



IN GEVEB A JOURNAL OF YIDDISH STUDIES

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by **Hinde Roytblat** and **Dine Libkes**, translation by Reyzl Grace MoChridhe

In geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies (March 2022)

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Selections from *Yidishe dikhterins* (Yiddish Women Poets)

Hinde Roytblat and Dine Libkes
translated by Reyzl Grace MoChridhe

Introduction: As I write, Russian forces have reached the northern edge of Kyiv, which once was home to both of these poets and the editor in whose anthology I first encountered them—Ezra Korman. After leaving Ukraine, Korman came to the United States and, bucking convention in his choice of residence as in so many other things, settled in the Midwest. Though he spent the remainder of his life in Detroit and I find myself in Minneapolis, as a fellow immigrant to the region I can’t help but feel a kinship with Korman, who dedicated much of his career to trying to understand what this distant place—so far from Kyiv or even New York—could do for the cause of Yiddish culture and the freedom of creative expression.

Published in 1928, Korman’s anthology of poetry by women writers, [*Yidishe dikhterins*](#), was one of many efforts to reach out to other kinds of peripheries of the Yiddish literary world and to raise up other voices from the margins. As a poet, I was struck by the honesty, perception, and skill of its contributors. As a linguist and translator, though, what stood out to me most was the abundance of ellipses. An astounding proportion of the poems contain at least one, as though to highlight how small a portion of any life a poem captures, or to suggest how every poem remains unfinished until every generation has had its chance to read, or to remind us of all that, for so many reasons, must remain unsaid—or even unlived.

Dine Libkes’s “On the Other Side of the Wall” is not her thematically deepest or her most technically dazzling poem, but it is among her most heartfelt. Originally from Slovetshno, Ukraine, Libkes moved to Kyiv as a young woman, working first as a teacher and then as an assistant librarian. Her fiction, poetry, and translations appeared regularly in left-wing publications and, during that brief, promising time when it seemed the Revolution of 1917 might yet bring freedom to the peoples of the Russian Empire, she became a signatory to the founding of the Association of Revolutionary Jewish Writers. Thereafter, her life becomes a series of ellipses. She survived the *khurbn* by going to Central Asia and was last known to be living in the vicinity of Kyiv again after the War, leaving us to wonder what her life was like in that terrible crucible and its

aftermath, and whether the longing and intense affection for other women that glows at the heart of so many of her poems was ever requited. As an LGBT librarian and teacher myself, facing a slew of attempts here in the Midwest to ban materials like Libkes's poems and listening to prominent figures on the right exhort my fellow citizens to support Russia's invasion of Libkes's homeland because "there are no Pride flags in Russia," I have so few weapons with which to fight back other than her ellipses.

Hinde Roytblat was born in Chernobyl, which, as of this writing, has been captured by Russian forces. As a teenager, she was deeply affected by the 1905 Revolution, joining the Russian Social Democratic Party and taking factory jobs in Kyiv. Although she started publishing in 1912, she disowned her early work after the 1917 Revolution, declaring that it had "no meaning . . . now" and rededicating herself as a "worker on the cultural front." Listening to President Zelensky's speeches, I think often of Roytblat's "We March" and its sense of quiet resolve and patient dedication, even as Roytblat finds a kind of action in the "busy[ness]" of mourning as much as in the proverbial 'soldiering on.' Still, what haunts me is the ellipsis at the end of "Snitkov," with its description of the ruined shtetl and the bare figure of Lenin, whose statues have been coming down so quickly since the annexation of Crimea that the Ukrainians have dubbed the process "Leninfall." A few days ago, Israel began preparations to receive refugees from Ukraine. It is to be hoped that this war will include no dedicated pogrom, but it is still certain that what remains of Ukraine's venerable Jewish communities will be further emptied, both into Israel and into the diaspora. It is unavoidable that priceless treasures of Jewish cultural heritage still residing in Ukraine's synagogues and cultural centers, museums and libraries, will be lost or destroyed. There will, once again, be ruins of *shtetlekh* and, indeed, deeper ruins made of what are already the ruins of *shtetlekh*. What, then, is Roytblat's ellipsis? Is it a reminder that life—and specifically Jewish life—carries on? Or is it a reminder that there is so much of what is lost that will never be described truly, or maybe even mentioned again? Perhaps both.

I know these few words of mine will be quite dated by the time they are read. I cast them onto the choppy sea of the future, uncertain where they will land or how they will be read. In this, I am again like Korman, who put out his anthology to dismissive reviews and lost his publisher—L. M. Shteyn—a tidy sum. Korman died in 1959, having lived long enough to see the Soviet regime dash the hopes of Dine Libkes and Hinde Roytblat and so many others for a growing freedom—long enough to see the officialization of Yiddish in Ukraine reversed, the last Yiddish theatre in Ukraine closed (in Chernivtsi in 1950), seven of Ukraine's brightest luminaries extinguished in the Lubyanka on the Night of the Murdered Poets (only a few of so many victims of Stalinist terror). Yet the anthology he assembled in 1928 carries the voice of each of its poets still as something living: an expression of longing for intimacy and community, a declaration of defiance toward convention and terror, an opening of the heart into a breaking world that could end in nothing other than an ellipsis . . .

Note from the editors: We have reproduced the Yiddish text according to the orthography of the original volume.

The Other Side of the Wall

for L. R.

On the other side of the school wall
a girl is sleeping with me;
I know, and she knows,
just on the other side of the wall! . . .

Sometimes, in a dream,
the wall drops away.
I feel her naked warmth –
her hand –

My youth blazes up within me,
and I wake with a start –
A wall!
Its senescence and its stony cold
grow wearisome.

On the other side of the wall,
a girl and I are sleeping together;
I know, and she knows,
just on the other side of the wall . . .

We March

With bent heads we stand before the coffins
and slowly touch the red cloth
with trembling fingers.
You are not the last
for whom we will kneel, singing.
Many red and black cloths flutter
on the way from the graveyard.
We march.

Your latest buried sorrow
keeps one of us busy for a while.
With heads bowed before the caskets
the crowd tarries at the gate.
We march.

One of us loses herself in thought for a while —
Who are you, you slain ones, and from where?
We march.

Snitkov

Snitkov — a shtetl.
A shtetl by the border.
A shtetl, like all of them,
as large as a yawn.

Narrow the alleys
and broader the squares.
Muddy small houses
of boards and beams.

Naked is the shtetl
— a floor of clay.
No little tree, no greenery,
no green-winding thread.

My room in the shtetl —
the prettiest of all:
a parquet floor
covered with designs,

an abstract painting
spattered with colors,
a clay figure of Lenin
not yet affixed.

My heart is torn for
the naked shtetl, lying
as though thrown down
on a chessboard.

פון יענער זייט וואנט

דעווידמעט ל. ר.

פון יענער זייט מיין כיידער־וואנט
שלאָפט אַ יונגע מיט מיר באַנאַנד;
ווייס איך, ווייסט זי,
אַז פון יענער זייט וואנט! . . .

טרעפט אַמאָל אין כאַלעם,
רוקט זיך אָפּ די וואנט,
דערפיל איך איר נאַקעטן ווארעם —
איר האנט —

ברויז אין מיר מיין יוגנט אופּ,
איך כאַפּ זיך אופּ —
אַ וואנט!
ווערט טויט-פאַרדראָסיק פאַר ווענטישער אַלטקייט,
פאַר שטיינערנער קנלעך . . .

פון יענער זייט וואנט
שלאָפט אַ יונגע מיט מיר באַנאַנד;
ווייסט איך, ווייסט זי,
אַז פון יענער זייט וואנט . . .

מיר שפּאַנען

מיר שטייען געבויגן די קעפּ פאַר די אָרנס,
און רירן פאַמעלאַך מיט ציטריקע פינגער
דעם רויטן געוואָנט.
איר זיינט ניט די לעצטע,
פאַר וועלכע מיר זינגענדיק קניען.
צום וועג פון בייסאווילעם
פיל רויטע און שוואַרצע געוואָנטן זיך ציען.
מיר שפּאַנען.

אַ וויילע פאַרנעמט ווער פון אונז
אייער לעצטן פאַרבאָרגענעם טרויער.
געבויגן די קעפּ פאַר די אָרנס,
פאַרהאַלט זיך אַ וויילע דער אוילעם באַם טויער.
מיר שפּאַנען.

פון אונז ווער פאַרטראַכט זיך אַ וויילע —
ווער זיינט איר, האַרוגים, פון וואָנען?
מיר שפּאַנען.

סניטקאוו

סניטקאוו — אַ שטעטל
אַ שטעטל באַם גרעניץ,
אַ שטעטל, ווי אַלע —
גרויס, ווי אַ געניץ.

ענגער — די געסלאַך,
און גרעסער — די פלעצער.
בלאָטיקע הייזלאך
פון ברעטער און קלעצער.

נאַקעט דאָס שטעטל —
אַ ליימיקער באַדן.
קיין בוימל קיין גרינינקס,
קיין גרינינקער פאָדים.

מיין צימער אין שטעטל —
דער שענסטער פון אַלע:
מיט דיל א פאַרקעטן,
באַדעקט מיט ווארעטן.

מיט זאכלאָזן בילד,
פון פאַרבן באַפּלעקטן.
מיט א ליימענעם לענין,
נאָך ניט קיין דערקלעפטן.

עס רייסט מיר דאָס האַרץ
אף דעם נאַקעטן שטעטל,
וואָס ליגט, ווי פאַרוואָרפן,
אף שאכמאטענעם ברעטל . . .