of Lviv came to meet him to welcome him. Even the mayor of the holy community of Lviv and with him, of course, all of the Lviv notables. As the holy Reb Velvele was already so renowned back then. But the holy Reb Velvele didn’t quite acknowledge anyone; especially not the notables. Until he suddenly approached one of the community elders. He looked into the elder’s face and commenced:

—Once, there were two brothers. Wealthy and poor. The destitution of his brother the wealthy one couldn’t ignore, hence he advised him to get down to trading and gave him a thousand ducats. This brother promised him, but without a contract, that the initial sum he will return if the business doesn’t crash and burn. And indeed, as the true holy scholars say, everything is up to chance. It means that the stance of a rich man is looking down at a pauper, but tomorrow, the wheel will veer, toward a different direction one will be steered—and whoop! the rich will lose all his gear, and the poor man who was still down yesterday rises up today and shouts joyfully, as today he is the one who looks scornfully at the one who is down, and this is how it goes round and round. Oh gosh, so many turns in a day! But no, the world is not in disarray. For God, who created both the work and holy days, gave law and order to everything under the sun. Hence, you, whose faith of the heart grows stronger, do not despair! Let the whole world turn like a spinning wheel, always trust in God, the Lord of Lords, and heed the following words.

The affluent brother, though, as you, son, can probably guess, has since gone to seed and become moneyless. But the poor one was thriving now—and very curiously—the gold hidden in his chest was growing furiously. One time, the impoverished brother visited to ask and implore for his gelt. Yet their encounter did not go well. The upstart scowled at his brother and slammed the door—farewell. Thrown back on begging, the poor barely scratched a living, until he died withering without any care and a roof over his head. But

the rich got diabetes and dropped dead. So after they died, they approached the heavenly tribunal side by side. The heavenly judges decided justly. When they counted their deeds and weighed them carefully, they condemned and expelled the rich brusquely but let the poor go to paradise freely. The poor one in disgrace, but with his heart in the right place, started to claim that he cannot enter paradise without an aim, since peace he cannot gain without his beloved brother. (Here, one must mention the holy Reb Velvele, out of good manners, who is recounting this story, as well as one of the Lviv elders marveling at its glory.)

And now, hark, dear coreligionists, the verdict of the heavenly judges. May the brothers be as strangers reborn! The poor, begging again, remains an object of scorn, while the rich one will sit at home in his prime. But they'll have no idea at the same time that they already were on the earth. So wandering about after their rebirth, they didn't know the path out to redemption; they were not aware how to reach a debt exemption and just correction. One night, the rich's star of salvation appeared above the town. Today at midnight, drained from roaming around, a beggar knocked at his door, yet it did not cross his mind that the rich can be one of his kind. So unaware was the rich, who refused to give any bread to a man who was, near his house the next morning, dead.

And here is our elder of the community, who, with his own ears, has an opportunity to hear Reb Velvele's wise words. His calmness is gone as it begins to dawn on him and his face is deathly pale as he recalls eerie things in detail. (He was trembling with fright when the beggar knocked on his door at night!) And here is the dear rich bending down, kissing ardently Reb Velvele's hands now, shedding tears bitterly, and pleading for God's mercy sincerely, he is determined to live austerely as he is recollecting eternal salvation. And here he is standing, quickly handing out his property to all saints and holy men, without further demanding. He is, of course, also not leaving out all scribes, rewarding them plentifully, as they can write on paper skillfully. And so he also found salvation in less than a year, and the brothers' souls appeared in the garden of paradise side by side. We will meet them there someday, our time is slowly closing in, anyway.

AMEN



*La Agua de la Sota, or  
The Ordeal of Jealousy  
by Viktor Levi, 1889*

*Translated from Ladino by Nesi Altaras*

המים המרים המאררים

או

לה אנואה די לה סוטה

סדר

ב'יקטור לוי

דומאנסו איגטיריסאנטי

---

קון לה חאונוריאקסיון דיז ויניקטיריון די  
לה אינקטרוקסיון סובליקה .

---

חינפרינדיז חין לה חינפרינטה די

איל טילינראפ'ו

5649—1889

The front matter of the novella. The title is in Hebrew (*Ha-mayim ha-marim ha-me'arerim*) and the subtitle—*La Agua de la Sota*—is in Ladino. The middle section contains the authorization of the Ottoman censorship bureau, “The Ministry of Public Instruction.”

## Translator's Introduction

Viktor Levi was a Ladino writer and newspaperman born in Istanbul in 1865 (d. Istanbul, 1940). *The Ordeal of Jealousy*, which was published at the press of the Istanbul-based *El Telegrafo* in 1889, is not simply a melodramatic family story. The crux of the story (and the title) is the out-of-use public fidelity test described in the Torah's Book of Numbers and in the Mishna. Levi alters this ancient custom to heighten the drama. As scholar Michael Alpert explains, Levi's *romanso* is part of a genre of Ladino literature centered on infidelity.

Levi sets the story in Jerusalem at the time of Solomon's Temple. By using the fig leaf of a villainous high priest in biblical times, Levi launches a searing critique of the corruption at the Chief Rabbinate in Istanbul. Despite the historical cover, his criticism was certainly noticed. Chief Rabbi Moshe Levi declared that the book should not be bought and that those who had it should burn it. This strong reaction makes the story even more interesting.

Levi likely received Jewish religious education at a local *meldar* (traditional Sephardic schooling), and he almost certainly received some schooling in French, though we do not know exactly at which institution or for how long. As Alpert relays, Levi was an editor or owner of various Ladino periodicals, a novelist, and a translator of French literature. His language, especially in his introduction, is florid and reflects his Francophile tendency, evinced by his Gallicisms and French borrowings. But the story is not merely the product of a Westernized Ottoman, reproducing French literary forms in his native tongue. Levi brings to bear deep knowledge about the Torah and Talmud, down to the names of areas of biblical Jerusalem. He uses this knowledge as a cudgel against the religious establishment and as a vehicle for expressing his proto-feminist ideas. These ideas motivated him across the years as an outspoken activist for the abolition of sex trafficking, for which Istanbul had become a major node during his lifetime.

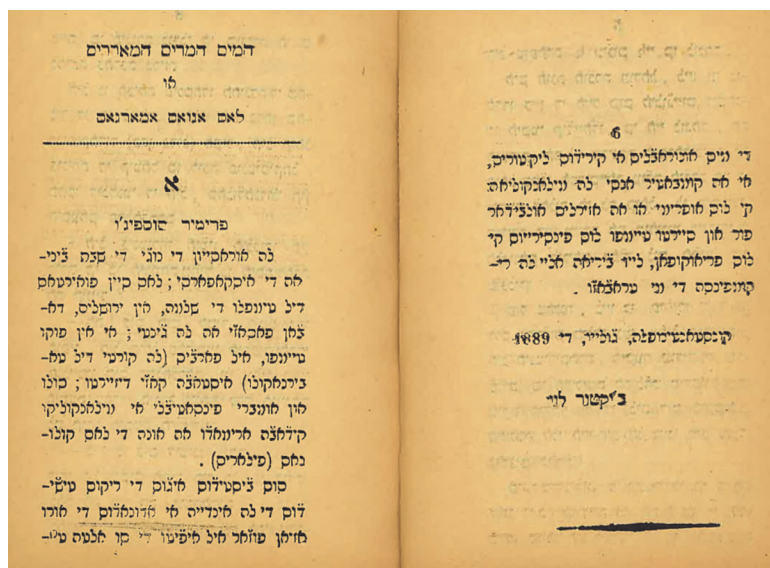
Like much of Ladino literature, *The Ordeal of Jealousy* was published in Rashi letters, a modified Hebrew script used by Ladino presses. But over the twentieth century, Ladino became romanized, and new learners mostly engaged with the language in Latin letters.



Thus, transliterations have proliferated to introduce older works to new readers. A transliterated version of *The Ordeal of Jealousy* was published in Istanbul's *El Amaneser* in 2022. This novella can serve as an entry point to Ladino literature, a collection of works that are still underrated among scholars of Jewish literature.

## Work Cited

Alpert, Michael. "An Anti-Clerical Judeo-Spanish Novel in Defence of Ill-Treated Women: Víctor Levi's 'Hamávim hamarim hame'ar'erim o la Agua de la sotá.'" *Ladinar* 9 (2017): xxxi–xli.



The opening pages of the novella, including the author's introduction.

## *La Agua de la Sota, or The Ordeal of Jealousy*

### Prologue

In recent times, when the Judeo-Spanish press has expanded remarkably, as periodicals enlighten the masses and as more and more novels are translated, I believed I, too, should add my efforts, however weak in proportion, to those demonstrated by many of our competent coreligionists who have set their sights on the laudable goal of enriching Judeo-Spanish literature.

Today, thanks to the efforts of these men of letters, lovers of reading have small libraries in their homes adorned in a satisfactory manner with newspapers, periodicals, and other things corresponding to their needs in every moment: newspapers to brighten their horizons considerably, novels and stories for moments of rest, science for moments when the spirit is thirsty for marvels, statistics to satisfy their capricious curiosity at any moment, useful advice responding to the greatest needs of practical life, etc., etc.

In these libraries, my small endeavor cannot have the pretense of occupying one of the better spots; modest in its format, it is also humble in its intentions. A small corner, dusty and dark, on one of the bottom shelves, in a small, hidden, neglected, forgotten corner, there at least it will find its place. It is a moral work, and I keep myself from singing its praises, leaving this care, if there is a place for it, to others, to the Jewish press, which knows how to assess each work to its just value and which, I hope, will want to put an account of a few lines under the eyes of the public.

Therefore, I cannot say but two things: it will please you and it will interest you. This modest pamphlet is for people of all ages, and also of both sexes. I created this with the sole aim of making it useful.

Thus, as this work grips the reader from beginning to end with interest, I will draw the attention of my honorable and beloved readers, and thus to combat the melancholy with which they come to me, or hear them forget, for a certain time, the thoughts that worry them. I shall see this as the recompense of my work.

Konstantinopla, July of 1889

Viktor Levi

## Aleph—The First Suspicion

The evening Shabbat prayer had just ended; the hundred doors of the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem gave way to the people, in little time the floor (the court of the altar) was virtually deserted. Only one man, pensive and melancholic, remained, leaning against one of the columns.

His clothes were made of rich fabrics from India and adorned in gold, increasing the effect of his grand stature, his noble and severe figure, and his long gray beard.

He had not yet thought to leave his spot when the high priest (*hakham gadol*) Asher, who had just taken off his pontifical robes, came in front of him, greeting him with these words:

“The Lucky Ofen has surely forgotten that his beautiful wife is waiting for him to eat?”

“Ah! Asher,” answered Ofen, who seemed to wake up hearing his words. “My wife ate this afternoon at the home of one of her friends who is ill.”

So said Asher, “I won’t keep you any longer . . . because doubtlessly you are going to go look for her . . . unless you hand this responsibility off to that young orphan boy you adopted five years ago during Sukkot.”

“Yes, thank God,” responded Ofen, smiling.

“You don’t sound too excited about attending to the needs of your new wife.”

“You should learn to listen better, Asher,” said Ofen, as if he wanted to dispense with an annoying thought. “The feast of the cabins, as you already know, takes place in autumn, the most beautiful season of the year. The season of flowers and fruits. This holiday is celebrated to bless the products of the earth, and thus the divine hand that makes them grow. Wicker cabins are made in front of our doors. It is necessary, during the whole time that the feast goes on, to have our meals together. How could I bring myself to partake in the pleasures of the holiday while refusing hospitality to a dying boy? That boy, Amial, was a child.”

“And today he is no longer one,” said Asher with an air of indifference.

Ofen said, "I remember, it was the first day of these grand celebrations, and the meal had already been prepared in the cabin. Held back at home to deal with a few religious obligations, I had just gone downstairs when Izel came to me, her eyes glassy with tears: 'Sir,' she said to me, 'a boy . . . a poor orphan has presented himself at your door, he is homeless! He is without refuge . . . ah! May the first year of our union be marked by a good deed and may the first holiday that I am celebrating under the roof of my husband be for his wife and his servant a memory of his generous charity! My friend, do not refuse me the first wish I have asked of you!' Izel was so beautiful, so moving in the way that she spoke to me, that I promised her to be the boy's protector. I returned to the cabin with her. A small boy was leaning against the hut. To me, he seemed no older than twelve. He was thirteen. I took him by the hand, invited him in, sat him down at my table, and called him 'my son.' I hope that I will never have reason to regret this deed."

"I hope so too, for your sake," Asher said darkly.

"You say that in a peculiar tone," said Ofen, on whose face a lively redness was replacing his usual pallor.

"But . . . this is my regular tone."

"I already know that you are my enemy," the husband of Izel repeated heartily.

"Me? Your enemy?!" cried the high priest with an air of benevolence that sharply contrasted with his hard and severe physiognomy. "Ofen, I might be your rival . . . but not your enemy, never! Having heard of her beauty, I had asked to marry Izel, the daughter of the widow Shiras of the valley of Hebron, her only daughter, I believe. I was refused. You were accepted. It's true that at first, I hated you, but later I consoled myself: the refusal of my proposal, my fortune, was lucky. It was lucky that this marriage did not come to be . . . Izel was fifteen at the time, I was already fifty . . ."

"That's my age now," said Ofen.

"Izel is beautiful, while the years and worries have transformed my face."

"And mine also," said Ofen in turn.

"Izel is sweet, smart . . . but young, lively . . ."

“Asher!”

“Like everyone her age,” rushed to add the high priest, without appearing to pay much attention to this pause, “and I, I am . . . suspicious . . . jealous . . . so . . .”

Ofen sighed with pain.

“I have a younger brother at home . . .”

“And I—a stranger,” murmured Ofen.

“A boy of thirteen,” continued Asher, “but after five years, he is eighteen; and Izel—twenty. The difference isn’t so great. This boy is becoming a young man, whose blond beard will put my gray beard to shame, and his words will seem sweeter and mine—harsher, perhaps . . .”

“Asher!” yelled Ofen, losing his patience.

“In short,” the high priest went on, seemingly without hearing or seeing the anguish displayed on Ofen’s face, “my young wife would have pulled away, and surely, I . . .”

“Asher!” repeated Ofen, his voice trembling with emotion.

“As I said, I am jealous . . . and . . .”

“Mercy! Ah . . .”

“Jealousy would have poisoned my days and nights,” Asher continued, emotionless.

“Oh, that I sense,” murmured Ofen.

“I would believe I was being cuckolded . . . and maybe I would have been!”

“You terrible man! Shut up!” screamed the husband of Izel, shaking his clenched fists.

“I’m not saying this about you, of course!” responded Asher, with apparent delight.

“What!” said Ofen, his voice multiplying in echoes. “What! You barbarian, don’t you understand that each of your words is a jab of the knife that you stab deep into my heart? Sure, unlike you, I do not have a brother. I have at my home a stranger!”

“But maybe he is not Izel’s lover?” the high priest responded.

“And who can assure me of that?”

“Well, you! You said you are not jealous.”

“And who told you that I am not jealous?” responded the unfortunate husband, his teeth clenched and his hand on the hilt of his dagger.

“None other than wise conduct, which everyone admires,” said Asher—his tone constant since the beginning of this dialogue, “the liberty you allow your young wife to enjoy, the trust you have in this young man Amial, who you let so close to her.”

“It is a trust that neither one abuses . . .”

“And who says otherwise?” Asher said. “Certainly I have no doubts, but . . .”

“Stop there!” said Ofen, gripping him by his coat.

“Excuse me if I may,” responded the high priest, wanting to get away.

“You may not leave me, sir,” yelled Ofen without letting go. “You will explain your words, explain that strange ‘but’ . . .!”

“I do not know anything,” Asher said genially, “I swear to you. Then again, I am like you: simple, trusting, and certainly I am not one of those who thinks your wife is cheating on you . . .”

“Cheating on me!” Ofen repeated staggering side to side like he had just taken a blow to the head. “Cheating on me! God of Israel, I am losing my head! Could this be the truth?! And others besides me have seen this?!”

“You must not upset yourself merely because of talk from wretched people. There are many who have nothing better to do than probe the interior lives of families. Many good-for-nothings whose sole occupation is to go here and there, telling what they have seen, what they have heard . . .”

“But what have they heard?! What have they seen?!” Ofen yelled, sweating. “I am going to go mad, Asher! Speak or kill me with a single blow . . . that would be more generous.”

“To be honest, Ofen,” Asher responded in cold blood, which could not be more at odds with the irritation that Izel’s husband was feeling, “to be honest, it is not wise or prudent to listen to what they say . . . Amial does not love your wife, without a doubt. He loves her as the wife of his protector, he loves her as a mother. And it is calumny, I swear to you, when they say that they spend the night together on the terrace.”

“And tonight, she was there,” Ofen said.

“Surely the orphan was not there.”

“He, too, was there, and I was as well.”

“Yes, tonight you were, but the others . . .” Asher said, throwing his words in Ofen’s face.

“The others!” Ofen repeated angrily, “The others! Are you a man, a snake or a demon? What is it you want? That I kill my wife, and this orphan, and you along with them? Asher! Take back your words. Pull back from my mind these suspicions that you have brought. Have mercy on me!”

“Your pain moves me!” Asher responded, squeezing his hand in a pragmatic move of friendship. “Come, come dine at my home. I already have a solution for how you could ascertain that your wife loves you.”

“How?”

“With one of our sacred customs that is not used much these days, one I wish to reestablish.”

“Which custom?”

“I am going to explain it to you—come!” Asher said, putting his arm under Ofen’s and pulling him out of the temple.

### **Bet—The Terrace**

It was already late at night when Ofen, passing through a major street of Jerusalem, came to knock on the door of his house. An old slave came to open it.

“Where is Izel?” he asked with such a spent voice that the slave raised her lamp to shine some light on the face of the inquirer, Ofen, to ensure that he really was his owner.

“Where is Izel?” Ofen repeated.

“On the terrace.”

“Alone?”

“No sir, the young Amial is with her.”

In an instant, Ofen found himself on the terrace, and with one look he had examined it in its entirety.

The night was clear and serene, as are the most beautiful nights of the East; thousands of stars of gold twinkled on a blue sky and formed a beautiful walkway toward the moon, which had just appeared.

In one corner of the terrace, some slaves were seated on straw mats. They were speaking in low voices. In the other part, Izel,

unveiled,<sup>1</sup> was sitting on some cushions, singing a psalm of David in a sweet, peaceful voice. Amial was sitting at her feet. Izel was smiling as she sang, and she looked at him as if she was playing with the emotions that she saw on the young man's face.

When they saw that Ofen was near them, they did not change their disposition at all: Izel continued to sing and Amial to listen. Still, when she arrived at a high note, the beautiful woman must have noticed her husband, raising her eyes toward him, noticing his cold and severe demeanor, and stood up, completely flustered. "Sir," she said, "What is going on with you? What happened?"

Ofen, declaring slowly and stressing each word, "Why did you leave the house of your friend Rika before I came to collect you?"

"Sir," responded Izel, her husband's tone bringing tears to her eyes, "you had not given me any order, my friend had gone to sleep, it had gotten late, and Amial was already there . . ."

"Amial! Amial!" repeated Ofen, unable to suppress his anger, "And what was Amial doing at your friend's house?"

To this unexpected question, the young and fearful wife had no answer. Amial stepped in, "My father," he said, "night was getting closer, and hoping to meet you, I went after you and Izel. When I arrived at Rika's, I realized that you had not come there. And thinking that you would be here at home already, we rushed, your wife and I, to come back here."

"Both of you have behaved badly," Ofen replied harshly.

"My God!" Izel said, letting the tears that she could no longer hold back run down her cheeks. "Sir, I ask you . . . forgive me . . . but I did not know that you would get so angry over this!"

To get the truth, Ofen thought it best to hide the suspicion that was piercing his heart under an air of calm. He sat among the cushions, took his wife by the hand and pulled her closer to his side. Wrapping his arm around her graceful figure, placing his hand on

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<sup>1</sup> Our honorable readers: Do not forget that Jewish women carried themselves this way by covering their faces with veils in front of strangers. Currently, this custom is conserved among our coreligionists in many countries of the extreme Orient.



hers to keep track of her heartbeat, he addressed Amial: "My son," he told him, "you are already eighteen years of age."

"As of last month," responded Amial, trying to make sense of these words.

"Are you aware you are no longer a little boy? Amial! And it is a great shame for you, being so big and strong, to spend your time like this, in women's quarters."

"What would you like me to do my father?" Amial responded, dejected. "I am an orphan, I have no one else in this world besides you . . . and Izel," he added, looking at the young woman who was smiling sweetly.

Ofen squeezed Izel's arm so tightly that it made her scream. Without paying attention to this, he added, "You are a man, and a man who does not want to expose himself as dishonorable must do as 'a man' does."

"If there were a war, I would serve . . . but the king of Israel lives in peace and harmony with his neighbors."

"In peace, just as in war, the state needs soldiers," Ofen said with a severe tone.

"I hear you, sir," the orphan said proudly.

"You want Amial to be a soldier?!" cried Izel.

"You will respond or provide your opinion only when I ask," Ofen responded.

The silence that followed this exchange seemed to weigh even on the slaves who had gathered in the corner. Ofen broke this silence a minute later.

"Hezekiah, the captain of the guards, is a relative of mine and my friend. He will receive you into the corps he commands. I will give you a letter to give him. Amial, you shall leave tomorrow."

"Tomorrow!" Izel yelled unintentionally. "Tomorrow!"

"Something the matter?" her husband asked calmly.

"You are being cruel to me, sir," said Izel, lowering her voice and pointing with a fearful gesture to the hilt of her husband's dagger that was nestled in his belt and that sat between her and her husband. "You are doing me an unkindness," she repeated, trying to get away.

"Wait!" Ofen said with an explosive voice that echoed from terrace to terrace.

The poor wife did not dare speak another word. A flash of indignation passed through the big blue eyes of the young orphan. He almost erupted . . . then he settled down.

“What time shall I come to receive your orders, sir?” Amial asked when he was finally able to hide his profound emotional distress.

“Two hours after sunrise,” Ofen responded coldly.

Amial bowed and exited.

Ofen got up and gave various orders to his slaves with a tone that made everyone shudder. An hour later, silence reigned in the abode of the rich man where the three main characters live, and, as our readers already know, none were able to sleep.

### **Gimel — The Shores of the Kidron**

Before the sun rose, Asher and Ofen were strolling along the shore of the Kidron.

“Is the ordeal of jealousy, this test of the bitter waters, infallible?” Ofen asked.

“Infallible?!” his friend responded with a pensive, knowledgeable tone.

“My reason will not let me believe it.”

“God’s might is great!”

“Yes, but if Izel is not guilty?” Ofen said, as if talking to himself.

“She will look more beautiful.”

“And if she is guilty?”

“Her body will swell and then she will die.”

“Asher!” the husband of Izel said, glaring around the deserted landscape around the Kidron River, whose waters were lapping up at his feet. “Asher, she must die! Do you understand?”

“The justice of God will prevail.”

“Asher!” Ofen went on, “You are an expert of the Law, and I am, too. But you are the high priest, and I am not. Your fancy words might work for the masses, but they lose their effect with me. So let’s speak with our faces bare, without veils, without covering up anything. Let’s not speak like a learned man speaking to an ignorant Levi, but man to man. Let’s sit down, but first let’s see if anyone is around to hear us.”

“Who would want to get up before the sun? Unless he is jealous or a scrooge, he would not be awake,” responded Asher, taking a seat on the trunk of a tree that had fallen because of a storm.

Ofen also sat down.

“I am a cuckold, Asher,” he said in a low voice. “I have been cheated. My wife and the orphan are lovers! Are you shaken? They are lovers! I am sure of it!”

Overtaken by emotion, which caused this train of thought, he fell silent for a moment. Then he started up again:

“It was yesterday, late yesterday when I became certain. If I do not kill the infidel and the ingrate both with the same knife, it is because I want nothing less than a dazzling revenge, vengeance that will serve as an example to all women, that will ensure that in the future, all husbands can rest assured. And I want Izel to die. Not at night, under the covers, murdered, assassinated, strangled by my hands. I want her to die at high noon, in the middle of the sacred temple, in front of the God of Israel. I want her to die on the test of the bitter waters. Do you understand me now, Asher?”

“The water in the ordeal is not inherently harmful; it only hurts guilty women, Ofen,” responded Asher.

“If I were the high priest, it would be up to my discretion, Asher.”

“The dust I mix into the water for the ceremony is taken from the floor of the temple.”

“Bitter herbs are mixed in with the dust . . .”

“I prepare two cups: one for the wife, one for the husband.”

“Put a sign on one of the cups, Asher.”

The light of wild joy shone in the eyes of the Kohen. An infernal thought appeared to redden his short and narrow brow.

“All deeds must be compensated,” he said, coldly.

From his belt, Ofen took out a knitted bag full of gold and gave it to Asher.

“But before doing it,” said Asher, “I want you to ensure that I . . . even if Izel deserves the fate you are preparing . . . I wish to have with her an hour of conversation . . . alone . . . me and her.”

“It seems you are dreaming!”

The priest got up.

“Asher,” Ofen said while getting up in turn, “ask me for something else.”

“Well, you want to do the test of the bitter waters . . . as you say . . . maybe speak to someone else then . . .” he said, inching away as he spoke.

“Asher!” yelled Ofen, “you have my secret.”

“I regret it so, and I am miserable, sir, to not have one to give you in return.”

Ofen thought for a minute about killing him, but he said instead, with the manner of a violent man:<sup>2</sup>

“Asher, when would you like to speak to my wife?”

“In the afternoon, after the *minha* prayer is over.”

“Fine, then it shall be.”

And without saluting each other, without exchanging looks, they both went their separate ways.

### **Dalet—The Goodbyes**

It was already daytime when Izel and the young man went down to the street from Ofen’s house.

“Brother!”

“Sister,” they called to each other as they threw their arms around one another.

“Amial! We must confess everything to my husband,” the young wife said through her tears.

“Never! Sister,” Amial said forcefully, “listen and be warned. Our father departed for that long voyage ten years ago, from which, ah, he never returned! He took me with him on that trip. You were then ten years old, and I eight. Shortly after, our mother, may God rest her soul, learned that the boat on which we had embarked on this voyage had sunk, along with the people and goods on board. I know these details from old Eli, our relative. Listen, sister—he told me—apart from all this, that the death of our dear father changed nothing of our fortune. When you got to a marriageable age, many men bid for your hand. Our mother narrowed the choice down to two: Asher the priest and Ofen, the most honorable and wealthiest man in Jerusalem. What a thing! The one who offered a larger

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<sup>2</sup> Originally, this thought is attributed to Asher, but that was, most likely, an error of the author.

dowry, Ofen, was the one that our mother preferred. She was so pleased to have him as a son-in-law that she promised him her entire fortune. In the meantime—listen well, Izel—our mother, she alone, knew that I was alive, that a sailor from the ship had swum to my rescue, that of this fortune she had promised to your betrothed, half belonged to me. But she was afraid that by admitting to Ofen that she had found her son, she would break up this matrimony. She kept silent and your marriage was done. You then followed your husband here, to Jerusalem.”

“And you, poor boy,” Izel said, putting her loving arms around the young man’s neck and bringing her lips to his brow, “you dear boy, when, five years ago, you came to the Valley of Josaphat, looking for a mother, a fortune, you found nothing, but this letter entrusted to Eli. Ah! Let me read it again, Amial, so that it gives me the strength to resist the current desire to tell everything to my husband, so that I hear one more time the last wishes of our mother, so I can take encouragement to obey her commands.”

Then, taking from Amial’s hands a parchment that he had taken from his bosom, the young woman cleaned her brow filled with sweat, her tearful eyes, and read out loud:

*My son,*

*When you return to the roof under which you were born, you will not find anything besides a plea; the plea of a dead woman that begs you not to dishonor her memory, the plea of a mother that has a confession to make, a pardon to ask for, but who, even in her tomb, does not wish to be embarrassed before her son or to ask for pardon from her son.*

*Our relative Eli will tell you the events that took place before your sister’s marriage. When I told Ofen that I had no other child besides Izel, I was telling lies. I had just been informed that you were still living. In my final hour, this lie weighed on me because who knows, will my lie tar my daughter’s honor? Will she have to blush every time her husband accuses her of having cheated him?*

*With that, my son, from the bottom of my tomb, this is the plea that your mother makes to you:*

*Be near your sister, tell her all this, order her to stay quiet, for the sake of my memory.*

*After you become a man, Amial, you will work, and with God's help, you will earn, I hope in this way, the fortune of which I robbed you.*

*Oh my son! May the God of Israel sustain you and give you, and likewise to your sister, the courage to fulfill my last wishes!*

*Your mother,*

*Shiras*

“So, you see that you must stay silent, Izel,” Amial said, taking the parchment.

“Ah!” Izel responded crying and throwing her head on her brother's shoulder.

“Courage,” he added with goodness, “Courage. Ofen does not know of the ties that bind us. He is jealous of our friendship, and he has reason to be. He wants me to go. A little earlier, a little later, don't we have to wake up? Shall I live like this all my life, under the care of your husband?”

“Under his care?!” Izel repeated in the tone of a sweet complaint. “I am the one who . . .”

“Hush!” said the young man, putting his hand on his sister's lips, “hush and bid me farewell!”

“Amial, listen to me. Do not leave Jerusalem this morning, or this afternoon, not even tomorrow. I beg you, grant me two more days for me to get used to our separation. So that I can tell myself: my brother is here, two steps away, and I can see him if I want to . . .”

“What childishness!” Amial said with affection.

“Do not refuse me!” She turned with her arms trembling. “Wait until tomorrow afternoon, at the foot of the Tower of David. I will come . . . or I will send a slave.”

“Very well, I promise.”

Suddenly, he pushed her away brusquely and left her arms; he had just noticed his brother-in-law.

“Forgive us for our tears and our goodbyes, sir,” said the young man with a dignity rife with sadness. “Izel is like a sister to me. I owe her the protection that you have accorded to a poor orphan. She took care of me, raised me—do not punish her for her pain.”

“I already know what must be believed to grant pardon, my son,” Izel's husband responded coldly. “Go join the army corps that you

are assigned to. I am giving you the horse you love the most and three sacks full of gold," he added, pulling them out of his belt and handing them to him.

Amial was going to refuse these offerings. A sign from his sister made him accept.

"Now, sir," he said to Ofen, "it is as a brother that I receive these gifts."

Then, fearing every minute that his sister would betray everything, he shook Ofen's hand, glanced affectionately at Izel, and quickly went away.

"Now it is just us two," Ofen said between his lips as he took his wife by the arm to force her into the house.

### He—The False Pilgrim

Leaning against the marble balustrade that surrounded the terrace of the house, Izel was gazing at a black point in the horizon. It was the Tower of David, where her brother ought to be waiting for her. She was shaken from this contemplation by the arrival of a slave.

"Madam, a pilgrim asks for your hospitality," he said, after bowing to kiss the ground with his brow.

"May hospitality be extended to him," Izel responded without taking her eyes off the black point.

The slave left, then returned once more.

"The pilgrim wishes a personal audience with you."

"Where is your owner?" Izel said.

"At the *tefilla* prayer," the slave responded.

"I do not receive anyone in the absence of your master; be gone!"

The slave went away but did not take long to reappear.

"The pilgrim asks for this audience in the name of humanity."

"I cannot!"

"In the name of your life, which he says, is in great danger."

"Be gone, leave me."

"In the name of your husband . . ."

"I cannot! I should not receive this man," Izel responded while thinking.

"In the name of the orphan Amial," added the slave, lowering his voice.

"May this pilgrim enter," she yelled hastily.

Izel covered up with her veil, but she had hardly taken one look at the pilgrim who had just been introduced that she exclaimed:

“Asher!”

“Daughter of Shiras, wife of Ofen, said the priest, I must speak to you without witnesses.”

Izel made a signal; the slave disappeared.

“Speak now, sir,” she said with an icy dignity.

“Daughter of Shiras,” said Asher, “before, your mother refused my proposal, she preferred Ofen . . . the rich Ofen. The spirit of jealousy reigns in the heart of your husband. Tomorrow you will be called in the temple by my voice and you will be forced to pass the test of the bitter waters.”

“I am not scared, sir,” Izel responded, unmoved.

“Girl,” Asher said, getting closer to Izel, “you are not afraid, and you would be right, perhaps, if the hand of God prepared the waters for the ordeal. But it is the hand of men . . .”

“Is it not your hand, Asher?”

“Yes. It is mine! And for that I asked to speak to you.”

After lowering his voice, the priest continued:

“Listen, young lady, and know that if you repeat any of these words that I am about to say to you, I will accuse you of lying. Your husband wishes for your death. And on his orders, I will poison the cup that will be given to you.”

“You vile slanderer!” Izel yelled, standing up, shaking and disturbed.

“This bag,” asked Asher calmly, taking a bag full of gold out of his belt, “do you recognize it?”

Agitated, Izel responded, “It was made by my own hand!”

“It is the price of your death!” the priest murmured.

Izel covered her face with her hands and began to cry behind her veil.

“But, if you want, this will become the price of your husband’s death.”

“You terrible man!” Izel yelled, recoiling in disgust.

“Listen,” the priest went on, “tomorrow during the ceremony, there will be two cups: one for you and one for your husband. One of the two will be poisoned. Promise to be my wife in one year and



one day, and you will leave the ordeal beautiful and pure, sure that you are righteous!”

Then, when Izel seemed unable to understand the meaning of his words, he added:

“What? Don’t you understand that if you drink from the healthy cup, your husband will drink the other and that tomorrow afternoon you will be a widow?”

“Infamy!” She yelled to God.

Before Asher had the time to know where she had disappeared to, a slave appeared, commanding him on behalf of his mistress to leave the house this instant.

### **Vav — The Test of the Bitter Waters**

The people of Jerusalem diligently and curiously filed into the Temple of Solomon. Each said hesitantly that the spirit of jealousy had conquered the rich Ofen, he had called on his wife to pass the test of the bitter waters.

When everyone had been seated—the men in the temple and the women in the upper galleries, covered in rags from top to bottom—a terrible silence reigned, even though there were throngs of people, this being a terrible ordeal that was being prepared. The spectators could not stop themselves from trembling in fear for this poor wife, so young, so beautiful, suspected of a crime, on whom the power of God was, maybe, going to manifest in a cruel manner.

The high priest had just appeared. He went step-by-step up the stairs to the altar. When he arrived at the sacred ark, he bent down to the ground and got up.

A man and a woman had followed him from a short distance. The man, dark and nervous, seemed to look at nothing except the bread that was in his two hands. It was Ofen.

The woman, which was Izel, walked on the left of her husband. She was fully wrapped up in a large veil of white wool. Even from behind it, her youth and her beauty were seen.

A heavy, thick atmosphere seemed to weigh on the crowded assembly and made every brow furrow pensively, all the faces uneasy. The husband, placing the bread on the altar, spoke these words: “The spirit of jealousy has overtaken my heart: I demand the test of the bitter waters for my wife.”

“This test of yours is accepted,” the priest responded.

“To that effect,” continued the husband, “I brought an offering: tenth of the semolina flour from a bushel of wheat, in which I neither mixed oil nor added any substance. It is a bread of jealousy, a memorial bread, to remind the memory of unfairness, the corruption of the customs.”

“Wife of Ofen, come closer!” said the priest. Izel took a few steps forward. Her way of walking displayed her fear clearly. Her legs were shaking.

The high priest, with an earthenware jug of holy water, filled the two cups that a young boy brought to him. Then, he collected dust from the floor of the temple two times. He put what he collected in the first of these cups. He collected another two times and did the same for the second cup. Placing the cups on the altar, he approached Ofen’s wife and removed her veil. A howl of admiration was heard arising from this beauty, so fair, so pure. A sweet mercy had won over every heart.

“Oh! Grace! Grace! For her!” yelled many voices, together.

The priest continued his ministry. He took the bread from the husband’s hands to place it on the hands of the wife, and nearing his mouth to Izel’s ear:

“You still have time,” he said to her. “Consent to be my wife.”

“Never!” screamed the accused, in disgust.

“One of these two cups is going to proclaim your innocence, the other will make you appear as a criminal!”

“Ah! My God! Have mercy on me!” Izel said, without responding to the priest.

“Give me one word, Izel,” he went on, “just tell me ‘yes.’”

“Kohen,” she responded proudly and with disdain, “finish the ceremony, and may the will of God be fulfilled!”

Asher took the cups angrily, and with a voice that he labored in vain to make solemn, but which a sort of convulsion kept from changing, he said, “Daughter of Shiras, wife of Ofen, if, being under the authority of your husband, you stayed wise and pure, may these bitter waters leave your body unchanged. However, if on the contrary, being under the authority of your husband, you stayed neither wise nor pure, may these bitter waters entering your

entrails make your body swell, your limbs fall off—such is the law of jealousy.”

The priests finished his words thus, and as he was stating the text of the law, he was alternately pale and blushed. Then, he put down the cup that he had in his hand and wiped his face covered with sweat.

He broke the bread, burned it, and neared Izel once again with the intention of trying his proposal again, but she pulled herself back. Annoyed, Asher brusquely took the cup and, placing it in Izel’s hands, said in a loud voice, from which only she understood the threat, “Drink, wife of Ofen.” Izel’s small hands took the cup, and, turning toward Ofen, who was looking at her in somber silence, she fell to her knees in front of him.

“Sir,” she said to him, crying and in a way that could not be heard by anyone except her husband, “since yesterday, I have been begging you for a moment of conversation, and you have been pushing me away. They tell me your wish is that I die. I love you and respect you, despite this harsh wish . . . but at this moment, appearing before God, allow me to testify to you that I am innocent, that she who you have honored with your name and your love will die with her dignity and without having cheated the other. Sir, have mercy on me!”

“And Amial? Amial!” murmured Ofen.

“Ah! Amial! Amial!” Izel repeated in a tone so sweet that Ofen got away from his wife and yelled at her in anger.

“Drink these waters, you vile creature, and pay the price of your crime.”

This injustice revived the victim. She got up, noble and calm: “People of Israel!” she said in a voice that seemed to echo off each column of the temple, the silence was so deep. “People of Israel! You, men, may you judge me, and you women, may you hear me. I swear to you that I am innocent, that my heart is pure, that my lips are righteous . . . and with all that, I am still afraid of this test. Because you could take the malice of men for the justice of God! Oh God! Forgive my enemies as I forgive them!”

Finishing these words, she brought the cup to her lips, drank its contents, and her beautiful black eyes, raised toward the sky, lowered little by little and met the heads of the men who surrounded her, an

immobile person, a mute, who looked as though she listened without hearing and saw without watching.

“Farewell, Amial,” Izel yelled, “Farewell!”

“Now it is your turn to drink, sir,” Asher said to Ofen, giving the second cup to the husband.

The minute he was about to put it to his lips, Amial jumped from his place, pushing everyone who stood in his path away, right and left, and came to take Izel in his arms, yelling:

“My sister! Sister! They have slandered you!”

The poor woman had fainted.

“Her brother!” repeated Ofen, whose hands the cup had escaped and, falling on the marble floor of the temple, broke.

“Here, sir,” Amial said coldly, giving him the parchment that his mother had left him as inheritance.

Ofen read it, in his despair, he was going to accuse the priest of having caused the death of Izel and of himself, when Asher spoke into his ear in a very low voice:

“The poison was not in this cup.”

“Then where was it?” Ofen asked moving back out of fear.

“In neither!” the high priest responded, his eyes fixed on the drink spilled on the floor.

“Ah! Izel! Could you ever forgive me?” Ofen said, expressing profound and touching repentance.

“Sir,” the young and beautiful woman responded, looking at the hand that Ofen had extended with love, “I am yours. You have the right to freely dispose of my life.”

Ofen, leaning against his brother-in-law and holding up Izel, stepped out of the temple. He left with his head held high, his gaze proud and menacing before the high priest who had lowered his eyes to not see this good fortune that he could not break. And the people spread out through Jerusalem, returning to their homes declaring the virtue of Izel who came out victorious from the ordeal of jealousy.



“A Modern Bride and  
Groom” by Sara  
Familiant, 1894

*Translated from Yiddish by Anita Norich*



## Translator's Introduction

The short story “A Modern Bride and Groom” (*Haynt veltige khosen kalla*) by Sara Familiant, was published in 1894 in volume 3 of *Hoyz-fraynd* (Friend of the house), an important five-volume anthology of Yiddish writing edited by Mordkhe Spektor and published in Warsaw. Much is known about Spektor and about Yiddish in Warsaw, but I have been unable to find a single word about—or another word by—Familiant despite an exhaustive search. This is not as unusual as one might suppose. Pre-twentieth-century Yiddish literature has received considerably less attention than later works—women’s prose even less. I was drawn to this story because Familiant reflects on the themes that most concerned her male contemporaries: poverty, labor, class, modern romance. And, unlike almost every one of her contemporaries, she does so by considering what all this may mean to women. How are young women to understand the modern emphasis on love rather than arranged matches? What, indeed, does it mean to be “modern”? The last line of the story is both a plaint and a challenge: “Who needs to be concerned about a poor, unfortunate girl” in late nineteenth-century Poland, or here and now?



# היינמ וועלטיגע חתן בלה

(ערצעהלונג)

- איך בעט אייך, גיטעל מאכט מיר דאס קלייד ווי בעסער, האט געוואגט, לאכערדיג די יונגע בלה, וואס איז געשטאנען געפען שפיענעל און האט גערויפט מיט דעם זיידען קלייד.

- זייט רהיב, פרייליך באדא, איך וועל שוין אלע מיניע פוזות ווענדען, אז איינער חופה קלייד זאל זיין וואס שענער. זאגט מיר, איך בעט אייך, מאכען דאס נאקעל שטאלער, צו איבער לאנגען עס אזוי ווי א צינד?

- גיין, לאז זיין אזוי! אף, ווי שאן שלעפט זיך דער לשיוף האט געוואגט באדא, קוקינדיג און שפיענעל אויף איהר שאנע פיגור.

- א, ווי גליקלעך איך בין - האט זי אויסגעשרייען א ביסעל שפאסער. און האט זיך אויסגעדרעהט איבער דעם צימקער.

- איהר זענט קיין צאמאל אזוי ניט גליקליך געווען? האט באדיא געפרעגט די מאדיסטקע. די מאדיסטקע איז שטארק רויט געווארען, איהרע אויגען און באקען האבען אנגעהויבען פרענגען, זי האט אראב געלאזט דעם גאפ, אז באדיא זאל ניט בעמערקן וואס עס קומט פאר ביי איהר אין הארצען.

- גיין... געווען... האט זי ארויסגעדרעמט מיט א זיפץ.  
- האט איהר געהאט שוין א חתן? ... דערצעהלט, ליעבע גיטעל, האט באדיא זיך געפרייגט געפרייגט.

די מאדיסטקע האט א שטארקען זיפץ געמדהן און האט אנגעהויבען דערצעהלען.  
- ער, האט זיך מיר אויסגעווינען, איז געווען א פיינער יונגער מאן און איך-האב מיר אין איהם שטארק פארליבעט.

- איך בין געווען א נאריש אינוויסענדיג מיידעל, א עלענדע יתוקה און ער איז געווען צו מיר אזוי גוט. איך האב איהם געלויבט, אז ער האט מיר ליעב, אבער אין גיכען האט ער מיר געווארפען... האט זיך אויסגעלאכט פון מיר... די ערשטע צייט בין איך שיער פון זינען אראב, פיעל, פיעל מאהל בין איך געווען גרייט זיך דאס לעבען געבען, נור דער שכל האט גובר געווען און האט מיר ניט צו געלאזט איך זאל מיר דאס לעבען געבען, איבער אונז נידעריגען מענשען.

- אף, גיטעל, דאס איז שרעקלעך! נור איהר האט דאך געוואוסט אז ער וועט מיט אייך ניט חתונה האבען?



The opening page of "A Modern Bride and Groom," as it appeared in the *Hoyzfraynd* anthology in 1894.

## **“A Modern Bride and Groom”**

“Please, Gittel, make this dress as pretty as possible,” said the young bride cheerfully as she stood near the mirror swishing her silk dress.

“Don’t worry, Miss Nadja. I’ll use all my powers to make your bridal dress beautiful. Tell me, please, should I take in the jacket or leave it as is?”

“No, leave it! Oh, how beautifully the veil flows,” said Nadja, admiring her pretty figure in the mirror.

“How happy I am!” she exclaimed a little later as she paced the room.

“Have you ever been this happy?” Nadja asked the seamstress.

Gittel blushed. Her eyes and cheeks burned. She lowered her head so Nadja would not notice her agitation.

“No . . . I was . . .” she sighed.

“Did you have a groom? . . . Tell me, dear Gittel,” Nadja said, full of curiosity.

The seamstress sighed deeply and began to tell her story.

“He seemed like such a fine young man. I fell deeply in love with him. I was a silly ignorant girl, a lonely orphan, and he was so good to me. I believed him when he said he loved me, but soon he threw me away . . . He laughed at me . . . At first, I almost lost my mind. Often—very often—I was ready to take my own life, but common sense won out and kept me from letting such a lowly person lead me to suicide.”

“Oh, Gittel, how awful! But you must have known he wouldn’t marry you?”

Gittel’s face clouded over. “No. If I had known, I would never have gotten together with such a person.”

Her cheeks burned. Her lips trembled. “He threw me away, just as all the ‘modern young people’ do with young girls like me.”

“Poor Gittel! But you’re still young. You can still be happy!”

“No,” answered the seamstress bitterly. “I vowed never to believe anyone anymore. All men are deceivers.”

“Certainly not all!” said Nadja happily. “For example, take my fiancé. He would never deceive me. He is so good. Have you seen him?”

“No!”

At that moment, the door opened and a young man came in.

“Here he is!” exclaimed Nadja.

Gittel turned deathly pale and was barely able to stand on her feet. “That’s him . . . My . . . Yakov!” she exclaimed.

Frightened, Nadja looked at her fiancé and then at Gittel. The young man was smiling as he went into the adjoining room. Nadja followed him. He embraced her and gave her a kiss. She pushed him away.

“Listen,” she said, “were you ever the seamstress’s fiancé?”

“Fiancé?!?” he said, laughing. “What do you mean, her fiancé!?”

“She just told me . . .”

“Oh, darling, what do you think? Do you think I should have married her? And who would take my dear Nadja?”

He embraced her. This time, she did not push him away.

“One doesn’t marry such people!” he said and laughed cynically. “Certainly not. It’s a joke. Foolishness. Playing at love . . . Let her think . . . The devil take it . . .! She cost me a lot of money . . .”

A few days later, Nadja was married with great fanfare. Near the door of the synagogue, the couple met Gittel’s eyes, red from crying, but they walked past as if they had not noticed her. And their smiles never changed. Just then, a thought came into the bride’s head: *What a silly girl! To come here and cry!*

No one noticed Gittel and her tears. Indeed, who needs to be concerned about a poor, unfortunate girl—a seamstress?



A postcard illustrating a scene from a traditional Eastern-European Jewish wedding. Printed in Krakow in 1902. Source: Jewish Heritage Collection, The Special Collections Research Center at the University of Michigan Library.



“The Meal before the Fast”  
by Uri Nissan Gnessin, 1905

*Translated from Hebrew by Marina Mayorski*



## Translator's Introduction

Uri Nissan Gnessin (1879–1913) was a Hebrew author, translator, and literary critic. He became well known for his unique prose style, being the first author to experiment with introspective fiction and stream-of-consciousness techniques in Hebrew, offering a radical and remarkably coherent alternative to the dominant tradition of Hebrew realism of his time. For decades, the lyricism and opaqueness of his style, coupled with the deliberate semantic complexity and syntactic irregularities, left Gnessin on the margins of the Hebrew literary canon, with the exception of a limited yet enthusiastic reception among a small group of critics and scholars.<sup>1</sup>

Gnessin's biography is emblematic of the upheaval experienced by his generation. Born in the Russian Empire (in what is today Ukraine), Gnessin roamed restlessly between his hometown Prochep and Warsaw, London, and Palestine. He was the son of a well-known rabbi, the head of a Yeshiva where Gnessin himself studied. His father was well versed in rabbinic traditional writing (Talmud and Mishna) as well as Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah). Under his father's guidance, Gnessin acquired deep knowledge of the Hebrew language in all its various historical layers, before it fortified its status as national language. He was also versed in Russian, Yiddish, German, French, and Aramaic.

The short story "The Meal before the Fast" (*se'uda mafseket*) was published in Warsaw in 1905. It portrays the eve of Kippur in the house of a grief-stricken Jewish family in Eastern Europe. The epicenter of the story—the tense relationship between the father and the daughter—reflects the conflicts that haunted young Jewish men and women at the time: processes of Jewish emancipation and urbanization that upended traditional Jewish life and led many young Jews to Western metropolitan centers in search of secular education and integration in European societies, creating a deep intergenerational divide. This tension is accentuated by the timing of the plot—the Eve of Yom Kippur—the holiest day of the year in Judaism, a time

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<sup>1</sup> Pinsker, *Literary Passports*, 13.



of self-scrutiny, atonement, and repentance. Gitel, the daughter, is drawn toward Western values and lifestyle and yearns to leave her suffocating small town home. She struggles with a myriad of mixed emotions with regard to her widowed father, whom she abhors for moments of unmasculine weakness but also cherishes for his kindness and vulnerability. This debilitating and static state of affairs is presented almost in the absence of action in the plot, which is constructed through intrusive, traumatic memories of the past and the attentive depiction of consciousness and memory.

Gnessin's experimentalism and his incorporation of different languages and linguistic registers render his work an immense challenge to the translator. His texts employ biblical and rabbinic idioms, molded with Russian syntactic structures. He tends to liberally incorporate allusions to Western European works, and his characters often recite Russian and Ukrainian texts and songs, which appear in these languages in Cyrillic alphabets. Gnessin's linguistic complexity and ingenuity are all the more striking if we consider that he wrote about contemporary life in Hebrew when it was not widely used as a spoken language in Eastern Europe.

In a letter written to his nephew in 1906, the author expressed his reticence about the translation of his works to Russian, stating that the "gentile soul" of the Russian translator might not be able to translate his literature, which is "built completely on *half-words* that, when aren't in the right place, don't say anything."<sup>2</sup> In these "half-words" we can place not only Gnessin's unique, flexible, and often aberrant use of language (even compared to his contemporaries) but also his rich and multilayered linguistic texture, incorporating many allusions to Jewish sources as well as to the intricacies of modern Hebrew literature. In doing so, the author recognizes a twofold irreducible difference: the linguistic difference, distinguishing the Jewish and the non-Jewish language, and, in a broader sense, the *Jewish difference*.

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<sup>2</sup> Gnessin, *Ketavim*, letter 71, page 109. The italics are mine.

## Works Cited

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## “The Meal before the Fast”

Sullen, Rabbi Noah opened the bedroom door slightly, put his gray-ing head and beard, still wet from bathing, through the door, and whispered in a feeble voice, “Gitel . . .”

Gitel was lying on the bed, her hands under her tilted head, sleeping. The room was in disarray. On the black dresser, mounds upon mounds had been amassed, books bound and unbound, newspaper sheets, and notebooks. Scattered here and there on the floor were scraps of paper, some blank, some scribbled on, some shrunken, and some smooth. On the top of the bed crouched an open book, its spine facing upward. On the desk, which was leaning against the mirror between the two windows, stood a globe; a large atlas on its edge, leaflets and folders strewn on top of it, some scribbled, some empty, and some erased; thin books, intact and torn. On the wall above the dresser hung Vereshchagin’s *Battle of Shipka*. The entire bothersome assortment lay half lit in the incandescent yellow strips of the afternoon sun. With a soundless sigh Rabbi Noah furtively closed the door.

“Ah, good God!” he muttered to himself in shivering lament, as his slightly taller-than-middling figure, wrapped in a gray, elongated garment down to the knees, topped by a light silk brimmed hat tip-toed away with a quiver.

An image came to him, echoing from the depths of time: a little room, a secluded house in the woods . . . Late in the day, by the light of a lamp, beloved *Gemara* fills the heart. Then his lips uttered once again with stinging bitterness, “Ahh! Good God!”

Approaching the table, covered in white cloth for the day of atonement, with prompt silver candelabras harboring unlit candles, he set his gaze upon the window. His hand reached and seized the edge of the tablecloth and briskly pulled from the table. The silver candelabra bustled, shook, and fell to the floor with clamor. Rabbi Noah stirred.

“Ahh . . .” he whispered despondently. “Where is the *Siddur*?” And his hands began rummaging through the empty table.

With the tumbling sound of the silver, Rachel, the maid who has been groaning since the morning, stormed into the room at once as though she was standing prompt just outside the door.

“Rabbi Noah . . . what is . . . the meaning of this?” She asked anxiously.

“Eh! What is this!” mumbled Rabbi Noah. “Pick up . . . the . . . where is the *Siddur*?”

And as he turned to the bookcase behind the door, his shoulders quivered, and he whispered bitterly, “Lying there . . . Ehhh . . .”

The maid’s somber, pale face shivered as her eyes filled with scorching tears. In her father’s house, she remembers, they would cry so much at this time, cry surreptitiously . . .

*Rabbi Noah, he is a righteous man . . . erudite*, she thought with a sigh of relief, arranging the candelabra.

“Have you seen my sash?” She heard his low, fractured voice, and hurriedly abandoned the candelabra, running to his quarters:

“Right away, Rabbi Noah . . .”

Rabbi Noah, walked toward his daughter’s bedroom. He reached his hand to the door but then turned his head and muttered, “Ehhh . . . After the *Minḥa* . . .”

His graying beard shivered.

“Here is the sash, Rabbi Noah!” the maid called out. Rabbi Noah took the sash and agonizingly began strapping it to his waist. Apprehensive, Rachel stood beside him.

“Is it . . . is it already time for the *Minḥa*, Rabbi Noah?” Her voice fumbling anxiously, wishing to speak with him a moment longer.

“Is it . . . and what do you think?” His words crumbled as his frail motions quickened. “Must hurry. . . The day isn’t long . . .”

He wore his long, black overcoat, habitually stroking his beard as he stepped toward the door.

“Prepare everything here,” he added. “Tell . . .”

His words lingered unfinished. He kissed the *mezuzah* and departed.

“Wha . . . What . . .?” Her question demised on her trembling lips.

There the empty room was anxiously holding its breath. As yellow daylight froze soundlessly, a greenish fly hummed, pleading on the windowpane. Rachel suddenly felt herself orphaned and feeble, abandoned to wander an endless desert, as though a hot metal claw were cauterizing her heart, dazzling her senseless. In an instant her eyelashes became fevered, as her heart-rending wail poured into the room.

The door burst open in a tumult as Gitel appeared. A girl of sixteen, not very tall, her shoulders just barely beginning to take mature form. Her fresh face appeared anxious, her large eyes blazing and fixating.

“Rachel! What is this? What is the matter with you?”

Rachel’s lament deepened as she hastened to the kitchen. Gitel finally yanked her legs to follow her, yet she soon recalled and withdrew her steps.

*Eve of Kippur*—the thought shot through her mind. Her lips became distorted with quiet ridicule—*Gullible fool* . . . She returned to her room and lay on her bed.

—*Crying* . . . she still could not forget the display—*Such vulgarity* . . .

She quivered. Was it not only last year that she, Gitel, was crying as well . . . she rearranged her coiffure with fervent diligence.

—*And yet* . . .

Last year, this room was filled with some odd disquiet . . . Her mother was still alive . . . She remembers her, traipsing around, wearing her white coat, absentminded, pale, moaning anxiously . . . Her heart had told her . . . As her head shook abruptly, her mind came to a halt.

*Nonsense* . . . *old habits* . . . *here Rachel cries as well* . . . Gitel sighed. Her eyes suddenly closed on their own, and in the arcade of darkness, silvering wandering dots unfolded before her, slowly sketching the image of her pale, dying mother . . . She did not know why, but from time to time, when her mother’s image emerged, the first thing she saw were the ghastly arms, shriveled as the hands of death itself, faintly groping the blanket searching for something or other. What were they searching for then? Here it is, the frail face,

the bulging shiny forehead, and there—the gaze, the dreadful, abysmal gaze, the final gaze . . .

Gitel bit her lower lip as a feverish blush appeared on her cheeks. Ten months, ten whole months. How quickly time went by. How she wished to behold her now. Gitel tossed and turned. But the image, the cruel image, incarnated in an instant in her mind, filling her convulsing heart, refused to leave her side. Rotten, wet mass, worms crawling, bones bulging. Her mother . . .

Her nostrils palpitated, her throat heated, a thin stream trickled down her eyelids. Swiftly and decisively, she turns her face to the wall.

“Nonsense!” she mumbles mournfully and coughed, “I’ve already cried plenty . . .” But the image persisted, constricting in her throat.

She remembered the seven days of mourning. The house in chaos, nothing in its place. The mirror hides its face in the wall, the beds undone. A table with prayer shawls and prayer books in the center of the house. On the dresser, covered with coarse dark cloth, two candles burning, spreading strange, warm light, piercing light. Filth, mire, clouds. On a stool in the corner by the stove, her father, silent, weeping . . . She sits before him flustered, crying as well . . . The tears sting, burn, scorch . . . The aunt, she too cried incessantly . . .

*How much he cried then, a man . . .* The thought crashed in her mind. *And then, before they departed . . .*

It appeared before her now so clearly. She sat in the crimson chamber of the station, one hand on father’s bag, the other on her knees. The chamber was bustling. A long table, filled with flower vases and strange bottles. Agile young men, polished young women, among them her thickset teacher, all chattering with their spoons and glasses, whispering and laughing. All around her small groups of Jews gathered, conversing. Her father, who had begun graying in those two months, walked around with his head tilted and his hands clasped, turning back each time he approached one of the groups. Before, she remembers, he, too, would converse and trade with them . . . suddenly he came up to her and said in a trembling voice, “Let’s go home, Gitke . . .”

“Yes, I will go tomorrow . . .”

She did not inquire any further on the matter. And all along their journey home, she recalls, he moaned every now and then and wiped his eyes.

“It was just a cold that she had . . . Just a cold . . .”

*Wretched!* Gitel thought with exasperation. *Wretched father . . .*

Suddenly, she stood and hurried to the door. In her heart kindled an immense, blind desire to see father, to embrace him, kiss him, talk to him—

“Gitel!” Rachel’s fractured voice reached her from the other room. “Will you wash your head? Father went to pray and asked to prepare everything . . .”

“He’s not here . . .” Gitel lay back down. She will not wash her head today. Father probably won’t even ask. She snickered bitterly.

“Gitel!” Rachel’s voice crept up again as she glanced into the room.

“Oh, just leave me alone!” she called out in anguish. Arranged her coiffure and muttered, “Gullible fool . . .”

Then she realized that, when father returns, she will be the one who has to bless the candles. The bed suddenly seemed too narrow. The ceiling appeared to be lower, burdening her chest with unbearable cruelty. She jumped to her feet, struck by piercing heat from head to toe, and began pacing around the room as her eyes wandered nervously, seeking refuge. Ah, how her heart yearns to go, leave, break out of these narrows, stand on her own, live as she wishes, do whatever she wants . . . Ah, how narrow this place is . . .

She sat on the bed, leaning on her right arm as her fist supported her chin. Her gaze fell on the clutter of school books. Her eyesight became blurry. There she will complete her studies, she will receive her diploma, and then . . .

And the image of sweet father, lonesome father, wretched, aging before his time, appeared before her in all its affectionate cruelty.

*Nonsense!* Gitel abruptly concluded, running her hand through her hair. *Nothing to it . . . Father will understand . . . Father will . . . Father is kind . . .*

She recalled how, several weeks ago, she told him she wouldn’t eat meat anymore. Gitel’s shoulders shivered and she squirmed. A



moment later she arose and began pacing in the room once again. What open eyes can mean to a person, she wondered with joy. Such truths, such sacred truths, she thought. If it hadn't been for that book . . .

Chills crept down her back. Only a few weeks passed since she stopped eating meat, and now it seemed that an eternity stood between her and that time. She can no longer fathom that she—she, herself—used to eat it each day, with such appetite, the flesh of the poor animals.

*And father?* Gitel sighed. Such pure heart, such gentle soul—and yet . . . She remembered how, in the first days, he would try to appease her, persuade her to stop with that “silliness.” She disregarded it once, twice. But when he persisted, she called out, “I don't understand, father, how you call ‘silliness’ to things, that . . . that many people think to be . . . well, simply, a sacred duty?”

He grumbled, *but ever since then*—he stopped. It was that night, she recalled, that his associate Rabbi Kalman had tea with them, and when he extended his hand, with his cup in it, he called out, as always, “Please, my child, another cup . . .”

Father responded with a mock-threat: “Be careful, Kalman . . . ‘Child’ . . . you are speaking to a knowledgeable one, already able to impose duties on herself . . .” Rabbi Kalman stared at him, and father added, “Child . . .”

Rabbi Kalman, his associate—an incidental notion crossed her mind—he is a different sort of man. When father told him of the matter, he cast a piercing glare and called with glacial wrath, “Brrrrr . . .” She chuckled, and father sighed quietly.

Ahh, what will be the end . . . Gitel's legs were suddenly struck by frailty and her mind seemed to sluggishly unravel. Her heart shriveling, she opened the window and sat on its sill.

Above the row of low-lying houses, extending beyond the quiet street, appeared the pure, free sky, which sprawled sinking and delving, delving and drowning, beyond the dewy treetops, grasping the jaded blue smoke, onward in the distance, the heartwarming distance that speaks to the heart, that whispers to the soul, glaring over the top of the temple, shining now in the weary rays of a setting sun, over the woods surrounding the cemetery, over the vicissitudes of the

railroad tracks winding endlessly and aimlessly . . . onward, onward. From another world, from a new world, bustles that mystery-distance. The gardens of the houses beyond that frozen street stood shrunken, holding their aging breath, and it seemed that the mere proximity of the sky burdened them, and there, in the sky, where no gaze can reach, one of the freeborn birds bathed in the pale blue waves. Her wings carrying her wherever she wishes, praying, dying, becoming one with the materializing blue, where man's eye can reach it no more . . .

“Gitel! . . .”

Gitel shook. She turned her eyes to the door, where her father stood hunched, pale, gaping. His reddish eyes wandered as his hands fumbled his gray robe.

Her heart pressed, as by a scalding metal claw. It was as though he appeared before her for the very first time.

“Gitel, come . . .” mumbled Rabbi Noah's shattered voice.

“Where? . . . What?” Gitel lowered one of her legs from the windowsill and lingered, embarrassedly.

“Come . . . the meal before the fast . . .” His voice broke, which Gitel did not notice.

“Ah! Soon, father! . . .” She stood up and began arranging her belt.

“No!” hurried Rabbi Noah as he took several steps toward his daughter. His voice was strange. “I am . . . with me . . . with me . . .”

Gitel turned pale. As by sunstroke, her mind ripped by a single, grave notion. The window before her suddenly became a black square in the white wall, and she collapsed backward on the bed with a suffocated moan.

“My child . . .” whispered Rabbi Noah in tears, pacing. “My only child . . . For my sake . . . For me . . . Eve of Kippur . . . My dear child . . . Come, eat some meat! . . .”

In the evening's twilight, two piercing, grief-stricken cries soaked the air of the room.



*Refael and Miriam* by Ben  
Yitzhak Saserdote, 1910

*Translated from Ladino by Devi Mays*



## Translator's Introduction

The romance novel *Refael and Miriam* was published in Istanbul in 1910. This was a time of unprecedented flourishing in Ladino printing in the Ottoman Empire, propelled by the easing of censorship after the Young Turk Revolution in 1908. The novel begins in an unnamed city of the banks of the Danube River, most like Ruse (Ruschuk), a city that was under Ottoman rule until its occupation by the Russian Empire and annexation to Bulgaria in the aftermath of the Russo-Turkish War (1877–78). At the time when the novel was published, Ruse had a substantial Sephardic population. The plot follows the love story between Miriam, the daughter of a wealthy merchant, and Refael, a poor printer who aspires to make a living from painting. Failing to obtain her father's approval to marry Refael, Miriam decided to run away and live with him in Europe. After traveling across the continent, the couple settles in Vienna, where Refael immerses himself in his art, pursuing his dream of becoming a renowned painter and making a living to support Miriam and, later, their newborn child.

The familiar trope of the young lovers who struggle with their families' disapproval (Romeo and Juliet are even invoked in the text) serves as a foundation for a quintessentially Jewish story that explores a society in flux, undergoing processes of modernization and secularization that profoundly reshaped its communal structures. Unlike the Shakespearean tragedy, the crux of the conflict here is not a long-standing rivalry but social class and the pragmatic view of art as a leisurely rather than commercial endeavor. The dramatic love story between two young Sephardim does not remain in the private sphere; it exposes the fault lines of a crumbling social hierarchy and the struggle to maintain both familial and communal cohesion. It does not shy away from politics either, as the violence of national fermentation brings about one of the main turning points in the plot, when Macedonian separatists murder Miriam's father, a tragedy that ironically empowers her to become independent and marry the man she loves despite the difference in their social status.

*Refael and Miriam* is one of the most intriguing works of literature published in Ladino, but its author remains unknown. The pen name Ben Yitzhak Saserdote does not appear in other works or newspaper publications, and we have no knowledge of such an author. Our conjecture, based on the novel itself, is that it belonged to a woman, as the text dedicates great attention to the feminine character and details with astounding familiarity occurrences such as postpartum depression. Miriam's character, who is undoubtedly the protagonist of the story, also displays immense agency and fortitude, both in her defiance of social norms and their patriarchal underpinnings and in her successful takeover of the family business after her father's death.

The rich texture of the novel's language exposes the embeddedness of Ladino writing in the multicultural sphere of the Ottoman Empire, employing Turkish and Greek loanwords even for some of the most common expressions, such as *chelebi*, a Turkish honorific that Ladino-speaking Jews used to indicate men of wealth and repute. It also displays intimate familiarity with biblical sources, which are used throughout the novel to reflect on the guilt and anxiety experienced by the young protagonists in their transgressive acts. In this regard, the novel poses significant challenges for the translator, as it requires a balance between the need for clarity and readability with the desire to express the multilingualism of the text and the lives depicted in it. Some of the loanwords, both from Hebrew and from co-territorial Ottoman languages, were maintained in their original form, in an attempt to aptly reflect the different linguistic registers of the diverse set of characters that populate the novel.

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רפאל אי מרים

נוב'ילה די לה ב'יד'ה די לוס ז'וד'יוום  
דיל אוריינטי  
פור בן יצחק סאסירדוטי

אידיעוויס:  
דור חביב. אי ב. הכהן  
גאלטטה ייני י'ול צכור הכהן פ'סק'י

נומירו 1

אימפרימיריאה  
אבואב' אי כהן  
גאלטטה, פירש'יווני צאזאכ, נייולזאדי האן  
קונסטאנטינופלה

1910-5670

The front matter of *Refael and Miriam*, 1910.



## **From Refael and Miriam: A Novel of the Life of the Jews of the Orient**

It was one of those cool and tender dawns in the month of September, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Millions of stars still glimmered in the sky, scintillating like a sea of diamonds, vanishing and reappearing over the black field of the heavens, as in a mad and audacious game, a race to enchant the human eye with marvel and admiration.

The great river, sprawling like a wide, silver-colored belt, could be seen from the street that descended from the city to the *mahalé* of the Jews, glittering in the darkness of dawn, a giant mirror reflecting the millions of stars across the sky, a celestial flock of sheep with eyes of diamonds playing in boundless fields.

The city seemed abandoned. The Jewish *mahalé* was deserted and dead. All were still lost in the dreams of daybreak, with no sound, no clamor to trouble the repose of nature. Every living being was still sleeping—even the trees did not sway their branches and leaves.

Two men came from the city and went directly toward the river, passing through the narrow and twisting streets of the *mahalé*.

“I want to see today, Branko, if you are really my true and faithful friend; upon your wit and capacity depends everything. At the moment you see us entering the boat, you should row with all your might for the other side of the river, forward to Romania. As soon as we arrive at the other bank, as soon as we put our feet on Romanian soil, there won’t be anyone who can impede us.”

“You have nothing to worry about, Refael, you can trust me. Make sure that you arrive here safely with your young woman into the boat, and I will deal with the rest. Go with good luck and complete your part. I will be waiting for you in the boat.”

On arriving at the end of the street of the *kahal*, the two men separated. That one who was called Branko took the road for the river, while the other went toward the plaza where the synagogue stood.

Not far from the synagogue stood a house that was taller than the others and appeared to be newer and better constructed. This was the house of the wealthiest Jew of the city, *Chelebi* Gershon

Arditti. In the corner that this edifice formed with another that was half destroyed, the man stopped, as if he wanted to find a hiding place where he could not be seen.

Meanwhile, the stars in the heavens became paler and less visible: a sign that the day with its clear light was about to break. Lights were lit in the synagogue. Bangs and blows were heard from a distance, drawing nearer and nearer the place where the man was hiding. It was the sound of the call of the *shamash* to the religious Jews to come to *Selichot*, to voice those holy and moving prayers that the good Jews say during forty days of the year, between the two lights, before dawn.

One by one Jews came to the synagogue, some with a lantern in hand. Not much time passed before the hidden man began to hear those melancholy and sad songs that he had known so well, those hymns to the glory of the One God of Israel that he himself had sung with his voice of a child ten or eleven years before, when his father had awakened him from his dreams to bring him to *Selichot*. Clearly audible was the voice of the *hazan* who sang, followed by the chant of the entire synagogue.

Where were those times of innocence and song? To Refael Alvo—this was his name—it appeared in that dawn that there had been an entire world, that there had been thousands of years, between then and now. Then he had within him belief and religiosity, he was an innocent and happy child, a child who believed he would see the heavens open when he sang after the *hazan* all those sad and touching melodies of *Selichot*. Now that his father was no longer among the living, now that he himself was twenty-six years old, these same melodies that he heard sung no longer made upon him the impression of before, no longer filled his heart with religious poetry and exalted sentiments; other thoughts, other ideas dominated his spirit, and with a profound exhale, he said to himself, “I am no longer that Refael of the past! All is in vain, past and lost and forgotten . . . Forgotten and lost . . .”

Turning toward that house of Gershon Arditti, Refael Alvo raised his hand in a threatening gesture, and with eyes glinting with rage, he said, “You old man without a heart, it is your fault, if I walk crooked paths following dishonest thoughts! It is your fault that I am

leaving and distancing myself from honesty and legality, you and no other upon which lies the responsibility for this crime that I am committing! Upon you the sin and the dishonor, old wolf who does not know satiation, a man without faith and without feelings! Until today, until this hour, I was honest and innocent and decent, and in spite of this, you have succeeded in making me a criminal and a robber and a rebel!”

As if in response to these violent words that the young man spoke to himself, footsteps could be heard in the courtyard of Gershon Arditti’s house; the door opened and an old man appeared in the street with a blazing lantern in hand. Locking the door behind him, the old man took the path for the synagogue.

Refael Alvo, who had withdrawn into the dark corner so as not to be seen, waited in his hiding place until Gershon Arditti disappeared into the synagogue. He emerged, looked around, and, seeing that there was not a living soul to hear him, clapped three times with his palms and then set himself to listen attentively for a response to the signal.

The young man’s heart was beating violently, as if it wanted to break the chest that enclosed it. The light sound of a woman’s cough was heard from within the courtyard. After a key turned in the lock, the door of the courtyard opened again, and the woman emerged, covered in a thick, large shawl.

“Come quickly, Refael, I beg you. I think my stepmother is awake!”

The young woman’s voice trembled with fright, her figure exuding irritation and nervousness. The two began to walk hastily toward the river. Refael shook no less than she did, the hand of the young woman in his hands. This hand, so small and fine, was frozen like snow.

“Don’t be so afraid, my soul, can’t you see that I am at your side? You are mine, you are my sweet dove, and I will defend you against any danger!”

At that moment, a Jew with a blazing lantern passed beside them. Curious to see who was this amorous pair that walked hand in hand so early in the morning, the Jew lifted the lantern to see them better, but Miriam—this was the name of Gershon Arditti’s

daughter—turned her face to the other direction, tightening the shawl that covered her. The curious Jew could not see who she was, although he saw the young man and he recognized him immediately.

“Good travels, where are you going, Refael, so early and with such haste?” asked the Jew, curiously. But Refael and Miriam walked ahead toward the river without answering. Shouts were heard behind them, coming from the synagogue and from Gershon Arditti’s house.

“It is my stepmother! This is my end!” said the young woman, half faint. Refael Alvo dragged her with force behind him, all but carrying her to the river. The shouts drew nearer to the pair. They were being chased.

“Seize them, seize them! There they are! Oh, what a shameless girl, oh, such shame! See, they are going for the river! Seize them, they are escaping! Such insolence, such wantonness! It is Refael Alvo with Miriam Arditti, the two lovers! They are going to throw themselves in the river, they are going to drown themselves, they are going to escape! Seize them, it is a good deed!”

But the two lovers had a head start of two hundred feet on their pursuers, and they were at most thirty feet distant from the boat when Miriam fainted. Then the young man took the precious cargo in his arms and, within seconds, they were on the boat. Branko, the faithful friend, began rowing forcefully. The boat went into the river. With the strength of his arms, the rower had already gotten the boat to the middle of the river when the pursuers arrived on the shore. The two lovers were safe. Miriam was in a profound daze. “Insolent girl! May shame befall you!” yelled voices behind them.

Jews are curious by nature, but those of my city are certainly the most curious Jews in the whole world; they want to know absolutely everything. When any of them went for employment to Vienna, the first thing they asked was after Refael Alvo and Miriam Arditti.

“Is that sweet couple here? Is it here in Vienna that they have taken a seat, Refael with the dove? Where do they live? What do they do? Have you ever seen them? I would like to visit them. What does Refael Alvo do and with what does he occupy himself? Is he still a printer or a painter? Is he still lost in the pursuit of this madness? Is it possible to live and support yourself in Vienna with paintings? Have the two married or are they still unmarried, living in

## רפאל אי מרים

אירה חונה די אקלייאס נואדרוגאלאס פריקקאס  
אי טיירנאס אין איל נויס די סיפעיונצרי, אינטרי ראש  
השנה אי יום כפור. ניליארדאס די אקטרילייאס רי-  
לונצראצאן איינדה אין איל פירנאמינטו, סינטייליאב-  
דו קונו חונה נואר די צריליאגטיס גיקוס אי גראכ-  
דיס, לוס קי פואיאן אי אפאריסאן די נואיצו בוצ-  
רי איל קאנפו פריטו דיבוס קיילוס, קונו אין אול  
אוגו לוקו אי אקטריצ'דו, אין חונה קוריטה פארה א-  
זיר אינקאנטאר אל אולו דיב אונצרי די נארטצ'לייה  
אי אדניראקייין.

The opening page of *Refael and Miriam*,  
as originally published in 1910.

concubinage? They are right! Why marry? It is better to live like dogs! Such misfortune for Gershon Arditti. . . for what came to him in this old age! The only daughter escapes from the house of her father with a 'painter,' with a fantasizer who is never going to earn anything! Misfortune for *Chelebi* Gershon! Now he is alone and isolated in that large palace. Dark fortune of the old man! For whom has he been laboring all his life? Thousands and thousands of liras, all these riches, to whom is he going to leave them? Is it not said that in this world there is neither a whole good nor a partial bad. The dark fortune of *Chelebi* Gershon Arditti! What bitter luck, what sadness at that age!"

And another good Jew responded to him: "Don't cry so much for that old dog, cry for those who have seven or eight children who ask for bread when the father has none to give them! Gershon Arditti is not one to cry for, nor to pity so much; do not worry yourself so much, I beg you, he has plenty to live for. Do you not see that he

has not gotten his fill of earning, that he is still laboring from dawn until midnight in the shop like the dog that he is? This man doesn't have a heart; he has a hard and dry stone in his breast. Why did he not concede to giving his daughter to Refael Alvo as a wife? Refael is a good son of a very good family . . . So he's a printer! . . . Not everyone can be buyers and drinkers of blood like he is . . . And printers come first in this world. Why does the old man not want to concede to giving his daughter to Refael when the two love each other so much . . .! This is very good, they did very well in fleeing . . . thus they come out on top of this old man without a heart."

"Did you see him give five *grushes* to some poor man? Did you ever hear that he has helped some beneficent project, given that he possesses seventy thousand liras? This is very good! He deserves that they do to him more still, much more; may eyes be brought to him, so he is overcome! Refael Alvo did very well; he behaved justly in robbing from him his only daughter. Some day the old man will croak and his daughter will inherit all of his goods. Alvo did well, from one day to the next. In the blink of an eye, Refael will become an incredibly rich man."

"Who is going to make him incredibly rich? Who is going to inherit all of the goods? Refael Alvo? The painter? The printer? This fantasizer who doesn't know which world he is in, and to whom it appears that his little paintings are the greatest wealth of this life! It's clear that you don't know anything about what happened: *Chelebi* Gershon Arditti has already done everything possible to disinherit his daughter, and Miriam with her rooster is not going to get a *grush*. Gershon Arditti is not a man to pardon his daughter for the shame and the affront that she gave him. Gershon Arditti no longer has a daughter. You don't know anything!"

"And who, then, is going to inherit all the goods?"

"Do I know who? Some devil, some relatives, of his or of the second wife, maybe Avramiko Pinto who has been in Arditti's shop for so many years . . ."

"You can't believe that Arditti is committing a madness so great to leave seventy thousand liras to a simple manservant."

"May the Devil take him, him and his liras! Come on, let's look after our business. We didn't come to Vienna to absorb ourselves

in the affairs of that old wolf. May the Devil take him, clothed and shoed!”

In truth, Refael Alvo and Miriam Arditti lived in Vienna for five or six months. First, the two lovers lost themselves traveling around Europe. Whether for the desire to know the world or for fear that Miriam’s father would pursue them and make his daughter come back, the young man and his beloved spent an entire year traveling through Italy, France, and Germany, ceaselessly running from one city to the next, from one country to another. Like a pair of birds who began to fly and enjoy the sweetness of freedom, the two did not have any pre-occupation other than enjoying life and the intoxication of first love.

The two loved each other, and they did not tire of saying it, one to the other, every day, every hour, and at every occasion. The people who saw them, so young, so beautiful, and so amorous, smiled. The servers in the hotels, who of course have experience in these things, thought of their own, and they did not tire of recounting to the other travelers the miracles and marvels of this beautiful pair of “Spaniards” who loved each other so much and did nothing but kiss and embrace each other. Refael and Miriam paid no attention to the others, did not see that people looked at them and that hotel workers spied on them. It mattered little to them. For them, there existed no interest other than their love; in this was summed up all of life; this signified everything for them, and the rest, nothing.

Happy days of youth, a beautiful time of the fluorescence of life, sweet time of spring, the flower of life, why do you disappear and flee so quickly, never to turn back, never, nevermore!

One day, Refael Alvo realized that they had no more than several thousand francs left, barely enough to continue another three or four months of the crazy life they had been living. It was then that he had the courage to say to his beloved, “My dear, what do you think about taking a seat in one place? You already know that my great desire is to begin to work, to work for you, my soul, to make grand works, works that will make my name known and celebrated. I also want to make money, to buy riches, all for you, to give you all the pleasures of this life. I want you to have the best outfits in the latest style, the most precious jewels. I want to make you happy and content, as your beauty deserves!”

She herself had already begun to feel the desire to rest a little from this crazy run from land to land and from city to city that had already lasted an entire year. And another motive began then to spread in her, a reason that made her scared and anxious. But she had not yet spoken to Refael about it, whether out of shame or another of those confusing feelings that live in the heart of every woman in a similar situation. Miriam had not revealed to Refael that she felt herself to be a mother, but she was bewildered that the young man hadn't recognized her condition, that he didn't see her face was paler than before, black marks growing below her beautiful eyes. And in secret Miriam had begun to cry sometimes, tears pouring out, still without knowing precisely how to explain the reason for her crying. A burden weighed on her, a black deafness tormented her. But with Refael, she appeared as happy and luminous as before.

She knew that she needed to acquiesce to Refael's suggestion, and she agreed to take a seat in some city and to build a nest. Refael Alvo wanted to live in some small city in Italy. Befitting the artist he was, he yearned to work in peace, in the lustrous and clear sun of Italy. He wanted nothing other than to leave immediately for Rome or Venice or Naples, or to take residence in some smaller place close by.

But Miriam disagreed. She didn't want to live in Italy, and she absolutely did not want to live in a small city, whether because of her pregnancy or because she did not know the Italian language. As a girl, she spent two years in a boarding school in Vienna and spoke German well, and she had a great gusto for living in this beautiful city, where life appeared to her more pleasant and agreeable than in other cities.

Also, who knows? Who can divine the secret ideas of a woman? Could it be that Miriam wanted to live in Vienna because she already knew that many brokers from her city went to Vienna for employment? Could it be that she wanted to be closer to her city, closer to her father . . . ?

Be that as it may, Refael was not one to refuse the desire of his beloved. Although for many reasons he did not want to rest in Vienna, neither did he have the courage to say no, and the two arrived in this city and took a residence in one of those new suburbs that are half



field and half city. The residence was composed of three rooms: a large room to eat, a smaller one to sleep, and a third with two large windows that looked out to an orchard; this last one would be the “atelier”—the room where Refael would work. Here the young man wanted to create grand works that would make his name known and celebrated; from here would come the paintings of an artist of talent, here Refael wanted to make money, to earn riches, jewels, and outfits, and all the pleasures for his “white dove,” as he sometimes called Miriam.

[. . .]

It was a winter day, and the streets of Vienna were dirty and covered with the mud of the snow that had fallen only to be melted immediately under the feet of passersby. A dense and heavy smoke hung over the great city and gave it a sad and dark appearance. It was one of those days when the heart of a man inadvertently saddens and is filled with melancholy impressions. In a house in the Döbling neighborhood was a very young woman, pale but beautiful. Her large and sad eyes were fixed on a corner, where a newly born infant slept. She had in her hands a book, but it appeared as though she wasn't reading, all her attention seemed to be concentrated on the little infant in its small cradle.

Just as the little child wriggled in its sleep, the mother began to rock her, wiggling the little cradle back and forth. From her lips resounded a song in German. A simple and sad song: it was a song about a poor laundress who gave birth and was abandoned by the man who deceived her. The sad mother cried over the fate of the small child who did not have a father, who did not have a name, and who would suffer who knows how many ills and shames in life. It was a somber and agonizing song, like the unfolding day itself, and Miriam Arditti was crying, her warm tears falling as she sang and rocked her baby.

Her newborn daughter in the cradle also had no father, no name, and who knows how much shame and how many ills this innocent little child would have to suffer . . . for the sin of her own mother, for the sin that she herself, Miriam Arditti, had committed.

Some women, after giving birth, are melancholy and anxious. Miriam found herself in a similar situation. Day in, day out, she felt a profound sadness, a heaviness in her heart that became even more

unsupportable when Refael was not in the house and she stayed alone with her infant. She felt alone and abandoned, and she did not know how to alleviate her heart in any manner other than crying. The fate of the woman reached her, the curse of God against the first woman. *In hardship shall you bear children*, and with what hardship did she bear this child. She was still so young, so small, not even eighteen years old.

And what pains! Her father did not want to hear from her; all the letters Miriam had written to Gershon Arditti remained unanswered. Refael was working day and night, losing his eyesight to bring bread home, but his efforts bore no fruit. And the worst part was that this young child had just come into the world, exacerbating her father's sadness and her mother's despair. Nonetheless, there was this innocent little child, the fruit of a guilty love! This little child without a name!

How had she come to fall so low? She, Miriam Arditti, the only child of *Chelebi* Gershon Arditti, the most beautiful, the richest and the most sought-after of all the young women of the city! And now, a lost woman, a dishonest woman, the most shameful, the last of all women! The lover of a man, the concubine without a name, the mother of a little girl without a name! Alone in a foreign city, abandoned by her own father, alone and forgotten.

She asked her father for his permission to marry Refael Alvo. His permission was absolutely indispensable according to the laws of Austria, seeing that she was still a minor, and her father, in his cruelty, did not respond to her letters. Her old father did not want to know of his only daughter; he did not want to forgive the wounds that she had caused. This feeling burned in her like a flaming fire; her own father no longer wanted to know of her, did not consider her as his daughter, no longer named her among the living. To her father, to Gershon Arditti, she was dead and forgotten.

[. . .]

They killed *Chelebi* Gershon Arditti. The *komitadjis*<sup>1</sup> spilled the blood of the old man. One fine day they found the richest Jew of the city lying on the ground, next to an iron box where he kept his riches, in his chancellery, covered in blood, with a terrible cut in his chest. The killer's knife had penetrated the depths of his heart. From

the terrible blow, it was clear that the killer was a sharp master of his occupation.

At that time there was a secret committee of Macedonians that was known by the formidable name of “Terror and Salvation.” This committee’s goal was to send bands to Macedonia to save Christianity from Turkish tyranny. The most hopeless elements of the population—people who had nothing more to lose—gathered together under the flag of “Terror and Salvation.” They formed companies and groups large and small. They received from the committee guns, ammunition, and money, and they put themselves under the command of some officer or chief. They passed at night, through mountains and unknown roads, to the Turkish frontier. Once in Turkey, these bands were burning villages, killing without pity innocent villagers who did not agree with them, especially the Greek, Turkish, and Serbian villagers. Woe to the village to which those *komitadjis* come! In a day, in several hours, all was turned into dust and ashes, blood and sadness and abomination, until the Turkish army came to their aid, to persecute the killers, those who are already in fields and mountains, who have already fled and saved themselves. They didn’t want to enter into action with the army; they fled from any kind of engagement with the Turkish soldiers. Their principal work was to kill, to burn, and to destroy. And this was called “saving Christianity from the Turkish tyranny.”

For this work, the *komitadjis* were lent money; they were lent significant sums. They acquired these sums with contributions from the rich people of the country. The committee, which knew all the rich people of the land, taxed each according to what appeared good to it with sums that these rich men should pay in aid to the work of “Terror and Salvation.” One fine day so-and-so rich merchant would receive a letter with the picture of a dead man, signed with blood in the name of the committee. In this letter, they demanded of him to pay within eight days such-and-such sum, depositing in some place the exact amount that was indicated. If the recipient of the letter did not respond to the demand and did not deposit within eight days the sum that was imposed upon him, he received a second letter in which they demanded an even higher sum to be paid within three days, otherwise he would be condemned to death. Woe to that

person who availed himself of the police! Suddenly some killer would appear before him and sheath the knife in his gut. At home or on the square, in bed or in church, the vengeance of the committee reached him. The police showed themselves to be entirely incapable of impeding this formidable secret committee. Many said that the police were in the same game as the Macedonians, that they were in bed with those daring saviors of Christianity.

One day, Gershon Arditti also received the nefarious letter with the picture of the head of a dead man and signed with blood. The committee had taxed him with the sum of three thousand liras in aid to "Terror and Salvation." In the first two days, the old Arditti told no one about this letter. On the third day, he spoke with the attorney doctor David Albahri. Upon reading the letter, the latter turned white as a ghost; he for his part had also received a warning for a contribution of a thousand liras and was trembling for his life. Gershon Arditti was an Italian subject, and the attorney gave him the advice of addressing himself to the Italian consul to ask for protection. Thus it went. The consul, who showed himself to be very enraged and revolted to see that the brigands of the committee had the audacity to ask for contributions even from foreign subjects, recommended that old Arditti neither respond nor give a single cent. He, as consul, wrote immediately to the ministry demanding energetically every protection for his subject. The government and consulate corresponded about this case, when Gershon Arditti received a second letter from the committee, in which they demanded a sum of five thousand liras, payable in three days, under the threat of death. And this second letter was turned over to the Italian consul. The consul again asked the ministry for protection and all the guarantees for the security of its subject. The ministry responded that the police had taken all the necessary measures to guarantee the safety of Gershon Arditti and all that belonged to him. For close to two weeks secret police agents were seen near his residence and shop.

On the third week, when Gershon Arditti was in his chancellery in front of his safe, alone as was his custom, doing the accounts of the incomes and expenses of the day, a villager entered to pay for a pair of clothing that had been ordered by a client from a small city in the interior. The employees of Arditti saw that villager enter and watched

him leave without raising any suspicion. Not half an hour had passed since the villager had left when one of the employees entered the Arditti's chancellery and found him dead, bathed in his blood.

In the country house that belonged to Gershon Arditti, in a place that was called "Las Vinias," half an hour from the city, a young woman dressed in black was speaking with a man of fifty years in the orchard. Not far from them was a young girl of about four years, busy playing with the governess. The young woman was Miriam Arditti. Her companion, who is also known to us, was the attorney Fintzy, brother-in-law of Refael Alvo.

In the three and a half years that had passed since Miriam Arditti separated from Refael Alvo and returned back to her old father, she had become even more beautiful and gracious than before. Elevated characters have the particularity that the sufferings of life spread over their faces and over all their appearance like a fine veil of generosity and nobility. As fine gold always becomes more elastic and soft the more the hammer hits it and the fire burns it, so Miriam Arditti had become in these three and a half years a woman of high and noble sentiments, a fine and sensitive woman, an intelligent and enlightened woman, a heart that knew how to partake in the anxieties and sadnesses of each of her secrets without showing the world her own pain.

The first months after her return to the house of her father were truly infernal for Miriam. Her anxieties were so great and numerous that, at different times, the young woman was on the cusp of ending her days, of finding the deepest place in the great river to drown both herself and her shame, all her evil and all the pains of her heart. If it were not for the little girl who she was then still maintaining with the milk of her bitter breast, Miriam Arditti would certainly already be lost and forgotten in the depths of the river. But on the one hand, there was this little child, the only precious token of the most unfortunate love, and on the other hand, there was that most miserable of men, that blind man, who was surely crying in a strange land over his bitter fortune, cursing himself and his own bitter life, and cursing her, who abandoned him after having everything taken from him, even his sight. And there was also the consideration that she owed to her aging father, although this same father was the cause of all the ills. These three people, who were the most precious in the world for

Miriam, made her resist the desire to put an end to her days, to find in death the rest that life refused to give her.

The anxieties of the first months were so great and profound that Miriam marveled how she had not lost her mind, how she had not gone crazy. After all the letters that she had written Refael Alvo were returned unopened and with the remark from the Italian post that “the addressee refused to receive them,” she learned that Refael Alvo was completely blind and that he was in the “Asylum of Peace” near the city of Florence. When this unfortunate news reached her, she wanted to drop everything and rush to his side, to spend her life with the man whom she herself had brought ill luck. But the warnings that she had received from Branko Kapitanovitch forced her to abandon this idea. The doctor at the “Asylum of Peace” wrote that the state of Refael Alvo did not permit him any excitement. Doctor Bruzante kept writing that for Refael Alvo, there was no cure other than forgetting, complete rest, and solitude. Once Doctor Bruzante wrote to Branko, “Heartache was the reason your friend lost his sight. If you come again to trouble him and awaken these old pains, he could lose his wits—he could go insane. Three or four years of time should pass for your unfortunate friend to revert to occupying himself with the people and the questions that interest him. Before that, it is impossible.”

Therefore, there was no way for Miriam to act on her burning desire. She could not draw near to Refael Alvo, could not consecrate her whole life to him, all the blood of her heart, to the last drop. Patience, patience, three or four years! To Miriam, this seemed like an eternity.

And the good people of the city, the good Jews pointed at Miriam and did not tire of saying, “See, she has come back to us, the damsel, the . . . the hussy; she fled from the house of her father in the middle of the night with her beau, spent a year living in fields and scurrying like dogs, she very well bled dry that unfortunate man, she spent him down to the last *grush*, she bled him dry even of the sight of his eyes, she left him blind and alone in foreign lands, and, look, she has now come back to us with a little child at her breast, with a bastard that she bore into the world. She neither ate garlic nor did her mouth stink. Did you see her? . . . Look! . . . That’s her, the pretty one—her father’s great Jewel, the hussy, the . . .! Poor stepmother who lost her

head for love of this shameless girl, poor Rachel who was so alive and so young! I should be as lucky as you, Miriam . . .! As the refrain says, 'My father's fortune covers my humps.' And she is also going to find a mate, her money is enough, there are men who will take her even with five bastards, not just one . . ."

Gershon Arditti received his daughter without complaint. It seemed that his heart of stone felt neither irritation nor bitterness from the affront that this only daughter had done to him. As before, the old man treated Miriam like she was an instrument that should serve to secure his wealth. Also as before, Miriam was in his eyes the daughter that the heavens presented him to take a good son-in-law and to hand over to him all his worth, saying, "It was I who collected all of this until today; I hand it over to you so that you will multiply it and that you gather with your own labor much more, so that you also pass it to your son." Still, in truth, Gershon Arditti felt much less amity toward Miriam than before. And this was understandable: before her flight, in the eyes of Gershon Arditti, no young man seemed worthy to be his son-in-law and inherit his worth. But now he told himself that any young man from a good and rich family should refuse the honor of being the son-in-law of *Chelebi* Gershon Arditti and take as a wife who was living in concubinage with that printer. He should therefore lower his expectations; he should content himself with some young man from a middle-class or poor family or some widower. All of this seemed to him like degradation, like debasement and dishonor, and that is why he did not forgive his daughter's affront. It was not for any higher or nobler feeling that Gershon Arditti was enraged at Miriam, but rather for feelings of pride and materialism.

With Miriam's little daughter, old Arditti acted as if she were a stranger to him. He never touched her or spoke to her. When the toddler began to speak several words, one of the maidservants taught her to say "*papu*." His terrible rage cut the word from the little girl's lips. Miriam had not seen so much enmity from her father in front of a small, innocent, and gracious child. She hid her little daughter when she could so that she would not appear before the eyes of the old man. Poor and unfortunate mother!

In the first months, Gershon Arditti did not have much trust in Miriam. He would always start trembling at the idea that his

daughter might still be pining after that “printer.” It was when he learned that Refael Alvo was completely blind that his heart began to rest from this fear. A blind man is three-quarters dead; there was no reason to fear that Miriam would have the crazy pretension of attaching her fate to a man blind in both eyes.

[ . . . ]

The sudden death of her father was for Miriam Arditti a new and formidable blow that had engulfed her without her ever thinking, without her ever imagining that such a thing could happen. Like lightning when it splits a clear and cloudless sky and pours out its fire at your feet with a frightening thunderclap to make you lose your mind, so was the effect of the murder of Gershon Arditti on his only daughter. In the first days, Miriam didn’t know where she was or what was happening around her. Her father who left in the morning healthy and strong was brought back to the house that night stiff and dead. The Italian consul and other functionaries of the consulate, functionaries of the police, the attorney Doctor Albahri, and other people came and went around her in those terrible days. They spoke to her of things that were entirely unknown to her, they wrote protocols that she did not understand, and they wanted to discuss questions and affairs that were entirely foreign to her.

Little by little, Miriam began to come to herself. Her father was no longer among the living, and she was now truly alone, with a small child of four years and a heart full of disappointment and sadness, without a single person close to counsel her, to tell her what she should do and how she should go about it. The truth was that Gershon Arditti was not the kind of father to earn and be worthy of his daughter’s affection, and he alone was the cause of her sadness. Nevertheless, she had a noble heart and she saw her misfortune as a punishment from the heavens. She did not blame her father nor feel enmity toward him. On the contrary, she hoped that he would one day be able to forget all that had happened and seek to recover geniality toward his disgraced daughter. Her only hope was that Gershon Arditti would one day retire from the fatigues of his working life and spend time near his daughter and his granddaughter, who was innocent of everything that had happened. Instead, they found her father dead, enveloped in his blood.



The Italian consul, who was a distinguished and noble man, considered it his duty in these circumstances to be near Miriam and to help her, since the young woman did not know and did not understand anything of the affairs of her father and of the procedures of her inheritance. It was he himself who was taking all the necessary steps to protect the interests of Miriam, who was the sole heir of all the worth of Gershon Arditti.

There was no will. Gershon Arditti still felt healthy and strong; he did not think of death. He did not concede to making a will even when his second wife was still alive and did everything in her power to convince him to make his testament. All the books found after his death were in the best order. The old man did not owe anyone even a single cent; everything he purchased was with cash. He, in contrast, was owed large sums. More than a quarter of a million in cash, aside from a large deposit of clothing that also represented a very important sum. In insurance papers, in money and in buildings, in clothing and in assets, the capital of Gershon Arditti surpassed more than two million francs.

Miriam was therefore quite rich. At the same time, she was also a disgraced woman. How could these riches serve her? What good could she see in them, when all her hopes were dead, when her future was covered by a dark and heavy veil, like that darkness that obscured the vision of that unfortunate youth, blind and disgraced for life, without a ray of light, without a shade of hope.

[ . . . ]

Miriam turned over all the affairs to the attorney Fintzy, Refael Alvo's brother-in-law, a quiet and intelligent man who was also like family to her. Why would she not allow him to earn money in this affair? The attorney Fintzy had gotten everything in order, with such precision and knowledge that the Italian consul did not stop praising him. On that day Fintzy had already given all the accounts to Miriam Arditti on certain collections and other questions. Before departing from the young woman, the attorney stayed several minutes longer, as if he had something on his heart but not the courage to utter what weighed upon him. It was Miriam who said to him, with a tone of friendship and with that sad little smile on her lips, which made her beautiful as an angel:

“Do you still want to say something to me, *Sinior Fintzy*? I’m ready to hear it.”

“Yes, it’s true. I read a piece of news in a gazette, but I don’t know if it is proper to speak with you about it. It does not concern business, but rather it concerns that . . . unfortunate . . . the father of this little girl.”

“It concerns the father of my child, and you don’t know if it is proper to speak with me about it . . . ! I beg you, *Sinior Fintzy*, tell me absolutely everything. There cannot be a question in life that has so much interest for me as that which concerns Refael Alvo,” she said with a trembling voice, choked with emotion.

“It’s a very extraordinary thing,” replied Fintzy, taking out of his pocketbook an edition of an important journal from Vienna. “For a week now all the newspapers of Europe have been publishing long articles on Refael and his paintings. It seems that there is an exhibition of these paintings that is about to be opened that is making great noise in the art world. This journal recounts the entire sad history of my brother-in-law, with great sympathy for the unfortunate Refael.”

Without letting him finish, Miriam, like a dead woman, took the newspaper and began to read. The paper contained a long article written and signed by one of the best known authors of German literature on the exposition of Refael’s paintings. The article was titled “The Blind Painter.” In it was recounted all the history of Refael Alvo—who Alvo was, where he was born, where he studied, and what difficulties he had to overcome to be able to consecrate himself to the art of painting. The history of Refael Alvo with Miriam Arditti was told in depth—their flight, their journeys, the misery in Vienna, and Miriam’s betrayal, when she left Refael to return to her father. Her name was not mentioned. The author merely stated that she was the daughter of a millionaire. With harsh words, the author castigated “the daughter of a millionaire” and condemned her behavior toward the unfortunate painter who lost everything because of a heartless woman. The author also condemned the parsimony of soul and the unkindness of Gershon Arditti, who had acted with such cruelty toward Refael Alvo but was not as much to blame as his daughter, as the daughter of the millionaire.

Then the author recounted the marvels of the works of “the blind painter.” The article was full of praise for his mastery, for

the force and nature of his pencil, for the grace of his use of color. Among more than ninety paintings that were exhibited, some were truly the works of a great master. One by one, Refael's works were described in all their details, and the author did not tire of expressing his admiration. Above all, there were three paintings of Jewish life and history that deserved the greatest attention. One of them showed a group of Jews gathered at night in a courtyard, saying the blessing for the new moon. The second painting showed "Hannah" and "Eli" (from the book of Samuel) in the Temple. Hannah was on her knees in front of the sanctuary, her eyes full of tears and her mouth open, as if begging the God of Israel that her soul's desire would come to pass. In front was Eli the *kohen*, looking at the young woman with curiosity and defiance. The third painting, the most beautiful and the greatest of all, was that which we know as Refael Alvo's last work before he became completely blind, and which carried the name *The Last Night*. The author described in his article the art, the bitter inspiration, and the pain that the painter expressed in this great work; he claimed that every man of high feelings was driven to tears in the presence of this sublime work. The author then expressed his admiration for other paintings by Refael, and the article finished in saying that Refael Alvo would have been one of the most important painters of our epoch, if he had not become blind at such a young age, that is to say, if "the daughter of a millionaire" had not come along to disgrace him for his entire life.

Miriam was bathed in tears when she finished reading the article. Everything that was written in the paper, all the bitter complaints and severe accusations against her, she had never tired of making them against herself. If the four walls of her room could speak, they would tell of all the pains that crushed her heart during those four years. Only God and her own heart knew the tears that she had cried alone, without anyone seeing. Yes, a thousand times yes, everything that the author had written was true. She, Miriam Arditti, "the daughter of a millionaire," was the cause of all of the misfortune of Refael Alvo, she was the reason why the painter lost his career and lost his vision, but not for infidelity, not for impulsiveness and lack of feelings, as the author blamed her with such severe words. No, and a thousand times no! If she had committed some fault, it was only because she

wanted to save her beloved, because she wanted to abrogate the terrible fate that threatened Refael, because she thought it was her duty to also console her father in his old age, to not let Gershon Arditti die with the curse of his only daughter on his lips. It seemed to her that in returning to her father's house, she would alleviate Refael's bitter fate, perhaps even convince her father to concede to their legitimate union, so that her little daughter could carry the name of her father, without taint and without repudiation.

Yes, she knew herself to be guilty and sinful, but not for impulsiveness and not for betrayal, save for the excess of love that her heart felt for Refael. All while crying warm tears, Miriam Arditti also felt profound satisfaction and happiness to see that Refael's art began to be met with the approval and recognition of the world. She knew of the fame of that author who wrote this article about "the blind painter," and she told herself that when a man of this competency wrote such praise about the works of her beloved, there was no longer doubt that Refael was in truth a great artist, an extraordinary talent, a genius who deserved the honors and respect of the whole world. And this flooded her with happiness mixed with her profound pain; it made the light of her beautiful eyes scintillate by the way of the tears that filled them. Little did she care that the author of the article condemned her with such harsh words; Refael Alvo and his art began to gather their well-deserved approval.

With a ray of happiness in her eyes, Miriam Arditti translated for the attorney Fintzy word for word what the author of the article had written about Refael Alvo, about his works and the role she herself played in the tragedy of "the blind painter." Then the young woman said, "I myself don't know why my heart begins to recover, as a breath of hope; it is insanity on my part to believe that clear days could still come to bring light to the dense darkness of my life. All the same, even without wanting to, I feel myself as if my heart wants to recover new hopes and a secret voice comes to tell me that all is not lost yet, that things could still take a turn for the better. Not even I myself know what to say, how to explain to myself how or in what manner, but it still seems to me that we should not despair entirely."

"It is always good not to abandon yourself to hopelessness," responded Fintzy, "not to lose courage entirely. Man lives with hope."



*Filipson: Memories of the  
First Jewish Colony in Rio  
Grande do Sul<sup>1</sup> by Frida  
Alexandr, 1967*

*Translated from Portuguese by Júlia Irion Martins*

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<sup>1</sup> Rights to this text were granted by Roberta Alexandr Sundfeld.



## Translator's Introduction

I found Frida Alexandr while lost in a Wikipedia hole prompted by a conversation with Marina Mayorski, co-editor of this very *Absinthe* issue. During a meeting about the issue, I mentioned to her I wanted to translate something, but I just couldn't think of any Brazilian Jewish writers. Over Zoom, I saw Marina's face shift into a sort of are-you-kidding-me formation: "Clarice?" I tried to cover my tracks with an "Oh, well, yeah duh, of course, Clarice!" But to me, Clarice Lispector isn't a Jewish Brazilian writer—she is *the* Brazilian writer. I'm not sharing this embarrassing anecdote to humiliate myself. Rather, it's to echo Mayorski and Maya Barzilai's question in the introduction to this issue. Brazil is one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse countries in the world; Brazilians have Iberian, African, Indigenous, Levantine, Japanese, and Eastern/Central European ancestry. In the same way that this issue raises questions about what it means to be a "Jewish Literature," Jewish Brazilian writers demand readers to consider what it means to be "Brazilian Literature."

One such author is Frida Alexandr, who is the only woman to have written a firsthand account of Jewish life in southern Brazil. Her book, *Filipson: Memories of the First Jewish Colony in Rio Grande do Sul*, is an indispensable text for both those interested in Jewish life in Brazil and those more broadly interested in immigration to Brazil.<sup>2</sup>

Born in Rio Grande do Sul to Russian Jewish immigrants, Alexandr grew up in Filipson, a rural farming community about fourteen miles north of the nearest city, Santa Maria. Filipson was one of many Jewish farming communities in the Southern Cone (primarily in Argentina) managed by Baron Maurice de Hirsch of the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA). Through these farms, Hirsch aimed to resettle Jews from Podolia, Bessarabia, and Imperial Russia. The colonies in Brazil (Filipson and Quatro Irmãos) did not last long, with inhabitants quickly moving to more urban areas such as Santa

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<sup>2</sup> *Filipson* has been out of print since its first run in 1967, but this year, Chão Editora published a much needed second edition with photographs and an afterword by Dr. Regina Zilberman (Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul). Soon, the work will appear in a full English translation by Regina Igel. I'd like to take a moment to thank Professor Igel for sharing with me the translation rights for these two stories; it's very generous.



Maria, Porto Alegre, and farther north to São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

After marrying Boris Alexandr, a pianist and Russian immigrant, Alexandr herself moved to São Paulo. There, she began writing *Filipson* at the behest of her children and with the help of the Women's International Zionist Organization, of which she was an active volunteer.<sup>3</sup> Published by Editora Fulgor in 1967, *Filipson* is hard to generically classify.<sup>4</sup> Composed of fifty-six short chronicles, the stories describe colony life from approximately 1904 to 1920 and illustrate the ways in which the recent immigrants adapted to *gaúcho* life while maintaining their Jewish traditions and customs: they learned how to read the directions of the winds and measure the fertility of the soil while also bringing Jewish teachers from Europe to educate their children in Hebrew and Portuguese (though children were not at all exempt from farm labor). At the same time, Alexandr also provides a critique of the JCA's administration of Filipson, detailing the unequal living conditions of the colonists and the JCA administrators as well as the administrators' failure to furnish the colonists with the necessary tools to survive.

Although *Filipson* is memoiristic, some of the recollections in the book happened before Alexandr could remember them, and others happened off the farm, where young women were by and large prohibited from going until married. For this reason, Alexandr often relies on the verbiage of "telling" (*contar* and *relatar*) and naming the inhabitants of Filipson who told her so.<sup>5</sup> With this rhetorical move, Regina Igel writes that "there prevails, in [Alexandr's] writings, a floating atmosphere of oral communication, further emphasized by her choice of a vocabulary filled with local colloquialisms."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in some stories such as "The Mirror," Alexandr narrates both from her position as a grown woman in São Paulo, years after leaving

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<sup>3</sup> Igel, "Frida Alexandr."

<sup>4</sup> It's worth noting that Alexandr's book came out one year before the Brazilian military dictatorship's AI-5—a decree that suspended habeas corpus and ushered in the most brutal years of the dictatorship. During this time, there was massive censorship of the arts—including the persecution of the São Paulo-based Editora Fulgor. Maués, "Livros," 102.

<sup>5</sup> Igel, "Brazilian Jewish Women Writers," 70.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

the colony, and as a young woman becoming aware of herself. This playfulness with memory, narration, and perspective positions Alexandr as an author who blurred generic lines—between memoir and fiction and between oral and written communication—in an effort to revive, at least textually, a form of life that had long since disappeared from the world.

The stories I've selected from *Filipson*—"The Mirror" and "Santa Maria," which appear consecutively in the book—are from Alexandr's direct experiences. "Santa Maria" is one of four stories that take place off the colony. In "The Mirror," Alexandr develops a painful toothache that requires her to go to Santa Maria by herself to be treated. Not only do these stories chronicle the rare event of a girl leaving Filipson alone, they also chronicle Alexandr's awareness of her transition from girlhood to womanhood.

But to stay in the spirit of memoir, I have to admit the primary reason I chose *Filipson* and this pair of stories: my mom is from Santa Maria, and I selfishly wanted to turn this into some sort of genealogy project. I knew her side of the family had immigrated to Rio Grande do Sul in the late 1800s from Bessarabia's neighbor, Bukovina. And although I didn't learn anything particularly concrete (just a poorly recollected story about a great- or great-great-grandmother converting to Catholicism), it was fun to share *Filipson* with my mom and receive WhatsApp messages as she read family names of childhood friends in Alexandr's work. (Thanks mom for editing my translation <3)

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## ***From Filipson: Memories of the First Jewish Colony in Rio Grande do Sul***

### **“The Mirror”**

It's one in the morning. I can't fall asleep. A growing fatigue takes hold of my limbs and brain, and, as always when I can't fall asleep and repress the maelstrom that reigns me, I feel frustrated, shattered.

I turn on the lamp and meet my image reflected in the dressing table mirror. Such disappointment! I see myself as I am: an old woman. I fixate on myself attentively and penetrate the depths of my tired eyes and my lost gaze. So I see myself again—many, many years ago. It was late at night, and a persistent toothache had tormented me for several days. I try to find a comfortable position. I shove my face in the pillow, looking to find in its warm softness a relief from the pain. I am exhausted from a day of work on the farm harvesting corn. My stomach is queasy and my head is spinning from the cigarettes that I smoked during the day, keeping my mouth full of smoke in order to numb the exposed nerve, as recommended to me by Maroca, Tibúrcio's mother, who assured me it was an infallible remedy. I don't want to turn the light on so as to not disturb my little sister, who sleeps beside me. In the adjoining room, I hear the measured snores of my dad and I hardly notice my mom's breaths. Maybe she's awake, with her gaze lost in the dark. I feel alone, abandoned. Nobody notices my suffering, or they just don't care. They're only interested in my labor, or so it seems. I spend the whole day on Malacara's back, perched atop baskets full of corn that I carry home from the fields. There, with help from mom and from little Idinha, I slide the heavy baskets onto the ground and we empty them. Next, we toss the corn into the dining room—transformed into a granary after our shed collapsed—where we watch it pile up and grow taller. I return the empty baskets to Malacara's back and resume my post on the trotting horse. I let go of the bridle and take from beneath the saddle blanket a book that I brought—hidden from mom—that helps me break the monotony of this back-and-forth all day. Sometimes I'm so absorbed in my reading that I don't even notice I'm

arriving at the farm. I only awake with the horse's sudden halt when we arrive at the gate.

The toothache continued to torment me, making me release some muffled moans. I felt my head throb. It must've been close to daybreak, as the roosters could be heard in succession from all the quarters of Filipson.

The new day came, equally full of work. We needed to move all the harvested corn into the house. The corn formed literal pyramids. If the rains were to fall and we left it piled up like this, all the corn would be ruined from rapid fermentation.

Until now, the weather had favored us. The cold was intense and dense frosts fell overnight. Ideally, one would stay at home next to a stove heated by a happy fire, roasting the last sweet potatoes of the season on the brazier while reading a good novel and pretending to be its protagonist. This, however, was nothing more than a vain chimera. After Adélia got married and after Jacques abandoned the colony for the no less brutal struggle of the city, I became indispensable to my parents. Dad counted on me for all contingencies. More specifically, he counted on me and Malacara. The horse and I helped each other. When we had less work, I loosened the girth, gave him a good ration of corn to be washed down with some fresh water, and then let him graze freely. In return, Malacara didn't trouble me when I was lulled by his leisurely pace, reading my favorite books.

But because I could no longer stand my persistent toothache, I got up and groped around in the dark until I found matches. I struck one and turned on the gas lamp. Next to it was the can of creolin with which we treated the cattle's worms.

I stuck my finger through a hole in the bedquilt and pulled out a grimy piece of cotton. I wrapped it around the tip of the used match that I'd dipped in the creolin can. I hunched over the mirror, opened my mouth, and pressed the creolin-coated cotton into the cavity. A lukewarm and abundant salivation began to dull the pain, diminishing the unpleasant taste of creolin. I continued looking at myself in the mirror as if I were seeing myself for the first time, momentarily forgetting that anguishing pain. I examined myself more thoroughly, and what I saw didn't displease me. I noticed two green eyes stained

with sparkling brown speckles, resembling the eyes of cats at night; I noticed eyebrows arched over long eyelashes that fluttered when the lamplight hit them in full. The eyes were circled by dark bags, which were made a bit less severe by the red of my sunburned cheeks. I was mesmerized by this image, carefully studying its assembly. Upon it, a rebellious wave of hair with the same golden highlights as my dad's, swept over my forehead and eyes, erasing the image from the mirror. I let out a breath of either satisfaction or sadness—I myself couldn't say which. Should I continue to ignore—or pretend that I was ignoring—what I already knew? That I had the appearance of a young lady and, as such, go on behaving like an unmannered little boy, treating the people with whom I was obliged to deal with the same air of defiance and arrogance that I'd always had, to make me respectable? I felt that something within me was changing, but that for my sake and for my parents' sanity, I shouldn't take it seriously.

The next morning, I awoke feverish. They didn't let me go to work. Mom went with me to the pharmacist, her *compadre*. We found him on his way out. Seeing us, he got out of the cab and caringly put his hand on my shoulders. In a nonchalant tone, he asked me, "What's wrong? Chatterbox isn't speaking today? Did you fill your mouth with potatoes?"

He examined me. He sprinkled some white powder on a little piece of cotton and placed it on my cavity. He spoke to my mom in private. I saw a cloud come over mom's face. With a forced smile, she said goodbye to the *machteinste* (*comadre*),<sup>7</sup> who insisted that we stay a bit longer.

On the way, mom was telling me that I would have to go to Santa Maria to have my tooth pulled. I was alarmed at the idea of going alone, but mom calmed me: "You will take the train tomorrow, and your dad will pick you up the next day on horseback. Don't worry, Freide."

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<sup>7</sup> The word *compadre* in Portuguese specifically means "godfather of one's son." While earlier the narrator referred to the pharmacist simply as *compadre*, here she uses *machteinste*, a Yiddish word derived from Hebrew (מחמתה) that means relation by marriage (referring to the parents of the son- or daughter-in-law). In Yiddish, it can also be ironic, meaning "pal" or "buddy." The author's transliteration of the word is consistent with how Yiddish speakers would have pronounced it. Similarly, in contemporary Brazilian Portuguese, the words *compadre* and *comadre* are used to mean "pal" or "buddy" (though not necessarily ironically).



A photograph of Primeira Quadra in Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul, circa 1911. Acervo do Arquivo Histórico Municipal de Santa Maria.

“Freide” was my baptismal name in Yiddish, but my older brothers had matriculated me in school with the name “Alegria” as an homage to Professor Back’s wife. I, however, didn’t feel comfortable with this name. As soon as we moved to Porto Alegre, I left it behind for good, along with all the other memories tied to my life as a peasant girl. Today, I really regret this. If I’d held onto it, it’s possible that my life would’ve unfolded in greater harmony with its meaning.

### “Santa Maria”

At night, my parents discussed where I might be able to stay for a few days. Mom remembered that my sister, Adélia, on certain occasions, had stayed at Chaïke Aronis’s house where she’d been treated like family. Additionally, Bene—Chaïke’s husband—was Abraão, the *shoiched*’s son and a close friend of my brother, Jacob.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The word *shoiched* is derived from the Hebrew word *shohhet* (שוחט), referring to the ritual slaughterer of livestock. It is transliterated to Portuguese the way Yiddish speakers would have pronounced it: *shoyhet*.

As such, there was no doubt that I'd be welcomed, especially in such an emergency.

As for me, the idea of staying at Bene's house made me smile. Adélia had told me about the comfort and luxury that Chaïke flaunted. She didn't even seem like she'd come from the colony, with her satin slippers and silk gowns that revealed her plump, pink bosom dusted with the finest rice powder. I still remembered the treats I'd gotten from her at temple during the end-of-year celebrations. Her chubby, ring-adorned fingers had caressed my face. From her neck hung a large, gold chain. The chain was accompanied, over her opulent chest, by a pin—also of gold—and a small watch of the same metal studded with small stones. I overindulged myself in admiring her big, plume-covered hat while she praised my mom.

I got to Santa Maria at dusk, carrying a small bundle of clothes and, tied in a handkerchief, the sum of two thousand *réis*. The directions were simple: I was to go up the street that began at the station and as soon as I reached the First Block, to knock on one of the doors.<sup>9</sup> If I didn't happen upon Bene Schteinbruch's house, I would, without fail, find myself at the door of some other former resident of Filipson who would know how to orient me.

With my heart racing, I knocked on the first door. A great apprehension began to torment my mind. What if none of our old acquaintances lived there anymore? Then where would I go? And what would I do? And as these thoughts assaulted me, the door opened and there appeared not Chaïke, but old Mrs. Raicher. Immediately recognizing me, she exclaimed, "God almighty! Who is it that I see! Where is your mom? And where is your dad? Is it possible that you came alone? Come in, come in! What am I doing, standing here at the door without inviting you in, you poor thing."

I excused myself awkwardly and told her that I was expected at Bene's house, but I didn't know how to find it.

I stammered, "Mom expects me to stay there."

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<sup>9</sup> In the original text, "First Block" (*primeira quadra*) is not capitalized—it is presented merely as descriptive directions. However, for decades, "Primeira Quadra" was the name of this particular, very trafficked street (now Rua Dr. Bozano, which turns into the Calçada Salvador Isaia, a pedestrian-only commercial area). Maciel, "O Projeto Do Calçada de Santa Maria (RS)," 5. With this in mind, I've chosen to capitalize it.



“Well then, walk quickly. It’s on the next block. It’s already getting dark.”

I kept walking up the street. When I came upon the indicated house, the first thing I saw through a wide-open window with a low sill was a table covered with a red velvet tablecloth falling all the way to the floor. A centerpiece full of fruits smiled at me. Opposite the table was a gleaming china cabinet full of crystals. Next to it was a door leading to a long corridor, from which the elegant figure of Chaïke emerged.

For a second, it seemed she didn’t recognize me. My head—and part of my face—was wrapped up in a scarf. She leaned over the windowsill, peered down the street in both directions, and then, as if she’d seen me mere moments ago and I was back to pester her yet again, she asked me, “What are you doing here in Santa Maria?”

I choked out a few words that refused to leave my mouth. I don’t quite remember exactly what it was that she said to me, nor do I remember how I dismissed myself. All I know is that I turned and went back down the street, not knowing what to do. I contemplated: If my parents had recommended the house of the son of our *shoiched*, it must’ve been because they were certain I’d be well received. Why, then, that indifference? What was it about my person that displeased her? Well, the only alternative was to return to Mrs. Raicher’s house and accept her truly spontaneous hospitality. But how would my parents come to know my whereabouts, and how would they take it when they found out? The Raichers had traded their existence as farm laborers for city life, where they dealt in scrap metal and used clothing and goods—peddling bric-a-brac, as we said in those days. Mom kept a certain distance in her dealings with them. Once, Adélia bought a little necklace of milky beads called “opalines” from them. Mom condemned this purchase, arguing with my sister. I didn’t understand why. In spite of it all, I found myself in the position of asking them for accommodations. Just as I raised my hand to knock on the door, it opened, as if someone were waiting for me. Clara, the Raichers’ daughter, grabbed my hand and exclaimed, “How good that you’ve come! You will sleep with me. Come quickly! We’ve been waiting for you for supper.”

She guided me across a dark courtyard. We walked up a few wooden steps that creaked under our weight. I heard, beneath my feet, the honks and quacks of ducks and chickens whose sleep we disturbed. In front of us a half-open door let in a thread of light, illuminating our path. Finally, we reached the dining room. Around a long table covered in a white tablecloth sat the entirety of the large Raicher family. Old Mr. Raicher sat at the head of the table.

I sat between Clara and her mother, who, in a continuous back-and-forth served the food, not able to remain seated long enough to serve herself. Everybody laughed and talked, doing everything to make me feel at home among them. Nobody asked me questions. I wasn't pressured by anybody to explain myself.

Before I settled into bed, Mother Raicher gave me a medication to gargle, saying it was an infallible toothache remedy.

The next day, they took me to a dentist who ripped open the abscess, releasing me from my suffering. The other times, I went alone. Clara went to school and the other family members left at the crack of dawn, each off to take care of their respective chores.

During these times where everybody was occupied, I roamed around, getting used to the house and the objects which made it up. It was an old cabin held up by stone pillars. Around it was a wooden veranda with a poorly fitted plank floor that creaked underfoot. Between the cracks, one could see piles of firewood, screened crates with chickens and ducks. Through the cracks rose the smell of rotten potatoes, rotten oranges, and chicken excrement. I think this shoddily constructed wooden floor was to blame for the nightmares that would trouble my sleep for years to come. I would often dream of walking over loose, spaced-out planks. They escaped from under my feet, and I ran the risk of being launched into the void. In this dream, I clung to the beams, wanting to call for help, but my voice was trapped in my throat. Here I woke, as if feeling a link between the nightmare and something located very far from my life.

A long corridor separated the bedrooms from a certain part of the house. This corner of the house was the only one forbidden from me because an extremely sick member of the family lived there—or so they said. The enormous front hall was a storage area with the

most absurd collection of objects: old furniture, used clothing, dusty china, books, and musical instruments including, even, a piano.

Clara studied piano. And when she was at school, I took care of martyring the poor keys. More than once, I tried to help the housewife. She was always busy with pots in the kitchen, but old Mrs. Raicher never accepted my offer. She did, however, sometimes call me to taste new seasonal fruit compotes.

After lunch, when the house was silent due to the mandatory nap, I excused myself to my little room with whichever book I'd picked up at random.

On the third day of my stay in Santa Maria, the dentist extracted my tooth without anesthesia. I returned to the Raichers' house and retired to the attic, where I cried bitter tears. An intermittent cold came over my body. I buried myself beneath a mattress and fell asleep. I don't know how many hours I remained immersed in that slumber. When I woke up, drenched in sweat, I saw in front of me the good Mrs. Raicher, who told me my dad had come to see me. He came upstairs twice, but, because I continued in my deep sleep, he didn't want to wake me. He'd been unable to wait, for fear of night creeping up on us while returning to Filipson. And so, he left me money for a return ticket.

Days after the extraction, the dentist allowed me to return home. I said goodbye to the Raicher family, sad to leave them, captivated by the attention and affection they'd given me.

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“Win or Lose” by  
Yossi Sucary, 2002

*Translated from Hebrew by Maya Barzilai  
and Ruth Tsoffar*



## Translators' Introduction

Yossi Sucary is an award-winning author and a professor of philosophy at Camera Obscura in Israel. Sucary was born in 1959 to a family that immigrated to Israel from Libya. He grew up in Pardes Katz, a suburb east of Tel Aviv. When he was nine years old, his family moved to northern Tel Aviv, a suburban area predominantly populated by wealthier Ashkenazi residents. Sucary dropped out of high school but completed his exams and went on to study philosophy and history at Tel Aviv University. His writings include essays, novels, novellas, and short stories.

Through his genre-bending writing style that often incorporates autobiographical elements, Sucary explores the intricacies of Mizrahi Israeli identity, challenging its false sense of cohesion and entrenchment in Zionist narratives. His writing offers a critical view of Israel's identity politics and its construction between East and West, Ashkenazi Jews of European origins and Arab Jews. While articulating a profound sense of estrangement that accompanies life in Israel—a sentiment that Zionism had long since purported to assuage—he is still able to build bridges and negotiate seemingly disparate extremes. In this manner, Sucary's texts undermine the teleological narrative of homecoming and the polarization of “diaspora” and “homeland.”

Such criticism courses through “Win or Lose,” the opening chapter of Sucary's first novel, *Emilia and the Salt of the Earth: A Confession*, which was published in 2002 and translated into French in 2006. After the death of his grandmother, the autobiographical narrator recalls her vexed relation to Israel. He remembers how Benghazi was the place where his grandmother wished to be buried, the place where she actually felt alive. In his depiction of Emilia, Sucary challenges and “corrects” the image of the stereotypical Mizrahi woman, who is usually portrayed as passive, timid, and domestic, limited to the confines of family life. Sucary's Emilia is dynamic, confident, and passionate, full of contradictions and riddled with anxiety and guilt. Reflecting on the death of his grandmother, the narrator recalls her vexed relation to Israel, tellingly identifying Benghazi as the place where she wishes to be buried, the place where she

lived fully. In his genealogical excavation of Emilia's figure, Sucary's attempt to fix or "catch" her slippery image is riddled with anxiety and guilt, perhaps reflecting the inherent complexity (or impossibility) of writing her into the hostile waters of Hebrew literature.

We embarked on this collaborative translation project ahead of an event that launched the theme year "Mizrahim and the Politics of Ethnicity" at the Frankel Institute for Advanced Judaic Studies. Organized by Ruth Tsoffar (University of Michigan) and Ella Shohat (NYU), the virtual roundtable was titled "Mizrahi Prose and Poetry: Meet the Authors." Other participants included Tehila Hakimi, Shlomi Hatuka, Amira Hess, and Mati Shemoelof. The aim was to bring into dialogue poets and prose writers of different backgrounds and generations. Each author read a short excerpt from their work in Hebrew, while the audience could also view the translations into English. That gathering led to the translation of this excerpt from Yossi Sucary's novel as well as other fascinating texts.

## “Win or Lose”

I raised my face to the sky to shake the flow of words out of me, to divert it into a deep pit in my consciousness. But instead of that, the impact of the last meeting I had with her tackled me with all its might. My mother, she (my grandmother), and I were watching television on the eve of Independence Day in the empty apartment in Pardes Katz, and when the national anthem came on, she suddenly sat on the chair and said with an expression full of contempt and a matter-of-fact tone, “Benghazi. I need to go to Benghazi! A person needs to be buried where he lived, not where he died.”

I understood that only if I left the gravesite in the cemetery in Givatayim could I think about the figure of Emilia without letting her disturb me. I entered a neighborhood restaurant, where they serve Tripolitan dishes. I was disappointed: the food was superb, but it didn’t allow me to avoid my grandma. It reminded me of how unenthusiastic she was when it came to cooking. For her, the kitchen was a trap. Even in the coldest winters, she would open the windows all the way so that the smell of the dishes wouldn’t suffocate her with the common image of the warm Mizrahi woman. She used to often say that all those Moroccan women who don’t leave the kitchen are actually cooking their families in there. They serve their families straight into the mouths of the Ashkenazim with a very spicy sauce that erases guilt.

It suddenly hit me that my grandmother sacrificed herself for me in the same way that the other grandmas of my friends did for them. She filled the same role, but in a different world: black instead of white. The shiny, proud letters that made up my grandmother’s tombstone forced her upon me in her death, in the same way that her defiant stance forced her upon me when she was alive. One of her typical expressions floated around in my head: “This is how they lied to Grandfather Doha. They brought us here at night under the pretense that the Arabs will not see us leave, and we followed them blindly. But actually, they brought us here in this way so that we would not see our gravestones immediately, so that we would have the feeling that after the darkness there will be light.” Suddenly her words seemed more profound than ever. They even scared me a



little. I tried to recall other expressions of hers that would balance out these ones, that would soften them, but everything that came to mind only strengthened and sharpened them. My attempt to draw a parallel line between her and the Ashkenazim would have driven her crazy. It's true that she thought that they and her were playing the same game, but as far as she was concerned, they were the players, and she was the one being played; they were the hands moving the pieces, and she was a pawn that they put on the chessboard so they would have something to sacrifice when the crucial moment came.

I pushed away the *hraise* plate and took a sip of soda water. I assumed that in the end I would be able to outwit Emilia and catch her image from an unexpected angle, before she could catch me. In the evening when I came home, she appeared to me in many different versions, all of whom, I believe, have never been seen in public. And in all of them, her soul remained full of holes.

The next morning, when I put my books in my bag, a memory trace of her smell flashed in my mind. I thought about it until the shelf of original Hebrew books in my library overtook my field of vision. It suddenly caused me discomfort; this shelf and the smell of my grandmother could not live together under the same roof. In all the books that populated it, there was not one line with which Emilia could identify. She would have been revolted by most of the things that are written in them, especially those characterizations of the different "oriental ethnicities" (*edot hamizrah*). There was nothing more foreign to her character than being a hospitable person, outgoing, speaking ungrammatical Hebrew, innocent, full of imagination, and lacking the ability to read the reality as it is. She was a cold woman, with fluent Hebrew, obsessively suspicious toward strangers, and, above all, she had the amazing ability to accurately capture the gap between the way things appeared to the eye and reality itself.

Instead of going to Camera Obscura, where I started teaching philosophy, I sat on my chair and racked my brain for the qualities I inherited from her, but I did not come to any conclusion, and when a characteristic that is clearly common to both of us finally appeared in the threshold of my mind, I preferred not to let it enter for fear of discovering that this characteristic stems only from blinded self-love.

I replaced this attempt with general thoughts about the connection between me and Emilia. Even in this matter I did not reach any clear-cut conclusions. Perhaps only one: that her hole-filled soul is the ground on which I have been standing my entire life.



“Stoneland” and “The Third  
Sin” by Rita Kogan, 2021

*Translated from Hebrew by Yardenne Greenspan*



## Translator's Introduction

The first thing that struck me when I began to translate Rita Kogan's short stories was her attention to detail. I know, I know—this is a writers' workshop cliché, sounded alongside such gems as “What's at stake for the protagonist?” and “Show, don't tell.” But in this case, the details do more than simply enrich the story—though they do this, too, in their delicious sensory abundance. In Kogan's writing the details are, in fact, the most foundational and essential building blocks.

Take, for instance, the fabrics in “The Third Sin”—the woolen scarves onto which crystalized frost clings, the thick curtains behind which fantasy awaits, the plush rug that allows a child to drag a chair silently and climb to new heights of adventure. The jackets, the aprons, the stockings—they all speak of a harsh Russian winter, spent in the cozy indoor solitude of a little girl trying her hardest not to wake her mother from a depressive nap.

Or, in the same story, the sleekness of a lacquered cardboard puzzle and the brightness of plastic toys in the home of a girl “whose parents were party members and could afford the wonders of capitalism” and whose relatives lived “in the good part of Germany” imply not only socioeconomic disparities but also the corruption of the Communist Party, preaching anticapitalist sentiment while enjoying the riches of the free market.

In “Stoneland,” the smell of saltwater, the red-black stains of cherries on sunburned skin, the rustling of lavender and limonium in nighttime, the quiet of a rural getaway punctuated by blaring communist marches from a nearby youth camp—details that encompass the freedom of a summer vacation spent so far away from home, as well as the helplessness of children constrained by the rule of adults.

But the power of these details is not only in how they drop readers into a particular time and place, shaping a clear image of a cultured place taken over by politically prescribed dereliction and neglect, but also in the way they speak wordlessly of a longing both sweet and bitter for somewhere that once was and never would be again. The Russia of Kogan's childhood is gone—not only from her personal experience, having immigrated to Israel as a young child,

but from the world at large, the country having transformed, its old ways vanished, then vanished again. The food lines, the shady deals to procure canned meat, the graphics on these tins, the stories and poems recited to a young child—which inspire her pretend play and her daydreams—are no more.

In the face of such grand sorrow, Rita Kogan's stories zero in on small dramas—a row between siblings, a petty theft, envy toward a scholarly child enjoying adult attention, a mother whose long naps leave time and space for transgressions. A sense of budding, unripe, and not yet understood sexuality pervades her scenes. The iron fist of communism casts a shadow over all. And every scene is water-colored with the warm, hypothermic emotion that is the lot of the immigrant—an unresolvable pining for a complicated past, both happy and miserable, one which they are glad to be rid of and yet for which they cannot stop yearning.

## “Stoneland”

They lay, each in his or her own shack, each in his or her own bed. They lay separated. The shacks weren't locked, but they were forbidden from leaving. The forbidding separated them more than any door, more than any key turned once or twice in any lock. The forbidding and the shame.

The sheets beneath Vita's body were taut and cold. Their cool alleviated her heat. Evening descended. Dark shadows sent trembling fingers from the corner of the shack, gripping the legs of the wooden table, the carved backs of the chairs, the feet of the iron cots, hers and her mother's. There was little furniture in the shack, all well made and comforting in spite of its agedness. Honey Mountain was still visible beyond the open window, or rather, its contours were—a soft, unbroken line with three rounded peaks. Its yellow-orange face, which inspired her nickname for it, was now painted black. At night it went back to being an extension of Kara Dag, the enormous black mountain that towered jaggedly over the coastal line.

Voicelessly, she listed the petrified mountain dwellers: the King and Queen, the Devil's Finger, Ivan the Robber, the Golden Gate, and the Portrait of the Bearded Poet (even though we can't see the profile from our side of the mountain, she clarifies wordlessly). The act of counting helped her unwind, removing her from the blowup that had just occurred.

Then she tried to rhyme Kara Dag: *ovrag* and *rag*. The high-quality rhymes (valley and foe) stopped the crying. But then they deteriorated: *durak*, *niyeh tak* (fool and not so). Here come the tears. Tyomka must be crying too. She pictured his face, his light blue eyes turning pink like a rabbit's, his upturned button nose flaring and filling with dripping dampness, his cherry lips growing wet and bitten.

She was convinced that Ilka wasn't crying. That traitor. How he'd screamed. He never dared curse, knowing he'd find himself grounded, just like them. The boys' mother was the strictest of the grownups when it came to clean language. Unlike Vita's mother, who herself indulged in the occasional dirty word, rolling it down her tongue before crushing it with her white teeth, as if it were a sour, juicy cherry. How he'd screamed. His face had twisted into a



Greek mask, a tragedy of rage and insult. She didn't believe him. He was acting again. His eyes had remained dry and calculated in spite of the sobbing and weeping. He'd yelled that it was always two against one, that they were keeping him out, disappearing on him, that he was always alone. He'd collapsed onto the dirt of the upper yard, limbs twitching. She still didn't believe him. A liar and an actor. A traitor. The three of them had never discussed it out loud, but it was clear to all—there was an unequivocal, all-encompassing agreement that, no matter what happened, they would not involve the grownups.

The grownups had believed him. His father had held him, enveloping him in the embrace of strong, tan arms adorned with white-burnt fuzz. He undid the boy's tightened fists, wiped his eyes without noticing they were dry. Ilka was then led downstairs to the kitchen shack, his entire body portraying a lonesome, defeated crusader for justice.

Now the pleasant dry air of dusk was filled with the aroma of valerian root, bitter and boozy. She imagined her mother releasing twenty drops from the dark glass bottle with a skilled hand, counting them solely with the movement of her lips, in a state of utter concentration, as if the world had fallen away, leaving nothing beyond the countdown of drops: twenty, nineteen, eighteen. She herself had never had the pleasure of partaking in valerian root drops. It was a remedy reserved for grownups with their shaky nerves and their fragile world. Ilka the traitor, having undergone the bitter initiation ceremony, had become a grownup that night.

She remembered how it all began. First there was a train. Actually, no. First there was the big accumulation. Mama had accumulated bags of sugar and tins of cured meat. The sugar was easier. Grandma exchanged her vodka food stamps for sugar food stamps. She performed the exchange in a dark cabin where glass bottles were returned for a deposit, a decrepit room hidden behind the large grocery store, laden with the heavy, sour smells of alcohol and alcoholism.

The cured meat was more complicated. The tins were never sold at the grocery store or at any other store Vita was familiar with. To enjoy them, one had to procure a gift basket intended "for party

members only.” She herself was a Pioneer, one of the first in her age group to be accepted into the movement, but that didn’t count when it came to gift baskets. Mama and Grandma were not party members, but Grandma was a doctor at an urgent care facility at the city’s largest railway station. Her satisfied patients often thanked her in the form of a party-issued gift. Shamelessly, Grandma requested that they leave her the cured meat as well as the condensed milk. “Go ahead and keep the vodka to yourselves,” she would add, winking generously.

After a year of accumulating, the tin cans crowded the shelves of the large pantry—soldiers on guard, twinkling dully in their red uniform, each bearing the grim image of a horned bull.

Then there was the train. They’d been lucky, she and Mama: their car-mate was an older woman, almost elderly. She parked herself on one of the bottom bunks. Mama took the other one, and Vita had climbed happily to the top bunk, the one above her mother’s. Since the other top bunk was empty, she hopped back and forth between the two until she was finally scolded, and the spare bunk was reappointed as a hand towel drying rack. The towels were thin, gray, and smelled vaguely of mildew. But even with just one bunk, she was still the Olympian goddess of the train, observing all that went on below from her mighty, elevated position. She watched the sliding door inside which a distorted rectangular mirror had been welded, the small, round-cornered metal table with a set of four thick, stained tea glasses, each stored inside an ornamental brass holder, carved in the shape of twigs and red currant berries. The train groaned and moved on, the glasses shook in their holders, and hard-boiled eggs and bits of boiled chicken were pulled out of tinfoil. Their heavy, moldy, yet appetizing aroma spread through the train cars, seeping into the aisles, mixing with the burnt tobacco smell blowing out of the mouths of smokers through the corridor windows they’d cracked, diluting with the stench of urine and feces that invaded through the sliding door of the filthy bathroom. Once again, somebody had failed to press down on the metal pedal, their excrement swaying and bobbing inside the black toilet bowl, up and down, left and right, along with the glasses, the eggs, the chicken legs, the bunks, the train cars, the passengers, and her. They were all

traveling seaward. They traveled a day, two days, and on the morning of the third day, they arrived at the seaside.

The sea was a miracle. It was blue, twinkling, enormous, warm, and nothing like her Baltic Sea, which was a pale, gray strip of freezing water. A small, white, peeling motorboat picked the two of them up from the dock, sputtering, faltering, starting up, and heading back out to the water. It was the first time she saw Kara Dag, the Black Mountain, the magical mountain, the primordial volcano that had gone extinct but might, someday, spew fire and spit scalding lava once more.

She remembered the salty spray, the white trail that lingered through the water, as if to mark their path from one beach to the next. At first, Mama forbade her from standing up, commanding her to remain seated against her. But within a matter of minutes, her mother had given in to the swaying of the waves and the headache they gave her and fell asleep. Then Vita was free to breathe, smell, lick the awfully salty drops, to move from the bow to the stern, from the stern to the bow, and commit to memory the rising contours of the mountain. It was hot, but it was a different heat, not the humid, deadening heat of her city in summer. The heat here was dry like sandpaper and translucent. Through it, she could see the petrified dwellers of the mountain: the King and Queen, Ivan the Robber, the Golden Gate, the Devil's Finger. Obviously, she hadn't known the names when she'd first seen them, and yet she did know. That first night, when Ilka, pointing at the mountain, had told her about the jagged shapes the lava had formed when it froze, listing them for her, she knew right away which one was which. Then she told him, "And that's Honey Mountain."

"Nonsense," Ilka protested. "There's no Honey Mountain here."

"Yes there is. That mountain over there, see how it's yellow and orange, even though you can hardly make it out in the dark? That's Honey Mountain."

"I see it!" Tyomka cried with excitement. "Honey Mountain!"

She was nine, Ilka was eleven, and Tyomka was eight. They were three, but they were not united. They were two against one from the very first night.

The rivalry was subtle at first, polite, contained—the rivalry of children of the intelligentsia. Though he was the older one, Ilka was shorter than his brother but also more muscular and sculpted. His boyish body implied the man he would become. His features were chiseled, his eyes narrow and gray, his nose straight and just the right length, his lips appeared painted, his manicured, thick hair, smooth and honey-toned, rested diagonally over his forehead.

The brothers had arrived in the small village about two weeks before her, and Ilka's skin now carried a gorgeous, uniform, golden tan. The milky-white, golden-haired Tyomka had been cursed with skin that tended to burn and turn red in the sun, much like hers—a redhead's skin, delicate and freckled.

Ilka was smart, sarcastic, and protective. He read books, could recite poetry by heart, even the forbidden kind. As he recited, he would narrow his eyes and emphasize the words he deemed important with a low howl. Her mother seemed to be flirting with him. Sometimes she would walk with him in the back of the group, discussing literature and poetry. Once, she recommended a Salinger book Vita had been forbidden from reading with that familiar enthusiasm that made her daughter envious of its object.

"There are sex scenes in that book," her mother had said in a low, knowing tone when Vita said she also wanted to read it.

"But I want sex scenes!" she'd let slip, louder than she'd meant to.

Everybody laughed. Vita blushed. Everybody kept laughing. Everybody but Tyomka. He squeezed Vita's arm gently, then whispered to her, "Big deal, sex scenes. So stupid. So grownup. Who cares?"

Ilka and Tyomka wore nice clothes, much nicer than was customary, especially for boys. Her mother said that Ilka and Tyomka's mama had an older sister who was married to an Italian man and living in Italy. Vita couldn't understand how a Soviet citizen could be married to an Italian but reassured herself—he might be a communist Italian, like Gianni Rodari. This international sister also had two sons and would periodically send packages of her kids' hand-me-downs for Ilka and Tyomka. The two wore thin, woven summer pants in cheerful yellows and whites. They had swimsuits that were

not see-through and reasonably stiff—unlike her swimsuit, which was made of the same fabric as her underpants. At least Mama had made sure to get her a new one before this trip, so the fabric still concealed her body, even when wet, rather than slip down when she swam toward the waves.

She was the one who'd discovered Stoneland: three boulders, not far apart, surrounded by a deserted pebble beach. Until they'd found this land, they'd been immersed in harmless competitions. She was also the one who'd come up with these. The first was a boat race. To the grownups, they seemed to be competing against one another, but in reality, she and Tyomka had built their boats together, while Ilka had built his alone. They were small boats made of smoothed bark and whittled twigs for masts. The first boats were bad. A few of them flipped over as soon as they met the water's surface. Others floated backward, not so much ships as insubordinate hermit crabs. All of them eventually sprung a leak and sank to the bottom. Ilka was the first to figure out what they were doing wrong. First he built a concave boat, forming a kind of keel that prevented it from overturning. Then he used clear fishing line as a hypotenuse, stabilizing the masts and blocking the boat from moving backward. Finally, he even sewed sails from a shirt he'd sacrificed for the cause. His father punished him for this choice, but his boats won every race. Each loss taught her and Tyomka another trick, but they were always behind. Ilka would lock himself in his shack or hide in the upper yard, slaving over his boats. When she and Tyomka just "happened" to stop by, he'd shoo them away. Over time, their boats also began to feature a keel, a hypotenuse, and a sail.

A week later, they enjoyed their first victory. Ilka threw his flag-ship to the ground furiously and stepped on it with a bare foot. A cracking sounded, and a momentary expression of pain folded his face in half, perhaps for the loss of the ship, perhaps from the force of the blow.

He limped for an entire day, and they embarked on the next contest—archery. "The trees are afraid of you," her mother pointed out lyrically during an afternoon walk in the park. "You've destroyed them all, you little barbarians," Natashka, the Iron Lady, admonished the children. She was a tall, long-legged, stone-faced spinster,

the unbaptized godmother of the boys and the best friend of their scatterbrained mother.

They truly had ruined the trees, first the bark in order to make the boats, then branches in favor of their bows and arrows. The bows required thick, bendy branches, ones that had just recently matured, still holding on to the memory of the young offshoots they'd once been. The arrows called for twigs of medium thickness, long and straight, older but not yet dried and aged. Ones that broke easily without hitting the target. Once again, fishing line was an essential component. Bow strings made of sewing thread, though more flexible and easier to tie, tore after one or two shots. To procure fishing line, they had their parents run to the department store in the neighboring village, larger than their tiny village which was devoid of shops, save for a small, empty corner store and a makeshift farmers' market that had come together alongside the dock and resembled a beehive. Since the two-hour ride in a wobbling truck bus down a bumpy dirt road was entirely unappealing, the boys' father suggested a day-long voyage by foot, through the mountains. The athletic Natashka was excited about the idea. The mothers considered sabotaging the endeavor but reconsidered after they were promised a potential restocking of the sugar and cured meat stock, which were running low, in spite of the great accumulation. "The boys have a healthy appetite, bless their souls," Natashka would mutter, adding a few hunks of the cured meat to a tin pot overflowing with young potatoes.

Tyomka, whose motto for the past two and a half weeks had become "What Vita said," never questioned her, even when he received a resounding "no" to his suggestion of inviting Ilka to share Stoneland with them.

They named each boulder, inspired by the stone characters of Kara Dag. Their favorite was the one closest to the waterline, which was shaped like an isosceles triangle, easy to climb, and offered protection from wind and spray. It was therefore named the Defenders' Boulder.

The second one was farther away in the deeper water. It was the widest of the three and shaped like a trapezoid. To reach it, they had to swim three or four minutes, then climb up. Though its sides

were gradated, climbing it was harder: its water-submerged foundations were covered with spongy seaweed, intensely slippery, and the children found themselves plopping into the water over and over again with a big splash and burning scratches. Sitting on it was comfortable, and there was room to hide against its back wall and keep lookout for approaching enemies. “This boulder has exceeding strategic importance,” she lectured Tyomka with a grave face, quoting, almost to the letter, a beloved James Fenimore Cooper character or a newscaster prattling on about American imperialism. This boulder was therefore named the Generals’ Boulder.

The third rock was also in the deep, parallel to the Generals’ Boulder, and nearly inaccessible: tall, jagged, without any visible protrusions to hold onto when one climbed it. It was black, while the Defenders’ Boulder and the Generals’ Boulder were yellowish-brown. This boulder was like a small-scale shred of Kara Dag, proud and dangerous. It was named Black Tooth, and she claimed it protected them from pirate ships. Everybody knew that jagged beach boulders were the cause of most shipwrecks. He and Vita only climbed Black Tooth a handful of times, and once it almost ended with injury. True, when they’d located an alternative swimming route to the tooth, one that overtook the Generals’ Boulder, they discovered an easier climbing angle, but it was still inaccessible and therefore immensely necessary. “This is where we’ll flee in times of trouble,” she said, and Tyomka nodded admiringly.

They came up with code names for different enemies. Strangers, though rare on this wild, remote beach, were known as Browns. Grownups—mostly negligible, unthreatening foes—were Greens. Code White, the worst of all, was reserved for their one true enemy: Ilka. Whenever they caught sight of him approaching Stoneland, they busied themselves with innocent beach activities: jumping into the deep end, sunning on a sun-warmed rock, or wading in the small bay.

It worked for three days. On the fourth day, as they made their way to their private realm, they spotted Ilka climbing toward the peak of Black Tooth. He was more muscular than they were and therefore an adept climber. He was already halfway to the top.

When he noticed them, planted motionlessly on the beach, staring, he stood up and cried, “Hey, you losers, is this where you’ve been hiding from me? It’s cute. What do you call this boulder? Black Tooth? Kind of a moronic name, if you ask me, but what can you expect.” As he said this, his foot slipped, his grip loosened, and he fell into the water, pushing himself away from the boulder at the very last second.

The contest had gone up a notch. It was no longer just healthy competition. This was war, bloody and persistent.

“À la guerre comme à la guerre,” Tyomka said gravely.

“What’s ‘algerre?’” she asked.

“It’s from *The Three Musketeers* and it’s in French: in war as in war,” Tyomka said, chuffed to the roots of his golden locks that he, too, had something of value to contribute.

“Oh, yes, that’s good, especially if it’s from the musketeers.”

Thus, the battle had commenced. First, they drew a precise, confidential map of their land, including boulder names, outpost locations, and markings for arms and food storage. It was all imaginary, of course, save for the food. They’d decided to gather nuts and unoled fried bread, which they’d sneaked under the table at mealtime. These were the only foods they could get their hands on that would not grow moldy. They’d drawn the map with magic markers and watercolors on a square piece of cardboard. She had drawn the majority of the details, but Tyomka, who turned out to possess a fantastic sense of distance, had afforded the map its desirable geographic panache. They covered it with an old kitchen towel and rolled it inside of a rare plastic bag to keep it safe even in case of drowning. Then they hid it in Vita’s shack, tucked underneath the thin mattress, just below where she rested her head. Now the target was well defined: he or she who holds the map is the ruler of Stoneland.

The day of the blowup, it was business as usual. An early wakeup to the sounds of cheerful communist marches emitted from the loudspeakers of the neighboring summer camp. Face washing and toothbrushing in freezing water from a manual, stainless steel watering apparatus the shape of a full, bell-like breast. The water for



this apparatus was pumped from the owner's well by the boys' father every few days. A long clapper, also made of stainless steel, dangled from the nipple. When pressed, a thin stream of water sprayed from the nipple, accompanied by a tender jingle that caused the entire breast to tremble. Morning exercise led by Natashka and attended by all those who were interested or not. A breakfast of kefir and black bread, and that day a special indulgence of salted hard-boiled egg. Walking down the rocky path to their regular beach, remote and undeclared. Ilka made a show of ignoring them, though he was overly polite. This should have raised their suspicions, but they were blasé. They'd had the map for a week by that point, carefully hidden. Illustrations now adorned its margins: of foxes leaping from the tops of boulders to their deaths in sea foam, of mermaids with twisted tails and budding breasts, of gold coins inside a coffin crowded with bottles of rum. They were close to calling a ceasefire in favor of a new, promising, joint endeavor: creating a homemade Monopoly set. The boys' mother forbade playing cards as well as Monopoly. "A lowly, moronic game of commerce," she determined, rolling her Rs. But when they assured her that the traded streets would bear the names of painters, composers, writers, and poets, she acquiesced, even suggesting some potential names, including Pushkin and Lermontov.

When they returned from the beach, salty and sunburned, Vita and Tyomka were sent to pick cherries in the upper yard. The landlady had allocated the vacationers three fruit trees for self-picking in exchange for a small fee. This wasn't an act of goodwill. The fruit was so abundant that she couldn't possibly pick it all herself before it went bad or was stolen by the birds. Ilka, who had been complaining of a stomachache since noon, was excused from duty.

By the time they came back downstairs, covered with red and black stains and carrying two overflowing baskets, lunch was waiting on the common dining table in the lower yard. They washed their hands and sat right down to eat.

Ilka showed up at lunch, ravenous as usual. Now Vita began to grow suspicious. As soon as she finished clearing the dishes, she asked for permission to retire to the shack. She walked over to her bed and lifted the mattress. The map was gone. Defeat, downfall,

destruction! They had already won and had been conducting discussions about the Monopoly set for the past two days. Traitor. Liar. Actor. She returned her mattress to its place and went out to look for Tyomka.

“What’s wrong? You’re as red as a tomato,” her mother said when she saw her, wandering, lost, in the lower yard.

“I must have spent too long in the sun,” Vita lied.

“Wear a hat tomorrow and make sure not to take it off. But, actually, this is good. The sun will make that horrid sinus infection of yours go away.”

Vita had no time to discuss that horrid sinus infection of hers. She had to find Tyomka, report the calamity, and plan their next move. But before she could find Tyomka, a long, high-pitched scream found her.

She rushed to the upper yard. The sound of the grownups’ footsteps echoed behind, but she was faster and therefore the first to see: the two brothers were standing in the upper yard. One of them was holding a large piece of badly damaged cardboard. Since he hadn’t managed to tear it apart, he’d burned it first, then drenched it with water, and finally tore bits and pieces off it. The black, wet scraps were flying around in the air. Ilka laughed, Tyomka screamed, and the laughter and screaming gave birth to the first slap.

She never confessed that Tyomka was the one who’d dealt the first blow. Then again, she never claimed the opposite, either. She didn’t say a word, and neither did Tyomka. Now the minutes ticked by very quickly and very slowly. Bodies were slammed, limbs wrapping around each other, dust billowing, damp flakes of dirt swirling through the air, as if the blowup had awakened Kara Dag itself, to complete its Pompeii-esque work of destruction.

They lay, each in his or her own shack, each in his or her own bed. They lay separated. Tyomka was surely crying. She wondered what they’d do now. They had to run away. She rose silently, gathered the bundle of nuts and fried bread, and ducked behind the kitchen shack. She only lingered a moment, listening in on the grownups’ conversation.

“You’re the one who messed up here, Lilka. Was it so hard to give birth to two of them? If you only had two girls, this whole

debacle would have been resolved!” the boys’ father cried, a hint of drunkenness in his voice.

*If you only had two girls.* But how could that be? Vita was the only one.

She heard them toasting and clinking glasses. Ilka the traitor joined his voice with theirs, reciting a poem. They applauded. Vita twisted her face as if she’d bitten into something rotten.

When she reached the brothers’ shack, she didn’t dare cross the threshold. The prohibition was too palpable, and its breach could entail a severe and prolonged punishment. She crawled under the open window, through which she heard stifled sobs, and tapped on the glass.

“Hey, it’s me,” she whispered, her voice suddenly growing hoarse.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” Tyomka poked his bloated face out the window.

“I think we should run away. We’ll climb Honey Mountain, spend the night there, and then decide what’s next. Let them kiss and hug their darling Ilichka all they want. That’ll leave us plenty of time to decide our next steps, and at least we’ll be together.”

Tyomka said nothing for a while. Then, his voice dull from crying, he spoke. “I can’t run away. Besides, there’s no point. You’re going home the day after tomorrow anyway. I’m the one who’ll be stuck here with them.”

“Then I won’t leave. I’ll stay here. And so will you. We’ll live in the mountains, like savages. We’ll hunt wild boars, gather blackberries, drink from streams.”

“Then we’ll get married,” he added.

She was surprised. They’d never discussed a wedding. “Warriors don’t get married,” she whispered.

“But if we don’t get married, how can we be king and queen of the mountain?”

She hadn’t thought of that. Tyomka was right; they couldn’t be king and queen without getting married. “Fine, we’ll get married. But not right away. First, we’ll build a shack in the mountains, and a boat, and we’ll learn how to fish. Then we’ll see.”

Tyomka rested his head on the windowsill. She pulled herself up and sat down beside him. This was nearly breaking the prohibition, but just nearly. She was still outside of his shack. He was still inside.

His crying subsided. The voices of the grownups, which had been ringing out until that point, high and cheerful, from the kitchen shack and the lower yard, faded away. They must have all retired to read in bed. Her mother must have stayed back to read in the kitchen so as not to wake her up. Vita couldn't sleep in anything but pitch dark. Even a dim nightlight made her toss and turn restlessly and whine, "Mama, Mama."

The darkness around her thickened. Now she wasn't sure they'd ever make it to Honey Mountain. Tyomka trickled into the room, back to bed. She heard his breathing, soft and measured—furry ping-pong balls tapping against the thin wall. He fell asleep. The village fell asleep too. Once in a while, a plopping sounded: another ripe cherry, the size of a baby's fist, fell to the dirt of the upper yard. One of the landlady's sheep responded with a long, lamenting bleat.

From her seat, she could only picture the sea, black as tar, mockingly performing for the King and Queen, Ivan the Robber, the Golden Gate, the Devil's Finger, and the Portrait of the Bearded Poet (though he could not be seen from their side of the mountain). Sea lavenders and limoniums whispered on the mountain slopes, both purple and dry. Tomorrow, she would climb up Honey Mountain with her mother to gather a small bouquet—a prickly souvenir to place in a vase before they travel back north, home.



## “The Third Sin”

There were five carnations, red as blood, real nice and pretty, flowers of the revolution. Five erect heads whose petals have yet to open completely, presented atop dark green stems, long and straight like Robin Hood’s arrows. Masha loved Robin Hood better than Peter Pan, because Peter was just another mean boy, while Robin stole from the evil, greedy rich and gave to the poor, just like any Communist worth his salt. Occasionally, she loved Peter, too, but she was convinced that if he ever visited her, he would break her heart, just like he’d done to Wendy Darling and the others. Though she was only five years old, Masha was an expert on heartache and communism.

Masha gazed at the bouquet as if hypnotized, curled up against the tall cushions at the far corner of the large, carpeted sofa. Her heart went out to the crimson wonder that had erupted in the middle of this freezing, snowy December. Mama had come home from school in the early afternoon, pale and tired. The low, gray skies of the northern city weighed heavy upon her head. The flowers, bundled in gray wrapping paper, were shielded from the cold inside her thick, purple woolen scarf. The drops of water on the ends of the stems clustered into delicate frost ornaments against the rolled paper and wool fibers, melting as soon as she entered the heated apartment.

A potbellied crystal vase was pulled out of the glass cabinet, filled halfway with lukewarm water, and carefully filled with five real nice and pretty carnations in perfect order, each flower tucked into its own crystal wedge. Once, Masha asked Mama why she always bought five-flower bouquets. Mama wouldn’t answer, but Grandma reproached Masha, explaining that only an odd number of flowers would do. “Even numbers are for the grave. Living people buy odd numbers, and three flowers are not enough for your Mama, because she’s got money to waste.”

“Money isn’t everything,” Mama barked. “And a three-flower bouquet is just sad.”

A low afternoon sun suddenly emerged from behind the icy-blue windowpane, glimmering over the crystal openwork, blackening the large dining table, silently charging the crimson heads, which now resembled the eternal flames at the center of the Tomb

of the Unknown Soldier. Masha had seen photographs of the tomb and the flame at the end of the thick book about the Great Patriotic War. This book was forbidden, because in addition to the photos of the tomb, there were also black-and-white images of dead people. Some of them were hanging from nooses; others were tossed naked and shot in pits; and others yet, shockingly pale and skinny, were crawling among the snow piles along the city's streets and bridges. She recognized the city easily. The bridges over the river and the embellished copper railings had remained untouched.

A woolen silence was sporadically interrupted by the rustling of the water trapped in the heating system. Grandma had yet to return from her evening shift. Mama fell asleep after dozens of valerian drops. A touch of the medicine's pungent odor hung in the warm air, like a reminder of some formidable mystery of the grownup world, foreign to Masha's universe.

Masha shook herself out of her reveries and got up to drag a tall wooden chair over from the phonograph corner. The seat of the chair was domed and upholstered dark brown, and the ends of its legs were pointy and uncovered. Masha therefore made sure to only drag it along the rug, never across the bare hardwood floor.

Once the chair was in the right spot, she climbed up and lifted both knees onto the table. She ran her fingertips over the hard petals and jagged edges. Carnations smelled like nothing, like snow. A clean, festive scent. She brought one curious eye closer to the flower and peeked into the tender sepal. Her eye drowned in the dozens of shades of red and pink, a living kaleidoscope, a thin, breathing tapestry.

Masha discovered the disappointing sight of a real kaleidoscope when she accidentally dropped the one she'd received a few months earlier, for her fifth birthday. It fell out of her hands as she stood on the command bridge (her mother's desk), using her makeshift telescope to examine the black, puffy sail striding toward her with its smoking cannons. All of a sudden, the two brass caps detached from the cardboard cylinder, and out spilled the glassy innards.

At the shattering racket, Grandma came running in from the kitchen, her paunch wrapped with the sails of an apron, a damp kitchen towel dangling from her shoulder like a military badge of

honor, and the sleeves of her blouse rolled up her thick arms. When she saw the glass flakes, she wrung her hands. “What did you break? The new toy Mama bought you?”

She kneeled to carefully rake the large shards. When she noticed her granddaughter preparing to jump down from the desk to help, she ordered the girl to stay put. “I don’t want you walking here with bare feet and getting cut by the glass. That’s exactly how sepsis happens. In the meantime, take that rag off of your head and fold it real nice and pretty back in the closet.” Grandma juttled her chin toward the red silk strand her mother liked to wrap around her neck on warmer days, which was now tied around Masha’s head in perfect pirate fashion. “Thank goodness it’s just the toy and not the thermometer,” Grandma grumbled as she returned to the kitchen to get the broom. Masha knew that breaking a thermometer was a serious misdemeanor. It was impossible to track down every tiny silver ball. Some would remain buried forever under the furniture, and mercury inhalation was even worse than sepsis.

But now the memory of the shattered kaleidoscope had fled her mind, and all that was left was the charm of the flowers. Stunned with their beauty, Masha bated her breath, which wheezed slightly due to constant mucus. If only the bouquet belonged to her alone, her own private, magical, enchanted treasure. The silence around her thickened, reddened, ripened.

Finally, she descended from the table, sliding slowly from the chair to the rug, so as not to wake up Mama. If Mama woke up and still had a headache, Masha would have hell to pay. If not through a slap then through a word of snarky malice, or worse—the silent treatment.

Masha tiptoed into her bedroom. When she passed the closed door of her grandmother and mother’s shared bedroom, she held her breath a second time.

Masha’s room was fabulous. A matching furniture set of bright green particle board and unfinished wood; a thick ceiling shade printed with enormous orange sunflowers; long, heavy drapes made of the same sunflowered fabric and alternately standing in for a dungeon or Tom Sawyer’s cave; Swedish wallpaper with a design of willow stamens and pale rose petals. Secretly, Masha used to smear



drippings of green snot over the wallpaper, making sure to stay on the stamens so that her mother wouldn't find out. The wall across from the bed was installed with shelves crowded with books: thin ones, which Masha could read by herself, and grownup-looking books with hardcovers and pages bare of illustrations. And there were drawers overflowing with dolls and toys; a desk covered with a glass plate, underneath which Mama and Masha had arranged their favorite reproductions: Degas's *Blue Dancers*, *The Rooks Have Come Back* by Savrasov, and Kiprensky's *Portrait of A.S. Pushkin*, bathed in its chilled brownness. In the portrait, the poet's right shoulder is covered with a homey checkered woolen shawl, and his gaze is angled toward the right, thoughtful and closed-off. Though Masha knew the artists' names by heart, she was always anxious about failing Mama's pop quizzes. When she did answer all the "And who painted this one?" questions promptly and correctly, she enjoyed a "That's my girl!" look.

But to Masha, the bedroom's pièce de résistance was not the fine furniture or even the large toy chest underneath the bed, containing countless treasures (a lifelike crossbow, a black pirate sword, and letter-faded wooden blocks for building forts and castles). The finest item in her room was a tiny dollhouse concealed on a little shelf.

This was no ordinary dollhouse, like the one owned by her neighbor Yulia—who was also the only daughter of a Jewish family and lived in the same section of the railroad building on 6 Shostakovich Street, with its many stories and entrances. Yulia was older than Masha by one year and one month, and her parents were busy engineers. She spent most of her afternoons and evenings in the company of her grandmother, a refined elderly widow and a retired German teacher. Once, in the middle of a game of hide-and-seek, Masha hid in Yulia's grandmother's room, underneath an enormous armchair covered in a silk sheet with brown tassels. Through the tassels, Masha watched Yulia's grandmother slip into the room and pull a white fabric bundle from underneath her mattress. She unfolded the bundle carefully on the desk, gathered invisible crumbs with bird-like fingers, and swallowed them down. Only when she fished a fresh slice of bread, which still carried the aroma of the oven, from the pocket of her house robe, did Masha realize that a stale slice

had been concealed in the handkerchief. Yulia's grandmother swaddled the fresh slice with utter devotion, then finally buried the precious bundle deep underneath her mattress, and left the room with the same soft, stealthy step. Yulia, who never imagined that Masha would be able to hide in her grandmother's room unnoticed, continued wandering through the apartment, calling over and over again, "Masha! Mashka! Where are you? Come out!" Only after thirty minutes had elapsed and the grandmother had intervened, did Masha crawl out of her hiding place and declare victory.

There was one advantage in spending time in Yulia's apartment—her friend's grandmother had relatives in the good part of Germany, who sent over clothes and toys the likes of which Masha had never seen before, neither in the shops nor in her other friends' closets. Among other valuables, she had puzzles made of thick cardboard coated in shiny lacquer, adorned with stylized, detailed designs, as well as a two-story dollhouse with an attic and a yard, and six spacious rooms furnished with light, bright plastic pieces.

But despite the grandeur of Yulia's dollhouse, Masha was convinced that her own tiny structure, a gift her mother had brought back from Tallinn, was immeasurably prettier. Her single-story dollhouse, handmade with delicate precision, a masterpiece of carving and engraving, included kitchen cabinets whose doors were painted the dark green of pine needles, a wide dining table, a porcelain sink with a tiny brass tap, minuscule kitchenware, and a little reading nook, which contained a bookcase, an armchair upholstered with orange fabric, and a standing lamp with an orange shade.

Masha's dollhouse was uninhabited. From time to time, she allowed one of the poopsies—tiny suckling babies made of hollow plastic—to take a tour. But this home was intended for grownups, not infants, and Masha owned no suitable dolls. One day, Yulia told her that in capitalist America there were tall, long-legged dolls with a painted girl's face and real hair, flowing and brushable. Yulia also confided that these women-dolls had breasts, a butt crack, and another crack—the secret one, the one at the bottom of the belly. Masha's attentive ear grew hot. She pretended to busy herself searching for a missing piece of the puzzle she was solving and then retired to her own apartment shortly thereafter, excusing herself to complete

chores she didn't actually have. Masha thought at length about this fantastical woman-doll but refused to believe it truly existed. Though Yulia had sworn she'd seen one with her own eyes when visiting a girl whose parents were party members and could afford the wonders of capitalism, Yulia herself did not own such a doll, and Masha was convinced that she herself would never own one either. Her gorgeous doll apartment therefore stood empty.

But a single piece of oddly shaped cardboard laden with knobs and holes had managed to sneak into the apartment and claim squatting rights. It was painted with half of Robin Hood's head, wearing a green beret, and his face, a handsome young man's face, filled with brash boldness. It was one of a 100-piece puzzle of Robin Hood and his Merry Men driving away the Sheriff of Nottingham's brutes. Yulia spent days searching for the missing piece, burrowing under the furniture and the rugs, checking dozens of other puzzle boxes, even digging through her mother's German vacuum cleaner's dust tank. But that entire time, the missing piece was set in a far corner of Masha's dollhouse, keeping watch over the reading nook with one sparkling, stouthearted eye.

Masha walked into her bedroom, closed the door carefully behind her, not letting it slam, and turned toward the dollhouse. First, she shifted the kitchen cabinets and pulled out a rectangular paper cutter from behind them. She slipped the paper in between two tightly squeezed books, so that their hardcovers could complete the task of smoothing it out. Then she returned to the dollhouse, nudged the armchair, placed the dining table in the middle of the room, and arranged the four chairs a small distance away, one on each side. Then she pulled out plates, bowls, cups, and glasses from the cabinets, and tiny forks and knives from a little drawer, and set the table. The glasses to the left of the plates, same for the forks. The knives to the right. When she finished setting the table, she pulled the paper rectangle from between the books and went to her desk. She kicked off her slippers and folded her legs underneath her on the soft, upholstered chair. Her feet, wrapped in a pair of old, fleecy cotton tights, rubbed together mindlessly once and again, trapped underneath her buttocks. An excited heat took hold of her—not the caressing warmth of the heater, but a ticking chill that hinted at

sickness, cooling and scorching in turns. She placed the cool back of her hand on her forehead. She reached no conclusions, because her hand was warmer than her forehead, but the dizziness persisted. Masha recalled that in order to accurately check her temperature, her mother used to kiss her forehead with her lips, which were pursed with concern, a fluttering touch that lingered only for a moment, though Masha wished it would go on for longer. She considered taking the thermometer from the vanity in Mama and Grandma's room but waved off the thought immediately. Instead, she lifted herself from the chair, pressed her forehead against the cold glass plate of the desk, and closed her eyes. A pleasant sensation spread through her. She pushed her forehead against the glass as hard as she could, careful not to fall off her seat. Then she opened her eyes. The colorful reproductions were so close, a terrifying, microscopic proximity; she could spot minuscule wrinkles in the chrome paper and imperceptible scratches on the glass surface. The blue dancers rustled their tutus; the rooks flapped their wings above the naked trees; and Pushkin fixed his eyes on hers, urging her to hurry up.

She raised her head. She had to finish the card. A week ago, she'd started preparing a secret card made of fine, firm paper that she'd cut out of a book of aquarelles. She painted it using the new watercolors that resembled double-wrapped pralines: wrapped once with tinfoil, then with a regular paper printed with the name of the color alongside a square of the very same color. She'd created a wonderful card, floral and sunny, the back of it devoid of all stains. But the water she used to paint the background had distorted the paper, so she had to locate a hiding place that would double as a flattener and a fastener.

This would be the first time that, alongside the traditional drawing, she would write a greeting in cursive letters. She's known how to write and read print for six months now, but she'd only recently learned to write in cursive, like a big girl. First, she'd write down the numbers—two and eight—then on the next line, she would write, "To my beloved Mamochka." Then, on the last line, aligned to the right and in smaller letters, "From Masha." Masha had practiced writing the words over and over again on the back of a lined notebook. She'd acquired her mother's age and a sample of the

words from Grandma, who wrote them for her on a separate piece of paper.

Masha pulled a small wooden ruler and a pencil from her stationery drawer, sharpened the pencil, careful not to break the tip, and drew three lines on the back of the card—three near-invisible lines, two centimeters apart. Then she sharpened the pencil again and began to write, slowly and with effort, her tongue sticking out and her nose wheezing meekly. When she finished, she leaned back and examined the result with satisfaction. Finally, she smoothed out the card and tucked it back in its place behind the dollhouse kitchen cabinets. Then she pulled out a pair of heavy scissors with rounded handles wrapped with orange plastic. She liked to play with the handles, pulling them open and pretending they were strange glasses. Her mother liked to joke that she'd end up cutting her nose off, and her grandmother cried that she could poke her eyes out.

Masha soundlessly opened her bedroom door and listened intently to the sounds of the apartment. The quiet rested over the space like a thick comforter, but the sun had disappeared. A thin dimness, emanating the scent of lavender, spilled in from the open windows and spread through the home, starting in the corners, then flooding the rooms. Mama was still asleep.

When Grandma came home, the silence was broken at once. Her keys jangled in the double locks, her heavy, locally made boots (“Not the Austrian garbage your mother spends a fortune on, then walks around all winter long with wet feet and a dripping nose”) treaded confidently over the hardwood of the foyer, sounding the ruckus of a warring battalion.

“Is anyone alive in here?” Grandma’s voice echoed through the space of the apartment, filling Masha with burning joy. *Babushka! Babushka is home!*

She rushed out of her room and skipped over to Grandma, hurrying to wrap her arms tightly around the woman’s thick hips, to bury her head in the big, soft, comforting gut.

“All right, all right. Let me take off my jacket. It’s so hot in here!”

“You know, Babushka, I have something so pretty to show you!” Masha prattled, her thin voice soaring to fill the apartment.

“Where’s Mama?” Grandma asked, paying no mind to her granddaughter’s statement. She turned to the kitchen and began to unpack the groceries she’d carried in a collapsible, knitted shopping bag, a bag that reminded Masha of a stately lady’s elegant hairnet.

“She’s asleep. She has a headache.”

“Asleep again? What about food? Did she make anything?”

“No, but I’m not hungry, Babushka. Come on, I’ve got to show you something so pretty!”

“Fine, fine. You’re a pain in my ass. You’ve got to, huh? Well, come on. What have you got to show me?”

Masha led her grandmother proudly into her bedroom, holding onto the woman’s blue apron as if onto the reins of a carriage horse.

“Well?” Grandma paused in the doorway, her eyes searching the room for something new.

Masha pulled her inside and closed the door. “First of all, this.” Masha pulled out the signed card and presented it proudly, holding the edges with her fingertips.

“What’s that? The birthday card? Very nice! Did you write it all properly? Good job, smart girl. Is that it? Can I go? Someone’s got to cook dinner for everyone.”

“No, Babushka, come here.” Masha nudged her grandmother gently toward the dollhouse. “Bend down and look.”

Grandma sighed and leaned in. She was used to her granddaughter’s inventions. Sometimes they were made of paper, other times of pine cones, acorns, or dry twigs she collected outside. That much, the mother had been right about—the girl was talented. Not in vain did she drag her frantically from art class to choir practice.

It took Grandma several seconds to notice anything different on the small, dim shelf, but when her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she bit her lower lip hard, stifling a scream.

“What’s wrong, Babushka? Isn’t it pretty?”

“It’s . . . it’s very pretty. Very. Does Mama know you cut them?”

“No, it’s a surprise!” Masha cheered.

Grandma rose back slowly, one hand supporting the small of her back, the other gripping the bookcase, then walked to the other room. Masha heard the squeaking of the opening door and the metallic click of the doorknob as it closed, followed by whispered

murmurs. Fear made its way into her heart. She padded softly out into the hallway and tried to eavesdrop on the conversation taking place behind the closed door. All of a sudden, the door banged open, and Mama, wearing a thin white nightgown and a brown Orenburg shawl around her bare shoulders, burst out. Her gorgeous, curly hair swelled wildly around her head, her large glasses rested crookedly atop her nose, and an odd expression sealed her brown eyes. Without so much as glancing at Masha, she strode into the living room. Grandma lumbered after her. Masha tiptoed behind, her footsteps inaudible.

A cry broke the quiet of the apartment. “But why?! Why?! Why did she do it? Why did she cut them? All of them! Why?! Is she an idiot? Is she evil? Why?! Does she hate me? Is she trying to spite me? She’s always trying to spite me!” The yelling was replaced by broken, unintelligible sobs.

“Shh, there, there . . . she didn’t mean it. She just wanted to do some decorating. It really does look very pretty. She wasn’t thinking.”

Masha ducked down and peeked between the legs of the adults. Five glimmering, waxy, dark green decapitated arrows, long and straight, were perfectly arranged inside the crystal vase, which was powerfully illuminated by the eight electrical pears of the grand chandelier.

“Of course she wasn’t thinking! Does she ever think about anyone but herself? Evil girl! Evil!” Mama stumbled out of the living room, her face red and puffy, her eyes burning and her nose dripping. Masha flinched and retreated. Grandma appeared behind Mama, overtook her, dragged Masha into her bedroom, and slammed the door behind her, blocking the exit with her body. “That’s it! Enough with the hysterics! Big deal, flowers! We’ll buy new ones tomorrow. She didn’t mean it. She wanted it to look pretty.”

“Sure, pretty. Pretty for her. Only for her! Always only for her!” Mama raised a skinny, bare hand and punched a single, lonely fist against the closed door. “I waited in line for hours. In the freezing cold. Hours, just to have flowers for . . . tomorrow.” She started crying again, a small, soft cry.

“Shh . . . it’s all right. She’s a good girl. She loves you. You love her too. Enough. The gals will come tomorrow—your friends. You’ll

sit, you'll gossip. He'll call too. Maybe even tonight. Or tomorrow." Grandma's voice poured more and more comforting words. Her bony hands caressed her daughter's curls, smoothing the shawl around her shoulders. "Go get dressed, you'll catch cold. Go."

Behind the closed door, Masha stood, petrified, her legs squeezed together. Her stomach growled. The voices outside her door dwindled and retreated, and she herself dwindled and retreated from the words. A thick dimness poured from outside through the two large windows which have yet to be draped shut. Masha didn't dare press the light switch. Mechanically, she kicked off her slippers and placed them side by side by the bed, pulled off her tights and hung them neatly on the back of the chair. The green feet of the tights draped down, unreal, barely visible in the dimness. She closed her eyes and began walking forward, barefoot, first on the cool hardwood floor, then on the old rug that was only spread over the floor of her room in winter. She held her arms out to her sides and put one foot in front of the other, silently, like a tightrope walker crossing a gaping abyss. The rug ended and the cold floor stung her bare feet once more. Finally, when she reached the windows, she could not go any further, and she opened her eyes again. Now she noticed that some snowflakes, few and far apart, had started falling, gathering slowly into small piles on the exterior windowsills, painting the rusty playground, the burst asphalt roads, and the hunchbacked street lamps with a thin, white brush, disguising the surrounding buildings, the ugly doppelgängers of her own, with their illuminated and dark windows—rows upon rows of twinkling squares that seemed to be made of tinfoil, as well as blackened, dead ones.

She felt a sudden urge to open one of the windows, but the latch was too high to reach without dragging the chair over. Instead, she turned to one of the drapes that were bundled into a thick, flowing fabric scroll and wrapped it around her body. Inside of the drape, the darkness became complete. Masha widened her eyes but could see nothing, as if she were in the belly of a sunken ship. As if her eyes had been poked out by a crow's beak. Her breathing turned heavy, wheezing, and monsters emerged from within the dimness, sorcerers and witches who stole lifetimes away from children, satanic robbers whose sole wish was to make innocent humans walk the



plank and slit their throats, pretty stepmothers whose true, evil faces were revealed only when reflected in the pure water of a pond. She pushed away the ends of the drape, fighting for breath, dropped to the floor, and crawled away on all fours. She crawled quickly, like a baby, until she reached the tiny dollhouse shelf.

The room was cloaked in darkness. The child sat, limbs gathered, on the rug. A meek, milky light beamed from the rectangular card she held in her hand, and her face stared motionlessly at the dollhouse, where Robin Hood's half-face was boiling a tiny pot of water for four marvelous crimson heads, which sat, each in its own seat, around the set dining table, while the fifth dozed off in the orange armchair, a tiny book at its side.

*The Harbinger of Good* by  
Shalom Bekache, 1884

*Translated from Judeo-Arabic by Avner Ofrath*



## Translator's Introduction

Nationhood, philosophy, girls' education, money—these are some of the issues discussed in this text by Shalom Bekache (1848–1927), a rabbi, *shohet* (butcher), journalist, publisher, and bibliophile whose life's trajectory was as meandering as the themes discussed in this text. A native of Mumbai, Bekache was ordained as rabbi in Safed, Palestine, before settling in Algiers in 1878, where he became a prominent voice of the Jewish Enlightenment movement—the Haskalah—and a pioneering figure of Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic publishing in the Maghrib. Having published his first articles in the Hebrew newspapers of Europe, Bekache soon turned to Judeo-Arabic writing in an attempt to spread the word of education, literacy, and piety in the Arabic vernacular spoken by most strata of Algerian Jewish society. With a publishing house, a newspaper, a steady flow of books and dense ties with journals and publishing houses across the Mediterranean, Bekache was a central figure in the coming of Judeo-Arabic political writing.

But who was this man of letters? Through what eyes did he see the seas he crossed—the Arab Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Mediterranean? What traces did the mix of French, Arabic, Spanish, and Hebrew that he heard in Algiers as he was making his way from the old synagogue to his home in the lower Casbah leave in his mind? Vast and bewildering though it must have been, the world in which he lived and sought to find a way had little to do with the identitarian categories with which the readers, writers, influencers, and feed-scrollers of the early twenty-first century make sense of their world.<sup>1</sup> Looking for traces of introspection in Bekache's writing seems a futile endeavor. Even the one note about his childhood in Mumbai is laconic, shorn of any adjectives or descriptions that may suggest a narrative of belonging, coming of age, formation. For all the changes and exchanges of Bekache's life across and between three continents, the coordinates of his intellectual world at first seem so clear and so unquestionable that they require little elaboration. The world that we find reflected through his writing is one where Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> Marglin, "Mediterranean Modernity," 36–40.

existence is defined, shaped, and governed by the Torah and the Halakhah, a world of lasting, binding piety throughout and despite two millennia of exile.

And yet uncertainty is everywhere in this text—the preface to *Mevasser Tov*, a collection of *midrashim* (exegeses), tales, geographic descriptions, and historical narratives. It is in the very effort to master the locals’ dialect; in its unstandardized grammar, syntax, or spelling; in its repetitions in Hebrew, Arabic, and French; in the erratic use of *midrashim* and a search for a linguistic register in which to address one’s readers; in the emphasis, time and time again, of the merit and wisdom of the Torah in a land subjected to penetrative, French colonial rule; in the closing sentences, in which Bekache rebukes the members of his congregation for refusing to listen to those wishing to bring to them knowledge and wisdom.

It is this tension between certitude and confusion that I have sought to bring to the fore with this translation of the second half of the preface—and it is this unorganized character of this text that the very act of selection and translation cannot possibly reproduce. In seeking to make this text legible, approachable, I have—consciously but reticently—removed some of its characteristic irregularities. I have omitted repetitions, separated paragraphs into sentences, and added punctuation marks. And by the very act of creating an *English* translation, I have left out the amalgam of Algerian Arabic, Baghdadi Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic, French, and Spanish words, phrases, and structures that constituted the textual world of Jewish life before monolingualism.

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ספר

# מבשר טוב

מישמיע שלום מבישר טוב מישמיע

ישועה (ישעיה כ"ז)

האר למצהאפ הווא נתאע לכראיפ ולאבן וואחד  
אלי יקרא פיה ייאכר גוסטו כואפ לאיין גא מכללט  
מן כל אטבאע „כראיפ „ מעשיות „ משלים „  
מוסר „ דבריו חכמה „ חוואיין נתאע אייאם לאוול „  
חוואיין נתאע האר לאייאם „ וגמיע אלי יחאב שי  
חאנה יציב פיה ומאזאל מא כרגש מצהאפ כיפו  
פלאגא דל יהוד נקלתום מן למצאחיפ אלי מאשי  
טונגדין ובתבתום אנא אוניד פל עאקל וזניד פנאם :

הצעיר שלום בכאש ס"ט

געשה ונגמר פה אלגיר המעטירה כשנת זרח -

השמש - בצאתו לפיק אלי הווא עאם

1884 לחסאב אנצארא

פה ליוורנו יע"א

עי שלמה בילפורטי העבירו

The front matter of *The Harbinger of Good*, as published in 1884. The title and subtitle (a verse from Isaiah) are in Hebrew, while the description of the book below them is in Judeo-Arabic.



## From *The Harbinger of Good*

There is no holy nation and there are no righteous people upon the earth like Israel. For after living under foreign nations' rule in exile without a judge, a sultan, a territory, or a realm of our own, we are not concentrated in one place. [ . . . ] And, God be Blessed, there are still Jews in the world, and even after almost two thousand years of exile we are still Jews and the Holy Torah is still among us, while other nations who were in the world in early times and ruled the earth have now mixed with other nations and became like them and no trace of them remains. And we, the Jews, also mixed with all other nations and still we remain separate in our spirit and are still Jews. And whoever claims that we mixed with the Christians and that nothing remains that can be called Jewish understands nothing, for the Holy Torah commands us to be "a people who live apart and do not consider themselves one of the nations."<sup>2</sup> Whoever can see clearly will recognize the wonder that for almost two thousand years we are in exile among the nations and still we haven't mixed with them and are still Jewish and will understand that there is nothing in the world but God, blessed be His name, and will understand that our Torah is still true and valid and her age does not diminish her words, God forbid.

[ . . . ]

Of course, we see that there are many people who forgot their religion and have no interest in matters of religion. But the reason for that is the exile, where we live among other nations. And so our knowledge of the Torah is diminished to the extent that people do not know even the blessing of the Torah, and there remains in them no respect for the Torah and no awe before God, blessed be His name. And indeed, several people have said to me, "What is the wisdom of the Torah and where is Her virtue beyond saying 'this is allowed and this is prohibited, that thing you should do and that thing you shouldn't do'" [ . . . ] And that stems from the fact that they do not read the Torah and do not know any of her good and virtue. And especially the girls, who do not read anything in the Torah but

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<sup>2</sup> Quotation from the Book of Numbers, chapter 23, verse 9.



read everything in the texts of the Christians, and they say “there is only virtue among the Christians,” and they go on to marry and have children and teach them only the things of the Christians and that is how the Torah and the religion decline.

And while I was in India, I saw there girls and women reading the Torah just like men, in the morning the wife sits down and prays the prayer word for word and the children pray with her, and in the same manner they say the *Birkat hamazon* after meals<sup>3</sup> with their children when they eat and read *Hok l'Yisrael*<sup>4</sup> every day. And the reason is that the rich [Jews] of India have built schools with their money for the sake of the Jews, where both boys and girls learn the Torah and English and so when they leave school they know the Torah [ . . . ]

And another reason for the decline of our religion is the freedom and liberty brought to us by the Christians.<sup>5</sup> Such an effort we make to receive the knowledge of the Christians and achieve liberty that the knowledge of the Torah declines and nothing remains of our religion. Thus said Our Sages, blessed be their memory, in their story about an old man who married a second, younger wife alongside his first wife, and the younger wife tore out his gray hair and only combed his dark hair to make him look as young as her, and the older woman tore out his dark hair and only combed his gray hair so that he looked old like her and so he was left with no hair at all.

And we the Jews are like the man with two wives. On one side is the Holy Torah and our religion, which are like the first, older wife, wanting to strip us of everything related to the Christians, and on the other side are the schools and books of the Christians and the liberty they have recently given us, seeking to strip us of our religion and customs which are with us from olden days, and so we are left alone and do not know how to find our way in the world.

[ . . . ]

And in the eyes of many people, there are no philosophers or thinkers in the world except those of the Christians, and our

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<sup>3</sup> The traditional blessing of food.

<sup>4</sup> Texts designed for daily or weekly study of the Torah.

<sup>5</sup> Bekache uses both the Hebrew *herut* and the French *liberté*. Since this is a recurrent pattern, I have chosen to keep the repetition in the translation.

# הקדמת הספר

## סנג'ק אל אחדות ולחק

אסייידנא עליהם השלום קאלו פֿל גמרא  
 וואחד גוי אראח לענד בית שמאי קאללו עלמני  
 אתורה עלא רגל ווהרא בית שמאי טרדוהו לדאך  
 לגוי (בַּאֲמַת הַבְּנִיּוֹן) פֿל דראע נראע לבנייאן ולגוי  
 אראח לענד בית הלל קאללום עלמוני אתורה עלא  
 רגל וואחד קאללו בית הלל פֿתורה מכתובה וְאֶהְבֶּתָּ  
 לְרַעְךָ כְּמוֹךָ אֲנִי ה' חב יקול חאגה אלי הייא דוני לך  
 מא תעמלאש לצחבך והאדי הייא אתורה כאמלא האד  
 לכלאם נתאע אסייידנא פֿל גמרא :

ואחנא יסטחקלנא נפהאמו עלאש בית שמאי  
 מא קאלולוש כיפ אלי קאללום בית הלל „ ועלאש  
 טרדוהו פֿדראע לבנייאן וחאגה גריבא אלי האד לגוי  
 כיפ וואחד למהבול אלי אראח יקוללום באש יעלמוהו  
 אתורה עלא רגל וואחד האיידא הווא אטריקא אלי  
 יחאב יתעללם אתורה ?

ולאכן אל מפרשים קאלו פי האד לְמַאֲמַר וואחד  
 לכלמא רכיסא פֿדייאמאנט אלי האד לגוי כאן וואחד  
 לכיים ופילוסופֿ כביר בייא אראח לענד בית שמאי  
 א וקאללום

*Hakhamim* do not know anything about the world, and so I thought I should write in this book a few words from my knowledge to show that our *Hakhamim* have been thinkers and philosophers before the Christians and before all other nations in this world. And even in these days, God be Blessed, there are among us the Jews great philosophers like those of the Christians [ . . . ]

And I am amazed how every month we bless *Rosh Hodesh*<sup>6</sup> in the synagogue, saying, “May it be your will to bring us the *Hakhamim* of Israel, them and their children and all that belongs to them,”<sup>7</sup> but when one of them comes to us, we despise and reject him and in order to ignore him, we say, “We do not need you, go out and learn, do not preach at us.” In the synagogue we say a prayer for them to come to us, and in reality we do not understand them. One Jew answered me and told me, “We do not pray for the *Hakhamim* of these days, but for those of former days.” And he was right in his answer. For indeed, those of the *Hakhamim* of Israel who lived in former days and passed away, may their memory be blessed, and are now under the earth—for them we pray for God to bring them, even though they are under the earth. [ . . . ] And may God elevate us from the ignorance in which we are today and lead us to a state as in the sentence “Israel, in which I shall have pride.” And I named this book *The Harbinger of Good* as in the verse in the Book of Psalms, “he who proclaims peace and brings good,” for I ask God nothing but the peace and good for the People of Israel in its entirety.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The holiday of the Beginning of the Month.

<sup>7</sup> From the Blessing of the Beginning of the Month.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, the verse is from Isaiah 52:7.

*Rotten Society* by  
Shemtov Revah, 1930

*Translated from Ladino by Amanda Schwartz  
and Marina Mayorski*



## Translators' Introduction

The novel *Sochetá podrida: Shenás dela vida reala de Salonika* (*Rotten Society: Scenes of Real Life in Salonika*) by Shemtov Revah was published around the end of 1930. It was written in Ladino using the Rashi script, which was commonly used to print Ladino works, but by this time was already replaced by the Latin script in places that became part of the Turkish Republic. The story is set in Salonika (Thessaloniki), Greece, a city that had become home to a large Sephardic community after their expulsion from Spain. The city had been under Ottoman control before it was annexed by Greece in 1913, which is reflected in the use of vocabulary derived from both Turkish and, to a lesser extent, Greek in the novel.

Until the Balkan Wars (1912–13) and the city's annexation by Greece, Salonika was known across the Jewish world as the only place where Jews were the majority population and was often referred to as “Jerusalem of the Balkans” and “City and Mother in Israel.” At the time this novel was published, the city still had a substantial Jewish population, though it had decreased significantly as a result of wars, emigration, and the Great Fire of 1917, which burned through the city. The fire left more than 50,000 Jewish residents homeless. Half of the population emigrated while many others were pushed to the suburbs of the city.<sup>1</sup> By the end of the Second World War (1939–45), more than 90 percent of the city's remaining Jewish residents had been killed. *Rotten Society* is one of a handful of novels narrating the last decade in the existence of this once robust Jewish community.

The novel is set in an impoverished Jewish neighborhood called Teneke Maale, whose name comes from the words for “tin quarter” in Turkish. What follows is a translation of excerpts from the first three chapters of the novel, titled “Una familia,” “Une muerte,” and “Sola en la vida.” The story follows a young Jewish woman named Sara who lives with her father and two brothers. In the preface, the author explains that the novel seeks to “walk among the masses” and “dare to see their suffering and their joys” in order to confront readers with the extent of the decay that spread in their society.

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<sup>1</sup> Naar, “Mother of Israel.”

The excerpts featured in this volume depict the death of Sara's brother and the repeated abuse she faces from her father, an unemployed alcoholic. As she cares for her brother on his deathbed, Sara expresses her anguish in a touching poem, full of pathos, that captures her loneliness and despair. The use of poetry to address everyday occurrences and concerns were very common and appeared often in the Ladino press. Amplifying the voice of the individual, such poems employed structures and themes of traditional Sephardic songs to portray contemporary issues such as military conscription, emigration, economic hardship, and even things like the rise in coffee prices.<sup>2</sup> The use of this popular genre within the novel demonstrates the diverse nature of Ladino literary culture and the multitude of forms used by Ladino speakers to express their experiences and especially the hardships they endured in the twentieth century.

The novel's hair-raising account of depravity, violence, extreme poverty, and disease serves its educational purpose, as it proclaims on the title page that "in this novel our readers will see and judge the consequences of alcohol." In this regard, it partakes in the long tradition of educational writing in Ladino, which was especially common in newspapers and magazines that sought to eradicate behaviors such as drinking and gambling as well as to educate readers on a wide range of issues, from moral etiquette and child-rearing to nutrition, fashion, and hygiene.<sup>3</sup> By employing fiction to edify and inculcate the masses, the novel also aligns itself with the broader tradition of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment movement, that spearheaded the emergence of modern Jewish literature with the explicit aim of modernizing and rectifying Jewish customs and behaviors.

*Rotten Society* can be perceived as evidence of the narrative of decline that often governs historical accounts of Salonika's Jewish community. This narrative begins with the wealthy, robust society that emerged in the city after the resettlement of Jewish refugees from Spain and ends with the murder of most of its inhabitants in the Second World War. But it can also be seen as an example of the diverse literary corpus that emerged in this city, one of the largest

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<sup>2</sup> Weich-Shahak, "Shire aktu'alia be-ladino."

<sup>3</sup> Stein, *Making Jews Modern*, 124–147.

printing centers in the Jewish world. We can sense in it echoes of rabbinic *musar* (ethics) literature that flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, alongside reverberations of European realism and especially French authors such as Eugène Sue, Victor Hugo, and Émile Zola, who were extremely popular in the Ottoman Empire. It is therefore a quintessentially Jewish and Ottoman work of literature, weaving traditional and Western European elements in an effort to address the turbulence experienced by a community in flux.

Translating Ladino is admittedly not my usual arena as a PhD student in mathematics. However, I had the opportunity to take a course on Ladino at the University of Michigan with Dr. Gabriel Mordoch, which led me to this project. Given that Ladino is derived from medieval Spanish, I was able to build on my knowledge of Spanish while also picking up new vocabulary from other languages along the way. I greatly enjoyed working on this translation and hope to have done it justice.

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# סוג'יטע פודרידה

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שינאם דילע בידה ריאיה די סאלוניכו

## קאפיטולו 1

### אונג פיאטוריה

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אדיינער די אונג קאליקס, איסקעלע, אידי איל גואיזנו אידי-  
קונפוטראצלי דילע (גואה קי קי פחיתים היי, איגלה די עולאק לאק  
סארטיק, דילאק צארקאק צינאק אונדי קי צין לאק, קיניאלים ציין  
אנגאק דילע פדיטה מיזירייה נוראצא אונג פאנילייה קונפוטראקט די  
דוק איזוס, אונג איזיקה, איל קאסו דילע פאנילייה, ציידו.  
לע אינטראדה דיל קורטיזו אונדי קי אמבונאצאן אונג א-  
לאדו די אונג איסקאק צארקאק—סור טון דיזיר גיזור—איסקאק  
פאנילייה, עייני איל אסקיקטו דיל ציזו קורטיזו דיל סאקו אונדי  
לוק גריטוס אי לאק גואליאק טון נאנקאצאן.  
אי פורטאטו אציהה אחי אדיינער טאנעאק נוצלים אלמאק,

The opening page of *Rotten Society*, 1930.

## From *Rotten Society*

### 1. “Una familia”

On a narrow street, where the smell of the water from the neighboring barracks was unbearable, where one could see the signs of dark misery, lived a family of two sons, a young daughter, and the head of the family—a widower.

The old courtyard where the barracks—or rather, these families—were stacked one on top of the other looks like a place where there is no shortage of cries. And, inside, there were so many noble souls, so many pious hearts, that although they didn’t have much, they wanted to help each other. The wretched poor pitied more those that suffered a little bit more than them.

And, it is in this moment that we see the neighborhood rush to help a young girl, with her hair undone, barefoot, and with torn clothes, who came out of the barracks followed by an old man who, trembling with rage, told her:

“Wretched, dirty girl! You’re going to tell me not to drink *raki*. I want to drink, look at what will take you from this world!”

And looking at the neighbors, he entered inside, murmuring, “Horrible people, ‘protecting’ me from *raki*!”

And the young girl was brought inside a barrack and sat down on a chair by some pious neighbors. As she was soothed and her clothes mended, she cried slowly to the quiet women.

At that moment, the older brother David—also brutalized by alcohol—came into the courtyard. Like his father, he was without work and dedicated himself to drinking, followed around by the police. He had no other comfort but drinking, making the life of the family hell. This afternoon, he ordered his sister to get up: “Ay! Sarika, why don’t you come get me something to eat, I want to lie down! Did you hear me or not?”

Reluctantly, the girl got up and went to the kitchen to make him food. While carrying the food, her younger brother Isaac came through the door. He was an intelligent young man, unlike his older brother. Having been in many gatherings, learning much about life, it was with disgust that he entered his house.

It wasn't the misery that scared him, being that he had already suffered quite a lot. But the disgust that it provoked in him was caused by the sight of his big brother and his father. The moral authors of his mother's death.

And if it weren't for his little sister, young with blue eyes and a round face that was marked by cries and deprivation, he would have already abandoned this house, taken a chance, so that he no longer had to see the scenes that made him anxious.

Raising her eyes, Sarika noticed that her brother Isaac entered.

"Come in Isaac, you don't want to eat?"

"No, little sister, I don't feel like it."

"You're going to eat, I insist!"

"Look, you bastard," the father jumps in, "she's begging that he eats! First he has to bring money!"

[. . .]

"I don't have any money because it's not payday. If it's for *raki*, I'm not going to give you money ever! Look at where *raki* brought you already; you were a lion, no one could put a foot in front of you, and now you've become a hunchback."

"Me! A hunchback!"

And the father lifts the tin cup from the table, which he threw at Isaac.

"Ha! Ha! David jumps up laughing, have a good shower!"

He couldn't see that it hit Isaac's head and he fell, swimming in a pool of his blood.

Sarika ran to his aid. She called him, but he did not respond. Like a madwoman, she ran for help while the father and the son laughed indifferently.

For the second time, the neighbors rushed in, lifted the young man and put him in bed. They cleaned the blood and eventually he came to. He turned his glance to his sister. The girl was at his side, crying.

2. "Una muerte"

Autumn had passed and the rigorous winter, with all its evils, had returned for the families in the barracks, most of all for the poor ones.

In Sarika's barrack, the darkest misery reigns. Because of a financial crisis, the principal winners ravaged the furniture, and what furniture: a dining table, an old sink, and a closet were all that could be found in the barrack.

The father, not finding anyone to drink with, drank with anyone who came around, and mostly with Sara. It was she who put up with everything, hiding from her brother Isaac the suffering that her father and brother David had caused her. After some time, David had committed a large robbery, fallen into the hands of the police, and been sentenced to six months in prison.

Isaac, weak, tired from wandering the streets without being able to find any work, arrived with a piece of bread in his pocket. The poor young man found himself in a miserable state, with torn clothes, without a coat, and had become so ill that it was a miracle he'd survived. But it left him weak, and, from a lack of care, he'd developed an issue with his lungs. Isaac hid all this from his sister, who already understood the sickness with which her brother was afflicted.

But what to do? What to do? The poor boy cursed society, the vices of men and most of all capital—capital that takes everything and doesn't leave anything for the poor.

It was January, the month of harsh cold. The strong wind blew on the roofs of the barracks. The rain fell heavily, and there, in Sara's barrack, young Isaac agonized. He's nothing but a pile of bones perched on the sofa, covered by a quilt—which was only a quilt in name, so much of it was torn and filled with holes.

His sister Sarika, who sat next to him, couldn't cry anymore. She watched her brother without stopping, attentive to all his gestures. Suddenly, the agonizing Isaac calls out:

“Sara!”

“What is it, Isaac?”

“How's the weather outside? Rain, wind? Our barrack seems to be full of water!”

“No! Isaac! Sleep and get some rest!”

“Sleep! Eternal rest is already coming for me. Don't cry, Sara, I don't regret anything in life. Being that it was nothing but torment and suffering for me. I think of you, my dear sister. I don't

want to die so that I can protect you, alas! My strength has already escaped me.”

[. . .]

The air blew stronger and stronger, and the rain fell heavily. Sara’s father still hasn’t returned from the tavern. Isaac, having become tired, seemed to have fallen into a deep sleep, a sweet sleep . . . In his delirium he went on talking about his past, about dashed hopes and about his loves.

Suddenly, someone knocked on the door. Sara went to open it. It was the father, tripping from side to side, stumbling over everything on his way to the sofa where the sick man lay.

“He! The lazy one is already in the bed! Mister Isaac, you didn’t earn anything to bring something to eat?”

“You can’t eat seeing how he is, he’s going to die!”

“Die! And I’m dying to eat!”

“There isn’t anything!” she responds.

Lifting his hand he punched her and knocked her down. Crying, Sara got up and sat next to Isaac who was still asleep. Suddenly, hearing the sound of tin blown by the wind, Isaac woke up.

“Sara,” he called, “where are you? Tell me, has father come home? Tell him I forgave him, in the end he is my father, he’s the one who brought us into the world. Still, I can’t forgive the one in prison, my big brother . . . If the oldest of the family were less of an alcoholic, if he’d taken care of the family, our mother would still be alive, and we wouldn’t have suffered so much. Ah! What cursed society! Are they cursed? Those people who brought us here? Are those who don’t allow us to earn our bread through the sweat of our forehead? No! No! Better to stay quiet, to leave without worrying too much about death, about eternal sleep, and to free myself from this weight.”

“Don’t talk like that, my dear. Don’t talk too much, it will make you tired, and you’re so weak!”

“But why shouldn’t I talk, sister? Look! It’s the end! When my eyes close forever, I won’t speak anymore. Why shouldn’t I say now what I think of this cursed society?”

And he fell back against the headrest with a cough that pulled on his insides. Sara got up, crying, and began to sing:

Dark misery since I was born,  
But I saw in my dream,  
Good fortunes, riches that I didn't reach,  
And that are denied to me.

To love, I cannot love,  
Because alcohol did its work,  
Who will take a girl like me,  
When in my house consumption reigns.

For what to live, for what to endure,  
When in disgrace there is no succor,  
To see a brother dissolve in bed,  
That is why I sing.

Sleep well in peace, brother,  
Go, your sleep will be curative,  
I sing not in vain tonight,  
Because I only have you around me.

No! You're not going to the grave,  
Because I must follow you to the moment,  
God must give this well,  
Since for this life I have disgust.

As she sang, the rain fell suddenly in a flood; the father, with his hoarse voice, yelled from the bed, "Sara! Come look over here! Is water leaking?"

"I can't. You look."

In that moment, the tempest howled in all its fury. Tin pieces of the roof lifted and flew away like pieces of paper. In the courtyard, the rain was stronger. It fell heavily. Inside the barrack it looked like the sea, full of water. Suddenly, the sick man jumped up crying, "What is happening? Why is the water running? Ah! My god, I'm cold! I'm trembling! Sara . . . Goodbye my dear sister . . ."

And he fell, breathless, onto the sofa while the rain continued to fall on him, until Sara covered him with her body. In the terrible

נזיזרייה פריטה די קואנדו נאסי  
נה יו צ'אה אין נזיס איספואיכיוס  
צווריק, ריקזאס קי נון חלקאנסי  
אי קי קון פארה נזי דיכיוס.

אנאר, יו נו פואדו אנאר  
פוקי חיל חלקול חזו סו אוצרה  
חונה כינייה קונו נזי קיין צ'ה טונאר  
קואנדו אין נזי קאזה לה טיקיאה לאצורה.

פוק קואלו צ'זיר, פוק קואלו איגזיקמיר  
קואנדו אין לה דיגראסייה נון איי חון חליידאנסי  
צ'יר חון אירנאנו אין לה קאנה סי דיריטיר  
איס פוק קואלו קאלי קי יו קאנסי.

דורנזי ציין אין פאס אירנאנו  
צ'ה, טו איספואיכיו סירה נזילזינדור  
יו נון קאננו איסטה נו' אין צ'אנו  
פוקי קולו חה מי טינגו קונו דירידור.

נון ! נו מי צ'אס איר חלה פואיכה  
פוקי קאלי קי יו מי סיגואה אל פונטו  
חיל דייו די איסטו קאלי ציין דיספינסה  
סינדו דיכה צ'דה יו טינגו דיגוסטו.

Sara's poem.

night, Sara's moans could be heard through the commotion of the wind. The neighbors didn't suspect anything. And her father slept, unaware of the water that dripped all over him. With a startle, Sara found herself close to the bed where her cursed father slept:

"Get up, wretched father! Get up and see your son in bed! Get up and see who an hour ago you called lazy!"

"What are you saying?" he asked, rubbing his eyes.

“I mean that my brother died!”

The drunk father got up and looked at his son without shedding a tear and sat in a corner of the barrack. One could only hear the young girl crying bitterly for her brother. And thus passed the night, the terrible night, and in the morning the neighbors were astonished to hear about Isaac’s death.

### 3. “Sola en la vida”

The neighbors were astonished to hear of Isaac’s death. They didn’t believe that in a short time, a young man would leave for eternal rest, having only his little sister to cry for him.

The father stayed in the corner with a bottle of *raki* in his hand, casting his gaze everywhere and pausing over the dead body of his young son. It was already ten in the morning and there was no one to do the necessary procedures to take the dead man to his last resting place.

Sarika didn’t cry anymore, and it was an unemployed neighbor who took on this duty, seeing that there was no one else. Sara’s relatives came. Which relatives were those? An old woman and a distant relative and no one else. The mortuary, with its stillness of death, seemed even more melancholy than death row. This sad scene continued until midday. The neighbors came and went, with nothing to say or do but to pity the poor girl. Although she still had her father and brother, she was alone in life. It was four o’clock when time came for the bathing of the dead man. They toiled over the body. The carriage came. Isaac was put inside and, with the hurry that a child is usually carried, went on its way.

Who accompanied this young soul to its final resting place? Only his father. The criminal who indirectly killed him. The rest—his acquaintances, his friends, those whom he had seen often—had forgotten him. In this rotten society, it’s a habit to abandon the unfortunate, but when they succeed, their friendships are desired. There was no honor to be found here but that of the neighbors and the cries of the sister.

Passing through the Vardar district and the Teneke Maale, people expressed sorrow when they saw the carriage of the dead man. The cantor, instead of riding in front, didn’t wait more than one





The Jewish cemetery in Salonika on a postcard, ca. 1917.  
Held by the Special Collections Research Center,  
University of Michigan Library.

or two streets before he got up and sat next to the driver, giving the appearance of a carriage carrying cargo when it entered the cemetery.

The victim of society didn't have anyone who would shed a tear over his grave, since his father, who mistreated him, did not make the effort to come.

Sara was crying at home and thought of what her life would be now. She knew what was waiting for her.

Meanwhile, the night passed. A sympathetic neighbor had made them some pastries.

And so, father and daughter slept that night and dreamt onerous dreams. In the morning, Sara's father went out and came in falling over at midday. He didn't bother to sit *shiva*.

## Contributors

**Arianna Afsari** is a doctoral student and translator in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan. Afsari holds a BA in Russian and Post-Soviet Studies and Hispanic Studies from the College of William and Mary. Her studies span three regions and languages: Russia, Latin America, and Iran. Afsari examines traditions of guerrilla poetry and committed literature deployed as tools of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist resistance. Additional research interests include the role of violence in liberatory theory and praxis; conditions of extremity; and revolutionary, leftist imaginations.

**Frida Alexandr** (née Schweidson, 1906–1972) was a Brazilian writer. The daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants who came to southern Brazil, Alexandr was born and raised in Filipson, Rio Grande do Sul—a Jewish farming colony supported by the Jewish Colonization Association. After marrying Boris Alexandr, Alexandr moved to São Paulo where she became an active volunteer for the Women’s International Zionist Organization and wrote her only published book, *Filipson: Memories of the First Jewish Colony in Rio Grande do Sul* (1967).

**Nesi Altaras** is a Sephardic journalist, writer, and translator from Istanbul, Turkey. His work has been published in English, Turkish, and Ladino. He is currently a PhD student in History at Stanford University.

**Maya Barzilai** is a Professor of Modern Hebrew and Jewish Culture and the Director of the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan. Her research focuses on twentieth-century

Hebrew, German, and Yiddish literatures, translation theory, and visual culture. Her 2016 book, *Golem: Modern Wars and Their Monsters*, explores the mass appeal of golem narratives in the German-speaking world around World War I, as well as the ongoing association of golem figures with mass warfare and its technologies in American and Israeli cultures of the mid- to late twentieth century. It received the 2017 Jordan Schnitzer Book Award and an honorable mention for the Salo Baron Book Prize. She has also published widely on issues of translation, self-translation, and adaptation between Hebrew and German literatures. Her second book, *The Golem, How He Came into the World* (Camden House German Film Classics, 2020), is a detailed study of Paul Wegener's 1920 film, situating it in the cultural, historical, and social contexts of post-World War I Germany.

**Shalom Bekache** (1848–1927) was a Jewish author, journalist, translator, and publisher who wrote in Judaic-Arabic and Hebrew. Born in Mumbai to a Jewish family of Baghdadi origin, Bekache was ordained as a rabbi in Palestine and eventually settled in Algeria. A proponent of the Jewish Enlightenment movement (Haskalah), Bekache published articles and collections of traditional stories, first in Hebrew and later in Algerian Judeo-Arabic. Following the enthusiastic reception of *The Harbinger of Good* (*Mevaser tov*), which was published in Livorno in 1884, Bekache founded a monthly and later a weekly journal aimed at disseminating the ideas of the Haskalah in the Algerian Jewish vernacular. He went on to establish a printing press before ceasing his operations in the 1890s due to the gradual abandonment of Judeo-Arabic in favor of French under the influence of French colonial rule.

**Sara Familiant** was a Yiddish writer whose work was featured in an 1894 volume of *Hoyzfraynd*, an important five-volume anthology of Yiddish writing edited by Mordkhe Spektor and published in Warsaw. Her short story “A Modern Bride and Groom,” which appears in English translation in this issue, was previously translated to Hebrew and appeared in an anthology of Yiddish women's writing published in 2021.

**Juan Gelman** (1930–2014) was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, to a family of Jewish immigrants from Ukraine. A prolific author, journalist, and translator, Gelman is widely considered one of the most prominent, committed literary figures in the Spanish-speaking world today. His oeuvre includes over twenty collections of poetry. Gelman's first volume, *Violín y otras cuestiones* (*Violin and Other Questions*), was published in 1956, around the same time he joined the Communist Party and abandoned his university studies to work as a journalist. By the early sixties, he was deeply engaged with leftist guerrilla organizations including the *Fuerzas armadas revolucionarias* (FAR, Revolutionary Armed Forces) and the Montoneros. In 1975, he was forced to flee his homeland due to the escalating state-sponsored repression that anticipated Argentina's last military dictatorship (1976–83). In August of 1976, Gelman's son, Marcelo Ariel, and his pregnant daughter-in-law, María Claudia Iruretagoyena, were disappeared and assassinated by the Argentine military forces. Gelman would spend the next two and a half decades not only mourning his missing children and compatriots but also searching for his granddaughter born in captivity. Gelman received several literary distinctions, including the Juan Rulfo Prize in Latin American and Caribbean Literature (Mexico, 2000), the Pablo Neruda Prize (Chile, 2005), and the Cervantes Prize (Spain, 2007)—the highest literary honor in the Spanish-speaking world. He died in 2014 in his home in Mexico City, Mexico.

**Denisa Glacova** is a PhD student in the Department of Middle East Studies at the University of Michigan. Her research focuses on the relations between religiosity and secularity in Jewish literature and the Jewish press. Prior to Michigan, she studied at various European and Israeli institutions, including Charles University in Prague, the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and the Hochschule für Jüdische Studien Heidelberg. Denisa is also interested in museum education and worked in the educational teams of the Jewish Museum in Prague, Yad Vashem, and ANU - Museum of the Jewish People.

**Uri Nissan Gnessin** (1879–1913) was a Hebrew author, translator, and literary critic. Born in Starodub, in what is now Ukraine,

Gnessin wandered through the Russian Empire and spent periods of his life in London and Palestine. He received traditional Jewish education but also acquired deep knowledge in classical and modern languages and literatures. Gnessin began writing poetry as a young boy, and at the age of fifteen he began publishing a literary journal that he founded with Yosef Hayim Brener. At the age of eighteen, he moved to Warsaw and began working for *ha-Tsefirah*, a well-known Hebrew newspaper where he regularly published his poetry, prose, and literary criticism. He also translated several works from Yiddish, Russian, and German into Hebrew. He became well known for his lyrical, impressionist writing style, which was new in Hebrew literature at the time. Gnessin suffered from heart disease and died in Warsaw at age thirty-three.

**Yardenne Greenspan** is a writer and Hebrew translator born in Tel Aviv and based in New York. Her writing has been featured in *Literary Hub*, *Haaretz*, *Words Without Borders*, *Asymptote*, *Two Lines*, and *Apogee*, among other publications. Her translations have been published by Restless Books, St. Martin's Press, Akashic, Syracuse University, New Vessel Press, Amazon Crossing, and Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Her translation of *The Memory Monster* by Yishai Sarid was a 2020 *New York Times* Notable Book. She has an MFA from Columbia University and is a regular contributor to *Ploughshares*.

**Adriana X. Jacobs** is the translator of Vaan Nguyen's *The Truffle Eye* (Zephyr Press, 2021) and Merav Givoni Hrushovski's *End*—(carrion bloom books, 2023). In 2022, she won the Harold Morton Landon Translation Award. She is the author of the microcollection *Afterlife Is Sweet* (rinky dink press, 2023), and her chapbook, *The Turning*, is forthcoming from Dancing Girl Press. She is an Associate Professor of Modern Hebrew Literature at the University of Oxford.

**Jessica Kirzane** is a scholar of Yiddish studies, specializing in questions of race, gender, and regionalism in American Yiddish fiction. She has translated three Yiddish works by Miriam Karpilove: *A Provincial Newspaper and Other Stories* (Syracuse University Press, 2023), *Judith* (Farlag Press, 2022), and *Diary of a Lonely Girl*, or

*The Battle against Free Love* (Syracuse University Press, 2020). After receiving her PhD in Yiddish Studies from Columbia University in 2017, she became Assistant Instructional Professor in Yiddish at the University of Chicago, where she teaches Yiddish language and literature. She also serves as the editor-in-chief of *In geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies*.

**Rita Kogan** is a poet, translator, and writer. Born in Saint Petersburg (then Leningrad), Russia, in 1976, Kogan immigrated to Israel in 1990. She now lives in Tel Aviv. Kogan published three books of poetry—*A license to misspell* (2015), *A horse in a skirt* (2018), and *Mal De Terre* (2022)—and a collection of short stories and novellas titled *Stoneland* (2021). She is the translator of several nineteenth-century Russian literary classics into Hebrew, including *The Tale of the Dead Princess and the Seven Knights* by Alexander Pushkin. She has also translated and published poetry from Russian and French (Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Boris Pasternak, Arthur Rimbaud, Charles Baudelaire, and Paul Verlaine). Her short story “Third Sin” won the first prize in the *Haaretz* short stories contest in 2016. Her poetry collection, *A horse in a skirt*, won an honorable mention from the Presidential First Lady/Gardner Simon Prize for Hebrew Poetry in 2018. She won the Levi Eshkol Literary Award in 2022. Her poems and stories have been translated into English, French, and Russian. Kogan is currently working on her second prose book and on a collection of poetry translations from Osip Mandelstam.

**Jiří Mordechai Langer** (1894–1943) was a Jewish writer and poet from Prague. Throughout his life, Langer created texts of various genres in the Czech, German, and Hebrew languages. His avid interest in Jewish mysticism and Hasidism and his repeated visits to the Belz Hasidim in Eastern Europe significantly influenced his literary oeuvre. Similar to his poetry, which is interwoven with mystical and homoerotic motives, his book *Die Erotik der Kabbala* (The eroticism of Kabbalah, 1923) also engages with cultural and psychoanalytic discourses on homosexuality. However, to the Czech readership, he is especially known for his 1937 compilation of Hasidic tales, *Devět bran: Chasidů tajemství* (Nine gates: Hasidic mysteries). In the same

year, Langer also published his translation of a selection of Hebrew poetry from the eleventh to the eighteenth centuries titled *Zpěvy zavržených* (The songs of the rejected) into Czech.

**Hezy Leskly** (1952–1994) was an Israeli-born Hebrew poet, choreographer, and dance critic who lived most of his life in the environs of Tel Aviv, apart from a pivotal period in the Netherlands in the 1970s. These years afforded Leskly, who was openly gay, the opportunity to explore and express his sexuality without the constraints of Israeli social conventions and to develop as a poet and performance artist on his own terms. His published poetry collections include *Ha-akhbarim ve-Leah Goldberg* (The mice and Leah Goldberg, 1992), where the poem “The Rift” appears, and *Sotim yekarim* (Dear perverts, 1994), which was published shortly after his death of AIDS-related complications.

**Viktor Levi** (1865–1940) was a Sephardic journalist, writer, and translator from Istanbul. Born in 1865 and educated at least partly in French, he wrote for and edited various Ladino periodicals, joining a larger cadre of modern intellectuals. He wrote original stories and novels as well and adapted and translated works from French literature. He was an outspoken activist against sex trafficking and participated in efforts around Europe for this cause.

**Júlia Irion Martins** is a PhD candidate at the University of Michigan’s Department of Comparative Literature and Digital Studies Institute. Her research examines the ways in which online security practices have shifted modes of reading and interpreting contemporary women’s fiction and memoir. In addition to working on the internet, Júlia also works on Brazilian literature/film, architecture, and translation.

**Marina Mayorski** is a PhD candidate of Comparative Literature and Jewish Studies at the University of Michigan. Her research examines the rise of popular literature in the modern Jewish world, studying different sub-genres of the popular novel in Hebrew, Ladino,

and Yiddish and especially translations from French, Russian, and German.

**Devi Mays** is an Associate Professor of Judaic Studies and History at the University of Michigan. Her book *Forging Ties, Forging Passports: Migration and the Modern Sephardi Diaspora* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020) won the Dorothy Rosenberg Prize from the American Historical Association, the National Jewish Book Award in the category of Sephardic Culture, the Jordan Schnitzer Book Award in the category of Modern Jewish History and Culture: Africa, Americas, Asia and Oceania from the Association for Jewish Studies, and the Alixa Naff Migration Studies Prize from the Moise Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies. Her articles have appeared in *Jewish Social Studies*, *Mashriq & Mahjar*, *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, and *AJS Perspectives*, and she has translated numerous pieces from Ladino, Spanish, and French for Jewish studies source readers. She is currently working with Julia Phillips Cohen on a book exploring a forgotten network of North African and Middle Eastern Jews in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe.

**Anita Norich** is Tikva Frymer-Kensky Collegiate Professor Emerita of English and Jewish Studies at the University of Michigan. She is a scholar and translator of Yiddish literature who has written and taught about American Jewish and Yiddish literature and literature of the Holocaust. She earned her PhD in Victorian Literature from Columbia University and studied Yiddish Literature at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Her most recent book, *Two Feelings*, is a translation of a novel by Tsilye Dropkin (forthcoming). She is also the translator of *Fear and Other Stories*, by Chana Blankshteyn (2022), and *A Jewish Refugee in New York*, by Kadya Molodovsky (2019). Her other publications include *The Homeless Imagination in the Fiction of Israel Joshua Singer* (1991), *Discovering Exile: Yiddish and Jewish Culture in America During the Holocaust* (2007), and *Writing in Tongues: Translating Yiddish in the Twentieth Century* (2013). She is also co-editor of *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish*



*Literature* (1992), *Jewish Literatures and Cultures: Context and Inter-text* (2008), and *Languages of Modern Jewish Cultures: Comparative Perspectives* (2016).

**Avner Ofrath** is a historian of citizenship, language, and the public sphere in the Middle East and North Africa. His first book, *Colonial Algeria and the Politics of Citizenship* (2023), investigates the troubled, multilingual, and radical history of rights and belonging in France's most important modern colony. He is currently working on his next major project, exploring Judeo-Arabic political writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

**Pessie Hershfeld Pomerantz** (1900–1978) was a Yiddish poet. Born in Kamenobrod (Kam'yanobrid), in what is now Ukraine, Pomerantz and her family immigrated to the United States and settled in Chicago in 1913, where she worked in a sweatshop while continuing to study. She first began publishing poetry in 1918, in New York-based literary journals and newspapers such as *Fraye arbeiter shtime* and *Der fraynd* as well as in Chicago publications such as *In nebl*, *Yugend*, and *Ineynem*. She was a leading figure in the Young Chicago literary circle, and her works appear in the group's anthology, *Yung shikago*, which was published in 1922. She published several books of poetry: *Kareln* (1926), a book of short, Haiku-like poems; *Geklibene lider* (1931) and *Royter toy* (1939); and *Reges fun genod, geklibene lider* (1957). After her husband's sudden death in 1962, the poet moved to Miami, Florida, where she published her final book of poetry, *Fun ale mayne lider* (1969).

**Shemtov Revah** was a Ladino journalist and author. Revah was active in Salonika (Thessaloniki) in the first half of the twentieth century. He was the editor of *El Asno*, a satirical anti-communist journal published in 1923. In 1931, he published his only novel, *Sochetá podrida* (*Rotten Society*), excerpts of which are included in this issue.

**Shloyme Shvarts** (1907–1988) was a Yiddish poet. Born in Kobrin, in what is now Belarus, he immigrated to the United States in

1920. He graduated from the University of Chicago, studying journalism and literature, and went on to become director of sales for Helix, Ltd., a photographic equipment store. Shvarts was a prominent member of the Young Chicago group of poets and was widely published in Chicago-based and international Yiddish newspapers and literary journals such as *Shikago*, *Idisher kemfer*, *Veker*, *In zikh*, *Kheshbn*, and *Literarische bleter*, as well as in several anthologies. His Yiddish poetry, often inspired by jazz music, was published in several volumes: *Bloymontik* (1938), *Amerike* (1940), *Goldener goles* (1971), *Vundn un vunder* (1975), *Brondzener mabl* (1981), and *Harbstiker fayer* (1984). He also published widely in English under the name of Selwyn Schwartz, including five volumes of poetry—some of which are self-translations of his earlier Yiddish versions: *The Poet in Blue Minor* (1942), *Passages of Refuge* (1942), *Preface to Maturity* (1944), *Letters to My Unborn Son* (1947), and *Horn in the Dust: Poems* (1949). In addition, his work was published in several modernist poetry journals in English, such as *Circle Magazine* and *Poetry* magazine. He received honors for his poetry from the World Jewish Cultural Congress Literary Foundation and the Comité Central Israelita de México and lectured on poetry at the University of Chicago and Northwestern University.

**Amanda Schwartz** is a PhD student in Mathematics at the University of Michigan, where she has also completed coursework in Ladino.

**Yossi Sucary** is an award-winning author and a Professor of Philosophy at Camera Obscura in Israel. “Win or Lose,” which appears in this volume in English translation, is a chapter from his first novel, *Emilia and the Salt of the Earth: A Confession* (2002). The novel was translated into French in 2006. At the vanguard of Israeli race and ethnicity discourse, his work includes essays, novels, novellas, and short stories. Sucary was born in 1959 to a family that immigrated to Israel from Libya. He grew up in the underprivileged neighborhood of Pardes Katz before moving to a predominantly wealthy Ashkenazi suburb in northern Tel Aviv. He dropped out of high school, but once he completed his exams, Sucary went on to earn a degree in philosophy and history at Tel Aviv University. Through his unique

writing style, Sucary often incorporates autobiographical elements, exploring the intricacies of Mizrahi Israeli identity, challenging its false sense of cohesion and entrenchment in Zionist narratives.

**Ruth Tsoffar** is a Professor of Comparative Literature, Women's and Gender Studies, and the Frankel Institute for Advanced Jewish Studies, University of Michigan. Ruth received her PhD in the Near Eastern Studies Department at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of *Life in Citations: Biblical Narratives and Contemporary Hebrew Culture* (Routledge, 2019) and the award-winning book *The Stains of Culture: An Ethno-Reading of Karaite Jewish Women* (Wayne State University Press, 2006). Tsoffar's earlier work on Israeli ethnicity focused on the intersection of body, gender, and poetry and was published at *Hagar* in two complementary studies: "The Body that Crumbled': Mizrahi Men Writing Poetic Anatomy, Part I" and "Dissected Identity: Mizrahi Women, Space and Body, Part II." Her other works include her study of Yona Wallach and Anton Shammas. Her future projects include a collection of essays on violence and women in the Bible and a study of the erasure of Jamusin, a Palestinian neighborhood in northern Tel Aviv as it became the Mizrahi Givat Amal and the luxury residence complex Akirov Towers.