



Border to Border, Door to Door

גרעניץ צו גרעניץ, טיר צו טיר

Selected Homeward Poems of Rokhl Korn

Translated by  
Joseph Reisberg

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Poems 1928-1977

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The primary dictionary used for these translations was Beinfeld and Bochner's *Comprehensive Yiddish-English Dictionary*. Also particularly helpful was Harkavy's *Yiddish-English Dictionary* and the OCR search tool from the Yiddish Book Center. I also referred to Shaechter-Viswanath's *Comprehensive English-Yiddish Dictionary*, Nakhum Stutchkoff's *Der Oytser fun der Yidisher Shprakh*, Zalmen Reyzen's *Gramatik fun der Yidisher Shprakh*, Abelson's *English-Yiddish Encyclopedic Dictionary*, and *Di Khokhme fun Khokhmes* by Dov Sadan. For words of

Slavic origin, I used the *Wielki Słownik Polsko-Angielski* as well as Glosbe and Lexilogos online resources. For words of Hebrew origin, I used the *Milon Bisko* as well as Morfix. For words of German origin, I referred to the Langenscheidt online German dictionary.

One line from “Shabbos in My Home” relies on a reading by Rachel Seelig. The last line of “A New Dress” was suggested by my classmate Yankl Krakovsky.

## Introduction

In the middle of a long winter in rural Poland, a lonely little girl named Rokhl with a dream of being a writer stares out of her window, into the darkness of dreams and mysteries:

In wintertime, I would sit on the daybed in the kitchen and look through the window on the snow-covered expanse, and especially at the orchard, with its small, young sour cherry trees, their crowns just barely peeking out over the fallen snow which had formed a fortress around our house. And I would read a dark calligraphy etched into the white snow, the tracks of wild animals that had emerged from the forest to pay us visits in the night: foxes, hares, does, and sometimes even a wild boar.<sup>1</sup>

As a high schooler, I read these words translated from a lecture Rokhl Korn (1898-1982) later gave at the Jewish Public Library in Montreal. I stared out of my own window, at the trees and moon outside, and the world seemed suddenly transformed, full of as many messages as the young Rokhl Korn received. This was at the very beginning of my study of Yiddish language and literature and I was looking for figures like Korn to read and revere, poets who mixed lyricism with the traditions and archetypes I was used to from Jewish sources. As I came to find out during the course of the research, Korn herself came to Yiddish at about the same age I did, as a political decision to forego the Polish of her childhood and early career after violent pogroms erupted soon after the first world war. Later, poetry literally saved her life as it was her membership with the Soviet Writers' Union and the connections she made in the world of Yiddish periodicals and salons that ensured her escape from the Nazis and her later immigration to Canada.

Rokhl Korn was a Polish-Canadian Yiddish writer whose legacy spans decades and continents—from the feminist modernist Yiddish literature of interwar Poland to her years of wandering in the Soviet Union to her immigration and warm welcome in postwar Montreal,

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<sup>1</sup> Rokhl Korn, trans. Michael Yashinsky, "Destined to Create," Yiddish Book Center, 2018.

which saw a continuation of salon culture and literary life long after other writerly capitals had been destroyed or assimilated. This thesis presents a collection of selected poems from all eight of her published books of poetry, ranging from 1928 to 1977. Through it all, her themes of diaspora and finding a home in poetry will be emphasized, making a case for Korn to be read by general non-Yiddish-speaking audiences as a canonical poet of exile and wandering.

Through the culturally specific lens of a Yiddish poet in exile from her native Galicia region, Korn's work can be read universally as poems of placelessness and longing, of lamentation while still being in love with the world and its sensory delights. This thesis will trace Rokhl Korn's journey through all the various homes she had as well as the borders she crossed and obliterated in her poems.

Her theory and personal vision of her wanderings was *na v'nad*, a biblical Hebrew term used to describe Cain's punishment that I have chosen to translate throughout this work as "exile." Like exile, *na v'nad* implies a state of punitive removal, as well as the precarity of being a stranger among others. Korn uses this term not to castigate herself or other refugees but instead to forge a textual link with a Jewish past, merging her personal sorrow with a collective one and announcing her separation with the earth that nurtured her. The orchard from where she drew her poetic power remained the central force behind her longing for home, a refuge of imagination and the only homeland Korn claimed for herself amongst all the regime and border changes of the twentieth century.

Poems are poor substitutes for lives. But they are portable homelands, collective dreams that Korn wove for the dwindling numbers of survivors in the small archipelago of Yiddish literary capitals. Korn was bound to her native soil, land that her family had tended for generations. Her poems let that land breathe again, narrated in the ancestral Yiddish that Korn learned and tended and nurtured like the land she grew up on. As there are memorial books of Jewish towns and villages destroyed during the Holocaust, Korn wrote memorial poems. But

they are so attuned to her specific upbringing and the textures of her life that they also chart the migrations of a soul in a circling, non-linear path homeward.

### **Part One: Sucha Góra, Eastern Galicia region, Austro-Hungarian Empire, 1898-1914**

Rokhl Korn's place of birth was Sucha Góra (Polish for Dry Mountain), a rural country estate that had once belonged to the *szlachta* (Polish nobility). Her upbringing was far from typical for Jews of Eastern Galicia, the region of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that she called home. Most Jews of this region were urban denizens and worked in commerce, trade, or as artisans, the traditional economic niches for Jews since their mass migration to Eastern Europe at the end of the medieval era. But Korn's family had owned and worked their own land for several generations, lived outside the bounds of a traditional Jewish town structure, and instead resided near a culturally Polish agricultural village.

Galicia was a region divided along many ethnic, linguistic, and religious lines. As the geographer and native Galician Abraham Jakob Brawer wrote, "There are few areas for which diplomats drew maps with such unnatural and unhistorical borders as they did for Galicia."<sup>2</sup> This was because Galicia sat at the crossroads of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires and near the Ottoman sphere of influence, wedged between Central and Eastern Europe, and partitioned from Poland in the late eighteenth century but containing sizeable Ukrainian majorities in the east and Jewish communities throughout.<sup>3</sup> By the nineteenth century, the two forces of Hasidism and Haskalah, one a mystical religious revival movement and the other a push for assimilation and enlightenment, had made shockwaves throughout Ashkenazi Jewish communities, spurring an age of modernization and emerging nationhood.<sup>4</sup> These twin revolutions revealed the extent to which the previous forms of Jewish communal autonomy and

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Israel Bartal and Antony Polonsky, "Introduction: The Jews of Galicia under the Habsburgs," in *Focusing On Galicia: Jews, Poles, and Ukrainians, 1772-1918*, ed. Israel Bartal and Antony Polonsky (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 3

<sup>3</sup> Bartal and Polonsky, *Focusing on Galicia*, 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 11-12.

unity splintered in the nineteenth century, decentralizing power from town rabbis and councils to the dynastic courts of the Hasidic wonder-workers or to the growing social movements that followed the Haskalah, such as Zionism or socialism.

Korn's father, Volf, as a landowning Jewish man living apart from an incorporated Jewish community, was certainly an adherent of the Haskalah's ideal of Jewish self-sufficiency and modernity. But he "would [also] sometimes study the holy books, and sometimes chatted about the Rambam."<sup>5</sup> It wasn't until later in her life that Rokhl Korn learned her father had written religious commentaries in Hebrew, a surprising revelation that she took as further confirmation that she was meant to be a writer.<sup>6</sup>

The vast majority of Jews at this time lived in towns or cities, a geographic vestige from their traditional social position within the "interstices of the feudal economy, intermediary positions between seigneur [who were mostly of the Polish nobility] and serf [who in Eastern Galicia were largely Ukrainians]."<sup>7</sup> Jewish alienation from the land was a legally codified practice for much of Eastern European history until the age of reforms began in the mid-nineteenth century, reaching Eastern Galicia specifically as the Emancipation of 1867, granting universal equality. But this newfound promise could not surmount long-standing ethnic rivalry. The age of modernization allowed for fewer residency or political restrictions on the Jewish community, but also marked the end of the feudally protected occupations for Jews such as manor lessees, innkeepers, or money lenders.<sup>8</sup> As these Jews faced economic competition for the first time from Poles and Ukrainians, "Galician poverty became proverbial... and caused serious dislocation and disruption to Jewish society."<sup>9</sup> Those changes influenced Korn, who later wrote lyrical portraits of Jewish and Slavic families, in cities and in the

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<sup>5</sup> Korn, trans. Yashinsky, "Destined to Create." The Rambam was a medieval Jewish sage.

<sup>6</sup> Seymour Levitan, "Rokhl Häring Korn," *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 31 December 1999. Jewish Women's Archive.

<sup>7</sup> Bartal and Polonsky, *Focusing on Galicia*, 27.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 30.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid,19.

countryside, who struggled through long winters of hunger, revealing the commonalities of suffering across social borders in this time of economic downturn.

By 1876, about 289 estates, mostly smaller-scale, were owned by Jews, and this number steadily grew over the next couple of decades as a slim door of advancement opened.<sup>10</sup> By 1912, about ten to twenty percent of the landowners in Korn's home district of Mościska were Jewish.<sup>11</sup> Different from being landed gentry, landowning still held significant benefits, as landowners could "multiply their capital by exploiting woods, alcohol distilleries, mills, brick factories, and sawmills that came with the estate."<sup>12</sup> Rokhl Korn's family was unusual in that they actually farmed the land they were on, something "only a few scattered Jews" managed to do, "earning themselves at least partial acceptance by their Polish neighbours."<sup>13</sup> Many Poles and Ukrainians thought of the Jews as transitory, rootless people, and very few Jewish landowners made pains to change this perception. As Tomasz Gaşowski writes, many of these landowners only used their estates as temporary residences or "sold them to peasants, earning a fortune, or used them for a few years, to pass them on to others, destroyed and exploited."<sup>14</sup> This general aversion towards settling permanently in rural areas can partially be explained by the fact that Jews lacked agricultural knowledge after centuries of being kept legally from owning land. But a great deal of this aversion can be traced to internal attitudes as well: "Traditional Jewish communities discouraged farming, fearing vulnerability and citing a lack of access to religious institutions and schools. Moreover, farming held a stigma of boorishness for many Jews."<sup>15</sup>

It is not known exactly why Korn's forebears chose to settle in a place without much Jewish community, even if they did have the opportunity to own their land. In general, the Austro-Hungarian government was more accommodating to Jewish landowners, since it

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 123-24.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 127.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 130-131.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 131.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 133.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Dekel-Chen, "Agriculture," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2017.

adopted more of an emancipatory spirit as compared to the Russian empire, where the breakdown of traditional societal roles was causing a rise of antisemitism and oppression of the lower classes.<sup>16</sup>

Regardless of the reasons for its origins, this agricultural life became the earliest wellspring for Rokhl Korn's poetry. In her poem "O, Erd" (Oh, Earth), she speaks to the very ground that they lived on in direct second-person address. She recounts how her grandparents prepared the land for them, her grandfather clearing the forest to make way for fields of grain:

My grandfather uprooted you [earth] with his broad arms  
ripped up tree-stumps and heavy, gray stones,  
until a light-green nook remained  
with a blue river-eye in the midst of the wall of forest.  
He left only three slender pines near the new house  
like loyal guardians on the watch.<sup>17</sup>

In her poem "Doros" (Generations), Korn also recounts a family story, this time of her grandmother, Khaye. The tone here is more complicated, however, than in the laudatory "O, Erd." The speaker of this poem wonders if her grandmother ever really loved her grandfather Shaya, alluding to her ambiguous "tough luck." It seems that grandmother Khaye resented being confined to a domestic sphere—the poem states that one of the only material remnants she has left of her grandmother are "pots bound up with wire in the attic, silent witnesses of a previous reality."<sup>18</sup>

But her grandmother gifted Rokhl Korn something priceless: an orchard of sour cherry trees, a magical place that figures prominently as a zone for revelation and wonder throughout

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Rokhl Korn. *Heym un Heymlozikayt: Lider* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine), 1948, 112.

<sup>18</sup> Rokhl Korn. *Bashertkayt: Lider 1928-1948*. (Montreal: Aroysgegebn fun a komitet), 1949. 96.

the decades of her poetic career, even long after the orchard was destroyed during the violence of WWI. The poem “Doros” also contains a description of this treasure:

She planted an orchard, an orchard dense and wide,  
trees rowed in even lines one by one,  
in order to clasp the new, naked house  
and her singular, large loneliness.<sup>19</sup>

Images of enclosure, of being surrounded by rings of orchard and forest and field, make up large swaths of Korn’s poetry. She depicts this landscape as protective, even charged with the holiness of her grandmother and mother, whose prayers ward off evil and whose devotion to the earth she memorializes with her poems. For Korn, “nature is not epitomised by the empty wilderness of the Romantics or, as she puts it, of the datshnik or turist [summer vacationer or tourist], but rather by the field where the peasant works to bring in the harvest.”<sup>20</sup> Nature is busy in her poems, overabundant and tied to the rhythms of Eastern Galician agriculture, such as the *przednówek*, a term for pre harvest that she employs as a metaphor for spiritual fallowness. The whole world in her poems responds to human intervention in the form of farming but is not subsumed by this human interference. Even the crescent moon “sharpens its crooked scythe.”<sup>21</sup>

This world of wood and orchard and stream and meadow and fields of grain became the texture of her childhood. She did not have many friends to play with, so “to ameliorate her loneliness, she treated the objects of the natural world that surrounded her as friends and playmates.”<sup>22</sup> As she later recollected, “I learned to write imaginatively in my early childhood, in order to create my own world in my loneliness, where I was raised all by myself with no buddies

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Heather Valencia. “‘Yidishe Dikhterins’: The Emergence of Modern Women’s Poetry in Yiddish and Rokhl Korn’s Poetic Debut.” *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 42, no. 2 (2009): 83.

<sup>21</sup> Rokhl Korn. *Di gnod fun vort*. Tel Aviv: ha-Menorah, 1968, 86.

<sup>22</sup> Esther Frank, “Home and Homelessness in the Poetry of Rokhl Korn, 1898-1982.” *Canadian Jewish Studies*, 18/19 (2010): 5-6

or girlfriends.”<sup>23</sup> Her parents, Volf and Khane Haring were prosperous, but busy with the operations of the farm. Her brothers Hersh and Leyzer never figure very prominently in her childhood recollections.<sup>24</sup> In later correspondence, she reveals certain obsessive tendencies she had: “‘My greatest dream as a child was to be allowed to clean the floors. But they didn’t let me do it.’ She confesses that when no one was home, she would lock herself into the bathroom, and she would wash the floorboards, ‘till they were as yellow as saffron.’ Only then was she at peace.”<sup>25</sup> This anecdote reveals the extent of her loneliness. Although there were various Polish and Ukrainian custodians and other hired help on the farm, Korn was not in a place with many other children who could understand her. Language was not a barrier, however the Jewish family’s assumption of a traditionally Polish landowning role was a cause of strife.

Her isolation made her more receptive to the world around her, and although it lacked the sophistication or literary connections of Warsaw or Vilna, her home provided the spark of her creativity:

Most Yiddish writers were born and raised in cities or towns where there were—even before World War I—writers’ associations, clubs, libraries, and especially a Yiddish newspaper that everyone read...But I was born and raised on a farm, ringed with fields and forests, where even to arrive at the nearest village was a serious journey, especially for a child’s tiny feet...The first real volume that ever fell into my hands was a torn little paperback belonging to my cousin Ester Likht, who was three years older than I...I was so enchanted that I took the story as a model. I decided that I must become like the sorceress who had bewitched the prince, but

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Valencia, “Yidishe Dikhterins,” 82. Translation is my own.

<sup>24</sup> Levitan. “Rokhl Häring Korn.”

<sup>25</sup> Zelda Kahn Newman “The Correspondence Between Kadya Molodowsky and Rokhl Korn.” *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, no.1 (2011).

instead unwitch him from his everlasting sleep with a kiss in the form of a word.<sup>26</sup>

Korn did not receive much of a Jewish education. Like many landowning Galician Jews, piety and communal ties were harder to forge in the more sparsely populated countryside and the influence of the Haskalah had encouraged Polish assimilation for Jewish social mobility. For this reason, Korn's upbringing was in a Polish/Ukrainian milieu, and she was educated by a village tutor in Polish.<sup>27</sup> Jews in Eastern Galicia in the late nineteenth century tended more toward Polish nationalism, as Polish culture was associated with the nobility and upward mobility, rather than Ukrainians who were largely serfs and had more blatant, church-sanctioned antisemitic beliefs.<sup>28</sup> Although large numbers of Jews turned to Polish schools and language, this unity was not to last. At the turn of the century the growing popularity of the National Democratic party among Korn's upper-class Polish neighbors signaled the rise of virulent antisemitic politics to mainstream popularity. "The general tendency towards the end of Austrian rule in Galicia was to increasing cultural division... the cultures isolated themselves rather more by choice [as opposed to longer historical processes]," a change that was in fact partially spurred by non-Jewish anxiety about the growth of Jewish agricultural production upsetting long-standing economic differentiation.<sup>29</sup>

Because of her upbringing, Korn's early poems display a remarkable sensitivity for Polish women, particularly women of the peasant class who had to provide for their children. One figure in her poem "Maksims Toyt (Maksim's Death)" is an unnamed wife who gets a soliloquy after her dying husband divides his belongings among his sons, and only his sons:

'Who are you leaving me with, poor orphan that I am?

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<sup>26</sup> Korn, trans. Yashinsky, "Destined to Create."

<sup>27</sup> Chava Rosenfarb. *Yiddish Poets in Canada, The Moyshe and Esther Menachovsky Lecture Series*, Mississauga: Benben Publications, 1994, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Bartal and Polonsky, *Focusing on Galicia* 36.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

No cow, no husband, and not a bit of field—  
I have truly toiled bitter and hard all my years  
and now I will be a stranger in my own house  
and my daughter-in-law will lock the bread  
in the pantry away from me.<sup>30</sup>

This kind of empathy was especially remarkable at the turn of the twentieth century, when the antisemitic National Democratic party was signaling a rightward turn in Polish nationalism, supported mainly by the gentry. This revealed the limits of the Haskalah, as “at the start of the constitutional era educated Galician Jews might be fervent Polish patriots but barely able to speak the language, [but] by the eve of the First World War Jewish intellectuals all had a mastery of Polish but fewer retained tender feelings for Poland.”<sup>31</sup>

In 1908, when she was eleven years old, Rokhl Korn’s father Volf died of a lung disease. In her writing, she depicts this event as monumental for her, even seeming to foreshadow the later tragedies and dislocations of her life. In most of her writings about her father’s death, the earth he toiled over as a farmer takes a central place. From the poem “O, Erd,” quoted earlier, Korn reminisces about how the meaning of earth changed for her after her father’s death:

You [earth] cried with me, amber-yellow sap poured,  
I listened attentively to your hidden life with my whole body,  
and waited for my father’s distant, distant call  
to tear through the lattice of roots and grasses like an underground thunder.<sup>32</sup>

After Volf’s death, Korn’s mother Khane took over control of the farm as tenderly depicted in the poem “Mayn Heym” (My Home):

My mother divided her years

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<sup>30</sup> Rokhl Korn. *Dorf*. Vilne: Vilner Farlag fun B. Kletskin, 1928, 70.

<sup>31</sup> Bartal and Polonsky, *Focusing on Galicia*, 37

<sup>32</sup> Korn, *Heym un Heymlozikayt*, 112.

between hundred-yoke fields and her three children.

Her solitary young-widow nights  
undulated with dreams of ample harvests  
and our round, red children's cheeks.

Her hours buzzed like bees with a thousand worries,  
and her work-full day  
marked the sun's path from dawn til dusk  
with streamlets of sweat on her face.<sup>33</sup>

Khane Haring knew the earth of Sucha Góra intimately, having to manage all the complicated moving parts of a working estate as well as raising three children. Yet she did not compromise or adapt her ritual observance as many rural Jews did. Korn's poem "Shabbos in Mayn Heym" (Sabbath in My Home), depicts the Sabbath day as a scared little child among all the unobservant neighbors, making a beeline towards her mother, where it "cling[s] to pleats of my mother's piety."<sup>34</sup>

Not that Khane Haring had much opportunity to display her knowledge. As Korn herself recollects from her childhood, "How would women occupy themselves in the evenings? They plucked down from goose feathers or shelled beans and peas."<sup>35</sup> Khane Haring's exact level of education is unknown, as there was no formal schooling for Jewish girls in the time period when she was young. In fact, "Traditional Jewish historiography evinced little interest in this subject, partly because of the assumption that girls received no education."<sup>36</sup> And yet many women of Jewish Eastern Europe are preserved in memoirs and other primary sources as especially learned, particularly women who served in some sort of role around a synagogue or charitable

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<sup>33</sup> Korn, *Heym un Heymlozikayt*, 94.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

<sup>35</sup> Korn, trans. Yashinsky, "Destined to Create."

<sup>36</sup> Eliyana Adler. "Educational Options for Jewish Girls in Nineteenth-Century Europe." In *Polin: Focusing on Jewish Religious Life, 1500-1900*, edited by Antony Polonsky, 301. London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization.

society, such as the prayer leader of the women's gallery, usually the rabbi's wife, or the women of the burial society. For rural areas, tutors for subjects such as foreign languages were more common for daughters, as the few primary schools for girls were generally in large cities. Because girls did not have to undertake the highly regimented course of Talmud study that was expected of boys, they were much more educated in secular subjects and generally had a stronger grasp of non-Jewish languages and mathematics than males in their communities. But there were still plenty of barriers towards getting a tutor, as "This option can only have existed for families with some disposable income and with a commitment to Jewish education."<sup>37</sup>

The influence of the Haskalah had reached broader swaths of Jewish society by the time that Korn was school age, so later, as a young teenager, Korn began attending sessions on Polish literature with a group of students in the closest town large enough to have the facilities, Mościska. There she studied the classics of Polish literature.<sup>38</sup> This was her first formal schooling besides the tutor who used to come by their estate.

Due to her Haskalah-influenced education, Korn read both Jewish and Gentile work, but always in Polish, not Yiddish. The most popular poet at this time was the Romantic Adam Mickiewicz. Like Korn, he was profoundly influenced by Goethe, and similarly to her he turned to short, terse poems after decades of exile. Czesław Miłosz describes this era of Mickiewicz's verse as "exquisite, gnomic poems...In Polish literature they are examples of that pure poetry which verges on silence."<sup>39</sup> From one of Korn's poems of this parallel, postwar era: "Pensive silence ripens with wonder / and listens closely / for the redeemer's far-distant steps."<sup>40</sup> A Jewish poet she was particularly influenced by and most likely first encountered in Mościska was Bolesław Leśmian<sup>41</sup>, a Polonized Jew who wrote fantastical, metaphysical ballads inspired by

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 307.

<sup>38</sup> Levitan, "Rokhl Häring Korn."

<sup>39</sup> Czesław Miłosz. *The History of Polish Literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983, 230.

<sup>40</sup> Rokhl Korn. *Farbitene Vor*. Tel Aviv: Yisroel Bukh, 1977, 55.

<sup>41</sup> "Rachel Korn: A biography on the author & poet," Jewish Public Library.org.

Polish folk culture and that experimented with the Polish language's capacity for neologisms and wordplay. Although she wouldn't write in this way until after WWII, Korn seems to share some similarities with Leśmian's symbolist soliloquies to an unhearing, or uncaring, God. The uses of nature as a respite in a brutal world also appear in both writers' work: "With his images of nature, Leśmian, in fact, was weaving a semantic web, a world of make-believe."<sup>42</sup>

Korn's childhood and early adolescence was the nurturing ground of her later poetry, even as storm clouds of trouble foreshadowed the later upheavals of her life.

### **Part Two, Vienna, Austro-Hungarian Empire, 1914-1918**

The idyllic and isolated landscape of Rokhl Korn's childhood was suddenly and irrevocably altered by the violence of World War I, which especially affected Eastern Galicia as it was at the confluence of Austria-Hungary and Russia. Although it is difficult to imagine in a post-Holocaust world, WWI in its immediate aftermath was viewed as an absolute catastrophe for Jewish communities in Galicia and nearby Ukrainian provinces like Volhynia and Podolia, often seen as the heartland of Ashkenazi Jewry. War came to Sucha Góra during the fall and winter of 1914/15, when Korn was sixteen, as "Russian forces advanced deep into Austrian Galicia and Bucovina."<sup>43</sup> Korn's family joined 77,000 Galician Jews who fled to Vienna during the first months of the Russian invasion; ultimately, between 200,000 and 450,000 Jews were displaced from Galicia during WWI, about half the region's Jewish population.<sup>44</sup> The escape from the advancing Russian forces was often treacherous, as the experience of Artur Frimm, a Galician Jew, shows:

After burying valuables under a chicken coop, Frimm's party evacuated to the southwest with their other valuables loaded onto carts. Cossacks chased the refugees, who had abandoned their carts, which distracted the

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<sup>42</sup> Miłosz, 349.

<sup>43</sup> David Engel, "World War I," YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, 2010.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

soldiers as they fled to the inn of a friend. Russian cavalry units demanded to see the “boarders” who were now dressed in peasant clothing, allowing them to escape detection. After a few days in this location, the looting subsided, the soldiers moved on and the activities in the town began to return to some degree of normalcy. Some of the party proceeded to the west, hoping to get to Vienna.<sup>45</sup>

Once in Vienna the refugees could enjoy a measure of safety. In fact, the treatment of the refugees by the Central Powers was so humane that many Jews decades later did not feel the need to evacuate at the cusp of WWII, so confident were they that this later generation of Germans would be just like their forebears. Rokhl Korn perfected her German while living in Vienna and received further secular education. Her love of poetry was bolstered by more German classics, especially the works of Goethe.<sup>46</sup>

As the war ended and new national borders were created, this transition period also saw the rise of a newfound political consciousness among Jews, which was informed by the enlightenment movements of the nineteenth century but which reached the scale of a mass movement due to the monumental societal shifts that had occurred from years of immigration and war. No longer confined to circles of literati and salon conversations, Jews now had political organization in the wartime Kingdom of Poland, and in the newly formed Second Polish Republic. The parties were generally left-leaning but had very different views of what role Jews should play in society— some were highly Polish-assimilationist, others called for Jewish (mainly Yiddish) cultural autonomy within a diverse Poland, others were Labor Zionist and advocated for complete territorial autonomy either in Europe or Palestine or elsewhere, and the

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<sup>45</sup> Kevin Stapleton. “Lives of Przemyśl: War and the Population of a Fortress Town in Galicia, Austrian Poland, 1914-1923.” M.A. Thesis, University of Central Florida, 2016, 67.

<sup>46</sup> Valencia, “Yiddishe Dikhterins,” 82.

religious faction who opposed these secular politics even organized themselves politically to safeguard their own interests.<sup>47</sup>

The Galician returnees to Poland often saw their hometowns destroyed by violence, looting, and occupation, but there was also optimism about the possibilities Jews could have in a newly formed Polish republic. Despite often bitter and violent nationalist rhetoric coming from the ruling classes, Jews had a huge variety of political choice in early interwar Poland, and communities and identities began to form around these political movements. Korn still lived in a Polish milieu, but the increasing sense of Jewish placelessness informed her identity and later her poetics. As Korn wrote in her poem “O, Erd,” “Oh, earth, I had never known that I was a stranger to you, / only coming to stay as a guest for fifteen, twenty generations.”<sup>48</sup>

### **Part Three, Przemyśl, Second Polish Republic, 1918-1941**

Przemyśl, the small city where the family moved in 1918, was located about twenty-seven miles west of the country estate where Rokhl Korn had been raised. Prior to the war, Przemyśl had been a very typical Eastern Galician city: a Polish ruling class, Ukrainian peasantry, and a commercial sector of Jews, who ran eighty eight percent of commerce during the pre-war period. Korn’s Polish-speaking family fit in well in this town, where over ninety three percent of Jews used Polish as their everyday language.<sup>49</sup> They also joined a swelling Jewish Przemyśl community, matching urbanization trends among Jews after the recent dislocations of war—“By 1921, Jews were 39% of a population of 48,000.”<sup>50</sup>

Zionist activity in interwar Przemyśl was mainly focused on ensuring Jewish safety in Europe, although there were also chapters that focused on Jewish migration to Palestine— they elected one of their deputies, Moshe Frostig, to the Sejm, or Polish Parliament, in 1922 in order

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<sup>47</sup> Engel, “World War I.”

<sup>48</sup> Korn, *Heym un Heymlozikayt*, 112.

<sup>49</sup> Stapleton, *Lives of Przemyśl*, 63-4.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 84-85.

to further their goals of Jewish representation within a multi-ethnic Poland.<sup>51</sup> Organizing with Po'ale Zion, a Labor Zionist organization, was how Rokhl Haring met her husband Hersh Korn, a doctor from a well-to-do family. They were married in 1920.<sup>52</sup> Poa'le Zion and the other Zionist groups, although helmed by young people, were meant to be a secular replacement for Jewish institutional life for all ages. In Przemyśl they operated hospitals, orphanages, and educational centers. There were even physical fitness groups and the Yuval Lige (Jubilee League), which presented theater and music in Yiddish like S. Ansky's monumental Yiddish folkloristic play, *Der Dibuk*.<sup>53</sup> There were over 300 active members of the local Poa'le Zion chapter and they had heated debates about "the character and path of Zionism, international socialism and the Jewish question, the socialist basis of the party, self-realization and the political and economic activity in the Diaspora."<sup>54</sup> They also had varying interactions with the P.P.S., or Polish Socialist Party, the dominant leftist movement among Polish and Jewish leftists in Przemyśl, which gradually altered its stance on Zionism from it being a reactionary movement to viewing Labor Zionists as potential allies in the fight against fascism.

Despite all the cultural autonomy promoted by her new friends in Przemyśl, Korn still existed in a world where assimilating to the Polish gentry was the surest form of social mobility. She earned her matura degree around the same time she married her husband in 1920— a degree that ensured she had a solid grounding in both Polish language and literature as well as a German education.<sup>55</sup> A couple years earlier she had made her literary debut in a Zionist newspaper, although in Polish, not Yiddish. She had two stories published in *Nowy Dziennik* in 1918, a newspaper for Polish-speaking Zionists who saw co-territorial Jewish assimilation as the surest route towards acceptance and modernity.<sup>56</sup> These were

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<sup>51</sup> *Sefer Przemyśl*

<sup>52</sup> Valencia, "Yidishe Dikhterins," 82.

<sup>53</sup> *Sefer Przemyśl*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> "Rachel Korn: A biography on the author & poet"

<sup>56</sup> Levitan, "Rokhl Häring Korn."

followed the same year by more stories of rural life in *Głos Przemyski*, a socialist Polish newspaper local to Przemyśl. Korn was influenced by Leśmian and the other Polish writers of folk romanticism she had read as a teenager.<sup>57</sup>

Unfortunately, the after-effects of the war exacerbated the ethnic tensions in the city and threatened the sense of Jewish belonging within Poland. According to the historian Kevin Stapleton, “Some of the citizens thought that the Jews who had left the town [Przemyśl] were unpatriotic, and the Jews that remained were soon accused of hoarding goods and manipulating prices to their own advantage.”<sup>58</sup> As placeless people, without a national homeland, Jews were left vulnerable to violence in the wake of the Central Powers withdrawing from Eastern Europe at the end of the war. As new borders were drawn around ethnic and linguistic groups, Jews represented a threat to national stability. They were often accused of being German spies, because of how readily they welcomed German occupation as well as the intelligibility between German and Yiddish. In the tension surrounding the Soviet revolution, Jews, too, were accused of harboring Bolshevik cults and orchestrating the downfall of the Russian empire. As a result of these fears and accusations, pogroms broke out in many towns and cities. Closest to Korn’s region was a pogrom in Lviv (named Lemberg in Yiddish), where Korn’s daughter later studied at medical school, which killed 73 Jews and maimed hundreds more.<sup>59</sup> These pogroms were violent reminders of the breakdown of civil society, the economic desperation that accompanied the war’s end, and the newfound essentialism of nationality, which came to define people much more distinctively than the coexisting ethnicities that had once made up the fabric of Galicia.

Rokhl Korn was “shocked by the fierceness of anti-Jewish violence in the new Polish state.”<sup>60</sup> Influenced by the cultural autonomy she had witnessed among Galician refugees in

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Stapleton, *Lives of Przemyśl*, 69.

<sup>59</sup> Engel, “World War I.”

<sup>60</sup> Rachel Seelig. “Like a Barren Sheet of Paper: Rokhl Korn from Galician Orchards to Postwar Montreal.” *Prooftexts* 34, no. 3 (2014): 355.

Vienna and back in Poland, “Korn, vowing never again to write in Polish, began writing in Yiddish.”<sup>61</sup> Although she had been surrounded by some amount of Yiddish her whole life, she was not fluent in the language and had to be taught how to speak, read, and write it by her husband, who also showed her that it was a language of world literature, and not just a wives’ jargon or speech for less assimilated, more economically-disadvantaged Jews,<sup>62</sup> as the stereotypes went among Polish-speaking Jews. As a German speaker with some knowledge of Hebrew, the language was probably not so intimidating for her to learn, but her contemporaries did comment on her mistakes. Melekh Ravitch, another Galician refugee in Vienna, and later a friend of Korn’s, had a Yiddish literary magazine called *Kritik*. He wrote that in 1919, “a year of beautiful hopefulness... our first subscriber was from Pshemishl, a girl with the name Rokhl Herring. She sent money and often wrote us postcards with blue pen and many errors in clumsy Yiddish.”<sup>63</sup> Ravitch’s recollection of Korn with her maiden name, and the year 1919, indicates that Korn had begun her exploration of Yiddish literature before her marriage. Certainly, she knew enough Yiddish in 1919 to make her Yiddish literary debut in the *Pshemishler Folkshime*, and then two years later she became a regular poetic contributor to the *Lemberger Tageblat*,<sup>64</sup> the periodical of the city whose pogrom had influenced her to turn away from Polish in the first place. Lviv/Lemberg was the cultural capital of Galicia, the largest city of the region and one that Korn certainly identified with as a Galitsianer. Therefore it must have been particularly traumatic to see the Jews of this city terrorized in this way, and particularly important for Korn to seek literary community in this quintessential Galician locale.

Korn was not alone among Yiddish writers in thinking that a change was necessary for post-WWI poetry. The anthologist Ezra Korman “demanded metaphors that undermined the

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<sup>61</sup> Frank, “Home and Homelessness in the Poetry of Rokhl Korn,” 6.

<sup>62</sup> Levitan, “Rokhl Häring Korn.”

<sup>63</sup> Melekh Ravitch. *Mayn Leksikon*, volume one. Montreal: Aroysgegebn fun a komitet, 1945, 239.

<sup>64</sup> Zalmen Reyzn. *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese, un filologie (Lexicon of Yiddish Literature, Press and Philology)*, vol. 3, Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1929, 569.

classical basis of Judaism. Korman thus decried Yiddish poetry that still could ‘wind itself up in the old prayer shawl’... at the time of the greatest world-cataclysm ever seen on Earth.”<sup>65</sup> Galicia, too, seemed to have disappeared, wiped off the face of the map with the disappearance of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Yet, Korn was beginning her modernist poetic career as a chronicler of small-town Galician village life, preserving in stasis the physicality of the land she had known, regardless of the arbitrary borders that had already come and went during her young lifetime. It was not a contradiction for Korn to celebrate the Polish village life of her childhood in the new modernist Yiddish she was learning—instead, readers celebrated her inventiveness in bringing new subject matter to Yiddish, and for bridging the cultural gaps that had long kept Yiddish as the domain of an urban literary elite. For other Galician Yiddish writers, Galicia “continued to exist as an imaginary space, full of nostalgic longings and future projections—a construct of multiple linguistic and cultural identities and affiliations, including dreams and hopes for a thriving Yiddish culture and language.”<sup>66</sup>

Concurrent with her arrival on the literary scene, Rokhl Korn also developed her identity as a leftist. Besides her participation in Po’ale Zion with her husband, Korn was also outspoken about the rise of fascism and the persecution of Jews and Communists. Towards the end of her time in Przemyśl, she was arrested and held in jail in Lviv for multiple days after she participated in a march for international workers’ day.<sup>67</sup>

Besides her writing and activism, Korn was also raising her daughter, who she called Khaye-Rene, after her grandmother. Melekh Ravitch, the editor of *Kritik* who commented on her “clumsy” Yiddish, gives us one of the only glimpses we have of Korn’s domestic life within the pages of his memoir, *Mayn Leksikon*:

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<sup>65</sup>Kathryn Hellerstein. *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish, 1586-1987*. Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2014, 106.

<sup>66</sup>Anastasiya Lyubas. “Gender, Language and Territory: The *Tsushtayer* Literary Journal in Galicia and the Contributions of Yiddish Women Writers.” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 37 (2020), 164.

<sup>67</sup>Ravitch, *Mayn Leksikon*, 241.

In the year 1922, when I was already living in Warsaw, I sometimes visited my parents in Redim, a town not far from Pshemishl. My father was traveling there on business, and asked me to accompany him. In Pshemishl he told me that a young woman had called upon him from a “nice, landowning family,” the wife of a doctor who had started to work in the leather-business, with the request that if I should be in Redim they should introduce me to her. At first I declined—because my father told me that the young woman was also a poet—and I had already rejected her poems. My father, always a gentleman, wanted to keep his word, and for me to go and accompany him because he wanted to see an encounter between two poets. It was early. Everyone still disheveled, half-dressed, her first and only child clapping her hands in the puddle from a spilled cup of coffee and then two Jews come in, both with beards, because I also had a beard then, and we asked for the poet. In five minutes there was perfect order in the house, because the young woman was remarkably efficient in housekeeping, and there was a tasty Galician breakfast with rolls and coffee on the table, and in another five minutes I was wrapped up in a deep literary conversation with the well-educated woman, knowledgeable about both Yiddish literature and general literature. She spoke and mixed three languages together, like all intelligent, national-Jewish Galitsianers: Yiddish, Polish, and German. I soon found out that this was none other than the first subscriber to “Kritik,” and today she is named Korn, and her husband calls her “Ruzhia”— two hours later, I looked around me and saw that my father had disappeared somewhere, the matter no longer interested him, but his son remains captivated with his whole heart, no fewer than twelve years after that morning.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ravitch, *Mayn Leksikon*, 239-240.

This anecdote reveals the rising stature of Korn during this era, despite the unassuming manner in which she lived. From her own lesser-known corner of Yiddishland, Korn was starting to make a name for herself as a poet and short-story writer who frequently contributed to Yiddish publications during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>69</sup> One particularly meaningful journal for her was *Tsushtayer*, which was founded in the late '20s. This journal was founded specifically to honor the contribution, or *tsushtayer*, of Galicia to Yiddish literature, as well as to foster Yiddishism among the mainly Polish-speaking Galician intelligentsia.<sup>70</sup> The journal was helmed by a staunch Yiddishist, Rokhl Oyerbakh, and her co-editor Dvoyre Fogel, a poet who Oyerbakh had convinced to turn from Polish to Yiddish just as Korn had done.<sup>71</sup> Korn was recruited as a contributor to the journal by Melekh Ravitch, along with Ber Horowitz, who was also a village poet.<sup>72</sup> Korn and Horowitz share many of the same qualities that Oyerbakh wanted to emphasize of her Galician writers: a lush attention to nature, rootedness with co-territorial Eastern European peoples, and a messianic fervor for the Yiddish word.

Soon, Korn's renown extended far beyond Galicia; in fact, she was read wherever the Yiddish press reached, from Moscow to Buenos Aires, from Canada to Palestine. Khave Rosenfarb, later her close friend in Montreal, colorfully recollects the impression Rokhl Korn first made in the Yiddish literary scene:

The young Rokhl Korn took Yiddish literature by storm. She was a revelation. It seemed as if she, the country girl, had driven in her Eastern-Galician country wagon straight into the hustle and bustle of Yiddish Warsaw's literary market-place, bringing with her the smell of soil, the aroma of freshly baked country bread, and the fragrance of feminine sensuality. Her appearance on the Yiddish literary scene coincided with those wonderful years after the First World

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<sup>69</sup> Levitan, "Rokhl Häring Korn."

<sup>70</sup> Lyubas, "Gender, Language and Territory," 164.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 169.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 166.

War when Yiddish literature was branching out into all possible directions...Suddenly large numbers of talented women began to call attention to the female poetic voice.<sup>73</sup>

Although she was still a cultural Zionist and had some Hebrew knowledge from her learned father, Korn was an ardent Yiddishist who believed Yiddish was a national language of the Jewish people that deserved the same protected or prized status as other languages like Hebrew. Yiddish was also historically associated with women through its status as *mame-loshn*, or mother tongue, although this was because women were barred from standardized Hebrew education. Women were also expected to know more non-Jewish languages so they could earn a livelihood and safeguard the religious learning of their husbands. Thus, “for Jewish women the re-turn to Yiddish [as a literary language] was mediated by their experiences with non-Jewish languages because of gender separation...Yiddish felt both feminine and Jewish for writers like Korn.”<sup>74</sup> Korn also chose to celebrate or depict topics pertinent to womanhood “such as pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, sisterhood, and abortion.”<sup>75</sup>

In 1928, the very same year her first book of poetry debuted, Rokhl Korn appeared as a contributor to a very influential anthology, Ezra Korman’s *Yidishe Dikhterins*, or *Yiddish Poetesses*. This was deemed as the first collection devoted to women poets writing in Yiddish, with a historical section of women’s supplicatory prayers from the sixteenth century onward, to contemporary writers like Korn who hadn’t even published a first book yet. The subject matter was equally as comprehensive: “His [Korman’s] selection shows that modern women could write all kinds of Yiddish poetry—the romantic, private, domestic, and secular poetry that their contemporaries expected of them but also modernist, public, political, erotic, and religious poems.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Rosenfarb, *Yiddish Poets in Canada*, 18.

<sup>74</sup> Lyubas, “Gender, Language and Territory,” 171.

<sup>75</sup> Hellerstein, *A Question of Tradition*, 4.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 40.

The publication of *Yidishe Dikhterins* revealed some of the misogynistic ideals that were still influential in the Yiddish literary world, including from Korn's friend Melekh Ravitch:

The tone of a review by Melech Ravitch in *Literarishe bleter*, the leading Warsaw literary weekly, was mocking and suggestive. The October 19, 1928, review began, "My dear, patient, infatuated, polygamist, Ezra Korman!"... What Ravitch most objected to in Korman's anthology, though, was the idea of a women's tradition within Yiddish poetry, as such a tradition would bring the devotional literature dangerously close to the secular, politically correct Yiddish poetry that Ravitch himself wrote.<sup>77</sup>

This gender anxiety was a hold-over from the beginnings of Yiddish literature towards the end of the nineteenth century, when enlightened male authors needed to "rescue" the Yiddish language from its femininity and make it a national language of the Jewish people. Ravitch, despite his personal support of Korn, did not believe that women had the ability to rise past folk motifs in order to deliver the ideologically pure messages that the new modernist Yiddish literature demanded. But readers were eager to hear from writers like Korn, whose poems were a literal breath of fresh air after work that needed to fit a certain political slant in order to be published by the factionalized Yiddish periodicals and publishers.

Soon after her success with the anthology, Korn published her first book of poems, *Dorf* (Village) in 1928 with the influential and highly prolific Yiddish publisher B. Kletskin, who she most likely knew through Ravitch or through her work as a reviewer for *Literarishe Bleter*.<sup>78</sup> The poems in this book are mainly free verse narrative poems, not so dissimilar from the fiction that she was also writing at this time. Her use of free verse instead of ballad formats or forms more familiar to Yiddish folk literature places her squarely with the American Yiddish writers, who

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>78</sup> Reyzn, *Leksikon*, 569.

had a more individualistic and experimental style.<sup>79</sup> This was one of Yiddish literature's greatest strengths: its absence of a national territory allowed many literary centers to thrive at once, meaning the place of one's birth was not such a great determinant of style. Unlike her contemporaries', "her early poems are [said to be] neither expressly political nor urbanely modernist. They do not wrestle with the textual traditions of Jewish culture...yet they are "Jewish" poems in quite a different way."<sup>80</sup>

Although her early work was not aligned with a single political movement like the anarchist poets or the writers of Labor Zionism, it is unfair to say that her work is not "expressly political." Her poems are deeply attuned to the economic desperation facing Galicia, and the figures in her poems are often lyrical characters struggling with starvation and powerlessness. Young women in particular figure prominently in *Dorf*, as sisters or wives, jilted lovers or prostitutes. Korn writes with an innate sense of the entrapment many women felt at this time period, the dire economic straits combining with traditional rural gender roles to hold the women close to home. But *Dorf* also charts the stirrings of modernity and social change in Galicia. For example, in the poem "Di Dinst," or "The Maid," Korn gives us a window into the lives of rural Jewish women who felt alienated from Jewish and gentile society because they lacked both religious and secular education. Korn shows the readers how they were "disoriented by the shifting realities as they entered modernity and moved from their familial homes to distant, unfamiliar cities."<sup>81</sup>

Moreover, Korn's choice of topic for *Dorf* was certainly a political choice. At a moment of skyrocketing Polish antisemitism, to write a lyrical portrait of Polish-Jewish coexistence in Yiddish was a bold decision. Besides seldom if ever appearing as a topic in Yiddish before, Korn's use of Yiddish seeks to domesticize and familiarize Polish culture for a Jewish reader. As

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<sup>79</sup> Hellerstein, 18.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 155-156.

<sup>81</sup> Lyubas, "Gender, Language and Territory," 177.

a tripartite language composed of German, Hebrew, and various Slavic languages, Yiddish speakers could choose to consciously modify their dialects to have more or less constituent elements of each language. Therefore, in poems like “The Old Hanke,” which is an elegy for Korn’s village midwife, Hebraic and Slavic linguistic components coexist and mingle. The finale of the poem occurs in the “squat village church,” where the villagers have gathered to light votive candles in old Hanke’s honor.<sup>82</sup> This is a thoroughly Slavic scene, down to the adjective, “duzshne,” used to describe the stuffy air. And yet the poem ends in a Hebraic image, that of the yizker likht, or memorial candle, that Korn’s mother lights in the church for Hanke’s memory. Just like she deliberately chooses which languages to draw from, “Korn combines the practices of the two religions into a beautiful, hybrid form.”<sup>83</sup>

Beyond linguistics, the agricultural and bucolic scenes also present a hybrid of rural Polish and rural Jewish life. According to one account, “In many of these poems the names of the protagonists are the only clue as to whether they are Jews or non-Jews.”<sup>84</sup> Another key difference was that Jews were often isolated from a Jewish community when they lived in rural environments, and they were even seen as less cultured or less educated by urban Jews. There was even a sense of falsehood in coming from a landowning Jewish family—weren’t many of the leading Jewish modernists, including the adherents of Po’ale Zion, emphasizing the idea of Jewish rootedness in Palestine or its opposite, the Diaspora Nationalism of the Bundists and other non-Zionist Jewish socialists? Instead, Korn’s village poems present Jews as essential fixtures of the Polish countryside, her “means of promoting the claim to [Jewish] indigenoussness,”<sup>85</sup> as well as connecting Yiddish more clearly to its Slavic roots. However, it must be said that these poems were inherently Romantic and were only written years after Korn was torn away from her childhood home by WWI. Therefore, they should be viewed as fictional

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<sup>82</sup> Korn, *Dorf*, 53.

<sup>83</sup> Hellerstein, *A Question of Tradition*, 167.

<sup>84</sup> Valencia, “*Yidishe Dikhterins*,” 86.

<sup>85</sup> Seelig, “Barren Sheet of Paper,” 355-356.

re-creations and not documentary testimony. In the words of one scholar, “ironically, the image of the Polish Jewish idyll that dominates the pages of *Dorf* emerged from a moment of lost innocence and attendant linguistic transfer. Korn’s portrait of rural Poland must therefore be viewed as a Jewish literary utopia rather than as a wistful, nostalgic recreation of Polish–Jewish conviviality.”<sup>86</sup>

Besides her village poems, *Dorf* is full of love poems that are startling and immediate with their lushness and eroticism, tied to the earth that she had known and tended. These poems made just as much of an impression as the village poems. As Khave Rosenfarb recollected, “[Korn] shed the fig leaves of false modesty, discarding all artifice and all inhibitions. The writer Gitl Maisel said of Rokhl Korn that she was a strange mixture of a wanton country *shikse* and a virtuous daughter of Israel.”<sup>87</sup> “Shikse” is a somewhat derogatory term for a non-Jewish woman; it is possible that Maisel was referring not just to Korn’s subject matter but also to her freshness to the Yiddish language. Rather than seeing her eroticism as unique, Rosenfarb admits Korn as part of a cohort of writers: “What bound her to the new feminine poetry was the freedom to express her sensuality openly and directly. In matters of sexuality, our women poets were franker than the men.”<sup>88</sup>

Despite her success, Korn was not immune to the misogyny that was so pervasive in the Yiddish literary world. The following two moments from Ravitch’s memoirs shows his amazement at her concern with domestic affairs, so different from the male writers he was more comfortable with, as well as a prank he played on Korn. It is doubtful if he would have played such a prank on a distinguished male writer:

Rokhl Korn has a passion for the kitchen. I have never been able to figure out if this passion outweighs even writing for her. Whatever the case may be, she once

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 355.

<sup>87</sup> Rosenfarb, *Yiddish Poets in Canada*, 18-19.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 16.

dropped out of a deep literary conversation with the best Yiddish writers in Warsaw during one of her rare visits to the capital, and she sat to the side with a woman she knew to write out a few recipes for her original caraway cookies and vegetarian latkes. Her lunches had a reputation and traveling Warsaw writers would make huge detours in their journeys just to come to Pshemishl to visit the poet/culinary artist. And exactly as she was the picture of hospitality, so too was she also stingy with literary compliments, like a pious Jew with an oath. She understood literature at an elemental level like her meals. Deceiving her with a bad poem or a bad story was just as difficult as deceiving her taste with a hastily prepared meal. One time I really did deceive her. Although it's a personal experience—I will still tell it. Yes, once our friendship had started to thin and become dispersed. I used a trick. I published a self-edited work, an imitation of a very tender woman-poem under a woman's name, "Esther Tambor." I wrote the poem myself. Two days later Korn was "by chance" in Warsaw. Her first question: Could you possibly introduce me to this Esther? It wasn't a bad poem. Two days later I revealed the secret. Our friendship, however, was again good and continued.<sup>89</sup>

The prank seems particularly galling considering how desperate Korn was for literary community and how isolated she felt in Przemyśl. Korn's behavior and unpredictable femininity seemed to confuse Ravitch: "The truth is, that she herself is a woman and also birthed and raised a child, but she feels herself to be more of a man."<sup>90</sup> Oftentimes, gender was essentialized in Yiddish literary circles. For example, writing in 1930 in response to Korman's anthology, the poet Kadya Molodowsky complained that "there was no excuse to lump women poets

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<sup>89</sup> Ravitch, *Mayn Leksikon*, 240-241.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 241.

together,”<sup>91</sup> as so often seemed to happen for the few women writers who managed to make a name for themselves in the male-dominated literary world.

Some years later, with her daughter, Khaye-Rene, grown up, Korn entered into an especially prolific era in her writing. In 1936, Korn brought out a collection of her short stories, entitled *Erd*, or Earth. It was followed the next year by *Royter Mon*, or Red Poppies, Korn’s second book of poems, in 1937. These poems continued many themes of *Dorf*, particularly the focus on “the rhythms of women’s lives within the workings of nature.”<sup>92</sup> In addition, Korn became more explicitly political in *Royter Mon*, perhaps as a result of the time she spent imprisoned around the writing of this book. Poems like “Shifn,” or Ships, lack any of the personal, confessional spirit that animates some of her other work. Instead, Korn was maturing into her voice as an international Jewish poet, poised to write about broad socio-political issues, such as the desperation Jewish and non-Jewish internal migrants faced in the 1930s, as they were unable to board “shifn” or ships, to America after the 1921 immigration restrictions. The maturation of her voice established hers as “essentially the poetry of a modern European consciousness.”<sup>93</sup> And yet, perceptive readers still traced the lines of Jewish textuality in her work, including Rosenfarb’s observation that “The rhythms of her earliest poems were reminiscent of the lilt of the women’s prayers, the *tchinot*, while her nature poems evoked the stylistic simplicity of the bible.”<sup>94</sup> The connection to the *tkhines* is particularly apt, as these were women’s earliest contributions to Yiddish literature, collected in Korman’s monumental anthology of women poets.

Some of the harshest critiques of her poetry were from male critics who focused on its prose-like qualities, prose being the traditional domain of male Yiddish writers: Ravitch wrote

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<sup>91</sup> Hellerstein, *A Question of Tradition*, 142.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 161.

<sup>93</sup> Valencia, “*Yidische Dikhterins*,” 82.

<sup>94</sup> Rosenfarb, *Yiddish Poets in Canada*, 18.

that her work is “almost entirely unmusical”<sup>95</sup> and another prominent poet, Yankev Glatshteyn, wrote that her poems seemed to be written by someone who was essentially a prose writer.<sup>96</sup> However, readers still responded well to both genres that she published in—most of all, readers responded to her “creation of a powerful personal voice,”<sup>97</sup> as well as the realism in which she depicted the Galician world she had grown up in.

Korn’s political and literary maturation accompanied the slow descent into fascism during the 1930s, and, as one author has put it, “her poems were permeated by an existential sadness.”<sup>98</sup> Korn’s worry became reality in 1939, when Poland was invaded by Germany and Przemysł was divided in half along the San river between Germany and the Soviet Union.<sup>99</sup> When the threat became known, Korn and her family drove to Romania and connected in Zbaraz with Baruch Sheffner and other Yiddish writers, who tried to convince Korn to attempt to travel to New York with them.<sup>100</sup> When it became clear that half of Przemysł would be under the control of the Soviet Union, however, Rokhl Korn decided to return to her city by train and become a Soviet citizen. Most likely her decision came about from her staunch leftism and the quality of the Soviet Yiddish literary scene. In fact, one of her first actions as a Soviet citizen was to join the Soviet Writers’ Union, and to attend meetings of literati in Kyiv, one of the nearest literary capitals.<sup>101</sup> Another major factor influencing her decision to become a Soviet citizen was that her daughter (now going by the Russian name Renya) was enrolled in a medical school in Lviv in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 239.

<sup>96</sup> Yankev Glatshteyn, *In Tokh Genumen*, New York: Farlag fun Idish Natsionaln Arbeter Farband, 1956, 318.

<sup>97</sup> Rosenfarb, *Yiddish Poets in Canada*, 12.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Stapleton, *Lives of Przemysl*, 35.

<sup>100</sup> “Rachel Korn: A biography on the author & poet”

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

Korn had an easier time adjusting to the Soviet occupation because of her politics and eagerness to become a Soviet citizen, as well as the fact that she did not have to be a refugee fleeing from German-occupied parts of Poland. Such refugees created an administrative nightmare for the Soviet Union, and a cultural nightmare for Jews who had been living in the Soviet Union for decades and did not want newly-arrived Polish Jews threatening their assimilation.<sup>103</sup> By March 1940, the Soviet Union, wary of both non-Jewish and Jewish Polish loyalty in a volatile border and front-line, delivered an ultimatum: either register with the NKVD as a Soviet citizen or be prepared at any moment to be deported to Germany.<sup>104</sup> Although Korn as a Soviet citizen and resident of the Soviet side of Przemyśl did not need to worry about this particular ultimatum, it still reveals the ancient trope of Jewish double loyalty that the Soviet Union wielded against Jews, as well as the reluctance many Jews had of becoming Soviet citizens, preferring to take their chances with Nazi Germany, when the extent of the “Final Solution” was still unknown.

In this anxious and tumultuous time, Korn never lost her humanity and sense of justice. Ravitch tenderly recalls how Korn lived close by to his elderly mother during the time of the Soviet occupation of 1939-1941—“She supported her, the old woman—although this was difficult to do.”<sup>105</sup>

#### **Part Four, Flight into the Soviet Union, 1941**

Rokhl Korn was a believer in the powers of foretelling. She was said to have told her dreams to anyone who would listen. One day in the late spring of 1941, Melekh Ravitch found one such prophecy from Korn in his mailbox:

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<sup>103</sup> John Goldlust, “A Different Silence: The Survival of More than 200,000 Polish Jews in the Soviet Union during World War II as a Case Study in Cultural Amnesia,” In *Shelter from the Holocaust: Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union*, edited by Mark Edele, Sheila Fitzpatrick, and Atina Grossmann, 29-94. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>105</sup> Ravitch, *Mayn Leksikon*, 241.

A couple days before the outbreak of the war, I received a deeply distressed letter from Rokhl, almost entirely made up of quotations of Johann Wolfgang Goethe's women-poems. Half of Yiddish literature was then gone from Poland—she, one among the few, remained and even in a provincial town, bound to her kitchen— which was now rarely visited or admired—... In that last letter before the outbreak, she wrote (quoting Goethe): “Only the one who yearns knows my pain.”<sup>106</sup>

Soon after sending this letter, Rokhl Korn went to visit her daughter Renya in her dormitory in Lviv. Renya “remembers how her mother ominously told her that when she came to Lvov she said that she had experienced the feeling that she would never see the garden of the house in Przemyśl again. This was in June when everything was in bloom.”<sup>107</sup>

Soon after, on June 22nd 1941, the unthinkable happened: Germany attacked the Soviet Union. As bombs started to fall on Lviv, Rokhl Korn rushed around the city with her daughter trying to arrange transport deeper into Russia with the only identification she had—her membership with the Soviet Writers' Union, whose meetings Korn was frequenting while she was in Lviv. That night or early morning she found a truck transporting women, “mostly wives of officers,” and they started heading east to Kyiv.<sup>108</sup> Affecting their instincts to flee was the uncertainty of when or if they would see their family again. The most crucial factor for Korn's successful flight was most likely her Soviet identification and her flagging of a sympathetic truck driver. There could be no other way to escape as only “some Jews were evacuated because of their military, professional, or Communist Party affiliations...there was no coordinated effort

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> “Rachel Korn: A biography on the author & poet”

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

to move Jews out of the areas taken by the Germans. Nor could there have been, in the initial chaos.”<sup>109</sup>

Rokhl Korn and her daughter were joining a mass migration of about 1.4 million Jews and 16 million more Soviet citizens and refugees<sup>110</sup> who were fleeing east ahead of the Nazi invasion by their own volition or later as evacuees sent to safeguard the Soviet wartime industry far from the western front-lines.<sup>111</sup> Although a mass migration, this movement of peoples barely made a dent in the millions and millions more who were still trapped in the western republics of the invaded Soviet Union.

In light of their shared enemy, the Soviet Union declared amnesty for all Polish people, Jewish and non-Jewish, on August 12th, 1941.<sup>112</sup> Prior to this, Polish occupants of annexed Soviet territory who did not wish to obtain Soviet citizenship as Rokhl Korn had done had faced “arrest and incarceration in a prison or labor camp, exile or deportation to special settlements, voluntary travel to work in the hinterland, [or] mobilization into the Red Army.”<sup>113</sup> The amnestied Polish refugees, most of them moving south from labor camps, swelled the already large numbers of people fleeing the Nazis. Therefore, the Polish Jews’ “journeys often took weeks, as the troop trains had first priority and civilians sat on the rails for days.”<sup>114</sup> Compounding the arduous journey was the uncertainty of what was happening back in Poland and the persecution many had already faced by the Soviets. As Eliyana Adler writes, “This harried self-evacuation was traumatic for many...Some of the Polish Jews even had to confront

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<sup>109</sup> Eliyana Adler, *Survival on the Margins: Polish Jewish Refugees in the Wartime Soviet Union*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020, 99.

<sup>110</sup> Mark Edele and Wanda Warlik, “Saved by Stalin?” In *Shelter from the Holocaust: Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union*, edited by Mark Edele, Sheila Fitzpatrick, and Atina Grossmann, 111, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017.

<sup>111</sup> Adler, *Survival on the Margins*, 158.

<sup>112</sup> Edele, Fitzpatrick, and Grossmann, *Shelter from the Holocaust*, 51-52.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 103.

<sup>114</sup> Adler, *Survival on the Margins*, 154.

German advances a third time.”<sup>115</sup> Korn’s escape from Lviv was certainly miraculous, only a very small fraction of survivors in the Soviet Union were able to outpace the German invasion in this way and escape to safety without having been forcibly evacuated and incarcerated as potential enemies of the state, as the non-citizens had experienced.<sup>116</sup> Renya’s knowledge as a medic would certainly have been prized—there were very high rates of malaria and other diseases common to the more southern climes of Russia that many refugees were heading to, following the wartime industry and warmer weather.

After reaching Kyiv, Rokhl Korn and Renya continued much further east, to Ufa, a city close to the Kazakh border. Renya got a job as a nurse in a hospital there.<sup>117</sup> Ufa inspired Korn to write the poem “Ufa Earth,” a poem which sees the earth transformed into a malevolent force for the first time in her poetry. Yet, it is telling of Korn’s expansive poetic imagination that the poem still imagines a union with this earth that is so strange to the speaker:

Do not be in too much of a hurry,  
but slowly through holes in my torn shoes  
plaster around my feet,  
engulf my body.<sup>118</sup>

Sometime in the fall, as winter neared, Korn and her daughter decided to travel south with the majority of the other refugees to the Central Asian republics. Chaim Grade, another Yiddish writer who fled deep into the Soviet Union, describes this rationale in his memoir:

“The refugees from the west flowed one after the other to the middle of Asia with the idea that it was warm there. But the dream also fevered in their eyes of crossing the border to Iran, or Afghanistan, and breaking through all the way to the land of Israel. But in the end the refugees saw

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 158.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 281.

<sup>117</sup> Rachel Korn: A biography on the author & poet”

<sup>118</sup> Korn, *Heym un Heymlozikayt*, 135.

that not even a shadow could creep through the wall of the Russian bayonets.”<sup>119</sup>

The two women traveled by train through the Karakum desert. This was a strange journey, filled with contradictory feelings of “liberation and woe,” as Korn describes in her poem “On the Way.”<sup>120</sup> Once in Tashkent, they traveled onward to the city where they would live for the next few years, Fergana. Korn’s poem “On My Shoes” presents a litany of Korn’s wanderings until that point:

On my shoes the clay from Bashkir,<sup>121</sup>  
from Karakum desert the glowing-hot sand,  
the muck of Russian villages and cities,  
and the light-gray dust of Uzbek land.

The dried blood of the Polish roads,  
the dust and ash of burnt remains...<sup>122</sup>

In her later writings, Korn refers to this time as her “na v’nad” years, a reference to the biblical Cain’s punishment of having to wander the earth while also marked as a fugitive. It is unclear how Korn figured herself as a fugitive—being a refugee is no crime. Perhaps this is a manifestation of survivors’ guilt. Or perhaps this is Korn’s method of accessing a universal Jewish past of wandering, connecting her suffering to as far back as recorded texts can go.

### **Part Five: Fergana, Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, 1941-1943**

Fergana is a city in the mountainous region of the very picturesque Fergana Valley, wedged between present-day Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Refugees were drawn here by the promise of warmer weather and ample food in Central Asia. A novel promoting Tashkent,

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<sup>119</sup> Chaim Grade, *Der Mames Shabosim*, New York: Tsiko, 1959, 370.

<sup>120</sup> Korn, *Heym un Heymlozikayt*, 136.

<sup>121</sup> The historic name of the territory where Ufa is located.

<sup>122</sup> Korn, *Heym un Heymlozikayt*, 240.

the Uzbek capital, as a “city of bread” was a major influence. The reality when they arrived, however, was quite different, as Soviet resources were beginning to be stretched to their capacity: “Huddled in and around train stations, forced to keep moving when denied entry to the overwhelmed Uzbek capital, refugees were greeted by widespread hunger, severe overcrowding and poverty, typhus, dysentery, cholera, crime, and despair.”<sup>123</sup> In fact, soon after arriving in Fergana, Korn had to be hospitalized with a case of pellagra she had developed from nutrient deficiencies.<sup>124</sup>

Finding work and shelter in their new homes was an arduous task for the Polish refugees, particularly those without Communist Party connections. There was plenty of competition—by that December of 1941, 10 million Soviet citizens had moved to the Central Asian republics.<sup>125</sup> Although ostensibly all were in the same situation, members of the privileged classes, or *nomenklatura*, “were able to enter closed shops to purchase goods that were unavailable to the rest.”<sup>126</sup> Renya’s utility as a medic for the Soviet cause ensured the family’s security in the Uzbek republic, as well as Rokhl Korn’s cultural connections with some leading Soviet literary figures. Other, less fortunate Jewish refugees found that “while a wide range of work was available, the pay was often insufficient to support basic nutritional needs.”<sup>127</sup>

Central Asia in the wartime years became a melting pot of Jewish cultures. Although Jews were not a group designated by the Soviets to be resettled in the east, they still tended to flock to the same cities together for community and job opportunities. Moshe Grossman, a memoirist of this era, describes the hierarchy of the European Jewish refugees and the scramble to find housing when newly arrived in Central Asia. This situation was complicated by the fact

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<sup>123</sup> Adler, *Survival on the Margins*, 186.

<sup>124</sup> Levitan, “Rokhl Häring Korn.”

<sup>125</sup> Edele, Fitzpatrick, and Grossman, *Shelter from the Holocaust*, 57.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 61.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

that many non-Soviet citizens had just experienced forced labor or imprisonment in the Soviet Union:

“The Russian Jews grabbed the big courtyard. . . . They would not admit any Polish Jews there. First because we were dirty, second because according to them we were all thieves. And third, we were not evacuees after all but released prisoners! . . . The Lithuanian Jews also regarded themselves as a higher class in the lineup. They didn’t like the Poles either. Even the Bessarabian Jews did not hold with us, while among the Polish Jews themselves there was a struggle between the Galicians and the Congress Poles. What was more, there was quite a special dispute between those who talked Polish and those who talked Yiddish.”<sup>128</sup>

Beyond animosity, though, there were some valuable interactions between Jews who had been kept apart by the Soviet border. Just as their Soviet brethren taught the Polish Jews how to navigate the twists and turns of Soviet bureaucracy, Polish Jews “also passed along to them ideas about Judaism, Zionism, and other aspects of Jewish culture that the state had largely eradicated.”<sup>129</sup>

Interactions with local Bukharan communities of Jews, who are native to Uzbekistan, were fewer than with other Ashkenazi Jews, but the groups did converge for official religious institutional needs, like for circumcision or ritual baths.<sup>130</sup> Most likely their linguistic and cultural gaps prevented more communication. The whole region, too, was reeling from the sudden arrival of millions of people, and everyone was operating under wartime deprivation.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>129</sup> Adler, *Survival on the Margins*, 291.

<sup>130</sup> Atina Grossmann, “Jewish Refugees in Soviet Central Asia, Iran, and India: Lost Memories of Displacement, Trauma, and Rescue.” In *Shelter from the Holocaust: Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union*, edited by Mark Edele, Sheila Fitzpatrick, and Atina Grossmann, 201. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017.

To be sure, Jews were getting accustomed not just to their countrymen but also to their Turkic-speaking neighbors, who now had to face this influx of refugees after decades of intensifying Soviet control. The Jewish refugees worked alongside these peoples and often rented rooms from them in their clay khibitkas, which were domed yurt-like structures. In the Uzbek republic, relations were tense at first, especially due to resentment of Polish Jews receiving aid from the Polish government in exile as well as from international Jewish organizations.<sup>131</sup> The cities of the Uzbek republic in particular faced extreme overcrowding, perhaps straining the relationship between peoples, as there are reports of much friendlier welcomes among the more sparsely scattered Kazakh population.<sup>132</sup> But over time, relations generally improved, as remembered by Moshe Grossman:

‘It took a long time for the Uzbeks and the Jews to get to know one another better. Once we were accepted as guests at their festivities, both people saw that you must not judge in a hurry or superficially the people you meet by chance in the street or the bazaar. Among them, as among ourselves, there were decent, modest, fine folk of high morality and culture’<sup>133</sup>

Eventually, culture began to be shared more readily among Jews and Uzbeks: “sharing of pilaf meals and wedding celebrations, the Jacobs who became Yacoub...comfortable afternoons spent in the local teahouses (chaikhanas) or even sightseeing at the grand mosques and mausoleums in Samarkand and Bukhara.”<sup>134</sup>

Just as she had perfected a Yiddish-Polish hybrid in her prewar poetry, Korn’s wartime work holds the imprint of Uzbek language and culture. In addition to the physical scenes of deserts and apricot trees, bearded men on clay thresholds and women in cloaked parandzhas, Korn’s poetry sought to merge Jewish and Uzbek geography into one sacred time. Thus, in the

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<sup>131</sup> Edele, Fitzpatrick, and Grossman, *Shelter from the Holocaust*, 59.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid*, 61.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*, 201.

poem “Night in Fergana” the Uzbek street turns into Korn’s childhood home at the time of khatzos, or traditional midnight study.<sup>135</sup> Korn made sense of her new locale by transforming it using the internal clock of sacred Jewish time, a kind of portable homeland. In this way, Korn attempted to mystically “obliterate every border” that stood between her and her physical homeland.

As the eastward migration encompassed many ethnic groups from the western borderlands of the Soviet Union, some Jewish refugees found unlikely neighbors when they arrived in Central Asia. This was the case for refugees Yosef and Manya Goldkorn, who arrived in the Kazakh republic city of Uralsk to find that they would be housed with a Don Cossack woman; “though historically Cossacks and Jews had difficult relations, this woman had lived through collectivization and was sympathetic to the homeless refugees.”<sup>136</sup> For many pro-Soviet Jewish refugees, resettlement was a chance to join the multi-ethnic coalition of the Soviet Union, with their common enemies of fascism and Hitler uniting them. This was the perspective of a Yiddish folksong gathered by the Kyiv Cabinet of Jewish Culture among Polish Jews in Alma-Ata, Kazakh republic, 1945:

I run away from the murderers and the slaughterers  
From that cursed German, Hitler.  
And the mountain speaks to me,  
It speaks to me,  
[Saying]: “Enough of this crying and complaining,  
Al tirah avdie Yaakov, don’t have any fears  
We are Soviet mountains, and we know Lenin’s Torah.  
All people are brothers  
From one father, and from one mother

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<sup>135</sup> Korn, *Heym un Heymlozikayt*, 144.

<sup>136</sup> Adler, *Survival on the Margins*, 166.

We are all a part of the same family  
Living in the shade of my shadow together  
A Kazak and a Kalmik,  
An Ungur and a Tadjik,  
Koreans, Romanians, Ukrainians,  
Kirgiz, Ossentiners, and Georgians.  
Now [that you're here], the family has another member  
Please be our welcome guest.  
You are our brother, dear Jew  
Even though the enemy hates you so much.  
Oh, you will be a beloved brother in our family  
Oh, and you will take a plow [in your hand].<sup>137</sup>

Overall, the experience in Central Asia was one of extreme contradiction, beginning with the fact that many refugees cursed their fate of starvation and toil while also being grateful that their lives had been saved. As the folk-song states in another stanza, "It was a storm wind / that brought me into Asia,"<sup>138</sup> showing that many Jews believed they were in Central Asia by mere luck or chance, and not knowing what to make of their strange circumstances. Soviet attitudes toward non-citizens, too, could be unpredictable:

Moshe Grossman was imprisoned as a 'class enemy' early in the war, then released under the Polish amnesty of 1941, and spent the next three years in Uzbekistan. But in February 1944 he was suddenly rearrested by the NKVD and charged with 'counterrevolutionary agitation.' After several months of interrogation he was sent to a prison camp.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> "Yiddish Lyrics." Yiddish Glory.com

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Edele, Fitzpatrick, and Grossman, *Shelter from the Holocaust*, 66.

Some Soviet citizens even thought Jews did not deserve to be resettled in Central Asia, even though there was no coordinated Soviet effort to get Jews out of the western borderlands in the first place. This mistrust of the refugees also turned to classic tropes of antisemitism: the “Tashkent front” was said to be where “Avram speculated while Ivan fought.”<sup>140</sup> Culturally, Russification was in full swing with traveling orchestras and theatrical performances from the Russian metropolises entertaining the Soviet masses at the same time people were “dropping like flies” in the street from hunger and disease.<sup>141</sup>

Rokhl Korn still sought literary community in Fergana, despite or because of the horrors of war. She even sent a letter to Soviet authorities in 1942 requesting more Yiddish books to be made available in Central Asia now that there was a large concentration of readers.<sup>142</sup> There was a wartime Soviet Yiddish magazine, *Eynikayt* or Unity, meant to foster patriotism and anti-fascism among Jewish readers, but this magazine was too expensive for most refugees and one refugee in Ushtobe “said that the few Yiddish books or periodicals that reached his town were generally sold as paper to wrap fish or roll cigarettes before he could obtain them.”<sup>143</sup>

Besides the lack of literature, Korn was starting to become suspicious of the whole Soviet authority, though she had eagerly become a citizen just a couple years earlier. The Soviet Writers’ Union even offered her a job to come and write for their newspaper *Di Frayhayt* in their temporary headquarters in Kuibyshev, near Ufa, in 1942, but Korn declined because the newspaper was staunchly Communist and she was starting to rethink her politics.<sup>144</sup> She had never liked being told how to think— it was why she sought literature among her rural upbringing, so she certainly did not appreciate the growing demands the Soviet Union was placing on its artists.

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 186.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Adler, *Survival on the Margins*, 175.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Rachel Korn: A biography on the author & poet”

## Part Six: Moscow, USSR, 1943-1946

In 1943, Renya decided to go to Moscow to further her medical education, while Korn stayed behind for another year in Fergana.<sup>145</sup> When she arrived in Moscow, it was a good time to be a Yiddish writer. Jewish intellectuals and artists were being recruited by the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee to make artistic depictions of Jews as productive, genuine members of the Soviet populace. Korn met many writers including Avrom Sutzkever, who was rescued from German territory by the JAFC because of the power of his wartime poetry, as well as Peretz Markish and Shmuel Halkin, writers she later memorialized in her poetry after they fell victim to Stalinist oppression.<sup>146</sup>

Despite residing in a cultural capital for the first time in her life, Korn felt like an outsider in Moscow. A decade later, in one of her only English pieces of writing, published in a magazine of Jewish politics, she editorialized that “The Soviet Union is a country where dead writers get the most attention and respect. This is one way of being sure they will not deviate from the political line the party has decreed.”<sup>147</sup>

Through all this wandering, Korn had very little information from the other side of the border, her home. When the war ended, the possibility to return opened up, but it could be a slow, chaotic process for many, especially those who were still in Central Asia and needed to prove their Polish citizenship. A representative of the Polish Professional Union in Uzbekistan said that “We even accepted medical prescriptions in the Polish language as valid documents.”<sup>148</sup> Repatriation did not come immediately after the end of the war, and most were unable to leave “until the spring and summer of 1946.”<sup>149</sup> In April 1946 Korn finally obtained an exit-visa to return to Poland as a repatriate. It is hard to imagine the mixture of fear, homesickness, and

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<sup>145</sup> Levitan, “Rokhl Häring Korn.”

<sup>146</sup> “Rachel Korn: A biography on the author & poet”

<sup>147</sup> Rokhl Korn. “Russian Jewry Destruction of Yiddish Culture,” *Chronicle*, Oct 1972, 17.

<sup>148</sup> Edele, Fitzpatrick, and Grossman, *Shelter from the Holocaust*, 67-68.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

relief Korn must have felt at this moment or if she was even expecting to see any of her family again.

Before she left, Korn went to say goodbye to the poet Peretz Markish:

In the beginning Markish had tried to dissuade me from leaving. Nowhere, he said, would I as a Yiddish writer enjoy such bright and favorable conditions to write and publish my books. When he saw that I had firmly made up my mind he said: Go, in the best of health, but don't stay in semi-fascist Poland, go from there to America or Israel!<sup>150</sup>

### **Part Seven: Łódź, Poland, 1946**

Korn and her daughter went across the western border with 200,000 other Jewish repatriates.<sup>151</sup> The Polish authorities in coordination with Jewish governing bodies such as the CKŻP, or Central Committee of Polish Jews, were steering the repatriates toward cities like Łódź or Szczecin in the western regions of Poland, because these were areas recently cleared of historically German populations during and immediately after WWII.<sup>152</sup> An additional motive was to limit the possibilities of property disputes and tensions if Jews were to resettle in their Eastern Polish heartland.<sup>153</sup> Those who did return to their hometowns were often met with hostility and even violence from neighbors who had just as often collaborated with the Nazis as resisted them. In Korn's city, "Ninety-four percent of the well over a thousand repatriated who had arrived in Przemysl between 1 February and 1 August 1946 left the town during the same period."<sup>154</sup> A few months after Korn's arrival in Poland, horrifying events occurred that further convinced Korn (and many other Jewish repatriates) to not return to their home regions.

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<sup>150</sup> Korn, "Russian Jewry Destruction of Yiddish Culture," 17.

<sup>151</sup> Kateřina Čapková, "Dilemmas of Minority Politics: Jewish Migrants in Postwar Czechoslovakia and Poland," in *Postwar Jewish Displacement and Rebirth 1945-1967*, edited by Françoise S. Ouzan and Manfred Gerstenfeld, 65. Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2014.

<sup>152</sup> Adler, *Survival on the Margins*, 240.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Edele, Fitzpatrick, and Grossman, *Shelter from the Holocaust*, 121.

Hundreds of Jewish Holocaust survivors that summer were murdered in towns like Kielce, where accusations of Jews abducting Polish children set the pogrom raging in a postwar environment that was already tense from all the trauma of war. Of the more than 200,000 Jewish repatriates to Poland, over 140,000, including Korn and her daughter, left permanently soon after this summer of pogroms.<sup>155</sup>

But before these cruel events, the Jewish repatriates had a bittersweet experience of surveying what was lost and seeing what they could rebuild anew. Korn found out the fate of her family from a survivor who had hidden among Polish farmers during the war. Rokhl Korn learned that she and her daughter were the last survivors of their whole family. To her prior poetic landscapes of orchards and fields, Korn added the mass grave in the woods near the shtetl Grayding where her mother and her brother Heniek were murdered, and the extermination camp Belzec where her brother Leyzer and his son were killed. Her husband Hersh tried to reach them in Lviv when the war first broke out, but his hiding place near the border was revealed by a Nazi collaborator and he was taken to Treblinka where he lost his life.<sup>156</sup> Although many had yearned and dreamed of returning home for so long during their Soviet exile, few were prepared for the absolute devastation that awaited them when they came back, as “Among the 3.3 million Polish Jews alive when Hitler invaded that land... [there were] hardly more than a hundred Jewish families [that still] stood intact.”<sup>157</sup>

Choosing temporarily to stay in Łódź, Korn joined a “minor Jewish cultural renaissance” there, along with writers like Chaim Grade and Binem Heller, filmmaker Natan Gross, and the legendary comedians Dzigal and Schumacher.<sup>158</sup> Over 28,000 tickets were sold to the Yiddish theater in Łódź between August and December 1946, and at Dzigal and Schumacher’s very

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid, 73.

<sup>156</sup> Korn, *Heym un Heymlozikayt*, 10-11.

<sup>157</sup> Edele, Fitzpatrick, and Grossman, *Shelter from the Holocaust*, 202.

<sup>158</sup> Jan Schwarz. *Survivors and Exiles: Yiddish Culture after the Holocaust*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015, 44-45.

popular and bittersweet reunion show, “both audience and actors stood facing each other for a few moments, and cried.”<sup>159</sup>

Despite this lively reunion, most still wanted to get out of Poland as soon as possible. Most went to Palestine or the United States, but “A smaller number, by the late 1940s and early 1950s, were able to secure immigration documents for Australia, Canada, Argentina, or other countries in Central or South America.”<sup>160</sup> Before going to Canada, Korn lived in Stockholm, Sweden for nearly two years where she was invited as a delegate of the Yiddish Writers’ Union to a conference.<sup>161</sup>

Ultimately, the legacy of the survivors of Soviet exile remains complex both in Poland and the rest of the world. As Eliyana Adler writes, “Our models for teaching and writing about the Holocaust do not make room for them,” as these models are much more focused on victims of concentration or extermination camps.<sup>162</sup> The experiences of the very few Polish survivors who had lived in hiding outweigh the narratives of the “considerable majority” who survived openly in the Soviet Union.<sup>163</sup> Most likely it is harder to construct a narrative of the exile experience, which doesn’t have the more familiar narratives of righteous gentiles or concentration camps that have become the mainstream Holocaust narrative of *Schindler’s List* and other media.

There is also a divergence between Polish and Polish-Jewish memory of Soviet exile. For non-Jewish Polish people, the experience of being forcibly evacuated into the Russian interior was one of total humiliation and Soviet aggression. But Jews, despite the hardships of exile, also experienced gratitude about their lives being saved from the Nazis:

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Edele, Fitzpatrick, and Grossman, *Shelter from the Holocaust*, 73-74.

<sup>161</sup> Seelig, “Barren Sheet of Paper,” 356.

<sup>162</sup> Adler, *Survival on the Margins*, 288.

<sup>163</sup> Edele, Fitzpatrick, and Grossman, *Shelter from the Holocaust*, 31.

Whereas the [Polish] Monument to the Fallen and Murdered in the East lists places of deportation in funereal solemnity, one [Jewish] child of a flight survivor remembers her father singing her to sleep with some of these same names. He had composed a lullaby made up of the colorful and curious-sounding names of all of the places he passed through in order to get back to his native Poland.<sup>164</sup>

### **Part Eight: Stockholm, Sweden, 1946-1948**

Once in Stockholm, Korn enjoyed being “the first Jewish writer to be an invited member of the PEN club in Stockholm, Sweden.”<sup>165</sup> While in Stockholm, Korn continued to write, developing her postwar poetics of minimalism while also reflecting on how to move forward from her loss. It is as if her poetry lost the excesses of narrative and imagery that defined her early work and instead there is a close concision, the lush joys of her earlier life stripped away:

#### **A New Dress**

I put on today,  
for the first time  
after seven long years  
a new dress.

But it's too short for my grief,  
and too tight for my suffering,  
and every glassy white button  
is like a tear,  
that flows down from the folds,  
stony and severe.

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<sup>164</sup> Adler, *Survival on the Margins*, 294.

<sup>165</sup> “Rachel Korn: A biography on the author & poet”

Stockholm, 1947<sup>166</sup>

Korn was also putting together her next book, *Heym un Heymlozikayt, Home and Homelessness*. The “Home” section is a collection of her prewar poetry and the second section presents the poems she wrote in flight in the Soviet Union, in Fergana, Moscow, and in Stockholm. Korn found a publisher in Mark Turkov, once a journalist in Warsaw, who had been living in Buenos Aires after the war and started a series of works from Polish Yiddish writers, publishing about ten a year.<sup>167</sup> These books, mainly reprints of Yiddish classics as well as Holocaust testimonies, were distributed in displaced persons camps and found a readership among those who were still looking for Yiddish literature, despite the very diminished publication infrastructure.<sup>168</sup> Along with *Di Goldene Keyt*, the premier postwar Yiddish literary magazine, published in Israel by Avrom Sutzkever, her fellow poet in wartime Moscow, Mark Turkov’s series was vital for the continuation of Yiddish literature. Rather than capitulating to historical demands of Zionism or assimilationism, Korn joined the staunch Yiddishists who would not let the language fade away. Korn’s decision to continue to reach her gradually diminishing audience of Yiddish readers was a corollary to Sutzkever’s request to present his testimony at the Nuremberg trial in Yiddish, instead of one of the approved languages. Although he was made to testify in Russian, his protest has still entered the record of history: “May our mother tongue be heard. May they hear our language, and may Alfred Rosenberg explode. May my language triumph in Nuremberg as a symbol of our indestructibility!”<sup>169</sup>

Korn’s readers were eager for new work by the poet as well as to revisit the poetry that had made her a well-known figure. As Heather Valencia writes, “From a historical perspective, the re-use of these poems in the later book afford them, retrospectively, an extra dimension...

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<sup>166</sup> Korn, *Bashertkayt*, 50.

<sup>167</sup> Schwarz, *Survivors and Exiles*, 92.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*, 93.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid*, 150-52.

they become a memorial to a community and culture which has been entirely obliterated.”<sup>170</sup> Not all reviewers were so understanding. In a review in *The Forward*, Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote that he had the “sense that her and rhythm do not get along very well. She doesn’t knowingly sin against rhythm, but she has, it seems, no sense of harmony.”<sup>171</sup> Rather than engaging the content of her wartime poetry, Bashevis Singer spent the whole review rehashing complaints about her prewar work, revealing how crucial that early work was to Korn’s reputation. That being said, Bashevis Singer’s attitude was not unknown to Korn. In a later letter to her friend, the poet Kadya Molodowsky, Korn slyly reports that “When it comes to women-writers, he depends on special methods to criticize them, as though he wanted to hold them responsible for his personal failures in other phases of [his] life. We forgive the critics their cunning. It means nothing, says nothing.”<sup>172</sup>

Korn spent two years in Sweden, devoting most of her time to *Heym un Heymlozikayt* as well as preparing for her next book of selected poems which came out a year later, *Bashertkayt* (1949). Through her literary connections, Korn, her daughter, and her son-in-law (who Renya had met in Moscow) obtained visas to immigrate to Montreal, Canada. Their provider, the Yiddish children’s writer Ida Maze, was to greet them and introduce them to Montreal’s literary world.<sup>173</sup>

### **Part Nine: Montreal, Canada, 1948-1982**

Rokhl Korn first moved to an apartment in Montreal on Bernard O., in the city’s bustling and overcrowded Jewish neighborhood, just to the west of Mount Royal.<sup>174</sup> Montreal was a major hub of what has been described as the “transnational Yiddishland.”<sup>175</sup> Of the 11,000 Holocaust refugees who came to Canada, over half came to Montreal, attracted to the close-knit

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<sup>170</sup> Valencia, “*Yidishe Dikhterins*,” 89.

<sup>171</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, “Tsvey naye bikher,” *Forverts*, April 3rd, 1949.

<sup>172</sup> Zelda Kahn-Newman, “The Correspondence Between Kadya Molodowsky and Rokhl Korn.”

<sup>173</sup> Seelig, “Barren Sheet of Paper,” 356.

<sup>174</sup> “Rachel Korn: A biography on the author & poet”

<sup>175</sup> Rebecca Margolis, *Jewish Roots, Canadian Soil: Yiddish Cultural Life in Montreal, 1905-1945*, Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011, xiv-xv.

community that could be found there.<sup>176</sup> Khave Rosenfarb, who survived the Łódź ghetto as well as Auschwitz, and immigrated to Montreal at about the same time as Korn, remembers what it was like to come to Montreal as a Yiddish writer:

Upon my arrival in Montreal in 1950, I found a bustling Yiddish social life. Without ever having to wait until I learned English properly, I could read the *Keneder Adler* every day, and so keep up-to-date with world and Canadian news events. Harry Hershman, my Montreal publisher, who made it possible for me to emigrate to Canada, supplied me with Yiddish literary periodicals, which kept me informed about Yiddish cultural life both here and abroad. He took me to the Folk University at the Jewish Public Library, which was the centre for Yiddish cultural life in the city. I visited the Peretz schools and the Folk Shule and became a student at the Yiddish teacher's seminary. I could count more than forty Yiddish writers living in Canada in the years just after my arrival in this country, writers of international reputation, recognized all over the Yiddish-speaking world, as well as more marginal writers, so-called Sunday scribblers—or 'graphomanes'—as they were dubbed in Poland. There was an active writers' union in Montreal, which I was invited to join. There were constant public lectures on literary topics.<sup>177</sup>

Korn's arrival was a sensation to the Yiddish literary community of the city: "Immediately upon arrival, Korn was welcomed into the literary salon of Ida Maze and invited to offer public readings at the Jewish Public Library, then under the leadership of Melekh Ravitch."<sup>178</sup>

Ida Maze's salon was the first stop for any Yiddish writer visiting or arriving in Montreal. Maze's son, Irving Massey, remembered the atmosphere:

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<sup>176</sup> Seelig, "Barren Sheet of Paper," 357.

<sup>177</sup> Rosenfarb, *Yiddish Poets in Canada*, 2.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.

It was always full of people all day and evening long. And sometimes all night long as well. We would gather around the table, and gathered around the table, we would drink tea all day long. And here there was a telephone on the wall. It rang starting early in the morning. Everyone needed something from my mother...They spoke about poetry, about lines, about words, about literature, about their own work. It was culture—soaked through with culture. The air itself was culture.<sup>179</sup>

The Yiddish literary community of Montreal was a place where writers could feel that they were part of something thriving again after many years of war and pushing back against a sense of Yiddish being lost to English and French in Montreal. Many writers came to spaces like Ida Maze's salon after working all day at factories and while living in cramped rooming houses.<sup>180</sup> Khava Rosenfarb, who wrote her monumental trilogy *The Tree of Life* in a small apartment while having to work menial jobs and raise her children, remembered these public and private worlds of Yiddish literature. She recalled that the culture of the Montreal scene could provide a sense of fulfillment for many recent immigrants, especially when a visiting writer would come and there could be both public readings and private celebrations:

Many public celebrations dedicated to these distinguished guests would follow one another, in addition to the private *simkhelekh*, the parties which took place in our 'literary salons,' the most popular of which was the one at the home of the poetess Ida Mase. There we would get drunk on homemade cherry-wine and on literary discussion. Or we would take our guests up to the top of Mount Royal, there to sit like the gods on Parnassus, or like *Got in Odesse*, discussing the works of our absent colleagues and taking delight in literary gossip.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Christa Whitney and Emily Felder, dir. *Ida Maze: The "Den Mother" of Yiddish Montreal*. Amherst, MA, Wexler Oral History Project, 2015.

<sup>180</sup> Margolis, *Jewish Roots, Canadian Soil*, 111.

<sup>181</sup> Rosenfarb, *Yiddish Poets in Canada*, 2-3.

Although Yiddish thrived among this community, it could not be said to be thriving elsewhere. Seelig points out that Korn's postwar motifs of barren, unleafed trees and white paper is "emblematic of what she perceived as the transformation of Yiddish from an organic, indigenous aspect of interwar Poland to its uprooted, moribund condition in postwar Canada."<sup>182</sup> In a letter to her friend and fellow poet Kadya Molodowsky, who she later collaborated with on a literary magazine, Korn complained that Yiddish was being trivialized amongst all the "society talk:" "We've become a folk of events. The content of the issue becomes a side thing... and they never address the main thing."<sup>183</sup> However, this did not mean that recent immigrants like Korn were going to stop writing or living their lives in Yiddish, because the cultural infrastructure already existed in Montreal, and the Holocaust survivors brought a renewed sense of the vitality of Yiddish:

The notion of a unidirectional and inevitable transition away from Yiddish exists only through the lens of historical hindsight; from the perspective of the participants in Montreal's Yiddish cultural milieu, the forsaking of Yiddish for English was far from an inevitability. Further, in post-1945 Montreal, Yiddish was not supplanted to the same extent that it was in other North American centres.<sup>184</sup>

With the support of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Korn published four books of poetry with an Israeli Yiddish publisher over the course of 1962-1977. She wrote all these while living at 21 Maplewood, in Outremont, a more affluent neighborhood close to the historical Jewish center.<sup>185</sup>

For her day-job, Korn worked as a librarian for the Jewish Public Library, the most important space for Yiddish in the city, where she also delivered many lectures and book

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<sup>182</sup> Seelig, "Barren Sheet of Paper," 351.

<sup>183</sup> Kahn-Newman, "The Correspondence Between Kadya Molodowsky and Rokhl Korn."

<sup>184</sup> Margolis, *Jewish Roots, Canadian Soil*, 194.

<sup>185</sup> "Rachel Korn: A biography on the author & poet"

launches. Sylvia Lustgarten and Annette Zakuta, the daughters of the Yiddish poet Y.Y. Segal, remember Korn as a permanent fixture at the library, which they recalled as a beautiful stucco Victorian building. Zakuta even remembers that Korn wouldn't let her check out *Nana* by Émile Zola because she deemed it pornographic.<sup>186</sup> Lustgarten remembers Korn as “proper, concerned, and caring”; she would even get into fights with their father, Y.Y. Segal, because he was a terrible flirt and enjoyed being irreverent with her.<sup>187</sup>

Korn also traveled to Israel in the late '50s, invited by the Organization of Przemysł Natives as a reunion with many of the people she had known in Po'ale Zion.<sup>188</sup> Although the physical landscape made a strong impression on her poetry, Korn never expressed any desire to live in Israel, most probably because Yiddish literature was denigrated compared to Hebrew and she wouldn't have been able to find the same community she found in Montreal. Through her travels, “Korn was constantly on the lookout for potential readers of and subscribers to *Svive*,” which was the literary magazine she helmed with Molodowsky.<sup>189</sup> It is telling that even the name of this magazine, which means atmosphere or milieu, points to the importance of being among other writers.

Despite all the joy she experienced in Montreal, including becoming a grandmother, Rokhl Korn's poetry became her vessel for the trauma and loss she had to carry. Many accounts of surviving the Holocaust were written in Yiddish in the fifties and sixties, and the subject matter was often angrier, more raw and emotional in Yiddish than testimony in other languages. For example, the Yiddish version of Elie Wiesel's *Night*, called *Di Velt Hot Geshvign*, or *The World Was Silent*, was hundreds of pages longer in the original and did not have a broadly universal appeal to humanity's goodness like the one added to the French version from which the English

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<sup>186</sup> Lustgarten, Sylvia and Zakuta, Annette. Interviewed by Christa Whitney, *Wexler Oral History Project*, 2016.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> *Sefer Przemysl*

<sup>189</sup> Kahn-Newman, “The Correspondence Between Kadya Molodowsky and Rokhl Korn.”

was translated.<sup>190</sup> Other writer-survivors turned to more philosophical or religious material. In fact, her move to Montreal marks a definitive shift in her poetic style, “from exuberant lyricism to somber symbolism.”<sup>191</sup> This is not to say that her work became consumed by sadness; at a book launch celebrating her book *Oyf der Sharf fun a Rege*, Leyb Tencer said that “Our tragedy [the Holocaust] has made our gentleness more finely-felt, and our greatest poets more human, sensitive.”<sup>192</sup>

Korn herself acknowledged this change, charting her own poetic progress:

In one's youth one feels the impulse to absorb into oneself ever more of the surrounding world, because, one fears, any minute now it could disappear. One greedily absorbs every form, shape, sound and smell, as if tomorrow it would be too late. So some of my poems of that [early] period are so rich in images that they are really overloaded, like trees during a very good harvest, their branches weighed down under the abundant fruit.<sup>193</sup>

In contrast, her later poems were characterized by short, dangling lines, lots of white space, and silence within the poem. For example, the poem below employs stark images of angels and cosmic wonders reduced to bare-bones description:

**From Here to There**

From here to there,  
a span,  
a distance?

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<sup>190</sup> The original Wiesel text was also published in the same series as Korn's *Heym un Heymlozikayt*.

<sup>191</sup> Seelig, “Barren Sheet of Paper,” 350.

<sup>192</sup> Rokhl Korn, *Evening for Rokhl Korn on the publication of her new book "On the Cusp of a Moment,"* with Jacob Zipper and Leyb Tencer, recorded November 25, 1972, Jewish Public Library, Montreal.

<sup>193</sup> Quoted in Valencia, “*Yidishe Dikhterins*,” 89.

Everything already happened,  
everything has been prepared,  
even the angel  
at the fork in the road of time  
waits with wings crossed,  
like two tired hands,  
to give me a kiss on the forehead—

so that I forget  
everything that happened  
and become  
like him,  
without smile,  
without sorrow,  
without tears.<sup>194</sup>

Miriam Waddington points out that this era of Korn's work is much more centered around God, in fact it shows "an easy familiarity with God, whom she often addresses,"<sup>195</sup> using the second person informal address, as is common with Yiddish literature. Korn's personal poetic voice of sensuality and abundance transformed into a more universal voice, one speaking at a national-religious level both to God and the Jewish people. Rosenfarb compares her to the biblical matriarch Rokhl: "She becomes a modern Mame Rokhl mourning the fate of her uprooted children. Hers becomes the voice of all-embracing motherhood."<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Korn, Rokhl. *Oyf der Sharf fun a Rege*. Tel Aviv: ha-Menorah, 1972, 28.

<sup>195</sup> Miriam Waddington, *Apartment Seven*, Canada: Oxford University Press, 1989, 195.

<sup>196</sup> Rosenfarb, *Yiddish Poets in Canada*, 21.

At a 1972 event honoring her new book, *Oyf der Sharf fun a Rege*, the poet Leyb Tencer identified her newfound religiosity as a kind of mystical kabbalah, writing that her work was like *tsimtsum*, or God's contraction out of the universe.<sup>197</sup> He meant that Korn's work practiced renunciation of the world and sensory delights in order to feel closer to God and the essential marrow of life. Seelig agreed, writing that a paradox similar to *tsimtsum* exists in Korn's postwar poetry: "the notion of writing as both a violent rift and a potentially redemptive act."<sup>198</sup> Although the Montreal Yiddish scene was decidedly secular as a result of its leftist roots, during the postwar period Yiddish writers reclaimed religious ritual from their childhood and refashioned it for their world.<sup>199</sup> Therefore, at the launch of Khave Rosenfarb's trilogy at the Jewish Public Library,

The Montreal Yiddish fiction writer and survivor Yehuda Elberg repeatedly referred to Rosenfarb's trilogy as a *seyfer* (a holy book)...By honoring a female Yiddish writer in this way, Elberg transformed a traditional religious act into a secular-humanist event.<sup>200</sup>

Although she lived in Montreal longer than anywhere else in her life, neither the city nor Canada in general appear often in her poetry: "The deep gray of the long Canadian winter came to serve her as a metaphor for the desolation of uprootedness, and as a short cut back to the ruins of her lost home."<sup>201</sup> Even in her last book of poetry, published in 1977, the motifs of her childhood orchard and home cycle through the poems, rather than her present-day life. The images of childish springtime innocence, the particular Yiddish-Polish language that came from these experiences, are broken and refracted through the many separations Korn has faced from

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<sup>197</sup> Korn, *Evening for Rokhl Korn on the publication of her new book "On the Cusp of a Moment"*

<sup>198</sup> Seelig, "Barren Sheet of Paper," 359.

<sup>199</sup> Although many writers and public Yiddish cultural figures like Korn denounced Stalinism and Soviet Communism, the mass culture of postwar Yiddish life in Montreal and other cities was still organized along mainly socialist, non-Stalinist lines.

<sup>200</sup> Schwarz, *Survivors and Exiles*, 54.

<sup>201</sup> Rosenfarb, *Yiddish Poets in Canada*, 20.

her idealized Yiddish word, from war and invasion to the general assimilationist indifference to Yiddish in North America. These images became stark and minimalistic in her postwar work, a landscape for her more philosophical and theologically inspired poems.

Korn never stopped writing, even when her memories become overwhelming or after she suffered from a coronary in 1973 and said that “her body felt like one of those railway cars that has got unhitched from the main engine and been shunted off to a sidetrack.”<sup>202</sup> She saw rewards for her hard work in the form of a supportive readership and awards including prizes from the Jewish Book Council and the Manger Prize, the highest honor for Yiddish literature. She lived to see her work translated into English, French, German, Hebrew, and Polish.<sup>203</sup> She passed away in 1982.

Rosenfarb leaves us with a beautiful, lyrical portrait of her friend as she remembered her:

I remember Rokhl Korn near the end of her life, as she appeared before me on the doorstep of her home one golden afternoon in fall. I recall how she greeted me with the deep chello tones of her voice, always hoarse from smoking too much... And so the memory of her figure, wrapped in the golden autumnal light of the setting sun like a Rembrandt painting, has remained with me until this day. In my memory I can hear her rasping whisper, reminding me that “On the other side of a poem miracles may happen...” And at the same time as I remember her on this side of her poem, in her actual Montreal garden, I can imagine her on the other side of her poem, in the garden of her soul, feeding the squirrels of thought and feeling.<sup>204</sup>

Korn herself often confronted the idea of her death in her later work, writing about it with the same disarming familiarity with which she addresses God and other subjects of a

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<sup>202</sup> Waddington, *Apartment Seven*, 194.

<sup>203</sup> Levitan, “Rokhl Häring Korn.”

<sup>204</sup> Rosenfarb, 20.

cosmic scale. But she also brings her characteristic humanity to her more morbid poems, the humanity that was tested and forged by years of wandering and that she revealed through the gift of her poems:

I will take with me the breath of the word,  
in its purest sorrow and humblest design—  
I will take with me my first love  
and my last tear.<sup>205</sup>

### **Translator's Note**

Above all else, in these translations I have hoped to be comprehensive and complete, to transmit the experience of reading a book of Rokhl Korn's poetry to a general audience as if they were the first eager readers of *Dorf* in 1928 or Korn's postwar audience of survivors and exiles looking for a home in the Yiddish word. This means I have tried to preserve the integrity of each poetic line, doing my best not to rearrange the word order or alter the phrasing too drastically in order to keep the same moments of surprise and progression within the language. Although I employed paraphrasing when grammatical differences became too daunting and changed some auxiliary words around, I have not made any drastic additions or deletions to the text. My ideal test of a successful translation was if I could hold the English poem up to the light and still see the support structure of the Yiddish underlying the language like an X-ray, giving it shape and rhythm. This attention to detail and completeness, although now commonplace, has not always been the case with Yiddish translation. Particularly in the mid-twentieth century, translations were often published with whole scenes missing or language that was significantly altered. These were "truncated translations, de-judaized translations, relentlessly unilingual

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<sup>205</sup> Korn, *Farbitene Vor*, 60.

translations, [and] stiffly uncolloquial or pseudocolloquial translations.”<sup>206</sup> Larry Rosenwald points out that these translation choices were made to ease the reading experience of a popular audience, as opposed to an academic audience. This era of Yiddish translation also followed the McCarthy era and mass Jewish assimilation to American culture. The popular mid-century translators of famous Yiddish writers like Sholem Aleichem focused much more on witticism and the “cutesiness” of Yiddish, not wishing to burden their readers with foreignness or ambiguity. They wished to provide a safe, uncomplicated manner of nostalgia for American Jews, especially given how recently the Holocaust had occurred, and they wished to present Ashkenazi Jewishness as unthreatening and universal for general audiences.

But today’s translators have different aims, and we have learned to find universalism in what is most specific and granular. The Yiddish translator and scholar Anita Norich dates this shift to the 1970s, influenced by scholars like Walter Benjamin and Itamar Even-Zohar, who believed in a translation that preserved much of the “foreignness” of the original language, on the continuum of foreignizing versus domesticating choices that a translator may make.<sup>207</sup> Now, readers of translation are often looking for a kind of journey through time and space when they read a work of translation, and to learn something about a culture they may know nothing about. In Korn’s poetry, I have left mainly religious terms untranslated, like *siddur* meaning prayerbook, or *tkhine* meaning woman’s prayer. Certain cultural terms too I left in the Yiddish. For example, in her poem “My Home,” Korn describes how “vilde, wild, shkotzim” have vandalized her family’s orchard. *Shkotzim* is a derogatory term for non-Jewish boys. Deciding that non-Jewish boy was too cumbersome, I have left the word as is, its status as a curse hopefully clear from the context. Leaving some key words like these untranslated, maybe with a “stealth gloss” to quickly give context, appeals to me because the sounds of the original

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<sup>206</sup> Larry Rosenwald, “Four Theses on Translating Yiddish Literature in the 21st Century,” *Pakn Treger* 18, 2002.

<sup>207</sup> Anita Norich, *Writing in Tongues: Translating Yiddish in the Twentieth Century*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014, 14.

language still appear in the poem and are not clumsily fitted to a not-quite match. Why should Yiddish to English translation necessitate a “crossing-over from Jewish concepts to Christian concepts, or at best to a secularized sensibility,” as Cynthia Ozick puts it?<sup>208</sup> Instead, why not appreciate these “untranslatable” moments as what is most vital about a translation. Perhaps earlier generations shied away from methods like footnotes or stealth glosses because it broke the illusion of a perfect translation. But Yiddish speakers themselves did not live monolingual lives, so I do not aim for English equivalency at all times.

Of course, there are still particular challenges for translating Yiddish. It is a language that many people have an emotional or familial connection to but far fewer speak. There is for this reason a particular anxiety about getting the Yiddish “right” due to a sense of a whole civilization being lost if we are not careful. (Yiddish is still thriving among Hasidic communities but they speak more modern dialects and it is not a cultural norm to read secular Jewish literature.) But modern Yiddish literature began at a moment of internal crisis in the late nineteenth century, when it seemed the traditional Jewish way of life was forever disappearing. In other words, even the writers we translate felt themselves to be losing hold of their “true” manner of life. Therefore, translation from Yiddish shouldn’t be thought of as carefully handling a delicate specimen. Instead, Yiddish translators can focus on the exchange of language and ideas rather than the baggage of meanings and responsibilities that Yiddish can appear to possess. As Anita Norich puts it, translating from Yiddish does not “suggest that Yiddish has no audience or future,” a kind of “obliteration” of the source language. Instead, the act can be a “defiant gesture” and “an act of resistance to history.”<sup>209</sup>

My experience was that of translating the work of one writer within a broader realm of Yiddish poetry. It was a sometimes eerie feeling to live with another writer’s voice for so long—when I tried to scribble my own poems, Rokhl Korn’s voice would come out. The longer I

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<sup>208</sup>Cynthia Ozick, “Prayer Leader.” *Prooftexts* 3, no. 1 (1983): 4.

<sup>209</sup>Norich, *Writing in Tongues*, 43.

worked with the poems, the more clearly her voice spoke to me from the page. I began to embody her obsessions, always flipping to the same words in the dictionary: blossom, sour cherry, na v'nad, stifling, the word shtil, which is so endless in its meanings from quiet to meek to peaceful to still. Cynthia Ozick writes that a poem and its translation should “not only [be] ‘equal’ in the sense of being ‘alike,’ but each having become the other.”<sup>210</sup> Or compare this with the words of the French translator Mireille Gansel, who also understood this merging but in less all-consuming terms than Ozick: “As I sat at the ancient table beneath the blackened beams, it suddenly dawned on me that the stranger was not the other, it was me. I was the one who had everything to learn, everything to understand, from the other. That was probably my most essential lesson in translation.”<sup>211</sup>

For Rokhl Korn, poetry was her homeward path amongst the uncertainties of diaspora and exile. Although she was not a Yiddish speaker in her childhood, she still infuses the language with the dreams and expansiveness of her perpetually young poetic vision. Her work invites everyone to journey back home with her on that “paper-white path,” a universal homeward appeal that invites her readers to share the joy of her earliest years and feel the sorrow of her wandering.

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<sup>210</sup> Ozick, “Prayer Leader,” 3.

<sup>211</sup> Mireille Gansel, *Translation as Transhumance*, New York: Feminist Press, 2017, 92.

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from *Dorf* (Village), 1928

## **The Last Spring**

I remember like it was today:  
the apple trees had just bloomed in the orchard,  
kissing the honey-heavy day  
with pale-pink lips of blossoms,  
and small leaflings fell  
like fragrant snow, springlike  
on my father's cold, tired forehead.

And while I was running among trees,  
wild and joyful with the spring and with my eleven years,  
my father turned his face away to the side—  
but I had not understood then,  
that he had wept.

And when his eyes filled with the wine of the blossoming day  
and his gasping lungs emptied of blood,  
he let two witnesses be called from the village,  
his brother-in-law and an old gray goy, a neighbor,  
prepared for himself writing ink, paper,  
locked himself with them in a separate room  
and didn't let anyone in, not even my mother—  
but at that moment I didn't know  
that his slender young hand  
was writing his will.

## **I'm Soaked Through With You**

I'm soaked through with you, like earth with spring rain  
and my blondest day hangs  
by the knocking pulse of your quietest word,  
like a bee by the branch of blooming lindens.

And I'm over you, like the promise of prosperity,  
in the time  
when the wheat in the field aligns with the rye.

Loyalty drips from my fingertips onto your tired head,  
and my years  
become timely-ripe and swollen,  
like the plots in the field,  
from the worry  
of loving you, beloved man.

## **I Stand in the Midday**

I stand in the midday of your life,  
a stalk, bent from fullness in the middle of the field,  
who at last has put on the green June-shirt  
and grows into golden certainty of coming days.

The air plays with bluebells on far meadows,  
the summer smells like the bitter scent of wild poppies,  
like sweltering hot earth  
and like my hair.

And when the day twists itself within my blonde braids,  
and the evening gathers the pearl of the dew,  
my brown body falls to your feet,  
like a stalk, breaking itself before the reaper.

## **My Heart Runs to You**

My heart runs to you,  
like a kid in small, new ankle-boots,  
the first time in school,  
and it hurries fast and faster.

After all, the blood can stream out of the hour  
like out of the throat of a partially slaughtered dove  
and delay my steps.

A minute  
can run over the road  
like a hare with pricked-up ears  
and be doomed—  
the misfortune already waits behind every fence,  
and it can also be—too late.

Runs my heart to you  
and hurries fast and faster,  
and knocks at your door with its quiet-lover trembling  
—Are you here at home?

## **The Longing Falls**

The longing falls with the sickle of the moon  
over surging-ripe fields of my blood;  
twenty-eight sheaves of my days are sliced  
under cloudy skies of my solitude.

Come and lead them into the barn of your love,  
the black wing of rain hangs over their heads  
and the swallows from my dream fly low;  
twenty-eight sheaves of my days are sliced.

## **Embroidery Rows**

The heart of every hour  
is pierced through with needles,  
bloodying with the deep color of red silk  
on the linen's cool white body.

And on the fresh grave of a new day  
an embroidered flower grows.

Heads gaze  
from the corners of the room,  
dispersed among tablecloths and Richelieu pillows  
with insane and empty eyes  
upon the deeply-bent, narrow shoulders of young women.

And young years lie with their faces veiled  
in fields of golden stalks on a velvet quilt-cover  
and day and night,  
night and day,  
time embroiders  
the pattern of loneliness and sorrow  
with blue-violet webs of veins  
on pale, weary women's hands.

## Sister

Bend your head to my shoulder  
sister,  
here I pamper  
your long, snakish hair,  
and I pet your pallid cheeks,  
wrinkled  
from sold kisses,  
your feverish eyes  
flame in their deep caverns,  
your head is heavy from weariness,

and beams of sunset bleed  
and beams of sunset weave  
veils of forgetfulness  
around your bowed forehead.  
So forget that evening is coming,  
so forget about the night and darkness,  
so forget that pale, painted-on lips  
must laugh  
with the high, whore-sound.

Meanwhile it's good to rest here  
and lull your slim arms  
in your orphaned lap,  
dried out from lust  
in the long nights.  
Listening in the deepest depth,  
how souls plead  
unborn to the light  
and how your whole being longs  
for the first cry of a child.

But the hours trickle out,  
like blood from an open wound,  
hours unwinding from life's  
desolate fate-thread.

Night is here, night already  
my sisters—  
hear,  
from ruins calls the owl.

You have tarried in dreams,  
and have not spread on your cheeks  
the crimson-red ash of shame,  
nor combed or braided  
your long, snakish hair.

## **Dirge of Young Mothers**

Our small children feel in the dark with their tiny hands,  
searching with their mouths.

Our children will not know at all,  
that our bodies lie elongated, like in hot fever,  
that the scattered, night-scented hair around our heads  
winds like hungry snakes around their sacrifice,  
and our heads rage and scream voicelessly  
in the deep hot night:  
—Come strong man, come and redeem—

The hammer of blood strikes the sharp nails of the years  
into the body's elongated cross:

Twenty,  
six and twenty,  
thirty.  
Through every limb,  
through the middle of every trembling toddler from our flesh.  
And in the bed on the other side of the room  
men snore with their mouths open,  
worked-out from hard day-jobs in search of livelihood.  
Their hands writhe in tired sleep,  
like the gnarled joists.

Our thirsty eyes at night sing  
the song to the hands of our men:  
Oh, black, hardworking hands  
come,  
wrap you all in the soft flax of my scented hair,  
hands of our men.

And our children will not know at all,  
that we are twenty, six and twenty, thirty years old,  
yet we cry so lonesome and loud and without an end  
in those first nights of children's worry  
and our young nights are sawn into strange and bloody bits.  
Their hands feel in the dark

and their hungry little mouths search for warmth close beside us.  
And our own lips are hot and thirsty  
bent against the pitcher of night  
as we drink our children's tears from it,  
and the sweat from black, tired, masculine hands.  
The hammer of blood strikes into the body's elongated cross  
the years, like sharp tipped nails.

## **Shabbos in My Home**

Shabbos comes to my home-village a stranger, unasked for,  
it arrives with the laboring of the steam iron in the neighbor's hands  
as she makes a linen shirt ready for Sunday.

Crows sing the song of sixteen work-days  
grayly from the stones  
over scythes sharpened to tips.

The rest-day flees embarrassed,  
clinging to pleats of my mother's piety—  
it marked itself off a piece of a place by my mother,  
however far her praying tune reached:  
from the windows to the edge of the stable  
and from the door to the old apple tree in the orchard.

And Sore, Rivke, Laye, Rokhl came out of the tkhine  
bidding "Gut Shabbos" with its beloved name  
to the orchard, the grain and the green meadows  
and to the ochre soil, stony, sun-burned,  
neglected by people, ashamed and barren of God.

## **Kheshvn**

The fresh, black raised rows of earth  
lie humble and tired under the autumnal sun,  
like the laboring woman in her childbirth,  
who smiles meekly from underneath her pain  
and is already prepared to be a mother again.

The crows are convening for the celebration,  
strolling with measured, dancing steps,  
searching for the excavated worms with their clever black eyes,  
and shaking their heads, like old aunts  
while they chew pieces of honey cake with their blue gums:  
“Don’t worry, it’s just some pain, like the white dew,  
and soon you will live to see pride, soon,  
even before the swallows will come with their sharp tails  
to shear the first wool out of the spring sky.”

## Layve

And nobody knows where he came from, crazy Layve,  
who bound the roads in a bow  
from Yaverev to Moshtsisk,  
from Samber to Grayding,  
carrying a letter in his bosom-pocket  
to his uncle's youngest daughter Rivtshe.

He knew all the houses in the villages,  
the gray road received his long, pointed shadow  
like a horse with his old rider,  
and the dogs lay quietly in their doghouses,  
when the well-known scent of Layve's long black coat  
called to their houndish hearts.

The old goyes in the field liked him,  
bent in the middle like sheaves with laughter,  
which smelled like goodness, like rye bread,  
they asked him:  
—Layve, you don't have a father, no mother,  
so why don't you take yourself a wife, like all of 'yours,'  
so she could wash your shirt for you and cook up a spoonful of hot food?—

Layve looks at the women's bare, bandy legs  
and plows through the brown field of sunburned foreheads  
with the agony of a sharp, stifling thought:  
—Because my uncle didn't want to give me  
his daughter for a wife,  
I go around and carry my heart with me,  
like a cat bound in sackcloth,  
and I want to leave it somewhere,  
so it can't find its way to me anymore—

And he takes a dirty piece of paper out of his pocket  
and reads the women a German letter:  
“An liebchen!”—  
And in the dark moss around his lips

a sad, crazy little smile  
blooms like a red berry.

But then one long, hard winter,  
unlike any the old folks could remember,  
Layve looked futilely  
into the small, bleary eyes of windowpanes,  
and the dogs let their heads down to the earth,  
sniffing all the footprints of the road—  
maybe he was wandering around nearby.

But nobody knows to this day, where he came from, crazy Layve—  
maybe the hungry wolves ripped him apart in the forest,  
and maybe his mother, who hanged herself young  
longed for him—  
from the dark attic of the old house she offered her son  
her small, gentle, pale hand.

## The Old Hanke

Nobody taught her her trade, the old Hanke—  
when the last day  
slid down on the string of time  
she birthed her own children without any help  
and bit through the cord of veins and blood with her teeth,  
because she couldn't pay the "Granny"  
with an apronful of hard grains and a quarter measure of potatoes.

And maybe the knife-slicing hurt  
from which her body twisted in on itself,  
like a willow in an unexpected storm wind,  
unlaced the hard reins from her work-wearied black fingers  
and made them soft and motherly for strangers' pain.

And when she went with the sickle in the field,  
she was often called for by a breathless little boy:  
"Come quicker, Hanke, quicker. Mamunya needs you right now."  
She tapped her waist, to see if her scissors were hanging by her belt with a little string,  
and her sheaf was left disheveled, unbound,  
with stalks sticking out, like hair standing up from wild terror—

In dark Kheshvn nights she led  
the eye of a lantern in a masculine hand  
to the open cottage, which watched with windows and doors,  
and where the mother's hoarse cries  
covered the open eyes of her children frightfully,  
like a sheet of blood.

And when the nails of someone giving birth for the first time  
dug into Hanke's haggard body with animalistic hatred,  
she merely pushed her hunchback to one side,  
like a little woolen shawl,  
and her small blue lips  
brought up full pails of caressing words  
from somewhere, from the bottom of her heart's deep well,  
words she certainly did not learn by the cradle of her own children:

“Hey, be quiet already...quiet—I’ll lay your head a little higher here,  
maybe it will be easier for you, sweetheart,  
but you must help yourself alone, with your own strength,  
you *must*...”

And as Hanke’s eighty years fell under the repose of death,  
like plots of earth under the snow,  
the little village church turned stuffy  
from all the candles which they lit in her honor:  
for every little head of a child, that first moved in her hands—  
a small yellow flame with weeping white drops.  
And in the squat little church,  
their flames mixing with all the rest,  
were three candles, three Jewish ones, which my mother kindled.

## The Eleventh Spoon

To the distant, loved woman M.H. A gift.

When the eleventh spoon came to the bowl  
and in just that time, when the rye blooms in the field,  
the father gave an evil look onto his newborn,  
who was lying wrapped up by the mother's side  
and he griped, like an angry old dog to his wife:  
"You're something of the rabbit family,  
who breeds and breeds without stopping—  
you don't even have room enough for all of them.  
Get up and knit small bags for them."  
The rainbow of his high spit  
cut through the gray twilight  
and the door shrieked from terror  
under the heavy arms of the master of the house.

And the mother-in-law, who grew by the oven,  
like brown moss on moist tree trunks,  
let down on the thin thread of her hatred  
words, like savage little spiders, who suck out the blood:  
"Don't be surprised, daughter,  
a husband is a husband—  
I remember that 'mine' had beat me with a strap,  
when I had a girl for my first child  
and wanted me thrown out of the house  
an hour after the birthing;  
and yes, yes, what does it matter in the hungry time,  
when the last fourth of potatoes is gone  
and you must go haggling in the yard?"

And the children, on them the fury of their father fell,  
like an overcast day on unguarded stacks of hay in the field,  
they quietly slid into bed  
and embarrassed they begged:  
"Mama, I wanted to cut me a piece of bread—  
the box in the pantry is empty already,

and Yashke cries in the corner by the door  
and gnaws his fingers from hunger—  
Mamunya, do you hear?”

She pushed her newborn away from her  
and stood up to grind rye into bread  
with the last bit of stale old grain.

The children looked astonished at their mother,  
they wanted to laugh at her contorted face,  
at her twisted, trembling legs,  
upon which she shook like a drunkard, here, there—

and the kitchen grinder, which opens its mouth,  
will, it seems, say something, scream out loud,  
but it chokes itself on the unground speech of moist rye  
and stretches out a long white tongue of flour  
to the hungry children.

## Ivan's Song

Ever since his wife ran away from him  
and left him the small child in the cradle  
everybody harrowed his ears with such mockery:  
“Hey, Ivan, where’s your wife? Not here?”  
“What kind of a man are you, someone whose wife ran away?”  
“She liked the gendarme better, the drunk?”  
Ivan stands alone before his pot of cabbage over the fire  
and clasps the well-made shirt of his days  
with the red belt of remembrance,  
embroidered with big stitches of his thoughts:  
—She was young and pretty, with full breasts—  
Probably the cuckoo in the forest had cuckooed her a different life,  
may her god in heaven forgive the sin—

And while the hungry wailing of his child at night  
rips each fresh seam with knife-sharpness  
Ivan gathers together the sheep of his sorrow  
upon the green pasture of his heart  
and, laying his thick black finger  
into his child’s twisted blue mouth,  
he splits the darkness into a hundred bloody portions  
with his hoarse voice,  
and words fall like tears onto the small head of his child:

“Oh, you cannot trust luck,  
like the stars in a November sky,  
that tell fortunes on a pretty morning  
and then bring out a rainy gray day,  
sleep on, my little dovey, ah-ah-ah.”

## The Daughter

The daughter came home from the city,  
and her years' earnings as a servant  
were bundled up in a small pouch:  
a dress, a shawl, and soft, new shoes.

Her head, fallen out of the habit of the low door,  
pealed her skullbone against the rafters,  
and the poverty of her house growled  
at her two healthy red hands  
with the anger of a hungry dog.

Little sisters caressed the flowers of the shawl,  
and little brothers tapped their fingers on the soft leather of the new shoes,  
but her mother's strict look peered at how her clothes tightened  
until she recognized something rising,  
like a molehill in the garden.

She called her husband in from the barn  
and snapped the dry twigs of her words,  
igniting the fire of the father's worries:  
"If we bring down the old cradle from the attic,  
people will laugh at our gray hair,  
and their talk will sting,  
like thistles on a naked body:  
—When does Vasil the artisan have any bread to be seen?"

The father rolled the thunder  
of his trembling-muffled voice through the whole yard,  
until his daughter stood before him,  
like a lightning-split apple tree in the orchard,  
and the leather strap whistled with his every word,  
a sign that the whole word was not yet lost,  
and a father is a father:  
"I still have seven small children in the house  
and my bread is bitter with livestock fodder,  
so how should I in my old age rear children and rock

strangers' bastards from the city?"

The daughter lowered her shamed head to her shoulders  
and her eyes beseechingly licked her father's hands,  
like a dog, when someone grabs her little ones to drown,  
and only her back was raised abjectly against the heavy blows,  
like a roof under stormy rain:  
—Maybe the leather strap will make peace?—

But her father's heavy steps  
shove her closer and closer to the door  
and his hard hand throws the little bundle from the city  
after her over the threshold  
with the dress, with the shawl, with the shoes.

## The Mother's Consolation

Twenty-four years already since that night,  
when her body split open like a horse-chestnut,  
and lame Hanke with her rusty old scissors  
withdrew the son from her body—help to her old age,  
but still she must wash her own shirt and work in the garden and the stable  
and pay rich neighbors with her workdays  
for their horses, which helped carry muck and tilled her piece of field,  
and when the spring comes, one must buy one's fill of potatoes.  
The swept bedroom waits for the painted crate of a daughter-in-law  
and the hunger of the fallow time expects able hands in the field.

The son's dogged silence lays like a bolt on his mother's mouth,  
and her years descend without the help of a daughter's hands,  
like heavy stones were sinking her to the bottom of her age.  
But when the winter nights thicken familiar trust  
the son sits by the oven and whittles rakes from white wood,  
that gnash their teeth to the dream of the first hay,  
and the mother's spindle buzzes, like a bee in summer,  
melting away the wrinkles on her face,  
like the snowdrifts in spring-time:  
"The thread is thick and sticks together when spun by old hands,  
and my eyes are red from sitting watch through long winter nights,  
it's past time, my son, that youngsters should spin for me—  
you are just like a tall poplar and the work burns in your hands,  
many keep looking after my son."

And suddenly, like worms out of the earth after a rain,  
the long-stifled thought creeps out of her mind,  
the thought that pastured her hungry eyes through the long bitter years  
on the field by the other side of the fence:  
"Magda's field borders our garden,  
all her produce gleams with fullness, like oil,  
and her house is the nicest in the village  
with a roof of sheet metal—  
and she isn't even old yet,  
two cheeks like roses and hands that work lively, agilely,

and I've seen with my very eyes  
how she smiles from the threshold at you.”  
Two men's boots beat angrily against the hard ground,  
just like they were squashing a wasp  
that stung his heart sharply,  
and words fall on the old one's shoulders, arms, and head,  
like dry peas during threshing:  
“Mother can arrange a match herself  
with that nasal rich lady, the widow—  
should I with my twenty-four years, like painted Easter eggs,  
go put on old clothes from that one's husband?  
And if you already talked with her, then I will also say my word,  
the word of a man, who brings home his whole week's earnings—  
Old Yurke's daughter will come into the house!”

The thread breaks suddenly from the curled spindle-head  
like a sad thought that was left unthought.  
The old mother goes to the dark stable,  
hugs the softly-notched neck of her “Cuckoo”  
and cries out for her cheated, heavy mama-heart—  
“Cuckoo” stands in the soft warm vapor of the waste pile,  
and listens carefully to the unfamiliar distress with her own milk-fullness—  
then raises herself up and shakes her broad ears a few times,  
shakes off from herself the white dew of tears,  
that tickles her skin, like the flies in summertime.

## Neighbors

Combing the orchard's full green head  
into two halves  
is a part in the middle from a narrow yellow path.  
Day after day the part is smoothed  
by the red, yellow, and black combs of uncounted feet.

Really from Moti's house to Sender's door  
it is not more than forty, fifty paces.  
Moti's geese come to Sender's coop,  
and Sender's rooster runs to Moti's house  
and chooses the prettiest tufted hen.

And sometimes, in an evening after the work,  
the householders convene  
and sit on their thresholds like black crows.  
The air fills with the hard sound  
of the heavy croaking of their words:  
“They're already mowing the second field  
and the roof of the barn is not yet repaired.”  
“It seems that I saw Zavl the matchmaker leaving your place?”  
“Who then obeys a father or a mother today?”  
“Tough times—and the potatoes are rotting in the fields,  
it's going to be a bitter year.”

But when the bolt engraved its rusty warning  
of a strange, uninvited arrival,  
only the running of the dogs could be heard,  
as they looped a garland of guarding steps  
around the lambs of the barn, house, and stable.

The lips of the darkness drink up  
all the white paths,  
and the orchard at night is like an old, dark wood,  
and only the drowsy apples fall to the earth, like stars  
slicing open the way for listening ears.

...And Sender's son guards the fruit in the dark orchard at night...  
a quiet opened window sighs in Moti's house,  
and by the pale light of the moon  
the candle of a blonde girl's head kindles  
and the beads of her steps scatter in the soft green grass—  
a sleepy sad mother's voice runs after them and gathers them in:  
“Khantshe, where can you be...Khantshe, call out for me!...”

## **Maksim's Death**

Death came almost aligned  
with sixty threshed sheaves of Maksim's ample years  
and with the stout yellow hen  
who stopped laying a long time ago.

And since old Yakimikhe couldn't ward the evil off anymore  
with coals, herbs, and holy water,  
she said to Maksim sisterly and faithfully:  
"Oh, friend, friend, at last the death is not far from you,  
your legs are swollen with its nearness,  
and the dog howls for the third night already by your door,  
but we must still try the last remedy,  
the yolk of a stout young hen."

The mournful tune of her words rained  
through the badly patched, crooked roof of Maksim's life.  
And Maksim shook his head  
as he answered quietly, restfully,  
with words that smelled like Sunday and scythed hay:  
"What else can come to this old skull,  
when the scythe flees from his hand,  
and he cuts his own crooked way with a plow,  
if not death?"

Afterwards, as the priest oiled with pardon  
the creaking spokes of his life for the last time,  
Maksim allowed his children to be called in from the work  
and ripped living strips from his body with every word:  
"You, Fedke, I give the field behind the woods,  
the potatoes should have a good harvest this year,  
you, Ivan, half of the house, the meadow, and seven plots,  
for Hanke the wheel-wedge in the hogpen  
which I bought many years ago in Swabia,  
and you, Zakharke, the second half of the house,  
the barn, the cows, the whole garden,  
and your mother will stay with you until her death."

The wife, who tended the fire on the oven  
to cook up the yolk of the yellow hen  
fell with her head to the bed:  
“Who do you leave me with, poor orphan that I am?  
No cow, no husband and not a bit of field—  
I have worked bitter and hard all my years  
and now I will be a stranger in my own house  
and my daughter-in-law will lock the bread  
in the pantry away from me.”

And in the end Maksim couldn't wait for his yolk,  
his eyes looked around at everything with the glass of death,  
until they were closed tightly by the right hand of his oldest son.

from *Royter Mon* (Red Poppies), 1937

## **Red Poppies**

The stalks—hairy and skinny bodies,  
its leaves— fresh and warm blood,  
and the fragrance is harsh and bitter-sweet,  
like my childhood blooming anew.

The midday hour, impudent from the poison  
of wild red poppies,  
hangs low and heavy on mountains and valleys,  
hangs low and heavy on rivers and shores.

You see it everywhere, in fields, by the sides of roads,  
like the earth, weary from its long dreaming,  
opens itself to heaven with these red stars,  
fevering out a flaming song.

## A Letter

You know, lover—  
today the day is so sunny and tart,  
like a yellow-gold fruit.  
I want to pluck it  
slowly and tenderly,  
so I shouldn't erase the clear color off it,  
wrap it up in the soft flax of my dreams,  
and send it to you,  
like a letter.

But I know  
that you would send the "letter" back right away  
with a margin-notation so tidy and fine  
that it's forbidden, you don't understand what I mean,  
(It's like this with you, Rokhl, always, always)  
and you are mad it seems,  
yes, even angry,  
because the envelope—is empty.

## **I Wanted To See Your Mother Once**

I wanted to see your mother once  
and kiss her hands—  
likely she would have found you in my eyes  
and all your words, which I hid in my gaze

and maybe she would have greeted me  
with that smile, quiet, clever,  
that always blooms on the lips of mothers,  
when their love for their own son is confirmed  
by other women.

But maybe—  
maybe her look would warn me,  
(mothers always know more than other women)  
of the wild sorrow  
and the hard luck  
of loving her son.  
I wanted to see your mother once  
and kiss her hands.

## Longing

My dreams are so full of longing,  
that my body smells every morning  
like you—  
and my teeth-clamped lips drink too slowly  
the only sign of stifled sadness,  
a drop of blood.

And the hours pour at last, like goblets,  
one into the other,  
the hope, like expensive wine—  
that you are not far,  
that here, at any moment  
you could come, come, come.

## My City

My city always yearns  
for you—  
streets, like lips  
will throw themselves to your stride.

The trees filling my window appear in my dream  
in long, winter nights.  
They look up at me then with anger and suspicion  
and bloom  
with dark flowerings  
of mountain birds and crows.

Trains come and go  
in a perpetual rush, in a perpetual chase.  
With blood vessels of bifurcated rails  
my longing flies  
to a small point  
of the large world.  
The heart of the station fevers  
and throws out the rainbow of the bridge—  
you on the other side—  
to unknown, undreamed of shores.

My city is always avid for you  
and waits—  
if a white bird will flutter  
its miniscule black feathers of letters,  
proclaiming in a breathless song  
the city and I's names,  
and maybe, maybe  
announcing your arrival.

## **My Waiting**

I already know that my waiting is futile—  
today I had read the flight of little birds  
for an entire morning  
and I realized it from our cat,  
who had forgotten to lick  
her yellow-white spots,  
as this is her habit,  
a sign  
that someone is coming.

And the fire was laying in the oven as well,  
like it was ashamed,  
sunken into ash and despair  
and not jumping to greet a guest  
with a sheaf of sparks.

You certainly will not come today.  
I will extinguish the lamp and bar the windows  
for everything near and far.  
Then with all my limbs I will  
throw myself into the jungle of my loneliness  
and feel with my thoughts, like my quiet tread  
for the night,  
so I don't step on a serpent-head of memory,  
then I will stretch out my hand for an introduction  
and start talking to my shadow,  
which flickers like someone exiled on my wall.

It can be dark—  
take my hot breath into your narrow hand,  
say one word—and my entire sadness will depart.

## **A Song from Yesterday**

One way or another, it's all the same anyway—  
I don't know where you are now  
or where your home will be tomorrow.  
Maybe I will pass close by to you, like a stranger,  
my head bent to the earth,  
and it can be  
that I will not recognize you anymore in the tumult  
with my near-sighted eyes.

The street will divide us like a hair-part  
with curses, shouting, and beggarly prayer,  
with children's buggies and baskets of bagels,  
and you will not even suspect,  
that through the jungle of stone gates  
both of our steps have been summoned,  
like lost birds.

But together with dust and wind  
I will bring home  
your aroma  
in the folds of my dress,  
which settled unknowingly in my heart  
among sweat and benzine, perfume and silk,  
like the idea of spring in Teves.

My life will not change from them,  
certainly  
everything will remain as it was,  
but my head will be bent a little more,  
and give yet another tear  
for the slavish day to carry,  
and nothing more—

But at night I will go over every word and every one of your smiles in my mind—  
again and again,  
even though it is all lost

anyway.

## **My Home**

My mother divided her years  
between hundred-yoke fields and her three children.  
Her solitary young-widow-nights  
undulated with dreams of ample harvests  
and our round, red children's cheeks.  
Her hours buzzed like bees with a thousand worries,  
and her work-full day  
marked the sun's path from dawn until dusk  
with streamlets of sweat on her face.  
Through her Shabosim, like whispered prayer, passed  
her wish of waving streams of grain,  
and her heart, like a lip  
wanted to drink up the black hail-clouds,  
which so often on summer days  
would slide over us from beneath the forest,  
like provoked, heavy-footed cows—  
wanting to trample the world under them  
and those fifteen acres of ripe yellow wheat,  
which stood unguarded below the free sky,  
though their stalks, like thick and hopeless fingers  
pointed up in terror and astonishment.

And when the first, sweltering wind,  
like a leaping, crouching cat,  
raised the heatwave from the earth,  
up to the treetops,  
bits of almond and rye  
broke off from the stalks,  
running down the middle of the field,  
like a line of geese in the small, blue stream of the sky  
that was clamped between the broad borders of the storm clouds—  
then she hid us somewhere in a corner,  
far from the lightning-plowed window, from chimneys and doors,  
and her voice was already struggling with the storm  
as she called the cows and guards in from the field.

Our measles were almost like  
those small, always sick turkeys',  
when on cool rainy days  
they had to be bundled up in rags on the oven  
as we poured sweet white milk  
into their open, chirping mouths.

Her heart was bloodied by every branch  
that wild shkotzim broke in the orchard,  
just like the time she saw the axe-split cheek  
underneath my eye.

But her trouble and toil was futile,  
today strangers are living in my home—  
meadows broadly planted with beetroots and clover  
are now turned into narrow peasant-plots,  
which come closer to the threshold of the house with every summer  
on emaciated legs of the beanstalks.

I heard that the stable is missing half a roof,  
and all the cherry trees are frozen in the orchard.  
But it couldn't be, it wasn't allowed to be any different—  
my unrest chased me from my home,  
from green meadows and from cherry trees  
to cities, where the asphalt burns your feet even through the strongest leather.

My life is like a house without windows or doors,  
free to all winds and storms,  
and my heart, like a lip,  
will drink up the black clouds over the chimneys of the factories,  
which hail with hard drops of people-sweat  
and rain with children's tears.

## **A House in Khesvhn Wind**

Between naked and brown fields  
the road ran like a scrawny wolf  
and lapped up with its skinny tongue  
the spilled blood of the autumn sun,  
which foretold rain and storms.

And five narrow little garden beds  
like lean fingers of a beggar's hand  
clasped fast Yoyne's house,  
so it doesn't run away with the wind.

By the window of her father's house  
Dvoyre, Yoyne's blonde daughter, lay,  
hiding within her big lonesome eyes  
her whole avid and unsettled life,  
which fled from her two lame young feet.

Through the sparse, threadbare forest  
nearing closer and closer to her window  
are the small, naked hills,  
like the tan does in the time of hunger.  
They fed Dvoyre's blue eyes  
with calm, with tender love,  
until they did not devour the earlier twilight,  
which crouched in wait by the edge of the Khesvhn day.

And as usual in the long and dark nights  
the small oil-lamp with the bundle of straw  
would turn the gloom out of the house,  
and Dvoyre would write love-letters for young girls  
from the village with her pale, emaciated hand.  
And her thoughts went up against her strange secret  
with the road, which ran like a gray wolf  
between naked and brown fields,  
and then returned  
from the threshold of a strange happiness  
to her own, lonesome night,

which comes as usual bitter and long and sleepless,  
and speaks—  
and speaks to her with cold words from the howling wind  
through the holes of the old house.

## Paper Roses

Lozer's hands were old from years and work,  
but the eyes and breasts of his second wife were young,  
and the paper roses on the window would tell this  
to everyone who passed by.

The dark stable kept quiet  
of wild love-nights and hot women's-tears,  
and of two rows of men's teeth,  
which engraved his great hatred in the darkness:  
"Well, throw away the old one once and for all!"  
But Lozer lulled the truth, like a small, frightened child,  
when he saw an empty bed across from him  
in the middle of the night:  
"She works little, so she can't sleep at night."

But one time, a quiet evening,  
when the winter unrest  
fell over the heads of the trees and the houses,  
he opened his heavy hand wide,  
like he would let go of them forever,  
his toiled-over five acres and his beautiful, new house,  
and with his every word, like with a plowshare  
he plowed new rows in the field of misery:  
"Consider this, Dvoyre, I am old and will not live long,  
but my eyes should not look at this,  
and I am ashamed of myself before my own children, I'm ashamed, Dvoyre."

Hitched to the yoke of hard days  
and lonely nights  
are twenty young, mournful years of a woman,  
and only the red-paper roses still smile from the window  
to every passerby with their quiet mystery.

## **Mother in Prison**

If she were a lioness, a dog,  
or at least a cat,  
she would defend her little ones  
with tooth and nail.

But she, the poor peasant woman from the village,  
with weary, worked-through hands,  
with shoulders stooped from hard toil,  
she goes to the last sighting of her son  
and two bayonets  
glimmer in the sun.

The old peasant woman stands by her threshold  
and keeps silent—  
because words can become ropes  
around the throat of her child,  
and one outcry  
can be a bullet in the very middle of his heart.  
And her hands remain speechless  
and choke the thousand prayers of a mother between her fingers,  
who is scared to touch her child,  
because then she can feel the place  
where the hangman will search with his hand  
in another three or four hours.

No word,  
no gesture,  
so how long can she stand by the door like this,  
measuring the wine of hopeful young life  
with the broken vessels of her years,  
and looking into the blue eyes of her child,  
which will drink up this whole world  
in a single swallow?

No word,  
no gesture,  
is the woman here by the door

petrified all of a sudden?  
But who in the whole world  
can know better than a mother,  
what to do in the last hour,  
the eve of death for her young and healthy son  
who could still live for many long years?

One must smile—  
(mother's hearts should endure  
this heaviest burden with a smile),  
bathe the child in the smile of a mother,  
bargain with the smile for some short moments  
by his new, creaking cradle,  
that waits there in the yard.  
Open the heavy iron gate  
and break a way through to sobbing childish joy  
— “Mama?!!!”

—It's not really true, my child,  
right?  
Then your mother could laugh like this,  
as the hangman waits with the clock in his hand?  
Do you see my hands?  
They tremble—they tremble because,  
because I have carried such a heavy bundle in them,  
bread for you, a little cheese and butter,  
your holiday-clothes and your new shoes—  
It's not really true, my child...

If she were a lioness, a dog,  
or at least a cat,  
she would defend her little ones  
with tooth and nail,  
but she, the poor peasant woman from the village,  
goes to the last sighting of her son  
through doors—iron,  
between windows—barred,  
under the watch of the police-soldiers.

## **Ships**

The hunger made them choose Prussia  
and the desolate house led to “Novi” York,  
both for Hrinke, the landless peasant,  
and for Berl, the poor Jew.

Fields had waved with grain,  
orchards had budded and bloomed,  
but not for Hrinke, the landless peasant,  
but not for Berl, the poor Jew.

Hard luggage drummed on the stones  
of distant and foreign stations,  
and ships were already waiting in the harbors  
readied for long voyages.

Sometimes a letter would come and a dollar:  
“Fix the house that’s falling apart there.”  
“Buy a cow, so there should be milk for the little kids,”  
was written to both Hrinke, and Berl, the Jew.

But since countries, like heavy fortresses,  
every land in turn, like a bet,  
guarded themselves from the foreign hunger, need and loneliness  
with bridles of spears and bayonets,

Hrinke, the landless peasant remained,  
Berl, the homeless Jew remained,  
with a handful of small, hungry children  
in the decaying, desolate house.

Today, like long ago, fields rustle with grain,  
today, like long ago, orchards bloom with buds,  
but after everything there is no bread in the home  
for Hrinke, the landless peasant and for Berl, the poor Jew.

They plow through the streets like plots in the field

of cities near and far—  
maybe stones will produce a full harvest of grain  
and work will suffice for willing hands?

Streets rock, like heavy bridges  
under weary, uncertain steps,  
and this new world becomes suspicious  
of Hrinke, the peasant and Berl, the Jew.

They sleep in holes, under gates and bridges,  
their bodies overrun with dung and filth,  
the hatred of their own hands grows wilder  
and the miracle of a loaf of bread becomes clearer.

A murmuring,  
                    a word,  
                            of excitement  
  and rage,

a hot, burning shout—  
now the city listens attentively,  
now the city is finally watching  
and answers with iron and with lead.

And prisons swim like dark ships  
under the stars of the sky and the uniformed escort.  
And they lead Hrinke, the landless peasant,  
and they lead Berl, the homeless Jew,  
to a new, common port.

from *Heym un Heymlozikayt* (Home and Homelessness), 1948

## Dream

to H. Leivick— in deepest admiration

In white, wintry nights  
when sharp winds howl, wail, and laugh,  
the moon slices a new way though the snowy abyss  
with her pointed horn,  
so I shouldn't get lost on my way home  
from the distant world-paths.

I stand a while opposite my old, straw-covered house  
and I toss a bundle of hay under the decaying fence  
for the does and brown hares,  
who were driven by hunger out of the deep forest.

My tear falls—and starts to sprout  
dry, rustling branches of antlers  
on the deers' slender heads,  
blooming with snowy stars,  
like the thorns with white flowers in spring.

I stand and wait—  
maybe the amber-yellow gaze of my cat will incandesce,  
who ran away to the woods  
in those days, when I lost my home,  
and nobody has ever seen her again.

I stand and wait—  
maybe the shadow of my grandmother Khaye will glide past,  
when she goes into the barn with her footstool and pail,  
to milk her cow, "Blossom" the loyal,  
who never trusted anyone else  
until her very death.

I stand and wait—  
suddenly arriving here from that other world

with winking, beaming eyes,  
one dark black and the other dove-gray,  
will be my uncle Hersh at the night-quiet crossroads  
with a young, hot-blooded maid—  
and opposite him will come my aunt Dvoyre,  
blocking his way with her broad shawl,  
which flows around her back, like a dark wave.

I stand and wait—  
I can hear something of a chase, a howling, a shriek,  
the woods at night are so large and near—  
maybe it is rushing to my grandfather's house  
to demand the three pines back?

Quiet, someone is calling me, someone knocks at the pane,  
I recognize my father's slender hand—  
he holds his broad bear-pelt open for me:  
“Child, come inside, the day begins and you are cold.”

I am so small and the pelt—just look, such a size!  
And he smells so good, but I don't know with what,  
I want to remember so badly...  
But on the gray eyelash of the sky  
the pale yellow tear of the sun hangs already  
and drips down on the small fresh tracks  
of the does and hares,  
who search for summer and grass  
on the mournful, snowed-over road—  
and on my dream,  
which appears in the middle of their way.

## Oh, Earth

for Y. Opatoshu

Oh, earth, striped in broad lanes and narrow plots,  
earth of my home, of my childhood years,  
I had never known that you would not even suffice  
as a grave for those who were born in your lap.

Oh, earth, I had never known that I was a stranger to you,  
only coming to stay as a guest for fifteen, twenty generations,  
when I grew with your springs and summers,  
with your forest, with your grain and with all your cows.

My grandfather uprooted you with his broad arms,  
ripped up tree-stumps and heavy, gray stones,  
until a light-green nook was left  
with a blue river-eye in the middle of the wall of trees.

He allowed only three slender pines  
near the new house, like loyal guards on the watch,  
that then rustled their longing and mourning  
into my soul with their green thatch.

Oh, earth, we were both betrothed with the most hidden secrets,  
today my body still carries signs of our deep bond:  
on my arms and legs and cheeks, gaping wounds are mirrored  
from the very same bruises of your stumps and branches.

I carried to you not only my happiness and sadness,  
to you, earth, I entrusted my love:  
My first sunny and trembling dream—  
when my bird, my little canary died

with ruffled-up feathers around his skinny neck  
and he didn't answer my wild, despondent shout with any peep,  
I wrapped up his tiny body with my nicest rags

and gave him to *you* to hide under one of the three pines.

But when I wanted to see just a feather of my beloved friend  
and dug you up with my nails around the pine-tree,  
I rummaged under every clod of earth, searching and crying hopelessly,  
but there was already no trace left of my sunny-yellow dream.

And then the second time—I was not quite eleven years old then,  
but at that moment I already understood,  
that no crying or digging would help,  
when you took my father within your damp clay valley.

You cried with me, amber-yellow sap poured,  
when I hid my sadness between the stalks like my greatest shame—  
because who besides you can understand how hard it is  
for a child without the soft touch of a father's gentle hand?

Then I spent hours and hours lying atop your broad breast,  
listening attentively to your hidden life with my whole body,  
waiting for my father's distant, distant call to tear through  
the lattice of roots and grasses like an underground thunder.

And when I grew, you grew along with me in our reach  
to the sky, to stars, to the sun and to rain—  
you absorbed the infinite joy of the first, green leaves with me  
and the unrest of saturated Kheshvn roads.

And in the long winters, when you were covered over with snow,  
and I couldn't get to the bottom of you with my small shoes,  
I would look for a small crack around a tree,  
so I could see that you were still there under all the white fluff.

And your naked image foamed in me, seethed in me,  
pulsing in my mind, in my heart, in my blood,  
until at last I understood, understood, understood,  
and birthed you again, revealed you in a poem.

Oh, earth, when I must go from you without clothes, without shoes, without roof,

then all my graves will rise, will accompany me,  
and with your empty holes, like trickled-out eyes  
you will stare straight at the transparent blue sky.

Oh, earth, when I must go from you in diaspora,  
pain will run through every limb of yours and mine,  
and they will become bloodied all the same, oh, earth, my home-beloved earth,  
you and me and my poem.

Przemyśl, January 1939

## Ufa Earth

Oh, earth, Ufa earth,  
with your strange, wicked redness,  
you run after me even in dreams,  
like the red cow, which terrified my childhood—  
a wild, provoked, horned abyss.

Oh, earth, Ufa earth,  
for which sin has your god punished you,  
that you became so cruelly red?

How much iron from swords and spears  
left their rust in your lap—  
how many leaves torn off at dawn through storm and wind  
which have still not depleted the joy of ripeness,  
does their yearning still fever forth in you?

How much hatred from ancient times blazes in your midst  
and screams out with Keyn's guilt and Hevel's young blood,  
so the sun extinguishes  
her light  
for eight long months?

Oh, earth, Ufa earth,  
your body does not smell  
like the longing of wheat and rye,  
just like all the waters  
have lost their way to you.

Your nakedness smells like mildew and graves,  
and when I merely look into your depth,  
all the parts of my body fly into a rage,  
will your bare heights not poison me,  
will your quietest call not kill me.

Oh, earth, Ufa earth,

you know that sooner or later  
I will fall into you,  
in your naked, open depth,  
like the leaf yellowed by sadness,  
and weary from loneliness.  
Do not be in too much of a hurry,  
but slowly through holes in my torn shoes  
plaster around my feet,  
engulf my body,  
and already I can feel your sharp jabs in my blood,  
and already I feel your angry breath in my every limb—  
can it be, that somewhere my mother still waits  
with a stubborn certainty from hour to hour,  
there by the roadsides where dreamy linden trees stand,  
there, where the earth is so simply black,  
where the sky is so simply, so childishly blue!

Ufa, September 1941

## **On the Way**

Glossy-sharp pitchforks of the rails  
stick into the far horizon,  
like in a freshly-reaped sheaf of wheat  
ripened and browned by the western sun.

The long train is like black thread,  
knitting the region  
prick by prick  
with the sharp, white-hot day.

The naked brown walls  
of the wagons  
are for days and for weeks  
a home,  
a shore  
for our own homelessness,  
for tears, for liberation, and for woe,  
and for me,  
that I stand in the midst of the desert,  
against its unending fire,  
like a pawn  
stuck by fate  
by the wildest and cruelest time—  
a bundle of bones and a pail of blood.

Ufa-Fergana, October 1941

### **My Mother Prays Today**

My mother prays today  
and looks in her little old machzor for any trace of me—  
oh, answer her, my God,  
with an amiable word:  
“From today to the new year.”

Oh, answer her, my lord,  
do not shame her loneliness, her old age,  
answer her through grass, through trees, through stars,  
while leading to her oversorrowed lips  
the letters, like dark quiet sheep  
to the spring of her tears.

Fergana, 1942

## Night in Fergana

The sickle of moon sliced the storm clouds  
and the white haze fell to the earth like wool,  
and it seems that the camel's long silent caravan  
trudges heavily across a quilted sky.

The dry apricots breathed with their autumn-scent,  
like drunkards with whiskey on the way home from the tavern,  
and somewhere the creator called to judgment  
the donkey's stubborn, whimpering cry.

The sharp quadrilateral of a stranger's lit window  
was thrown like an anchor from a warm house,  
and it became my own home before my eyes,  
when every door was shut before my steps.

And I was sure that I only needed to shout,  
and my mother's head would bend down from the pane  
and her love would lower warmth to me  
over my drenched legs and arms frozen stiff.

But with every hour that nears midnight study,  
the luminous ray of light turned thinner and narrower,  
until finally the darkness obliterated every border  
between the lonely street and the mist and me.

Fergana, 1942

## Evening

The smoke from the kibitkas begs pardon of heaven  
for all the sins of the red-hot, greedy day—  
it's evening and the last circling swallow  
slices open my longing with her sharp flight.

The clay threshold where the bearded old Uzbek man sits  
shadowed deeper after my exiled steps crossed it,  
and only the road which led me into my homelessness  
still whitens ghostly and mournfully in the middle.

Soon my grandmother's Shabbos-evening "Got fun Avrom"  
will open a rupture to you with the first star, oh, Lord,  
and my half-forgotten childhood will follow her word for word,  
to the very last border of this sorrow.

Fergana, 1943

## East

Here in this direction my father stood and turned his face,  
head and forehead covered with his black-and-white tallis—  
his gaze poured into the meadows, fields, and forests  
as he let his heart go on a distant journey.

The old apple tree spreads his shadow out  
to the incandescent poppies, to the pea-plots,  
and like a dark path to the threshold of the house,  
on which a bee embroidered my childhood.

My father's quiet, murmuring prayer,  
like Kheshvn leaf-fall, like rustling sand  
erupted through windows and through the open door,  
barring my wild course, restraining my young joy.

Maybe the desert's fasting breath had already  
put a burning premonition on my heart and brow,  
and I stilled, like water on the eve of a storm,  
when anything can still happen through miracles and through tears.

And maybe my blood already felt this hour,  
ripened through blaze, through murder and through violence,  
when I will stay here, the desert's mute, gray betrothed,  
and my only home—  
just my shadow, which throws away my form.

And then the desert, a beggar woman, an old woman,  
will reach her emaciated, shrunken hand out to me  
of hard thorns and crumbly sand,  
to me, the exiled one without clothes, without shoes, without land.

Fergana, 1943

## **To the Partisan**

I have never seen you before, have never heard your name,  
I don't know which tribe you stem from or what is your vocation,  
but I know that your steps are the noose of fate,  
but I know that your eyes are—judgment, and your fists—punishment.

Poplar and birch braid tighter together,  
so their shadow should be a roof for you, and house, and home,  
the she-wolf yields her resting place in the forest for you,  
and the fox his cave in hard clay.

The silence around you is like a deep lake,  
where the last screams from elders, wives, and children are drowned.  
When the murder-hands flayed and burned the living body—  
and the west still burned with a fresh, hot wound.

The earth mounds higher, higher, higher there,  
like it would reach to the sky with hunted flesh and defiled bodies  
and it seems to rear over those buried alive  
who struggle like silent worms, blind in the deep.

There grows no grass, no flower in that zone—  
like a young man's hair graying from fear in a single night,  
all the roots from their choked screams wither away,  
that poisoned the earth in that cruel and godforsaken hour.

The wayfinders of gallows reveal the road to you,  
and the fresh scent of unconsumed fire leads you in the starless nights,  
by every place where the enemy sheltered themselves  
with rifle-walls, with tufts of barbed-wire and steel lattices.

But you are like a thorn stuck in the murderer's seldom-satisfied sleep  
and like a burning nettle to his body and hands,  
you are the vengeance-call in every unexpected croak of the door,  
which sets him to trembling at the merest shadow on the wall.

Every ditch, every bridge is a dock for dynamite  
and every piece of earth a nest for your grenade  
and then the night rings out with a dry crackle, like Morse-code:  
Ten have died in turn—The ammunition-warehouse is burning—

Like a cowboy on the broad prairie of the night  
you throw your flame-lasso around the neck of the racing train,  
which rears like a beast and bellows to the stars  
with a clatter of glass, with iron gnashing and human lamenting..

—I have never seen you before, have never heard your name,  
I don't know which tribe you stem from or what is your vocation,  
but I know that your steps tie the noose of fate,  
but I know that your eyes are—judgment, and your fists—punishment.

And although the way to my home is still lined with gallows,  
I know you guard every stone there, every fence and tree,  
I entrust to you, like to an only brother, my mother's gray head,  
like I entrust to you also my longing and my dreams.

Fergana, 1943

## To My Daughter

I led you from the country, where under every step  
ruptured earth spurts with blood, with fear, with terror,  
where mercy is the fast, unexpected death  
and a mother blesses her child with a piercing bullet.

The blooming acacias led the sky onward  
just like with us into exile, bitter  
in every day—and their sweet, stifling-heavy fragrance  
choked the air with gathering tears.

I lacked the courage to look back,  
and when I merely saw my home once in a dream  
and my mother's face—my temples grayed  
and my eyes were dry, but every step—wept.

And I don't know anymore for whose life I have to beg,  
I don't know through how many graves I am closer to the earth,  
whose door will interrupt my weary steps,  
or falling to which threshold is my fate.

But you and I—the last and only of our whole family tree—  
I entrusted your youth to a fateful star,  
like my mother entrusted her quiet prayer to her god,  
like my grandmother her hot tears to her lord.

But you and I—and if I'm not enough,  
go on and let my mother's prayer weep in your blood,  
the call of all generations ripens in you,  
and the path in my village waits for your young legs...

Moscow, 1944

## **I Am Finally So Ripened**

I am finally so ripened by sorrow and suffering,  
that even God himself  
can take my hand—  
I will surely bring him  
there, to that other land.

At last my longing has mended all the roads there,  
my heart stood upright again  
every burned, destroyed bridge,  
so my tear will not  
be lost anymore,  
my steps,  
not you, my God.

We will stand  
by my mother's door  
and kiss the dust of her threshold  
and hold the doorknob so long in our hands  
that we can start to hear her quiet breathing  
from the other side of the wall.

Who will be the first to open the door—  
who still waits in that silent home for me?  
If a twig from a tree  
blown by dust  
knocks its childish hand  
at my mother's dream:  
“It's someone come here from a distant land?”

Speak, why do you hesitate, my God?  
Indeed, I have mended all the roads there,  
and stood every bridge upright  
to that quiet house,  
to that orchard—  
so maybe you are scared, God,

to return?

Moscow, 1944

## To My Husband

Like Yankev you were bound to my fate  
for three times seven years,  
and guarded my days and nights with loyalty,  
and followed with your heart after my every trace.

More than once I neglected you in my poems,  
which led me away on ways of passion  
to imagined sequels of a strange life  
and to the genesis of my own, genuine tears.

You listened carefully to my hidden sigh in the nights  
and the prayer of your gaze was so hopeless,  
which called me back from the moon-paths  
and from the chasm homeward, back to you.

You carried the mystery of my love to others  
like your own, severest sin,  
and searched for interpretation and forgiveness  
in the believing eyes of our child.

Nobody offers me the accounting of my tears anymore,  
and my heart is already exiled for many years,  
and sleeps by strangers' thresholds, like a dog,  
and is beyond every love and treachery.

Now nobody stands except death between you and me!  
My nights are like Kheshvn, the day stopped blooming at all,  
but I feel how your quiet breath lines  
the fresh imprints of my poems.

Stockholm, May 23, 1947

## **With What**

With what shall I come to you now, my people,  
I, the blood of your blood and the rib of your rib—  
where can I find the word for your sorrow,  
when every firstborn dies at the edge of my lips?

As long as my head is not yet entirely gray,  
as long as my heart is still like a wound,  
which binds me to morning through an elder's weeping,  
and through the last pleas of a three-year old child.

I must be silent, my people, and only in the nights,  
in the time of strictest soul-searching,  
will I plead that our fate shall be,  
you and me—the destiny of a tear.

Moscow, 1945

## Rokhl

Blooming sour cherry trees unlocked the sky  
for my mother's humble, barefoot words,  
but the tune of her prayer was halted  
by the permissible ground of my first tear.

I was embarrassed that I would stand there alone,  
in the glowing heat of Yankev's young eyes,  
and my own fate would bend  
its weakened lips to the well beneath the heavy stone.

But Yankev's waiting years are sealed already  
through the rustling yellow pages of the tkhine,  
and my seven hot tears cannot extinguish them  
and Rokhl's sadness cannot veil the green meadows.

And my mother's prayerful tune then leads me  
on Bethlehem's desolate, hard-stone ways,  
and I see Yankev's head at last under the gray ash,  
and don't want to hear any more and don't need to ask.

But if it's really true, that they die young,  
those who God himself betrothed and chose,  
through a kiss on their forehead in the hour of birth  
sealing them for great love and great suffering,

then I will also die that way, like that other woman,  
like I carry her name and the same fate suckled us,  
I want to die somewhere on the way to distant shores of longing,  
but with a last kiss upon both of my eyes.

My mother's old tkhine lies on the garden bench,  
and I stand waiting at last under the sour cherry tree—  
the clay pitcher is full with clear and cool water  
and my left hand bends it to the lips of the dream.

But why should the shepherd of my father's sheep be named  
not Yankev, but Ivan—and from his belt an axe flashes,  
and lying in his bosom prepared  
is sackcloth for my mother's Shabbos dress?

Stockholm, May 1947

## **I Want to Go Up Sometimes**

I want to go up sometimes,  
just on the tips of my toes,  
to a strange house  
and feel the walls with my hands—  
from what kind of clay were the bricks burned,  
from what kind of wood was the door made,  
and what kind of god settled here,  
that protected it from misfortune and holocaust?

What kind of sparrow under the roof  
fashioned her nest from straw and earth,  
and which angels disguised as people  
came here as guests?

What kinds of saints greeted them,  
carrying bowls of water to them  
so they could wash the dust from their feet,  
the dust of the earthly roads?  
And what kind of blessing did they leave  
the children—from the oldest to the youngest  
that could shield and guard them  
from Belzec, Majdanek, Treblinka?

From just such a house,  
curbed with painted pickets,  
in the middle of trees and flowering plots,  
which were blue, gold, and aflame,  
walked out—  
the murderer of my people,  
of my mother.

I will let my grief grow,  
like Shimshin with his hair long ago  
and drag the millstone of days  
around every bloody trace.

Until a night  
when I will hear over me  
the murderer's drunken laughter  
and I will break the hinge off the door  
and shake the foundations—  
so the night should wake up  
from shuddering, which will go through every pane,  
every brick and nail and board of the house,  
from the basement to the roof—

Though I know, know, my lord,  
that the falling walls  
will only bury me  
and my sorrow.

Stockholm, April 20, 1947

## **When All Diaspora-Ways**

When all diaspora-ways cut through my heart,  
and my only home, my mother's last tear—  
to which heavens do my exiled steps now grieve,  
who locks the door before me with hard and heavy bolts?

To whom do I still carry my word, my poor final bounty,  
in whose eyes is my shadow contorting on itself quiet and weary?  
I'm guilty, guilty a thousand times, that I am a specter still,  
and guard the dream of the world with my lonely song.

February 2, 1947

## **The Owl**

The owl who terrified my childhood  
knew more than I did then—  
so why did I close the door  
from her cries in the night?

The sparrow who carried in her beak  
the spring, the dream, the joy,  
had already betrayed to Belzec and Majdanek  
my youth, my home, and my cradle.

My mother would search for me no more  
by birds' nests, by flowers in the field,  
where my childhood was rooted with earth,  
like a dream with the heart of the world.

I would sit by the edge of the forest and listen closely,  
how the owl's weeping pried apart the night,  
and I recognized in her large glassy yellow eyes  
the shine of an imminent blaze.

Maybe I would become an owl myself  
and shout wild through the night,  
so that the animal can understand me, the human,  
the stones and the latticework of trees.

I would chase away the spring and expel the summer,  
plunder the Kheshvn of its gold,  
and maybe then my warning would be understood  
by my mother, my brother, my folk.

February 13, 1947.

## A Child Wept

A child wept by the edge of a forest,  
alone in the deep night—  
foxes and wolves fell silent  
and watched the lonely weeping.

Did they drag the mother by her hair  
to Auschwitz—or maybe put a bullet in her heart  
as her body attempted with its last warmth  
to melt the snow around her child's mouth?

Or was this her last confiding in fate  
and human mercy, bringing the child here  
so someone should have pity on this Jewish child—  
the only witnesses were the stars and the night.

Foxes and wolves fell silent,  
and the wild-boar stilled his restless grumbling—  
he quickly led his young into deeper shrubs  
and cast terrified glances behind him.

A man also overheard the passing sobs,  
and sharpened his knife, loaded his gun,  
and went out on the hunt in the dark night  
not for wolf, not for bear, not for fox.

His path honed in to the edge of the forest,  
the footbridge close by, the pines, the stone—  
on the sharpness of his gleaming-lustrous knife  
bloodied the child's weeping.

1947

## **On My Shoes**

On my shoes the clay from Bashkir,  
from Karakum desert the glowing-hot sand,  
the muck of Russian villages and cities,  
and the light-gray dust of Uzbek land.

The dried blood of the Polish roads,  
the dust and ash of burnt remains,  
and the angel hides his face as he guides me  
from border to border to this last shore of weeping.

And I still don't know where I will spend the night  
and where my home will be tomorrow,  
which distant wanderings will paste  
my shoes with blood, with sand, and with clay.

Not long ago I saw the house of my mother,  
the trees in the orchard with roots in the air—  
a Russian soldier had sawn them into pieces  
for firewood in the quiet orphaned yard.

I also saw the cat with wild eyes,  
who still searches for where my mother went—  
then we were standing right across from each other,  
until the soldier chased her away with a rod.

After a while I saw her again on the tip of my roof,  
the distant memory of petting in her gaze,  
and her back bent upwards,  
like she was making a bridge to heaven over an abyss.

On my shoes the clay from Bashkir,  
from Karakum desert the glowing-hot sand,  
the muck of Russian villages and cities,  
and the light-gray dust of Uzbek land.

The dried blood of the Polish roads,  
the dust and ash of burnt remains,  
and the roads are like silent pairings  
to my tired steps in the time of goodbyes.

Nobody has anything more to give,  
nobody will say: "My child, come inside"—  
I am truly a stranger everywhere and my only home  
is my mother's last cry.

1946

## **My Lord**

My lord, maybe today you have become as exiled as I am,  
because a human's heart has denounced you,  
and you walk like I do against the loneliness  
from border to border and from door to door?

Where should I let our dreams flow, my lord,  
so they don't devour the nearest fire?  
It's a Sodom everywhere already and a flood could come  
only through the miracle, the miracle of our own tears.

It's a Sodom everywhere already, it's turning into night and twilight—  
oh, don't ask me, my lord, where the road is going,  
maybe even today we can still encounter a word,  
a human word, and it will become roof and threshold and shore.

Stockholm, 1947

from *Bashertkayt 1928-1948 (Destiny)*, 1949

## A Letter from Uzbekistan

My friend over distant, distant seas,  
I am writing this letter to you—  
it is the month of March in Uzbek land,  
the time when the almond trees bloom and the apricot  
on every back-street, by every wall,  
but how does one choose the words so you can understand me?  
My hand is tired, the skin wrinkles on it,  
pushed to the side like an empty bag,  
and my greatest dream—  
is a loaf of bread.

When I went out in the street,  
right in front of the house across the way  
the carcass of a dog was lying,  
and the spring wind played  
with his threadbare hide.

By chance a wagon passed by  
with a white coffin laid crosswise over the wheels.  
An old and wrinkled granny halted her steps  
and crossed herself with her dry hand  
long and slowly.

“The hunger, hunger is already here again in the land—  
just yesterday he was playing here with the child,  
I know him, know him, it’s my neighbor’s dog.  
And look at that coffin, look at its size and length,  
ay, if only these were beds, tables, chairs—  
and do you think that the one lying there in the unhitched white box  
died, God forbid, from a disease?  
It’s hunger, hunger in the land.

And you, my dovey, let’s read your hand—  
how long do you think you still have on this earth?  
I see that your steps are already heaved by death.”

The sun shined yellow,  
I stood quietly  
and listened to the old one's talk.

I should have written you this letter sooner,  
my friend—  
you remember my wild joy  
in the first spring times,  
when the earth smelled like fresh grass,  
and my lips, like the buds of a tree  
spilled over with juices of wanting  
and blossoming dreams,  
do you remember, my friend?

And today—  
today I want to crawl somewhere in a hole  
just like an animal, when she feels the hour of death near at last,  
and my greatest dream is still after all—  
at least a heel of bread.

Fergana, March 1942

## **Beads**

Give to me, my friend, a necklace of beads—  
my naked throat  
longs for amber stones smooth and bright,  
the tears of old primeval wood.

Their color is July-day and honey  
and blooming branches of linden,  
their fragrance is distant, forgotten longing,  
like withered blossoms.

They lie around my neck  
so smooth and tender and cool,  
like the touch of your fingers,  
like your word when it's still.

My throat is so pathetically naked,  
like a hopeless cry in a wasted realm—  
give to me, my friend, a necklace of beads,  
the petrified tears of an ancient tree.

## **A New Dress**

I put on today,  
for the first time  
after seven long years  
a new dress.

But it's too short for my grief,  
and too tight for my suffering,  
and every glassy white button  
is like a tear,  
that flows down from the folds,  
stony and severe.

Stockholm, 1947

## **We Made a Voyage for Tashlikh**

We made a voyage for tashlikh  
on a large and white ship,  
where the seagulls don't fly anymore,  
where the water is chasm-like and deep.

We made a voyage for tashlikh,  
further and further from there,  
where the graveless demand  
a resting place by our nights.

We made a voyage for tashlikh—  
emptying out our hearts and the sack,  
the water turned gray  
from all the shadowy ash.

We made a voyage from tashlikh,  
freed from sorrow and from suffering,  
and it seems we had finally been freed  
from our very selves.

We made a voyage from tashlikh  
six days and six nights without stopping,  
against us the strange-new land  
was surfacing from the fog.

We have come from tashlikh—  
but why is the shore so gray?  
The ash swam here after us  
and clouded over our way.

## **Who Today Is In Exile**

Who today is in exile and who tonight  
only owns a tear, should come here to me—  
I have already covered the windows, put out the lights  
and prepared the refreshments by the open door.

I divide myself with my loneliness, like with a piece of bread,  
trembling fingers breaking through its middle—  
it seems nobody will be ashamed here  
and nobody will be shunned.

And with my poor word I will divide myself with you,  
no matter how bitter the taste should be or how poisonous to the gums—  
this paper white path goes to God after all  
and carries your dream and silent grief to him there.

## Wolfs'-Lilac

It's the month of March—  
the wolfs'-lilac now blooms lily-blue  
in the valleys and forests of my home.

Both shrub and tree are still naked,  
but in that hour  
the spring evening stirs  
the first glimpse of blossoms  
on the stiff horns of the buds,  
the sky cloudy and gray.

And the paths of the forest,  
and the damp and deep valleys  
tremble at last with sharp and wild longing  
from animals' awakened steps  
and with the bittersweet scent  
of wolfs'-lilacs' small lily stars,  
which have bloomed overnight—

Once, when I brought into my house  
a brown twig with lily stars,  
the night turned into a forest  
from its bittersweet scent,  
with wolfish-green, avid eyes,  
with the feline-soft tread of animals—

And someone, seduced by scent,  
has lost their way in this night,  
and someone's blood ripened  
by the bitter scent of little blooms,  
and on this very night constellations  
have eluded each other like strangers.

## Old Women Buy Flowers

They choose their flowers from the saleswomen for a while,  
bending over every bud and leaf,  
like hidden treachery was lying for years already  
within these little hearts.

They choose like they're haggling for their destiny,  
and in a moment their gaze turns soft, veiled, and matte—  
because this color here awakens a long forgotten wanting  
and something must spoil every fragrance anew.

In their twisted and wrinkled hands  
the prettiest flowers turn weary with late-summer-sadness,  
as if their withered hands were collecting admission,  
like a tollkeeper by the cemetery gate.

Then they dress up in their nicest clothes,  
to satisfy that mound of earth, their well-known temple,  
and they go with their flowers in hand there, where it seems  
that someone is still waiting for them, for them and their smile.

## Generations

My mother loved another  
and became the wife of my father—  
she caressed the other one's picture, paled from long years  
of smiling from her old, velvet album.

When she embroidered a hand towel, a tablecloth,  
she stuck her longing in with red silk, her desire,  
the jabs would run like skinny streams of blood,  
silvery, hemmed in by her silent tears.

My grandmother—who today can understand the life of a grandmother—  
I remember only trembling hands and thin, blue lips.  
Who can know today if she loved my grandfather Shaya,  
how tough her luck was and what she endured.

There are no letters left from her, not a piece of paper,  
only pots bound up with wire in the attic, silent witnesses of a previous reality—  
when her husband died she remained a young widow  
with five children, the youngest a tiny orphan of not quite seven years.

She planted an orchard, an orchard dense and wide,  
trees rowed one by one in even lines,  
to embrace her new, naked house  
and her own vast loneliness.

And I— my daughter has turned sixteen years,  
just like me in those days of that month of May,  
when a quiet hour planted the most wonderful word in me,  
and it smelled of white lilac, of spring and with the distant nightingale's play.

A parcel of letters on the shelf, a skinny ribbon of poems,  
this here is all the ash of my life—  
Now I see it clear— I was too close to my happiness—  
I was forever running onward, onward—and it was always near.

I would say to my daughter—No, don't, don't run,

let yourself be carried by the embroidered red stream of blood,  
listen to what the trees murmur in grandmother's orchard,  
and what my poem whispers so pensively and distressed.

But how can she, with her sixteen years, understand  
the trembling and the sorrow of past lives?  
It all begins with her again, again—

She walks and the shadows walk after her and kiss her footprints,  
and somewhere on a branch of white lilac  
the nightingale fevers forth his song.

## **Khave**

Probably he would still till this day's dawn  
have pastured God's dreams in the garden of Eden,  
like flocks of sheep on starry grass,  
and not known the joy of a rendezvous  
and not know of the sadness of parting,

had not she, the wife, the woman, Khave,  
in that hour, when Odem rested,  
lulled to sleep, intoxicated from the Eden splendor,  
sensed how an unknown longing blossomed in her,  
and how its worry sent roots through her blood.

She was interrupted from her rest and tranquility,  
like a fruit weighed down by its own ripeness  
and saw at once the nakedness of heaven  
and the entire sadness of joy,  
that is to be no one's betrothed, for nobody destined.

And with her first quiet, flowing tear  
that obstructed the sky and stars above,  
Khave ripened for the earth,  
which suddenly opened before her,  
in its whole great pain of birth.

## Home

Dust from how many lands on your feet, my people,  
how many deep bloody cuts of crosses on your body  
and axes sharpened again by every stone  
eternally over the head and nape of every Jew.

What kind of people still have such legends,  
like every one of our words leads us to the sacrifice  
from epoch til epoch every generation anew,  
from graybeard til grandchild—the whole community.

From the Inquisition-place in Spanish Toledo  
through the ghetto-gates of Maints and Amsterdam,  
until Kishinev, Majdanek and Treblinka,  
like milestones: murder, libel and flame.

Auto-da-foes of bodies and holy books,  
which the enemy turns into a ready sacrifice—  
but higher still than flames and smoke  
and higher than our own grief and pain

is the dream, the dream of that distant land,  
which Halevi kissed with his thirsty-hot stanzas  
by the foreign shores of Spain  
in incandescent longing and quiet hoping.

From border to border and from calamity to calamity  
you carried, my people, your dream in the letters of holy books,  
and carried the canvas sack with the bit of earth from there  
on your heart by your resting place within the diaspora-graves.

Blessed should be the hour, my people, when you return to that land from all the stations of your  
pain,  
and the spring teaches you, the boulder, the swamp, the stone,  
the word, the long-forgotten one we once knew and understood—  
you stammer it, you sob it out, you sing it out—my home.

from *Fun Yener Zayt Lid* (From the Other Side of the Poem), 1962

### **On the Other Side of the Poem**

On the other side of the poem is an orchard  
and in the orchard is a house with a straw roof—  
three pine trees stand and bear the silence,  
three guards on perpetual watch.

On the other side of the poem is a bird,  
a yellow-brown bird with a reddish breast,  
it flies here again every winter  
and hangs like a bud on the naked bush.

On the other side of the poem is a path,  
so narrow and sharp, like the thin-thinnest hair-part,  
and somebody who is lost in time  
wanders there with quiet, barefoot steps.

On the other side of the poem wonders can occur  
even today, on a day that is stormy and gray,  
when the fevered longing of a wounded hour  
pulses into the glass of the windowpane.

On the other side of the poem my mother can come out,  
and stand on the threshold for a while lost in thought,  
and call me home, like long, long ago:  
“Enough playing now, don’t you see? It’s night.”

## **My Mother Came To Me Tonight In a Dream**

My mother came to me tonight in a dream  
with an open siddur in hand,  
finding her page with a dampened finger,  
she strictly demanded:  
“My child, say Vidui, it’s the highest time.”

I was not even surprised  
that we were together here  
by the bedside of my last prayer.

My mother gave birth to three children  
with blonde and chestnut-brown little heads,  
but all three had eyes of a deep beer-color.

Already the two younger sons  
are together now with her.  
One like his mother, with a German bullet in the very middle of his heart,  
and the second swam up into the air  
with the black crematorium-smoke.

Now my mother calls homeward  
her oldest child and only daughter—  
she stands by me and demands, and demands, and demands:  
—My child, it is the highest time, say Vidui.”

The dark letters from the page she found  
led me to the border entirely alone,  
to that border you can only go over once.

I broke myself off of my last hour,  
like a branch from a sick, weary tree,  
and my entire hereness became  
a distant, nightmarish dream.

The calmness of evening was in me,  
which the evening itself piously devised,

and merely by thin, withering rays of light,  
like a narrow road,  
this whole suffering of mine was led to the very last shore.

Terror was in my heart, terror as well,  
but at the same time,  
like it would suddenly become redeemed,  
was a hidden longing for this very minute,  
which I have carried in myself through all these years.

Nobody was there to call me back,  
nobody's voice could demand something of me at the last moment,  
and nobody's gaze was following me.

And my only witnesses were my lips,  
which tried to carry over to God  
my embarrassed, childish smile from long ago,  
like a last, hidden away secret.

I repeated the words from the looked-for page,  
words on a yellow piece of paper:  
—My lord,  
though I stand before you today  
with my whole woe and sorrow—

I was ready.

But suddenly a voice in me, or over me,  
a severe voice, as if sharpened by a chisel, said  
“You have not yet set down all that you need to write,”  
and broke me again into life,  
like an eternal debtor,  
a stricter and fairer judge  
of new toil, new temptations,  
of sin and forgiving.

Nobody knows that I have already not existed,  
nobody has suspected that I am here again.

And each time I wake against the new day  
is so hard and so pitilessly-difficult—  
nobody waits for me here.

## The Words of My Alphabet

Here they come to me, the words of my alphabet,  
they don't smell like wild-poppo and periwinkle anymore,  
like ripe wheat, like fresh hay and clover,  
a number from Treblinka is branded on them,  
they emanate smoke from Belzec and Majdanek.

They are like the shiva-sitters after a last sigh  
and the luller of an unsaid Vidui;  
they are the messengers from the ghetto kingdom,  
escaping from bloodbath and treachery.

They write to me on walls of destroyed shuls  
through someone's last prayer and unheard weeping,  
engraving me by the deathbed of time,  
like a memorial for my people's remains.

And when was this, how many years ago?  
Under the broad cherry tree covered with white flowers—  
a wooden bench, a table, an opened siddur  
with dots and dashes, like a new bridge  
would lead me to the old shores of the bible.

And like the fragrance would arise at once  
from the middle of the land flowing milk and honey,  
three partners—a wasp, a fly, and a bee  
settled in and soaked within the holy book's margin.

It was quiet around me, only buzzing  
were the wasp and the bee, when with his thin ruler  
Shmuel, my teacher, lifted up every separate letter,  
unchained from the long line.

The blue sky peered into the old siddur  
through the cherry tree's fragrant, white thatch,  
and gave a fatherly wink with its eye  
to the gang of doves on the brown roof.

They all got up at once, one by one,  
circling above me, spinning around in a sphere,  
braiding in the air around my young head  
a garland of fluttering white wings.

Just like every dark distinct word  
was a seed God himself sowed  
on the half-yellowed, old siddur page,  
prepared for their broad, avid beaks.

...It's quiet now around me, the quiet of twilight,  
only the written-on page rustles under my hand,  
which will become a home for my half-forgotten childhood  
and tries to be a home for my exile.

## **Don't Shame My Word**

Don't shame my word, which tears itself in two for you,  
like you command us not to shame a poor man's hand,  
it should not be humiliated, it should not dry up  
like a stream in the middle of stones and sand.

Don't send my song into diaspora for a lifetime  
of wandering in a borrowed, patched shirt  
among my kin and close ones, wailing like Shloyme:  
—Three times woe, that my nearest does not recognize me.

You have taken all from me and changed it, Iyov'd  
every year, every day, every hour of my being,  
stuck me like an unwanted pawn  
by the dust and ash of burnt remains.

You have estranged my childhood from me through flames and smoke,  
my memory still sits shiva for mutilated years—  
only the word, only the song is recognizable to me,  
and it's like a seal, like a golden seal,  
on your grand and lordly silence.

## **Tonight I Have Felt**

Tonight I have felt a poem on my lips—  
it was like a bitter and juicy-sweet fruit,  
but it dropped down in my blood at day's dawn,  
and only its fragrance and color still follow me.

I hear its quiet trembling all the time in the stammering of objects  
which want to be revealed through my poem;  
they stand neglected now, with closed hearts,  
and they cannot be opened by anymore praying or begging.

Every part of my body weeps with frozen death  
and my head is bent all the time to the earth;  
God called on me to renew his genesis,  
and I—I missed his voice and did not hear it.

The day is already faded in its earliest hour,  
and the piece of paper withers in my barren hand—  
God blocked his face from me with a storm cloud,  
and like a stranger at my shamed door I now stand.

## Passover Night

I can't get up from bed  
to open the door  
for you.

My crutches  
lean against the wall,  
like saddled horses,  
waiting for someone's hand  
to lead them to me.

I have become unfamiliar from the earth,  
and the sky  
is so stingy with me,  
here, however much the only window  
in the wall can contain.

But I can see how the moon rips clouds to bits  
and wheedles the roads  
for you.

Eliyohu the prophet—  
the cup is not filled  
and the table not set,  
but in any case you must come to me tonight,  
in the nightly hour,  
because who will if not you?

And even back then,  
when people had just invented you,  
they sent you on distant wander-ways  
so that you could replace  
the sadness of night  
with a cup of sparkling wine—  
you must come to me,  
right now,  
and touch with your outstretched hand

the wooden crutches, which are leaned against the wall,  
so they can dream of their own childhood,  
in a forest greened with summer.

## **All That Is Lonely**

All that is lonely has the color of my sadness,  
and all that is embarrassed and weary  
stands in a crown of extinguished stars  
by the first word of my poem.

Unnoticed beggars, unprivileged princes,  
unremembered smiles, untimely weeping—  
who will bend an ear for you and pray for  
you all, when I will not be?

## **The Cricket**

The cricket saws through the night, “Tshir-ri-ri” —  
she saws and saws and turns not a drop tired.  
The solace is beheaded already, and sawn into pieces  
is the grief, which searches for a way to my poem.

“Tshir-ri-ri,” until the distant span of morning,  
shadows slink from hidden corners,  
the cricket bores still deeper and deeper—  
my heart is left to be sawn into bits.

## **So Many Roads**

So many roads the night extinguished,  
my narrow path is also among them—  
only shadows are around me, only sorrow is with me,  
which is the only thing faithful to me in the world.

So many roads the night extinguished,  
and left me standing in the middle of a dream—  
a half-withered tree woke by where the roads slept  
and wept with dew.

## **Black Crows**

Black crows on the white fields,  
their footsteps etched in snow  
like handwriting, dispersed by the Kislev wind—  
and my sorrow shadows beneath them.

Black crows pass by in cawing,  
their hoarse crying hangs like a storm cloud,  
when they lift their heavy wings to fly—  
and my sorrow shadows beneath them.

They fall to the naked branches on the trees,  
stuck in rows like they're frozen stiff,  
just like they would wait for a hidden incantation—  
and my sorrow shadows beneath them.

Just like they would wait for a hidden incantation—  
to rescue them from their own cries,  
which encroaches on the sun, the sky, and the white snow  
like cataracts with dark premonition—  
when my sorrow throws its shadow over them.

## Iyov

for A. Glants-Leyeles, to his sixtieth year

Like the sky had suddenly opened  
with a cloudburst of curses and lesions,  
which rinsed all the blessings from me,  
so that I was forced before you in my whole nakedness.

My king's- riches became my loneliness,  
I saw the eyes of my neighbors, friends, and wife  
turned away with disgust  
from the look of my festering, stinking body.

You have petrified me with bad tidings, God,  
with tidings of my downfall and calamity,  
until I was crushed underneath them  
with my face buried in dust,  
and could barely stutter: How much, how much more?

And so I was in my deepest and bitterest mourning  
still rich compared to today,  
when I am again embraced and honored  
with sheep and cattle, children, wife, and friends.

While your heavy arm beat me,  
I was still your most loyal slave in my blasphemy,  
you were still reflected in my every tear,  
and in my bitterest complaint you were fair.

Now you give back to me with an over-full measure,  
you have doubled my number of sheep and cattle,  
you have given me seven sons and three daughters anew,  
so that I can exhaust the luck of fatherhood.

How can I free myself,  
I, that am riper now with three and seven death throes,  
and have buried ten deaths deep in my blood?  
I have already cried for everything, what is left behind becomes a tear,

now I cannot cry anymore and cannot laugh.

And I carry my name, like sackcloth and ash,  
to strew across all shivas in the world,  
and I myself became a dwelling place  
with doors always open and free,  
if somewhere there is a misfortune, come and study with me,  
if somewhere a calamity, they should borrow a tear from me,  
if somewhere a punishment, I should be the eternal witness.

How can I believe you, when you yourself don't believe  
in your own creation?

How can I trust you, that because of a mere game  
you entered into a bet with Sotn,  
and stuck me into the match  
for blind, desolate shame?

Was my naive awe too little for you,  
my falling to bow for your radiant countenance  
by every new arising of the day's light?

I was whole and full with joy of my days,  
I am still full in my pain and grief—  
but now I have cracked, like an earthen jug,  
for I do not see anymore sense in your will, lord.

If you would have tried me and beat me with your fury,  
in order to raise me like a flag of misfortune,  
so that people should see and recognize you in my suffering,  
dread should come over every doubter,  
and dissidents should be newly born in their belief—

you might as well have let me double over  
in my suffering, taken by the magnitude of my pain,  
to know and understand the outcomes of your doings.

But you, you great, all-encompassing lord,  
you, who lingers by every joy and every worry,

you want to be reflected like you once were  
in the blue from heaven and the grass of the valley in my eye,  
so that I with my meek and artless smile  
will obstruct the howling in me, that roar,  
when my body wept with pus and leprosy—

you want me to forget everything,  
betrotte myself to you again,  
to stand in blind certainty  
past every woe?

Now I also play a game with you—  
I put on my Shabbos clothes,  
and put the holiday on my face,  
and bring you all sorts of sacrifices,  
and smoke woesmoke on the altar,  
so that all the signs appear  
that I am Iyov after all,  
Iyov from long ago.

But I am finally approaching the last boundary,  
that border, where there stands no watch or guard,  
where the good and the bad no longer have any power,  
through my suffering I have neared the foundation—  
but now, I am still poorer, neglected,  
like long ago in my leprosy and loneliness,  
because who can make me accept my enormous loss,  
because who can change you, my God?

November 1949

## Winter Landscape

The white-browed calm  
protects the dream of the mountain,  
lightening its heavy, bald head with dawn  
over the city.

Rushing wind  
broadens the way to the stars,  
while it shakes flocks of frightened birds  
down from their branches,  
like dark, ripe fruits.

They circle the sky, fluttering helplessly,  
heavy drops of night  
on their wings,  
kept watch by the sadness.

The sadness watches  
and listens closely  
to the sigh of the hour,  
which bargains with the stingy blind night  
for a bit of comfort and a bit of rest  
for itself,  
and for all those  
who have tarried  
a whole lifetime  
at the feast of windows, drunk with light.

Now they throw crumbs from their holiday  
to the darkened street,  
to the frozen snow,  
and the passerby,  
who strays among them.

### **To the Writer from Kinneres**

You are gone too early, I have arrived too late,  
I go here after your footprints and they show me the way  
to Galilean mountains with pink-tinged heads  
by sunset—the Kinneres-mountains.

Birches had waved by the side of your cradle,  
but palms now rustle over your flat roof—  
brought here for you from distant Persia,  
they stand like loyal guards on the watch.

They let you know when the Kinneres raises itself,  
crumpling its broad forehead, wave after wave,  
breaking itself apart in unmeasured longing,  
stammering stubbornly only one word: “Rakhel.”

And when you keep silent, given over now to new loyalty,  
it breaks its head on your stone threshold,  
and wants your last home floating to the foundation—  
it demands back its great love,     you, Rakhel.

You are gone too early, I have arrived too late,  
I understood in the eyes of the mountain gazelle,  
who stopped in its wild run for a while,  
the dark premonition and the sorrow of your poems, Rakhel.

## Desert

With fasting breath the desert blazes through all my limbs,  
I want to remember when I stood here long ago—  
It can be that I still remember that old well  
by the road, where the foreign caravans stayed.

Not my brothers sold me for heavy pieces of silver,  
so I should become the gazer of stars in Pharaoh's land,  
and give drink to the thin cows, and make full the stalks,  
empty and waste, with the dew of my tears.

Not my sisters covered my face with a veil  
so that I shouldn't see the sadness in my fate's eyes,  
when it betrothed me to the foreign roads  
in an hour, which brought the sky down with smoke.

Now I stand like long ago in the desert's feverish ardor,  
lonely like she is, from exile and wander-ways weary,  
but I feel how her longing arises in my blood

to the first young grass, which will spear through  
the red, raw, naked earth like green swords,  
like the start of a poem cuts its way into my heart.

from *Di Gnod fun Vort* (The Favor of a Word), 1968

## **Do Not Renounce Me**

Do not renounce me,  
do not cast my word away,  
tired from all its wanderings—  
it can still rise up to you  
today in the bud of a poem.

And tomorrow—  
tomorrow it can become a remedy  
for sadness,  
which drinks the twilight gray,  
and reads your signs  
in the flight of the bird,  
in the wrinkles of bark,  
warding off the wicked evil-eye  
of a feverish hour.

Dreams can be interpreted,  
which have all betrayed us  
and obscured your commandments  
with dark writs of smoke.

My word is so lonely,  
like you in the desecrated heavens,  
and it's searching in these Sodom times  
for the last upright person.

### **Apply Your Word to My Lips**

Apply your word to my lips,  
like a seal to a finished writ,  
and send me—where to?—I don't know myself—  
who waits for me then, besides bad luck?

I have already been anointed with sadness,  
like the queen of eternal night,  
who doesn't know if she is a dream,  
or if she is invented by somebody.

And maybe she has merely become  
a deposit in fate's hand,  
placed as a bet and forfeited  
to desolation, to wind, to the unknown?

Apply your word to my lips,  
and lead me like a child by the hand,  
to the border lined through tears,  
the border to the nightly land.

## **It's Already Too Late**

It's already too late for that other word,  
that was set for you—  
and maybe it is still too early  
for that quietness, that evens out  
the distance between you and me.

No trail, no way,  
will lead me by your footprints—  
the bit of ash which was  
your look, the scent of your hair

went away somewhere  
with a border of sown grain—  
but every smoke that rises  
lingers in the air, tries to reach heaven  
and binds and spells  
the letters of your name.

## **It's So Quiet in Me**

It's so quiet in me,  
like all the evenings  
which turned gray before their time  
started to lighten inside me,  
and veiled me, like a bride  
betrothed to loneliness.

There's no distinction at last,  
between when and how—  
the shadows wake by my side,  
like by a child in a tiny cradle,  
so I shouldn't be tempted to sin,  
I shouldn't fall,  
when my time will come.

And everything turns so simple, clear,  
like the seal would break open  
of a last tear,  
when the world swims into  
the mirror hung on my wall.

## **All Winds**

All winds stilled,  
like they would cradle somebody thoughtfully  
between naked branches of the trees  
on a rainy Khesavn night.

All sadnesses anchored themselves  
at my threshold, like there was no other place  
in the whole world, besides in my eyes,  
my hands, my smile, and my word.

## **I Have Separated Myself**

I have separated myself from all that is near me,  
so that I can understand you better,  
you last moment of mine, when it will be both of us  
rocking to sleep in the weary silence of departing.

So many words still remain unsaid,  
so much sadness waits for interpretation—  
on my lips a smile silvers,  
as I raise myself up and stammer: I am ready—

## The Orchards of my Childhood

The orchards of my childhood sometimes bloom in my dreams—  
the sour-cherry trees drink up the blueness of the sky,  
and it seems to me that the small wisps of cloud, that swim,  
are the white dreams of the sour-cherry trees.

It cannot be, that apple trees should smell like this  
in the middle of the month of May,  
just like the night had opened their hearts  
and enveloped the earth and the trees with their fragrance,  
the stars and the nightingale.

It cannot be, that apple trees should smell like this  
and water until drunk the May wind—  
unless the moon mixed up the years  
and you became a child again.

Sometimes a word blossoms forth in the dream,  
a word long-forgotten and paled,  
a word, which betrothed me to spring—

When I wake up  
the pillow at the head of my bed is wet  
and shadows are coming towards me  
from the wall with peaceful, outstretched hands.

## **You Test Me So**

You test me so, God, that I don't even know  
where the beginning is and where the middle—  
I have stopped counting the opulence of my suffering  
and don't know how much sorrow has eluded me.

The border to my yesterdays is effaced with ash,  
the way to the morning is lined through tears:  
fate has placed me in a reality,  
which has pawned the sky and the stars

for a pittance at a time, that blazes, Sodoms inside  
her desolate laughter for days and nights,  
and inebriates every hour with falsehoods,  
so it doesn't know who the sacrifice is, who the slaughterer.

Where is your voice that bloodies, thorns with your fury,  
so that I can accept this, sense and hear it,  
where is the word that can show you to me,  
starry with your mercy in a night with no stars?

## Oh, God

Oh, God,  
how much accounting with you  
in my Kheshvn days—

You make me taste  
the bitter roots of life  
from every variety,  
and the bite of bread  
that I eat every day  
is bitterer than wormwood.

Someone is now cutting the grain,  
sowing  
over the ash  
of everything  
related to me  
through love,  
through sadness,  
through joy.

I stand in the middle of the unleafing time  
like a naked tree—  
and so I am ready  
to take into one moment,  
like a frame,  
the sigh of a person,  
the breath of the sea,  
the beginning of a poem,  
the continuation of a dream,  
and everything stands amazed,  
and everything is astounded,  
like a child playing by the very edge of the abyss.

And I won't look,  
I won't see,  
that storm clouds

slide on their bellies  
low and heavy,  
like animals in a prey chase,  
ready to devour everything in their way,  
just like my Kheshvn days.

## **Give Me Back, My Lord**

Give me back, my lord,  
the burden of small day to day worries  
in their whole shabby-weekday grayness,  
always at the verge of giving and borrowing.

What then is their whole complaint and desire?  
They clamor in every moment with requests—  
the baking should turn out well, the flower pot should green,  
and the children shouldn't come too late.

Bread should never be missing from the table,  
the roof shouldn't leak, the fire should burn  
with a warm shine—and the sadness should become  
adorned in the tune of Tsenerene.

I have always dismissed them,  
always been ashamed of them and avoided them  
like coarse relatives, who come and interrupt  
the celebration of intoxicated words, red-hot.

Now I know—  
when they shuffle quietly and pensively by the wall  
they are taking the measurements of life,  
and learning the wisdom of being with us,  
the joy of understanding and of forgiving.

Give me back now, my lord,  
the burden of those little preoccupations, worries,  
so the day  
should receive its measurement and weight  
and I can feel on my gums the taste,  
the taste of a tomorrow arriving.

## **My Small Daughter**

My small daughter is a mother of two large sons—  
some years back she sheared off  
her two long black braids and tied up with them  
the spring of a first, budding joy.

Sometimes there is still the reflection of a word  
in her gaze, like from a distant star,  
a word, which has the fragrance of freshly-sown plots  
and the taste of still unwept tears.

But her lips—two pressed seals  
guard strictly and jealously the trembling  
of those days, when an earlier autumn  
had uncovered them and left them naked to the weather.

And it's as though a dream just then turned to dawn,  
and renewed itself with every generation again,  
trying to reconcile her windswept longings,  
which wait quietly, patiently, and true.

## Protect and Shelter Me

Protect and shelter me grandmother Khaye,  
I the oldest daughter of your youngest son,  
of all your grandchildren the only one still here—  
spread out your apron, hide me,  
like long ago.

Around me is naked, hollow, and stripped—  
the needles of the scale  
bargain for nothing,  
the late-autumn winds come inside,  
into my unguarded days.

Wait for me on the clay mountain  
with the fox holes downturned and narrow,  
until I will come running from szkoła  
out of breath with deathly fear,  
like in those days.

Button the empty, open hour,  
like my jacket long ago, so I don't freeze,  
and ward off the evil eye of excited stars quickly,  
so no one should hear—  
who else can still know the incantation, like you?

And lay your hands over my eyes  
so I can better see,  
how to go  
home.

## **I Am Cold, My Mother**

I am cold, my mother—  
probably it is the damp chillness from your grave,  
where your heart  
with a German bullet in the very middle  
nourishes the roots of trees  
in a clandestine betrothal.

I cannot even find the way in dreams  
to that Grayding forest,  
overgrown and old.

Maybe there is a path  
trod on by little shepherd's feet,  
or children  
foraging for nuts.

And maybe a bird in flight knows the way?  
It begs that you should take pains  
for your daughter,  
so she should not go under  
to that black kingdom,  
where you can swap your tears  
for a wild smile—  
where the scream  
hangs itself  
on the branch of a tree,  
so it should not  
hear itself anymore.

## To My Not-Born Son

Why something today,  
not yesterday,  
not years ago?

It can be because today is by chance the yahrzeit for my brother,  
and maybe because I'm turning much lonelier and wearier,  
I have suddenly yearned after you.

You would have been called Volf after my father, or maybe Zev,  
and likely you would already be a father yourself today,  
and maybe,  
(one can from the thought itself lose one's senses)  
you would have been gassed, burned in Belzec with the yellow patch,  
like my brother Hersh together with his son,  
who was also named after my father.

Such a kind of mellow stillness in the air,  
like the summer is out-sunning itself  
by its last shore—  
probably this was how it was too  
in those other days.

But I am cold,  
I freeze—  
the cold comes from inside,  
like all the graves are opening themselves wide,  
that I have carried within me  
through so many years.

Prop me up,  
offer me your arm,  
and lead,  
like I would have lead you long ago,  
and give a gentle pat from time to time—

And maybe you would have really become a poet

and smiled to yourself  
with pardon and consolation  
at the rhymes  
of your mother?

And you yourself  
will write the poem,  
which will rock me to sleep,  
when the sadness clouds over me  
and I am so tired.

You don't need to be embarrassed  
calling love by her name—  
Truly poets  
write their finest poems and sonnets  
for their mothers,  
just like Bialik and like Heinrich Heine,  
you needn't be embarrassed—

it's good, certainly it is good,  
so why should I be crying?

August 15, 1964

## **From Here to There**

From here to there,  
a span,  
a distance?

Everything already happened,  
everything has been prepared,  
even the angel  
at the fork in the road of time  
waits with wings crossed,  
like two tired hands,  
to give me a kiss on the forehead—

so that I forget  
everything that happened  
and become  
like him,  
without smile,  
without sorrow,  
without tears.

## Autumn

The birds took the dream of the trees along  
with them to the distant, southerly land,  
taking off suddenly and punctuating the air,  
like pebbles thrown from God's unbodied hand.

And soon—they fly at last with their captains  
fashioned in a segul, daled, or gimel,  
like a dark handwriting that longing left  
on the board of the Kheshvn sky.

The birds took the dream of the trees along,  
and in their hard, moss-covered grooves  
it's as if only sadness is left in the wrinkled bark,  
waiting for me—I should come and inherit it.

## Artur Zigelboym

When did she become set and sealed,  
your large and wondrous, undying deed?  
Was she dreamed of for a long time in your childhood,  
or did she come like a dark messenger  
to your London wandering?

And knocked softly on the door of your house,  
a woman, deeply-veiled and tired—  
“I come from Warsaw ghetto, from burning earth,  
my clothing torn, my eyebrows scorched,  
and my lips bloodied.”

She remained there in loyal partnership  
to your orphaned days,  
and stood at the foot of your bed in mourning nights,  
showing you the only way.

You knocked on doors, on locked hearts  
of the world’s ruling-class: “It’s a disgrace, a shame  
to call yourself a ‘man’ when children are rounded up  
and no one’s hand is raised to rescue them”—

You dragged the piles of paper in suitcases  
with long numerals multiplied through death—  
and the longer the number, all smaller the price  
for those who are grayed in ash.

They smile, the gentlemen, all civil, all fine:  
“All permitted, then you are correct,  
we will believe you—but bring us a demonstration,  
we are truly the slaves of strict statutes.”

If the bill is agreeable for you, my gentlemen,  
then my life, my belief is a mistake—  
I seal with blood each long numeral,  
so my death should be the demonstration for you.

In a May night, when the orchards bloom  
and the spring proceeds arm-in-arm with the stars,  
a single window wakes with his light  
in the dark old London house.

You wrote the letter with a calm hand  
so they could read it by first daybreak—  
a shot resounded, a single shot  
atoning for the disgrace, the shame of a generation,  
through singular death, with singular blood—  
and a last salute,  
for those who wait there beyond hope!

Montreal, 1950

## **The Night Falls**

The night falls atop Mount Carmel,  
and just see, see how they multiply  
and pasture there in the heights,  
scattered like lambs,  
my grandmother Khaye's stars.

I still remember the evening,  
a little tired from cherry-blooms,  
which had by the merest breath of wind  
scattered the earth with white blossoms.

The Shabbos day had been guarded  
meekly and piously by my grandmother—  
I didn't know—was this her prayerful murmur,  
or the buzzing of the bees?

Until the three pensive stars  
were put on watch  
right over the roof—  
and a dark flock of birds  
had carried the last reflection of the day  
to their nests  
with the blessing-word of my grandmother Khaye.

Haifa, 1958

## Lot's Wife

I didn't have any courage to look back,  
when my home blazed behind me,  
and everything was annihilated  
that I once called—happiness.

This is why I am so envious of you,  
who stood yourself up in the middle of leaving  
and gathered in your whole love  
within hard salt stone.

The exile scared you more than God's rage  
and longing was stronger than his punishment—  
under your lashes nested your home,  
the cradle, the orchard, the brown flocks of sheep,  
when the fire licked its flaming tongues  
over the open wounds of earth, of stone, of clay.

Now you stand on watch of all your dreams,  
a guardian of hollow mountains, of a dead sea—  
the sunset blood drips into your limbs,  
and in the brightness of her flame  
your body shimmers with rosy youth,  
and your lips smile with remembrance  
of your own confided name—  
you are still you—and not merely the wife of your husband.

I didn't have any strength to look back,  
my heart is stiff now—a clod of stone,  
and the word salts on my lips  
with a quiet, un-cried-through cry.

## **My Father**

My father tried to hide the diaspora from me  
under blooming orchards, green meadows,  
while the longing wept in his blood  
for the mournful Shekhinah.

From among wheat fields and thick forests,  
ringed with the goyim-neighbors,  
his trembling voice cut a path through  
for himself to the ancient-home:  
“L’shana habo b’Yerushloyim.”

A strange soil covered his young bones,  
who knows if there is a trace still remaining  
of his grave in the Moshtsiska graveyard,  
where the destroyers paved the streets  
with the tombstones.

Only me, the only one of your three children,  
is destined  
to carry your longing through all these exiles,  
so she can kiss the holy earth.

from *Oyf der Sharf fun a Rege* (On the Sharpness of a Moment), 1972

## **My Great God**

My great God, sometimes I am so close to you,  
that I can read and understand your every sign,  
and feel your breath on my weary face,  
still wet from nightly weeping,

as your voice tears me out of heavy sleep  
so in my loneliness I should hear  
the flutter of an angel's wings over me  
and sense my mother's hands on my forehead.

But more often I am so neglected,  
like someone wandering in a dream without an end,  
and my call resounds ashamed in a wasteland  
seeking you, oh lord.

I try to persist through the exiled sadness,  
which, like me, is left standing in the middle of time,  
and watches as fog is drawn like a cataract  
over this moment, which passes.

## **You Are Tired, My Eye**

You are tired, my eye,  
you are tired, my arm,  
and you, my heart, still wearier—  
I do not know if only from sadness,  
or also from the weeping, which searches  
for a home in my poems.

The sky before night falls is adorned  
with fever-red specks,  
like leaves falling from the tree of life  
reddening the whole blue  
of all the sky's outstretching.

The spiderwebs tremble with the wind,  
a drop of dew  
is cradled in their nets,  
both heavy and clear,  
like an angel in his flight  
had left there a tear.

## **In A Summer Night**

My hair filled with knowing  
under the touch of your hands,  
but my speech was childishly hopeless,  
as if each and every word was embarrassed of itself.

Your smile shaded my eyes,  
when blossoming lindens honeyed over our heads  
and scattered spores  
over your fingers and on my braids.

Tantrum-prone, only-daughterish, like God alone  
would give me the whole world as a deposit,  
I had my palm stretched out to the moon  
so she could read the fortune from my hand.

She looked, delved into the narrow-twigged lines  
with her browless, expressionless eyes,  
and she was astonished  
so she blocked her face with a storm cloud.

Likely the moon then knew,  
what I couldn't even have a premonition of,  
that soon, very soon  
the shot in far Sarajevo  
will resound in our reality  
and fresh graves  
will break up the earth,  
the earth, where we stood—  
and in my hair only the sadness will fade.

## To My Father

What have you brought there  
from me—  
is it my smile,  
or my childish tears  
from those days and weeks,  
when I ran to you  
like I was cursing myself,  
that a plaything of mine had broken?

I still remember that Tammuz morning—  
grain was ripe in your fields for the harvest,  
but the sky had closed in with rain,  
when my mother's lamenting and weeping  
had torn me from my sleep,  
into my orphanhood.

Ten years and a half—it doesn't seem like a lot,  
but my younger brother was seven years younger than me—  
still to this day the scent of your Purziczan-tobacco follows me,  
which browned the tips of your slender fingers.  
And many times I wanted to hide  
like long ago in my childhood  
inside your heavy, broad bearskin coat  
which enveloped you  
when you traveled to the city.

What have you brought there  
from me,  
my young father?  
Maybe my foolish-childish questioning still clings to you:  
—why, what, how, and when?—  
just like then,  
when all joys were growing within me,  
and they betrothed me to the world  
with all her wonderful secrets,  
which only you could explain.

21st day of Tammuz 5732

## **My Mother Wept Very Often**

Maybe a birch grew over the mound,  
for which murder-hands took the measurement,  
in the thick forest near the town Grayding,  
and only birds come here to the ancestors' graves.

To my mother's unknown grave,  
where she lies, in her heart a German bullet,  
I can only in dreams go and go and go  
with shut eyes and muted mouth.

-----

I remember, my mother wept very often,  
and I, I thought  
that from the yellowed pages of her tkhine  
Avrom's son came to her bound  
and she thought of herself like mother Sore.

Because we, her children, romped, fooled around, laughed,  
although our father died so young—  
had he lived, the good father, he would never, never  
have led us to Mount Moriah for a sacrifice.

So my mother wept very often—  
did she know, predict,  
that the heavens were already prepared in their height  
to throw their gates open wide  
and take up both of her sons  
in clouds of smoke?

But I, her only daughter, remained,  
like a thorn on a desolate, renounced plain,  
becoming the continuance of my mother's tears,  
becoming myself  
her weeping.

## **It Is Such A Night**

For Dov Sadan

It is such a night that stars want to weep,  
but the full abundance of tears is not destined for them—  
They glimmer, tremble, like thin brooches  
in the dark hair over a woman-star.

It is such a night when all quiet ways  
breathe in the autumn within open days-and-nights,  
when figures can only appear  
from a dream—long paled, forgotten.

It is such a night that purifies itself through sorrow,  
and stretches a ladder up to heaven,  
for all those who are ripe and worthy  
of being given to Yankev in this night.

It is such a night, when a blue longing wakens  
over dreams, lonely messengers,  
who carry on their lips a word with seven seals  
for small children, fools, and poets.

## **Shloyme Mikhoels**

to the memory of the great artist, human, and Jew

“Only with the right foot,” he always used to tell me,  
and he himself was in that gauche reality without mercy and without God,  
where each word can turn into a denouncer,  
and lead to prison and to the gallows.

“Only with the right foot,” and kissed me on the forehead,  
fatherly, protective against every crouching suspicion,  
his kiss a stamp on the passport of life  
in my once bitter exile.

“Only with the right foot”—and he himself was a pawn,  
with a proud lion-head and eyes full of premonition—  
he performed, performed to protect others  
such as him, forced converts and marranos.

“Only with the right foot”—his full bottom lip  
lowers even more and trembles  
under the burden of unsaid words,  
which would only come out wounded and altered.

“Only with the right foot”—his glance asks and inquires  
if I comprehend his allusions and his intention—  
the wrinkles on his high erudite forehead smooth out,  
like they were shining under my understanding.

“Only with the right foot”—Mikhoels speaks to himself,  
when he transformed into Lear on the stage—  
driven out of his court by sport and laughter,  
a blind king without a crown, without kin, or land.

“Only with the right foot”— and now Shloyme is jealous  
of that clever, weary, gray old man,  
whose blindness protected from sight  
everything that the sage’s eyes must see.

“Only with the right foot”—did he murmur these words,  
lost in thought in the winter night,  
the night of mad riddles and omens  
on the Minsk streets so trusted and near?

And did he tear the mask off his face  
under the cold, starless sky  
when he was about to meet his death  
on that snow-covered stage?

## **I Am The Guardian**

I am the guardian of desolate homes  
and dead streets,  
where on warped fences,  
on crumbling walls,  
the sadness  
hangs in woven spiderwebs.

The wind carries letters  
to erased addresses—  
a name starts to flutter  
already long since forgotten.

A shadow outspreads nearby,  
and grows taller and taller  
in its attempt  
to find a human-like body.

In the silence  
tearful  
with unwept tears  
I can hear  
the whisper of a Vidui  
from under the arid earth.

## Who Will Hush the Weeping

Who will hush the weeping  
of things and objects  
dragged from Jewish homes,  
some to Teutonic land,  
some to their own neighbors?

Somewhere a table yearns  
for Shabbos candles and white challahs,  
an old dresser  
still carries the fragrance  
of letters  
from distant grooms to their brides.

The sideboards remember  
a sheepskin coat, a fur cap,  
a long silk jacket,  
sewn for the first time  
in young joy.

The smile of a child in its cradle  
appears in the mirror's dream,  
which is flecked with rust,  
like spots of dried blood.

Empty spice boxes  
are silent—  
they wait for celebrations,  
for pious holidays  
to trumpet, hum  
like bees  
over the blooming meadows.

And silver candlesticks  
and brass candelabras  
raise their branches  
like necks in death throes,

when the slaughterer stands  
over them with a knife.

Who will hush the weeping  
of things and objects,  
dragged out of Jewish homes,  
some to Teutonic lands,  
some to their own neighbors?

## Hey, It's Purim, Purim in the World

Hey, it's Purim, Purim in the world!  
Everyone, everyone is masked—  
painted buffoons and acrobats  
create new commandments  
for nights and for days  
intoxicated with their own terror.

Hangmen of disguised redeemers  
preach love for people and for the world,  
fairness for everybody dishonored—  
But to eradicate the ancient evil  
they suppress under their heavy boots  
everyone who will not convert to  
their Torah,  
the new gift—  
and in the name of fairness  
they behead everyone,  
even a word,  
an idea.

Nazis under masks of solid citizens  
with kingly high salaries  
lament their own decline in the quiet  
and drag out their medals  
from hidden boxes,  
to excite themselves with all the details  
of old recollections  
from Auschwitz and Buchenwald.

Astronauts in inflated uniforms,  
conquistadors of unknown space,  
twinkling stars by the edges of their roads,  
they let themselves stroll  
in the stratospheres,  
like acrobats on tensed strings,  
and dream about the simple earth,

about its nightly joys.

Divers with masks of revolving rows  
which hang like piggish snouts,  
lower themselves down until the bottom of the seas,  
where the waves read  
carved primeval scrolls  
on mussels, corals, and shells.  
Intoxicated from victory and their own audacity  
they frighten the sea-lion, the fish, the medusa.

The young sons and daughters  
veil themselves, jump  
in a wild ritual,  
and between weeping and laughter  
search for some kind of deity,  
the ancient  
within their jungles of disheveled hair.

A split atom  
seethes over the flung-wide abyss  
and longs for its restful wholeness of long ago,  
just like the humans in their wild hurry crave  
the distant cave.

Hey, it's Purim, Purim in the world!

And even God is so masked  
that he cannot recognize himself—  
he wanders over orphaned roads,  
mirroring himself in every flowing tear,  
and asks and asks:  
“Who am I, who?”  
And he looks in the ash sown by wind  
over fields,  
over forests,  
searching for his own altered form.

## **To the Moon**

Your face sealed with primordial sadness,  
with knowing notched in all your wrinkles  
of otherworldly secrets  
and earthly nights,  
which lie open before you,  
like scrolls.

Not the sun,  
not the stars,  
did my people garland with their prayers,  
but your two horns  
budding and young,  
and they walked with lit candles under  
your renewal.

Sleepwalkers,  
anointed with your shine,  
their eyes closed,  
clamber to you in the night  
over cornices, over roofs, over chimneys,  
to crown  
your kingdom  
with their dreams.

The round yellow eyes of the owls  
fill with your light, like cups with wine,  
when they conduct their wolfish howling  
out of the forest and over the snowy plains.

In the patterns of your green rays  
I would hide my childhood terror  
of witches, who ride  
over trees and roofs  
on old brooms,  
and of bandits in the nearby woods  
with axes and knives under their belts.

You were like a silver seal  
to monogram God's finished creation,  
on your empty mountains and valleys  
time  
should have no measurement,  
no resolution,  
genesis-like rest  
remains forever unfurled.

Your craters,  
like children soon after birth,  
suckled the milk from the milky way  
with open mouths,  
and the brightness of the stars.

The first human step  
on your stony ground  
notched in you  
the first, deep wound.

Now, like long ago from my childhood bed,  
I look up to you  
and I plead—  
protect our dreams from a comfortless reality,  
and keep guard, defend the very last secret—  
the godly should remain concealed in humans,  
and the humanity in eternal god.

Three times holy  
are your sands and stones,  
the unending deserted plains  
not sown with ash of human bones,  
not asphyxiated with smoke  
from a crematorium-chimney.

I bless the innocence of your virgin-soil,  
which is not splattered

with Hevel's blood—

I pray,

that for you will never be destined  
an Auschwitz, Majdanek, Treblinka,  
like this greened and blooming earth.

## To A Writer-Friend

Your letter lies here before me, where you call for a poem,  
even better would be two or maybe four?—  
Wearied, my day returns from markets and fairs  
and throws its gray shadow on the whiteness of paper.

The sheets of paper shimmer with frosty-white nakedness,  
and they also demand that I deck them with lines  
and their cool even surface mists with breath  
from words nestled between thin ruled margins.

I often hear a voice nearing me in my dreams,  
opening wide and scattering the night's dark gardens,  
a voice from lips long ashed already and silent,  
which will entrust their longed-after name to me.

I have become a debtor to all and everything,  
to those who are on the earth, to those who are under the earth—  
like a wealthy woman I have to count taxes on my sadness,  
even from the tear, my destined one here.

And where are the poems? Forgive, my friend, forgive.  
After all, nothing has blossomed in the desert yet from the thorn—  
meanwhile, please take this for love,  
these words  
from your  
Rokhl Korn.

November, 1971

from *Farbitene Vor* (Altered Reality), 1977

### **In A Concealed Circle**

I just to need close my eyes for a moment  
so I can find myself  
in that altered reality  
where the people are mute  
and only things and objects speak.

Not everyone can set foot on  
the boundary  
to that concealed circle,  
where feeling comfortable  
in its dwelling places  
are holy ones,  
fools,  
buffoons,  
and prophets  
from sinking worlds.

April 15, 1975

## How You Shamed Me

How you shamed me  
before your own countenance—  
from that pinnacle,  
where the word unfurls a new genesis,  
you flung me down  
to a dungeon  
without windows, without light,  
where everything is backwards  
and insanity  
lies in wait,  
intoxicated with the milk  
of green heads of poppies.

You made me a citizen  
of a landscape  
devised by Sotn himself,  
a landscape  
which can never be my home,  
a landscape  
where even memory  
drowns in a flood of tears—  
nobody can hear my call from here.  
Not even you, my lord,  
who hides your face  
with the hem of the extinguished stars.

November 4, 1974

## **All Forbidden Ways**

All forbidden ways are now open before me  
to the altered reality  
on the other side of hoping,  
where time with her sigil  
seals ashamed days  
and over beheaded dreams  
an angel stands with lowered wings.

May 1974

## Not All Will Become A Word

Not all will become a word,  
not all can be a poem—  
sometimes stones, trees, minerals, things, will  
enclose themselves in themselves  
and wait for their own waking.  
They are framed in a finished frame  
despite the toiling  
of forms,  
concepts,  
rhymes—  
they will not be pawned for time,  
which passes.  
They will guard God's breath within themselves,  
from the eve of Genesis this pious trembling,  
the sigh of a soundless sound,  
which tomorrow can become  
a Song-of-Songs chant,  
a vision full of its own self,  
like plains freshly greened in springtime.  
They wait for a moment readied since ancient times,  
the moment, which clasps the infinite  
within itself.

Not all will become a word,  
not all can be a poem—  
pensive silence ripens with wonder  
and listens closely  
for the redeemer's distant steps.

April 6, 1976

## **I Will Take Along**

I will take along with me the green meadows,  
and the fragrance of sour-cherry blossoms from my father's orchard,  
the narrow path between grain-lanes  
that still remembers my childhood's steps.

I will take the fluffy storm clouds with me  
so they make a softer place for my head to lay beside,  
and my mother's tired, overly gentle smile  
will be at the side of my bed along with the great silence.

I will take with me the breath of the word,  
in its purest sorrow and humblest design—  
I will take with me my first love  
and my last tear.

November 6, 1972

## **I Know Answers Already**

I know answers already to all sorts of questions,  
and I am so grown-up  
that it terrifies me  
when I remember  
how many revolutions of sun and moon  
I am away from my childhood.

I know already how people smile when they want to cry,  
I know the useless waiting for someone's arrival,  
but I still don't know  
how to greet  
the sadness,  
that has no name.

June 20 1972

## **So Many Times**

So many times already I have perished,  
who can remember the time and the place?—  
on the sharpness of a moment,  
on a thorn of a word,  
on the barbed-wire of envy,  
blocked by guile,  
on burning roads  
of the altered world.

And after all I return  
and am newly-born,  
once again I become renewed  
through the breath of the wind  
and through my own tears,  
like a grain planted in autumn in raw earth.

And I become part of a new scroll  
sealed with a single star.

April 1973

## Everything Betrayed Me

Everything in my life betrayed me,  
unleafing every dream before its time—  
the naked hours cling to twilight  
and loneliness is like my own house.

The exile comes here to rest,  
sometimes spending nights here,  
propping itself by the side of my bed with a star,  
which turned blind in the middle of its journey.

And the crow flies in loudly cawing,  
a messenger from dark, foggy distance—  
but my grandmother is not here like long ago  
to ward off the evil with her incantation  
and with spitting three times to her sides.

May 31, 1973

## Which Word

Which word of all the words,  
which were familiar and near to me,  
with which I used to sift the flavor of life,  
will be the last to detach from my lips  
and lead me to lie down in the valley of great silence?

When the sun will go down in my eyes,  
when muteness seals the windows, the door,  
in the empty-waste space  
my longing itself  
will entertain us for a while  
to console the mourning dream.

February 15, 1975

## **I, the Oldest of the Three Children**

I, the oldest of the three children  
with the birthright of generational sorrow,  
come closer and closer  
to the border,  
concealed in gray fog,  
where time  
calls itself  
homeward.

Such a silence around me  
like the eve of creation,  
that it seems  
I should be able to hear  
the sigh of an hour  
on the eve of its departure,  
and the approach of footsteps in the distance.  
But nobody is coming—  
I am so lonely here and secluded,  
separated from all earthly passions  
and there is nobody here with me,  
with whom I can share  
the inheritance of unwept tears.

May 15, 1974

## Shmuel Halkin

“Deep pits, red clay,  
Once I had a home.”

The broad table covered and always prepared for guests,  
the door to the simple house open for everyone—  
he shares his bread and salt with near and far,  
like he shares the blessing of his singular stanzas.

He reads and beams—a soft, mild smile  
warms every punctuation mark, every line,  
until words receive wings and fly away  
to the past, to the time of proud Jewish strength.

He reads and beams and drinks every word,  
until he alone becomes drunk, merry  
from refreshments prepared for the others,  
and from the wine of his own stanzas.

The blonde head of his Mary by the table,  
who knows each and every word by heart,  
shines, like from her there would soon be revealed  
the ascendant wonder of Halkin’s poems.

Sometimes he grows sad suddenly, ashamed,  
like each one of his words was choking him,  
when his lines, like they were disguised in a Purim skit,  
anointed the “Proud Tomorrow” with praise.

Afterwards he would bite his fingers into the nights,  
why should he be so fearful, careful,  
and put chains on his gentle, trembling word,  
and his lament can only be stammered out through allusions:  
“Oh! When will it be light at last?”

## Notes to the Poems

**The Last Spring:** The line “An old gray neighbor” originally read “An old gray goy, a neighbor.” The word goy comes from Hebrew, meaning non-Jew, and appears regularly in Korn’s earlier work. Due to its more pejorative connotations in English and the fact that her early work paints the portrait of a Jewish family in a non-Jewish rural world, I have meant for “neighbor” to also imply that this witness was not Jewish.

**I’m Soaked Through with You:** Some ambiguity in the grammar if the final word is “man” or “husband.”

**Sister:** The word “being” in the original is *neyfesh*, a Hebrew word that stems from “neck” but later came to mean soul or being, as in an essential breath of life or vital spirit, like the Latin *anima*.

**Shabbos in My Home:** Shabbat (or Shabbos in Ashkenazi pronunciation) is the sabbath or day of rest, observed from sundown on Friday night to sundown on Saturday night. Multiple categories of labor are forbidden on Shabbos, and this poem plays with the many types of labor in Korn’s home-village, from her neighbor washing laundry to the crows cawing over scythes. Tkhines were Yiddish prayers meant for women to recite, especially on Shabbos, and a good number of them were in fact written by women. A tkhine could refer to the individual prayer or to the books they were collected in. For more on tkhines, *Seyder Tkhines: The Forgotten Book of Common Prayer for Jewish Women* by Devra Kay, is a key text. Sore, Rivke, Laye, and Rokhl correspond to the English Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel, rendered in Korn’s Galitziyaner dialect of Yiddish. These matriarchs were frequently invoked by tkhines, in this case to wish “Gut Shabbos,” or a good sabbath, to the rural environment of Korn’s childhood.

**Kheshvn:** Kheshvn (or Kheshvan in modern Hebrew pronunciation) is a month of the Hebrew calendar, corresponding roughly to late October and early/mid November. Korn uses both calendars in her poetry, as was typical of Eastern European Jews, who tended to use the Gregorian for secular affairs and the Hebrew calendar for birthdays, death memorials, or other more personal matters.

**Layve:** Yaverev, Moshtsisk, Samber, and Grayding are today’s Yavoriv, Mostiska, Sambir, and Horodok in the Lviv Oblast of western Ukraine, almost at the border with Poland. At the time Korn lived there at the turn of the twentieth century, this was the Eastern Galician region of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Korn paints the rural quality of those Jews in her home-region like crazy Layve by using a more Slaviced, salt-of-the-earth style Yiddish. For example, Layve’s

cousin is not named the Hebraic Rivka but instead the Slavicized Rivtshe. The original phrase for “old Christian women” was “alte goyes,” or old non-Jewish women, but I decided Christian captured more of their difference from Layve.

**The Old Hanke:** Korn mixes Jewish words with Slavic subject matter, for example using Khesvhn, the eighth month of the Jewish calendar, to describe the dark nights Hanke the non-Jewish midwife journeyed through. “Stuffy” refers to the incense used in the church service, in addition to all the candles lit in the small church.

**The Eleventh Spoon:** Balebos can mean “master-of-the-house,” but also boss or husband, and is another Hebrew word used for a non-Jewish family in Korn’s early work. The meaning of “small bags” might be death shrouds—I’m not sure how else to read the line. The “hungry time” is the Polish przednówek, the gap between when the last year’s food runs out and when the first harvest is gathered. It is also called pre-harvest.

**The Mother’s Consolation:** “Painted Easter eggs” refers to pisanki, eggs that are painted in bright colors and designs for Easter in Poland.

**Neighbors:** This is a portrait of dorf-yidn, or village-Jews who left traditional Jewish communities in cities or towns to work the land, something more possible after civil reforms opened new possibilities for Jews in late nineteenth-century Galicia. It is significant that the fathers, Sender and Moti, have traditional Yiddish names but Moti’s daughter is called the Slavicized diminutive name Khantshe.

**A House in Kheshvn Wind:** Autumn is the rainiest season in Eastern Europe.

**Ships:** Beyond the more well-known immigration to America, there was also lots of internal migration in Europe at the turn of the century, as agricultural workers went westward to places like Prussia and Jews moved to larger cities in their home regions or in Western Europe before embarking to further places. This poem charts the rising trends of xenophobia, particularly after the passage of the U.S. Emergency Immigration Act of 1921, which severely restricted immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe.

**Mother in Prison:** In Yiddish, peasant has less of the pejorative connotation than it does in English and it is a more neutral term for someone’s social class.

**My Home:** Shabosim is the plural of Shabbos, or sabbath. Korn’s “axe-split cheek” refers to an event described in some of her autobiographical writing where she was attacked as a child by

older boys who struck her in the face with an axe. The reference to that event signifies the rising trends of nationalism and antisemitism in Poland and Ukraine that culminated in her family being alienated from the land that they lived on and tended.

**Dream:** H. Levick (1888-1962) was a prominent Yiddish poet, known for his mystical, messianic verse.

**Oh, Earth:** Y. Opatoshu (1886-1954) was a popular Yiddish fiction writer. Przemyśl was a town in Poland where Korn's family relocated after World War I. This poem, written on the eve of World War II, marks the point when Korn realizes she will soon have to flee Poland again.

**Ufa Earth:** Ufa is the capital and largest city in the southwestern Russian republic of Bashkortostan, which in September 1941 was the Bashkir Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, named for the predominant ethnic group there, the Bashkirs, a Turkic people. (Korn also references "the clay from Bashkir" in her poem "On My Shoes.") The region is known for mineral resources and traditional livestock raising, both of which appear in the poem. Ultimately, Ufa was only a way-station in Korn's wanderings, as she and hundreds of thousands of other Jews were evacuated by the Soviets farther east from the Russian frontlines of the war.

**On the Way:** This poem describes the refugee transport from Ufa to Fergana, a city that was part of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic in 1941 and is today in Uzbekistan. The Fergana Valley was a historic center of the Silk Road. It remains an important meeting point of peoples, wedged today between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, but for this reason has also been a recent center of conflict. In this poem, Rokhl Korn displays the ambivalence of Jewish refugees evacuated east, who were grateful to be safe, but did not necessarily trust Soviet authorities nor were pleased about being relocated from their homes and separated from their families.

**My Mother Prays Today:** A machzor is a prayerbook especially for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the high holy days. It includes penitential prayers and entreaties to be inscribed in the book of life for a good year.

**Night in Fergana:** This poem imagines Jewish rituals and their sanctification of time occurring in a non-Jewish milieu. (Although Bukharan Jews are indigenous to Uzbekistan, Korn's poetic Fergana focuses on foreignness rather than familiarity). "Called to judgment" in the original Yiddish is "rufn tsu beys-din", or "called to the house of judgment." This would be a formal ritual where someone convicted of an infraction was made to appear before a rabbi trained in the fine points of Talmudic law, who would deliver a verdict. "Midnight study" is originally

“khatzos,” a rabbinic Hebrew word for midnight but also a way to refer to the devout practice of waking at midnight to study, particularly texts of lamentation on the destruction of the temple.

**Evening:** A kibitka is a type of yurt with a dome-like roof used by Kazakh and Kyrgyz pastoral nomads. “Got fun Avrom” is a prayer traditionally recited by women on Saturday night, just before the transition from sabbath to the secular week, traditionally considered to be a time when one’s soul is especially vulnerable to demons and forces of evil. The prayer begins “God of Avrom (Abraham), of Yitzkhok (Isaac), and of Yankev (Jacob)! Protect your beloved folk Israel from all evils.”

**East:** This poem compares the poet’s current eastward wandering with the eastward direction of Jewish prayer, toward Jerusalem. A tallis is a prayer shawl traditionally worn by Jewish men.

**To the Partisan:** Partisans were resistance fighters of many nationalities who opposed Nazi occupation of their home territories during World War Two. Just because they resisted Nazis did not mean they protected Jews, however, as the main Polish partisan groups like the Armia Krajowa (Home Army) had outright antisemitic views. In this poem, Korn is most likely talking to an imagined Jewish partisan fighter, who operated mainly in all-Jewish groups, as she wonders which of the tribes of Israel he comes from and also refers to him as a “brother.”

**To My Husband:** The first line refers to the biblical Jacob who served Laban for twenty-one years to marry Rachel and Leah. Korn was also married for twenty-one years, until 1941, when the German invasion separated her from her husband while she was visiting their daughter in Lviv and he was murdered in Belzec.

**Rokhl:** In this poem, Korn imagines herself as another Rokhl, the biblical Rachel, as she listens to the matriarchs in her mother’s tkhine, or prayer. The well refers to the place where Jacob first met Rachel. The “permissible ground” refers to an eruv, a boundary made of string that marks the area of public ground where people can carry objects from one place to another, a form of prohibited labor on Shabbos. Ivan is a kind of stock name for a non-Jew in Yiddish, and implies someone who is coarse or boorish. The Ivan in this poem represents the Nazi collaborators in Korn’s home region.

**I Want to Go Up Sometimes:** The Yiddish for “devastation” in this poem employs the Hebrew *khurbn*, which in pre-Holocaust texts almost always referred to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, but in post-Holocaust times became the standard Yiddish word for the genocide of 1939-1945. I have kept the meaning of the word broader in this translation, but this could just as easily have been translated “Holocaust,” especially as this is a postwar poem. Shimshin is the

biblical Samson, who brought down the temple of the Philistines while crushing himself in the process.

**A Child Wept:** Grammatically, children are gender-neutral in Yiddish so I have tried to preserve this in English.

**On My Shoes:** The places mentioned in this poem appear in other writings by Rokhl Korn, except the Karakum desert, which covers large swaths of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan.

**A Song from Yesterday:** Teves (or Tevet in non-Ashkenazi Hebrew) is a month of the Hebrew calendar corresponding to late December to early/mid January.

**We Made a Voyage for Tashlikh:** Tashlikh, which means “casting-off” in Hebrew, is a ritual done around Rosh Hashanah when people symbolically cast their sins away from them and into a moving body of water, often by throwing pieces of bread. This poem imagines the voyages made by Holocaust survivors as a kind of tashlikh, but in the poem they cannot seem to cast off their past fully and it follows them wherever they go.

**Khave:** Khave is the biblical Eve and Odem is Adam.

**Home:** Korn references the Spanish Inquisition, the late-medieval ghettoization of Jews in Western Europe, and the Kishinev pogrom of 1905, as well as the concentration camp of Majdanek and the death camp of Treblinka. Judah HaLevi was a medieval Hebrew poet in Andalusian Spain, whose most well-known poem inspired Korn to write “Home:”

My heart is in the east, and I in the uttermost west—  
How can I find savour in food? How shall it be sweet to me?  
How shall I render my vows and my bonds, while yet  
Zion lieth beneath the fetter of Edom, and I in Arab chains?  
A light thing would it seem to me to leave all the good things of Spain—  
Seeing how precious in mine eyes to behold the dust of the desolate  
sanctuary.

(Translated by Nina Salaman)

The “canvas sack with the bit of earth” refers to an Ashkenazi custom of burying people with a small bag of soil from the Holy Land placed over their hearts.

**My Mother Came To Me Tonight in a Dream:** Siddur is a prayerbook. It is customary for someone on their deathbed to recite the Vidui, or confession before dying. In structure and language, it is similar to the confessions of sins on Yom Kippur, the day of atonement.

**The Words of My Alphabet:** Shiva is a week-long mourning period enacted by the immediate family members of the deceased. It is called “sitting shiva” because mourners traditionally sit on the floor or low stools. The Vidui in the poem is said to be “lulled” or “rocked” because many Jews sway, rock, or bow back and forth while they pray. Shul is Yiddish for synagogue. The “dots and dashes” in the prayerbook refer to the Hebrew diacritical marks used to signify pronunciation.

**Don't Shame My Word:** Shloyme is King Solomon of the bible. Iyov, the name of Job from the bible, is used here as a verb, Job'd, as in the speaker's life has been destroyed like Job's.

**Passover Night:** Eliyohu (Elijah) the prophet prophesied against the cult of Baal and King Ahab in the biblical book of Kings. He became a folk-hero in Jewish culture and traditionally has a special chair at every circumcision as well as his redemptive cup of wine on Passover. Many people at their seders, or Passover meals, will ceremonially open the door to invite him in.

**All That Is Lonely:** All the “Un” words begin in the Yiddish with the prefix “Far,” a very versatile prefix related to the German “Ver,” and used to intensify or negate the words it is paired with.

**Black Crows:** Kislev is a month of the Hebrew calendar which corresponds to late November and early/mid December.

**Iyov:** Iyov is the biblical Job and this poem is from his persona. A. Glants-Leyeles (1889-1966) was a modernist Yiddish poet known for expanding the range of Yiddish subject matter to more introspective rather than political concerns. Sotn is the Yiddish pronunciation of Satan, which means adversary or enemy in Hebrew. The book of Job is in fact one of the only canonical references to Satan as a character distinct from God in Jewish texts, as evil is usually depicted as a more internal, existential threat.

**Winter Landscape:** The mountain in the poem is possibly Mount Royal in Montreal.

**To the Writer from Kinneres:** Kinneres is the modern Hebrew Kinneret, or Sea of Galilee, in the north of Israel/Palestine, a large lake which is the most important source of fresh water in the region. It is a vital pilgrimage site for Christians and Tiberias, one of the four holy cities of

Judaism, is on its shores. This poem is written to Rakhel haMeshoreret (Rachel the Poetess, 1890-1931), an early Zionist settler and poet who lived on communal farms near the Kinneres, and who is buried in a grave overlooking the water, as per her wishes. This poem implies the world of difference between the two poets, the Israeli Hebrew Rakhel and the Yiddish Rokhl.

**Desert:** This poem references events of Genesis, like Joseph being sold into Egypt and Leah being disguised as her sister under a veil.

**Oh, God:** The beginning of the poem plays with the similarity between the month *Kheshvn* and the word for bill or account—*Kheshbn*.

**Give Me Back, My Lord:** The Tsenerene was a massively popular version of the bible printed in Yiddish for women to read, dating back to the early 1600s. Its name comes from a verse of the Song of Songs: *tse'ene u're'ene, b'nos tsiyen*, or “go forth and look, daughters of Zion.”

**Protect and Shelter Me:** Szkoła is a Polish primary school.

**To My Not-Born Son:** A *yahrzeit* is somebody's death anniversary, marked in Jewish tradition by lighting a candle for their soul. The choice of Zev over Volf (Hebrew and Yiddish for *wolf*, respectively) reflects the possibility that Korn might have settled in Israel. In the original, “rhymes” and “mother” correspond nicely to “gramen” and “mamen.” Chaim Nachman Bialik (1873-1934) was one of the first literary innovators of modern Hebrew and a major Zionist cultural figure. Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) was a German lyric poet who was very influential to European modernists and who Korn studied along with Polish poets when she was a teenager.

**Autumn:** Segul, daled, and gimel are letters of the Hebrew alphabet. A segul is a circle, a daled is almost like a mirrored English lower-case “r,” and a gimel is like an upside-down “Y.”

**Artur Zigelboym:** Born Shmuel-Mordkhe Zigelboym (1895-1943) in Poland, he was a trade union leader and a prominent member of the Bund, the socialist Jewish workers' party. At the beginning of WWII, the Bund (then operating underground) smuggled him across borders so he could rally support and aid for Jewish refugees. In London, he became discouraged by the world's apathy and decided that his suicide would be a more effective wake-up call. In real life, he took sleeping pills, but in Korn's poem “a shot resounds,” perhaps for dramatic effect.

**The Night Falls:** This poem was written on one of Korn's trips to Israel/Palestine, with the specific landscape of Mount Carmel and the city of Haifa as a backdrop. The poem's setting in time is just before Shabbos begins, as her grandmother welcomes Shabbos through prayer while

they wait for the three stars to appear in the sky that officially marks the beginning of the sacred time.

**The Earth Is Red:** Keyn, Hevel, and Khave correspond to Cain, Abel, and Eve. The word Korn uses throughout her poetry for exile, *na ve'nod*, is the curse Cain experiences as a fugitive and wanderer.

**Lot's Wife:** Lot's wife couldn't resist looking behind her as they fled Sodom so she was turned into a pillar of salt. This poem also uses Korn's experience of traveling near the Dead Sea, where Lot's wife is said to reside eternally in the columns of salt there.

**My Father:** The Shekhinah is the divine presence of God, who comes whenever people pray or study holy texts, and she is often depicted as an exiled bride who is yearning to be returned to Jerusalem. The concept of the shekhinah is slippery and various, as she exists in later rabbinic literature but not any texts from biblical times. This is the one time I have decided to translate "goy" literally, this time as its plural "goyim," because the poem is about living in diaspora among non-Jewish people. "L'shana habo b'Yerushloyim" is a Hebrew phrase meaning "Next year in Jerusalem," recited at the end of a Passover seder, or ceremony. Streets in post-war Europe being paved with Jewish gravestones was not a rare occurrence—recently it was discovered in Vilnius as well.

**To My Father:** Tammuz is a month of the Hebrew calendar, corresponding roughly to late June and early/mid July. In Jewish tradition, an orphan is anyone with at least one deceased parent. This poem is dated with the Hebrew date, as it is written for Korn's father's *yahrzeit*, or death anniversary. The Hebrew year 5732 is the Gregorian year 1972.

**My Mother Wept Very Often:** This poem references the story of the binding of Isaac from Genesis.

**It Is Such a Night:** Dov Sadan (1902-1989) was a literary critic and Israeli politician who was from the same region of Eastern Galicia as Rokhl Korn. The poem mentions Jacob's ladder and the idea of exchanging wives which comes from the same story.

**Shloyme Mikhoels:** Shloyme, or Solomon, Mikhoels (1890-1948) was an actor and director of the Moscow State Jewish Theater, the center of Yiddish culture in the early Soviet Union. He was a prominent activist on the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, where he met prominent people like Albert Einstein while denouncing the Nazis on behalf of the Soviets. The committee's usefulness to Stalin, however, waned after the war and as part of a rising trend of cultural

Russification, Stalin ordered Mikhoels to be assassinated on a Minsk street in 1948. A marrano is someone who, in the context of the Spanish Inquisition, was forcibly converted to Christianity. Here in the poem it refers to Jewish artists who had to conform to Soviet standards of socialist realism, and couldn't make any art about their culture or religion without being branded a counter-revolutionary nationalist.

**Hey, It's Purim, Purim in the World!:** Purim is a carnivalesque holiday of costumes and merry-making celebrated in February and March, when the biblical book of Esther is retold.

**To The Moon:** The second stanza refers to the Kiddush Levana ceremony, to stand outside and bless the new moon which also begins a new month.

**Everything Betrayed Me:** Spitting three times is a custom to ward off the evil eye.

**Shmuel Halkin:** Halkin (1897-1960) was a prominent Soviet Yiddish poet and writer, also on the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. He was imprisoned from 1949 to 1955 but escaped execution because of a heart condition. His peers faced a different fate—August 12, 1952 became known as the Night of the Murdered Poets because dozens of the leading Jewish intellectuals of the Soviet Union were executed. This is part of a series of portraits Korn wrote of Soviet Yiddish writers.