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Contents

"Despite its minimalism and simplicity of language," writes Karina von Tippelskirch, "Rajzel Zuchlinsky's poetry possesses existential depth and the ability to capture the world in its smallest details." This portrait introduces us to "one of the greatest Yiddish poets of the 20th century." Follow this reading with Chaia Heller's "The Yiddish I Know" (p. 56), Seymour Mayne's "Yiddish" (p. 57), and Zychlinsky's "The Undarkened Window" (p. 111).

Karina von Tippelskirch

Rajzel Zychlinsky: Writing in Her Mother's Tongue

Rajzel Zychlinsky (1910–2001) is considered one of the greatest Yiddish poets of the 20th century and a master of the small poetic form. When the 18-year-old poet made her debut with a poem in the Yiddish newspaper *Folks-tsaytung* in 1928, no one could have imagined that she would become one of the few surviving Jewish poets of Poland. In the five books of poetry she published after the Holocaust, Zychlinsky paid tribute to Eastern Europe's destroyed Yiddish culture and memorialized the murder of many of the Jewish people and of her own family, which haunted the poet for the rest of her life.

In the foreword to her first book, *Lider* (*Poems*), published in Warsaw in 1936, Itzik Manger (1936) recalls how Zychlinsky arrived on the poetry scene like "a flurry smelling of plum blossoms and birds flapping with their wings over autumnal scenery" (p. 3). Manger, by that time one of the most influential modern Yiddish writers, compared her poems to Japanese *utas* and *tankas*, short poems written in free verse. He then offered a sparse inventory of the tropes used in Zychlinsky's poems: "The mother, the cat, the willow, the cloud, the poplar, the beggar, the child, the well" (p. 3). One of her most often-quoted poems, "Mother" (in Yiddish, *"Mame"*), illustrates how the author, with just a few images, evokes the intimate relationship between mother and daughter:

> Mother, / you have made a fire. / Little pieces of wood / you have blown into a sun. / You hear my hair thanking you: / Thank you, thank you. / But outside, the wind still wails. / Take it, mother, into your apron / and rock it to sleep. / The wind will believe you, / and like a lamb / will close its eyes.
> (Zychlinsky, 1997, p. 177)[1]

Zychlinsky's early poetic imagery originates in the familiar world around her. The intimacy of the domestic scene, however, contrasts with the modernist austerity of the poem. Indeed, Yiddish literary critics noted Zychlinsky's proximity to both French surrealism and the Introspectivist movement in American Yiddish poetry, *In-Zikh* (Groezinger, 2015, p. 272; von Tippelskirch, 2000, pp. 29–31, 39–40).

"Mother" is one of the only two poems in *Lider* that directly address another person: All of the others are lyrical monologues. This speaks to the fact that Zychlinsky was, from the beginning, a solitary writer. Throughout her life, she joined no literary, social, or political group. Spending much of her time alone, she was an ardent reader of Yiddish, Polish, French, German, and, later, Russian and English. As a young author, she was aware of the literary currents of her time, but in poetry, as in life, she insisted on forging her own way. Her poetic style was simple and unadorned, her voice clear and distinctly feminine. Zychlinsky nevertheless shares the characteristics of many a "New Woman" in the era between the fin-de-siècle and the 1930s, about which Linda Nochlin (2012) writes in her introduction to *The New Woman International:*

> What all New Images of the New Woman do have in common, flapper or vamp, political revolutionary or suffragette, is a heartfelt rejection of woman's traditional role as it was defined by every society in the world: rebellion against oppressive notions of the "womanly" understood to be a life devoted to subordinating one's own needs and desires to those of men, family, and children. (p. vii)

Zychlinsky's lyrical miniatures often return to the

same images and themes, finely depicting them from ever-new perspectives. The image of her mother is a leitmotif in her work. Yet, as this essay will show, it shifted dramatically during and after the Holocaust.

ZYCHLINSKY'S CHILDHOOD INFLUENCES

Rajzel Zychlinsky grew up in Gabin, a small town of almost 6,000 inhabitants in central Poland, 77 miles northwest of Warsaw. In 1921, according to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (2007), almost half of the town's population was Jewish. Dvoyre (Deborah) Zychlinsky, the poet's mother, was deeply religious; for generations, her family had produced respected rabbis. She chose to remain in Poland while her husband, a tanner, emigrated, like many other Eastern European Jews, to the United States to build a new life for the family. The reason for the prolonged separations that followed was, according to the poet, that her mother did not want to bring her children to a country where they would have to work on the Sabbath.[2] Although Zychlinsky's father returned several times to Gabin, he died in Chicago in 1928, leaving his wife in charge of the tannery. In many of her later poems, Zychlinsky remonstrates with her absent father and against the abandonment that her mother endured for many years (Groezinger, 2015, pp. 272–273).

The absence of her father and the loneliness of her mother raising five children may be two of the reasons behind Zychlinsky's insistence on independence and her refusal to follow the traditional path for Eastern European Jewish women. After her formal education in a Polish public school, she received private lessons and studied French in order to read Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* in the original. She also began to write and publish poetry, and she left Gabin in the mid-1930s to work as an administrator for a Jewish orphanage in Włocławek (von Tippelskirch, 2009). Many of the children there came from families whose fathers had emigrated to America and whose mothers had died in their absence. The sequence "Poems From the Orphanage" (Zychlinsky, 1997) compassionately describes a little girl called Tobshe and asks, "How many wives had Tobshe's father now somewhere in the world?" (pp. 200–201).

In 1936, Zychlinsky moved to Warsaw, by then a major cultural center of modern Yiddish literature, and not yet under the rule of the Nazis. Like her mentor, the Yiddish writer and critic Melech Ravitch, she worked as a bank clerk. In addition to Ravitch, she met other literati, among them Itzik Manger and his wife, the poet Rokhl Auerbakh, as well as Rokhl Korn. [See Korn's short story "The Road of No Return" in the Spring 2011 edition of *PRISM*, pp. 7–11—Ed.] She read intensely, not only Yiddish poetry but also Chinese, Japanese, and German poets, especially Rilke and Else Lasker-Schüler (von Tippelskirch 2000, pp. 46–47, 205).

During this period, it was Manger's *Khumesh-lider (Bible Songs;* Roskies, 2011) that inspired her to read the Torah. Although the motive for her bible studies was a literary one, it provided a secular way for her to stay close to the religious world of her mother. The fruits of Zychlinsky's Torah reading surface in her second book, *Der regn zingt* (*The Rain Sings*), published in Warsaw in 1939, on the eve of World War II; of the 37 poems, a substantial portion have biblical themes. Following Manger's example, these poems empathetically explore several overlooked and destitute women, such as Leah, Hagar, and Tamar. The last poem, however, foreshadows the violent expulsion that would soon become the author's own fate. The English translation names it as *"Ibn Dagan of Andalusia"* (Zychlinsky, 1997, pp. 54–55), while the original Yiddish title is *"Vegn vos hot gezungen der letster yidisher dikhter af shpanisher erd?"* ("About what did the last Jewish poet on Spanish soil sing?").

> Ibn Dagan of Andalusia, / the last Jewish poet / in the Spanish land, / in deep, blooming orchards / he kissed the face of his beloved. / He sang: / Flowers grow beneath your feet, / you are beautiful like the sun, / and like the morning star, / you are the light of my eyes. // — Came the expulsion. / All the Jews were driven out of Castille / and Aragon. / About what did he sing then, / Ibn Dagan? / Here history is silent. / We know only / that thousands set off wandering / into the unknown distance. / Thousands died of hunger, / thousands — of cold. / Murderers slaughtered them / and robbed them of their money. / And those who survived / sat down by the road, / on the bare earth, / and waited for the Messiah: / He was expected to come / in the year fifteen hundred and three.

What begins as a love poem ends with the aftermath of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, a reflection possibly of the deportation of nearly 12,000 stateless Polish Jews from Germany to Poland in October 1938, a precursor to *Kristallnacht.*

THE INVASION OF POLAND

As the Nazis occupied Poland, the heyday of Yiddish culture there ended, and with it the ascending literary career of the aspiring poet. Warsaw was devastated by the German bombardment and the subsequent siege in September 1939. After the surrender of the Polish army, Zychlinsky witnessed the first German atrocities against the Jewish population and fled eastward across the Bug River, which had become the border between German-occupied Poland and the eastern part of Poland, annexed by the Soviet Union in the fall of 1939. For their flight, Zychlinsky and three other Jews paid 400 zloty each to a Polish taxi driver, a stately sum at the time. The four refugees were lucky

and made it across the border. Others trying to escape were betrayed, robbed of their money and belongings, or even murdered (von Tippelskirch, 2000, pp. 15, 18–19).

Initially, Zychlinsky stayed in Lvov, another Jewish cultural center. With the war raging, the poet moved further east to the city of Kolomyia, the home town of her future parents-in-law. She and Izaak Kanter, a physician, psychiatrist, and writer, married there and subsequently survived the war in the Soviet Union. With the help of Russian Yiddish poets, Zychlinsky became a member of the Soviet Writers' Union, and her husband served as a doctor in the Red Army. To escape the German advance, the couple moved as far east as Kazan, where in 1943 her only son, Marek, was born. By that time, she had learned about the murder of her family and the Jewish population of Gabin. She mourned them in a cycle of poems called *"Lider fun mayn haym"* ("I want to walk here once more"; 1997, pp. 39–41). Another poem, titled "My Mother Looks at Me" (p. 25), continues an earlier trope, but now it expresses the anguish over the loss of her family:

> My mother looks at me with bloodied / eyes, out of a cloud: / Daughter, bind up my wounds. / Her grey head is bowed. // Amid the leaves of each green tree / my sister moans. / *My little daughter, where is she?* / *Rajzel, gather her bones.* // My brother swims in the waters — / days, weeks, years — / dragged forward by the rivers, / flung back by the seas. // My neighbor wakes me in the night; / he makes a woeful sound: / *Take me from the gallows — / put me in the ground.* // May. With my son in my arms I wander / amid shadows. I greet them all. / So many severed lives are clinging / to me, to my corners, to my walls. // So many severed lives are trembling / on the long lashes of my son. / So many severed lives are sobbing / in May, when the spring winds come.

In the poem, the dead are alive and omnipresent, looking at the survivor and her child, speaking and clinging to them. The mother calls from a cloud high in the air, the sister from the green trees, and her brother from the waters. The laments can be heard night and day, the shadows they cast are everywhere. Even the sight of the eyelashes of her infant child provides no comfort, because they too tremble from the many lives cut short, and the May wind arrives not with spring and hope for a new beginning—but with a moan. Like other survivors, Zychlinsky [Fig. 1], pictured here in 1994, carried a heavy burden for the rest of her life. She assumed the weight of remembering the lives and the fate of her murdered family and other Jews. Every poem she wrote after the Holocaust reflects this experience. While she continued writing modernist poetry, using free verse, and poeticizing everyday encounters, the familiar tropes and those of her new home, New York, mourn the losses endured and the absence of the once familiar shtetl world.

In "My Mother Looks at Me," the author speaks of only one brother, in the singular. In the Yiddish edition (1948, p. 8), the poem is dated "Kazan, 1943," revealing that the author had learned by then about the ghettoization of Gabin's Jewish population as well as its deportation and murder in the death camps in May 1942.

If she had any hope that one of her brothers had survived, it was shattered after her return to Poland. When the war was over, the family decided to go back to Poland, hoping to find surviving family members or friends. In September 1946, while in Lodz, she wrote "The Grass Grew Pale," a poem about the death of her brother David (1948, p. 11). It is included in *To Bright Shores,* the last book she published in Poland. The first page in the book carries the dedication: "To the holy memory of my mother Deborah, my sister Chaneh, my brothers Jacob and David, and their children, my mother's grandchildren—victims of Chełmno and Treblinka" (n.p.).

To Bright Shores opens with the poem "My Jewish Eyes" (pp. 5–6). Its first lines evoke Zychlinsky's early imagery, creating and at the same questioning a sense of being *heymish,* the Yiddish expression for feeling at home. Without transition, the domestic scenery suddenly reverts to the death of the speaker:

> Did I bring this flowerpot home / and wait, / its blossom should open? / Yet I have been buried alive! // I myself dug the grave, / the soil was hard / and frozen, / . . . / Only my head sticks out from the grave, / a cursed plant, that cannot die.

FIG. 1. The poet Rajzel Zychlinsky. © Karina von Tippelskirch.

The narrator in this poem, though still alive, shares the death of the murdered victims. She feels buried alive, left only to observe the world around her, a witness to the recent past and the present, from which she is cut off. Yet her open eyes express, at the end of the poem, the wish to live: "My Jewish eyes / drink all colors. / My Jewish eyes, / open / look out from the grave / and don't want to die." Although Zychlinsky employs an individual voice, a signifier for modernism in Yiddish pre-war poetry according to Roskies (1980, pp. 354–355), she no longer speaks only for herself but from a distinctly Jewish perspective.

ZYCHLINSKY AS SURVIVOR

The poems written immediately after the war address the void left by those who were murdered and by the destruction of the once-vibrant Jewish life of Poland. They reveal the distance between the Jewish survivors and those who can go on with their lives. Her resentment towards gentile Poles becomes apparent in "Dear Neighbors" (1997), a bitter poem about selling her parents' house before leaving the country (p. 17). The impossibility of creating normalcy and a home among the ruins was amplified by continued acts of antisemitism after the war, with the Kielce Pogrom, on July 4, 1946, being the worst of several violent outbursts in Poland. Like the majority of returning survivors, Zychlinsky and her husband decided to leave her birthplace again, this time for good. They moved in 1948 to Paris, where her brother Abraham lived, and from there immigrated to the United States in 1951. Looking back, in 1969 she writes a poem called "How Cool, How Velvet Green":

> How cool, how velvet green / was the moss in the Polish woods / where, amid pine trees, / I dreamt in the days of my youth. / How pearl-white were the clouds / in the blue heavens — / the green, plush moss / was only a thin cloak / over the open graves / awaiting me; / the silver clouds — no more than cataracts / on the blind eyes of God. (p. 20)

In a 1934 photograph [Fig. 2], the young poet can be seen in a flowery dress and fashionable shoes, dreamily stretched out in the forest near Gombin (Zchor, n.d., n.p.). Nothing in this picture hints at the destruction that will begin just five years later. "How Cool, How Velvet Green" recalls this scene but unveils it as a delusion. Thirty years after the outbreak of the war, the Shoah had extended its reach even into the past and erased the sense of security and ease that the poet had felt in the Polish forests she loved so much.

Like many writers after the Holocaust, among them Itzik Manger and Zvi Kolitz (1946) in his famous *Yosl Rakover Talks to God,* Zychlinsky struggles with faith, often referring to God as blind or absent. The title poem for the English edition of her selected poetry is one of her most famous and disconsolate: *God Hid His Face* (1997). Notably, in her continued dispute with God, Zychlinsky is able to hold on to Him, if now as an unknowing, rather than all-knowing, deity, as in "The September Wind":

> The September Wind repeats my brother Yukev's / last request: / *Yashek, I'll hide at your place / in the empty shack; / just bring me, sometimes, / a little water, / a piece of bread, / and I'll survive.* // But Yashek, our Polish neighbor, did not answer. / The yellow leaves are falling, falling from the trees — / My brother Yukev's last words. / All the empty shacks in the world / are now / wide open and wait — / wait for my dead brother Yukev / to come drink water / and eat bread. (p. 14)

Zychlinsky loved the fall season and wrote many autumnal poems before and after the Holocaust. After it, we cannot think of September without remembering that it was also the month of the outbreak of World War II and, for her and all Polish Jews, the beginning of the Holocaust in Poland. The poems Zychlinsky wrote during the Holocaust often give a place and a date, approximating her works to historiography. The first poem she dated is marked "Warsaw 1939" (1948, pp. 27–28). "The Grass Grew Pale," marked "Łódź, 1948" (p. 11), bears witness to her brother's death and to the time and place the poet learned of it, thus emphasizing the reality of his murder. "The September Wind" speaks again of people the poet knew personally and gives the names of the brother, Jacob (in Yiddish, Yukev), and his Polish neighbor, Yashek. The poem, however, transcends the actuality of the event and its historical time. The September wind repeats year after year what the brother asked of his neighbor, perpetuating his distress. Every fall, when the foliage turns yellow, the color of the star Jews had to wear under the Nazis, the author is reminded of her brother's last request, for shelter, water, and bread.

FIG. 2. Rajzel Zychlinsky, 1934. Photographer unknown. Courtesy Marek Kanter.

Jacob's request remained unanswered. The poem's readers share the author's knowledge that he will not return from the gas chambers. The pain Jacob felt when his neighbor turned away from him, and his sister's pain knowing of it, reverberate within us. The paradox of the now wide-open doors of every shack in the world, awaiting Jacob, makes us recognize that nothing will ever remedy his death—or that of any Jew in the Holocaust.

A different reading focuses on the present, into which Jacob's suffering is carried by the poem. It is as if the September wind addresses the readers, demanding from us that we not turn away wordlessly from those who need help.

Despite its minimalism and simplicity of language, Zychlinsky's poetry possesses existential depth and the ability to capture the world in its smallest details. Her writing about individual family members is no longer restricted to the familiar: It has evolved from the personal to a metaphorical representation of the Holocaust and its victims. If Zychlinsky writes about her brother, she speaks of all brothers lost to human indifference and war. If she writes about her *mame,* she speaks of all Jewish mothers. It is the mother's image that appears most throughout the poet's work, evoking all who perished in the Holocaust.

Zychlinsky's seven books of poetry were published in four of the countries where she lived: Poland, the United States, France, and Israel. In Israel, in 1975, she received the Itzik Manger Prize, the highest recognition in Yiddish literature. Although she spoke and read in several languages, Zychlinsky wrote poems only in Yiddish, the *mameloshn*—her mother tongue. It linked the poet and her mother, and it remains the language that can carry the Eastern European Jewish world beyond its destruction by the Holocaust into the present.

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END NOTES

[1] I thank Rajzel Zychlinsky's son, Marek Kanter, for permission to reprint the English translations of the poems from *God Hid His Face* (Zychlinsky, 1997). Translations from the Yiddish that are not from *God Hid His Face* are my own.

[2] I visited the poet several times in Brooklyn when working on my doctoral thesis between 1991 and 1997. The results of our conversations went into my dissertation, "*Also das Alphabet vergessen?" Die jiddische Dichterin Rajzel Zychlinski.*

STEPHEN HERZ is the author of *Marked: Poems of the Holocaust* (NYQ Books, 2014) and *Whatever You Can Carry: Poems of the Holocaust* (Barnwood Press, 2003), about which Thomas Lux said, "Not since Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* have I read a book so precise, so powerful, so terrifying." Herz's poems have been widely published and used in Holocaust studies classrooms. To contact the poet, email him at herzpoet@yahoo.com.

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TERESA MOSZKOWICZ-SYROP was born in Poland. Only she and her brother, Symcho Moszkowicz, now an acclaimed visual artist, survived the Holocaust. After the war, she was reunited with Symcho in the USSR and later immigrated with her husband to the United States.

ZOFIA NAŁKOWSKA (1884–1954) was a Polish writer whose works about the condition of the Jews and Poles in occupied Warsaw are considered masterpieces. An essay about her life appears on pp. 8–13.

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JENNIFER ROBERTSON lives in Edinburgh, Scotland. Her books for adults and children include *Don't Go to Uncle's Wedding: Voices From the Warsaw Ghetto* (2000, Azure). Her work has been published in anthologies including *Warsaw Tales* and *Bucharest Tales* (2010, 2011, New Europe Writers). Her latest short story collections are *Wojtek and Other True Wartime Tales* (2014, Fleming Publications, Glasgow) and *From the Volga to the Clyde,* a Pinnacle Achievement Award winner. She was the UK prize-winner in the German/UK writing competition that produced *A Book of Plans, Hopes and Dreams* (2015). To contact the author, email her, at jsr.juniper3@gmail.com.

ARNO ROLAND was born in Berlin, Germany. After *Kristallnacht,* when he was 15, his father sent him and his 14-year-old brother on a children's transport to Holland, where he lived in a refugee camp until the German invasion dispersed the group sheltered there. Faced with deportation, he went into hiding, spending two years alone in an attic. He came to the US in 1948 to be with his father, the only other survivor of his family.

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