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The Silver Candlesticks

by **Tea Arciszewska**, translation by Sonia Gollance

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The Silver Candlesticks

Tea Arciszewska
translated by Sonia Gollance

Introduction: Tea Arciszewska (née Tauba Lipska, 1890–1962) was born to an illustrious Hasidic family in Mława, Congress Poland.¹ After spending several years in Jerusalem as a teenager, she returned to Warsaw and became one of the few women to frequent I. L. Peretz’s celebrated literary salon. As an actress, artist’s model, founder of the Azazel theater troupe, purported muse to Peretz, arts patron, and salonnière, she was a dazzling figure in the early twentieth century Yiddish cultural scene in Warsaw. During World War II, Arciszewska lived in Warsaw with Aryan papers, and was interned (as a Polish citizen) in the transit camp Burgweide and the concentration camp Gross-Rosen; her brothers Jean and Elia perished in the Holocaust. After the war, she moved to Paris, where her sisters [Sara](#) (a visual artist) and Liba (a dancer) had survived; Arciszewska lived in an apartment in the 14th arrondissement that had belonged to Jean. She published her play [Miryeml](#) (1958 in Canada, 1959 in Paris) and several shorter pieces before her death in 1962. “The Silver Candlesticks,” the poem translated below (or the “fragment,” as Arciszewska referred to it), appeared in *Almanakh* in 1960. Léon Leneman excerpted the poem in his obituary for Arciszewska in the *Forverts*, claiming that this, her final piece of writing, was an accurate representation of her religiosity and isolation at the end of her life.

Arciszewska’s decision to focus on Yom Kippur candlesticks alludes to the significance of candles in East European Jewish ritual. Women would traditionally [measure](#) wicks for Yom Kippur candles from ancestors’ graves, a practice recounted in Bella Chagall’s

¹ For recent research on Arciszewska’s life, see Aviv Livnat, “Far undzere kinstler (For Our Artists). Tea Arciszewska and the Jewish artists,” in *Art in Jewish Society*, ed. Jerzy Malinowski et al (Polish Institute of World Art Studies & Tako Publishing House, 2016), 25–36; Marta Orzeszyna, “Siostry Lipskie” [The Lipska Sisters], *L’Officiel Polska* 10 (2019): 152–163; Renata Piątkowska, “Artystki i miłośniczki sztuki – kobiety w żydowskim życiu artystycznym międzywojennej Warszawy. W kręgu Żydowskiego Towarzystwa Krzewienia Sztuk Pięknych” [Artists and Art Lovers: Women in the Jewish Artistic Life of Interwar Warsaw. In the Circle of The Jewish Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts], *Studia Judaica* 47, nr. 1 (2021): 175–211; Sonia Gollance, “[Tea Arciszewska: Remembering the Modernist Playwright on her Sixtieth Yortsayt](#),” Digital Yiddish Theatre Project (January 2022).

1946 memoir [Brenende likht](#) (*Burning Lights*), itself a work with frequent descriptions of candles and candlesticks. Yet the graves of victims of the Holocaust are frequently unmarked or inaccessible. For the speaker of this poem, the candle itself stands in as a memorial. With its focus on Yom Kippur as a day for remembering departed relatives,² the poem also hints at the *yizker* memorial prayer recited on Yom Kippur, which Rokhl Oyerbakh famously invoked to commemorate the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto in her essay "[Yizker, 1943](#)." Like Arciszewska's other writings, this poem recognizes the power of material objects, especially as a reminder of prewar Jewish life. Her use of this motif resonates with Malka Heifetz-Tussman's later poem "Kelters un beydemer" (Cellars and Attics), which commemorates the destruction of East European Jewish civilization through the disappearance of valued possessions.³ In Arciszewska's poem, candlesticks are the sole survivor among missing household furnishings, just as the speaker is left alone on a day she used to mark with her family. Reading "The Silver Candlesticks" underscores themes—such as lost parents, witnessing, ritual objects mourning their Jewish owners, and the contrast between prewar wealth and wartime devastation—that animate Arciszewska's magnum opus *Miryeml*.

As in Arciszewska's play, where the protagonist's speech often rhymes, "The Silver Candlesticks" is characterized by alliteration and by its frequent internal rhymes and occasional end rhymes. The internal rhymes lend a sense of momentum and musicality to the poem that contrasts with the otherwise fragmentary, hesitant, unpredictable verse. In my translation, I have tried to maintain the elements of rhyme and alliteration, as well as give a taste of the refinement that Arciszewska's colleagues regarded as one of her defining characteristics.

I am grateful to Dalia Wolfson and Jessica Kirzane for their comments on this translation and reflections on Arciszewska's style. Thanks to Miguel Friede for his permission to publish my translation of his grandmother's work.

² Rosa Palatnik also compares Yom Kippur in Paris with the celebrations of the protagonist's childhood. See Rosa Palatnik, "[The Yom Kippur Lights Went Out](#)," trans. Jessica Kirzane, Yiddish Book Center, September 11, 2017. For Yiddish, see Rosa Palatnik, *Kroshnik-Rio: Dertseylungen* (Monte Scopus, 1953), 194–98.

³ Malka Heifetz-Tussman, "Cellars and Attics," in *Yiddish American Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*, ed. Benjamin and Barbara Harshav (University of California Press, 1986), 606–11.

The Silver Candlesticks

(A Fragment)

Dedicated to Melekh Ravitch

On Yom Kippur the sky is so changed – on that
Day the sky is dark and gray, in the heavenly
Silver the evening hour hides more quietly still...
In the sky, with a flame, a mute black smoke hurries – heavy
Gloomy clouds soar up on high... somewhere far away...
On this Yom Kippur, it seems, everything has come to a hold –
My breath, and the breath of the world.
From deep in a corner of my lonely, unfamiliar Parisian home
A pair of silver candlesticks calls softly to me –
My tired eyes see, in their twinkling, so many
Years together with them... The silver candlesticks
Have remained... The candles in them burn as before,
Gone is the table, the Jews... the homes, Papa is gone,
Gone our Mama...
Yom Kippur, my soul fluttered like the flames ...
Like the fine lace around my Mama's hands. – The candlesticks
Stand like two shell-shocked sisters, silver-veiled.
Their candles drip... They wail their fate, surrounded by strangeness...
Next to the candlesticks, it seems, someone prays... My wise Papa
In satin, in silk, his hands smooth as velvet. My heart quivers
Like a diamond trembler brooch. Tears glitter in the candlesticks...
Old secrets weep... Yom Kippur – My home is enveloped
In quiet, terrified awe... My brothers sway back and forth praying
In blue dawn, in a tulle mist...
Their kitls shine in the faint, white streak –
My sisters pale as Jewish pearls,
The silver candlesticks stand, mournfully pensive...
Papa... The sound fades... My sigh becomes
Muted... My heart locked and sealed...
Jewish candlesticks, dear voiceless witnesses... If you had
My heart and eyes... like my limbs you would twist,
Melting in flames as our family did...
Dear candlesticks from my long-ago home, if you
Could see and hear... You don't see, candlesticks,
How my life is extinguished... and don't know –
That you'll stand by me soon, and your candles
Will drip... with tears congealed... Silently...
Softer and softer... then eternally still...

And at night, for hours, I spoke forlornly
To the silver candlesticks... And for a long while
My heart caressed these Jewish candlesticks...

די זילבערנע לייכטערס

(פראגמענט)

געוויינדמעט מלך ראָוויטשן

אין יום־כיפור איז דער הימל אַזוי אַנדערש – אין דעם
טאָג איז דער הימל טונקל און גראָ, אין דעם הימלישן
זילבער באַהאַלט זיך שטילער די פֿאַרנאַכטיקע שעה...
אויפֿן הימל יאָגט מיט אַ פֿלאַם – אַ שטומער שוואַרצער רויך, שווערע
טריבע וואָלקנס גייען ווייט ערגעץ אַהין... אין דער הויך...
יום־כיפור דאַכט זיך מיר, אַז אין דעם טאָג האָט זיך אַלץ אָפּגעשטעלט –
מיין אָטעם, און דער אָטעם פֿון דער גאַנצער וועלט.
אין מיין איינזאַמער, פֿרעמדער פֿאַריזער שטוב, אין אַ טיפֿן ווינקל
רופֿן מיר שטיל די זילבערע לייכטערס צוויי –
מינע מידע אויגן זעען אין זייער געפֿינקל, אַזוי פֿיל
יאָרן צוזאַמען מיט זיי... די זילבערנע לייכטערס,
וואָס זענען געבליבן... ווי אַמאָל די לייכט אין זיי פֿלאַמען,
ס'פֿעלן דער טיש, די ייִדן... די שטיבן, ס'פֿעלט דער טאַטע,
ס'פֿעלט אונדזער מאַמע...
יום־כיפור, מיין נשמה האָט ווי די פֿלעמלעך געציטערט...
ווי די דינע שפיצן אַרום מיין מאַמעס הענט. – ס'שטייען די
לייכטערס ווי צוויי שוועסטערס דערשיטערט, אין זילבער געשלייערט.
די לייכט אין זיי טריפֿן... זיי קלאָגן, אַלץ אַרום איז זיי פֿרעמד...
לעבן די לייכטערס, דאַכט זיך, מען דאַוונט... מיין ווייטער טאַטע
אין אַטלאַס, אין זייד, זינע הענט סאַמעט גלאַטע. מיין האַרץ פֿלאַטערט
ווי אַ דימאַנט ציטערנאָדל. אין די לייכטערס פֿינקלען טרערן...
ווינען אַלטע סודות... יום־כיפור – מיין היים איז אינגעהילט
אין שטילער שרעק... די ברידער מינע וויגן זיך און דאַווענען
אין בלויען פֿאַרטאָג, אין אַ טיילענעם נעפל...
זייערע קיטלען לייכטן אין דעם בלייכן, וויסן פֿלעק –
מינע שוועסטערס בלאָס ווי די ייִדישע פֿערל,
די זילבערנע לייכטערס שטייען טרויעריק פֿאַרטראַכט...
טאַטע... דער קלאַנג ווערט פֿאַרלוירן... מיין זיפֿץ ווערט
פֿאַרשטומט... מיין האַרץ פֿאַרקלאַפט און פֿאַרמאַכט...
ייִדישע לייכטערס, טייערע שטומע עדות... ווען איר וואָלט געהאַט
מיין האַרץ און אויגן... ווי מינע גלידער וואָלט איר זיך צעבויגן,
צעגאַנגען אין פֿייער ווי אונדזערע קרובֿים...
טייערע לייכטערס פֿון מיין אַלטער היים, ווען איר וואָלט
געקאָנט זען און הערן... איר זעט נישט לייכטערס,
ווי עס לעשט זיך אויס מיין לעבן... און ווייסט נישט –

אַז באַלד וועט איר שטיין לעבן מיר, און די ליכט
וועלן טריפֿן שטיל... מיט פֿאַרגליווערטע טרערן...
שטילער און שטילער... ביז אייביק שטיל וועט שוין ווערן...

און לאַנג אין דער נאַכט האָב איך עלנט צו די זילבערנע
ליכטערס גערעדט... און לאַנג האָט מײַן האַרץ נאָך
די ייִדישע ליכטערס געגלעט...