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“דער ים, און „אלטמאָדיש“ • “Old-Fashioned” and “The Sea”

by Yoysef Kerler, translation by Maia Evrona

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“אַלטמאָדיש” און „דער ים”

“OLD-FASHIONED” AND “THE SEA”

Yoysef Kerler

translation by Maia Evrona

Introduction: Yoysef Kerler was born in southern Ukraine in 1918, and served in the Red Army during World War II. He was a significant Yiddish poet, who wrote and published at a time when doing so posed a considerable risk for a Yiddish writer in the Soviet Union. In 1950, not long after the banning of all Jewish publications, Kerler was arrested and served five years in the Vorkuta gulag for “anti-Soviet nationalist activity.”

Following his release, Kerler worked as a lyricist and published poetry in Russian translation and in Yiddish journals abroad. In 1965, he became one of the first *refuseniks* when his application to leave the Soviet Union for Israel was denied. After six years, and the intervention of writers like Georges Simenon and Arthur Miller, Kerler was finally allowed to emigrate in 1971.

The following two poems come from Kerler’s 1979 collection *The First Seven Years* (*Di ershte zibn yor*). This was the first collection Kerler published in Israel, and, on the surface, its title appears to refer to the seven years Kerler had lived there by then. Yet the title also conjures the first seven years of plenty prophesied by Joseph in Egypt, and, thus, the specter of seven years of famine to come.

In these two poems, however, Kerler seems more haunted by the specter of the past, particularly the Holocaust. The first poem, “Old-Fashioned,” contains an exceptionally difficult word to translate: *kdoyshim*. In Hebrew, this word literally means “holy men,” and it is the word for Jewish martyrs, those who died *al kiddesh-hashem*—for the sanctification of the Name—or, in other words, those who chose death rather than breaking Jewish law.

Over the years, any Jews murdered simply for being Jews came to be called *kdoyshim*, and in modern times the word is understood to refer to victims of the Holocaust. Yet victims of the Holocaust were not martyrs, exactly, as they were not given the choice of conversion. During the Holocaust, Jews did not encourage one

another to die *al-kidesh-hashem*; they encouraged one another to live. Thus they are often said to have been *kdoyshim*, but *al-kidesh-hakhayim*—for the sanctification of life.

This evolution is simply impossible to recreate in the limited space of a poem, and I fear that after this introduction, readers will be disappointed by what I settled for. As essential as the literal *holy* aspect will seem to anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of Hebrew, I feared that my attempts to include it in the translation risked misleading the reader. Another potential pitfall was a word choice that might lead a reader to think that Kerler was referring to victims of Soviet oppression, rather than Holocaust victims. I did wonder if I could find something that might reflect the weight the word has in the original Yiddish, and the personal feeling Kerler obviously had for the *kdoyshim* he mentions, but I realized—inadequate translation of one remarkable term aside—the poem had already succeeded at that.

“Old-Fashioned” and “The Sea”

Old-Fashioned

I am old-fashioned like the great sky,
that shines forth after a sudden storm,
with smiling compassion for the satellites
storming over its infinite heart.

I am old-fashioned like the thinnest blade of grass,
that breaks through and grows green in asphalt,
that withers and shrivels and again recovers
with every drop of rain that falls.

I am just as old-fashioned as the newly born,
and as the murdered Jews of my generation were,
they who, in memory, become ever younger
the angrier the frost grows in my hair—

I am old-fashioned!

The Sea

Today the sea has a mother's gentleness,
it surrounds you and rocks you to sleep
with good, old-fashioned lullabies
that now seldom return
to our dazed century,
drunk on blood and kerosene.

Today the sea is still and astonished
as if just emerged from Creation,
from between those divine fingertips,
from which the dew still drips
and bright rings are multiplying
over the blue just born.

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„אַלטמאָדיש“ און „דער ים“

אַלטמאָדיש

אַלטמאָדיש בין איך ווי דער גרויסער הימל,
וואָס ליכטיקט זיך פֿון וואַלקן־בראָך ארויס
מיט שמייכלענדיקן מיטלייַד צום געווימל
פֿון סאַטעליטן אויף זײַן אינסופֿיקער שויס.

אַלטמאָדיש בין איך ווי דאָס מינדסטע גרעזן,
וואָס פֿיקט זיך דורך און גרינט בײַ דעם אַספּאַלט,
וואָס דאַרט און קוואַרט און ווידער ווערט גענעזן
מיט יעדער טראָפן וואָס פֿון הימל פֿאַלט.

אַלטמאָדיש בין איך גלייַך ווי ערשט געבאָרן
און ווי געווען זײַנען די קדושים פֿון מיין דור
וואָס ייִנגערן אַלץ מער זיך אין זכרון
וואָס בייזער ס׳ווערט דער פֿראַסט אויף מײַנע האַר.

אַלטמאָדיש בין איך!

דער ים

דער ים איז הייַנט מילד ווי אַ מאַמע,
ער נעמט דיך און פֿאַרוויגט
מיט גוטע אַלטמאָדישע גראַמען
וואָס קומען שוין זעלטן צוריק
צו אונדזער צעדולטן יאַרהונדערט,
פֿאַרשיכורט פֿון בלוט און פֿון נאַפֿט.

דער ים איז הייַנט שטיל און פֿאַרווינדערט
ווי נאָר־וואָס אַרויס פֿון באַשאַף
פֿון צווישן די געטלעכע פֿינגער
פֿון וועלכע סע טריפֿט נאָך דער טוי
און ס׳מערן זיך זוניקע רינגען
אויף נאָר וואָס געבוירענעם בלוי

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