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Irena Klepfisz's "Fradel Schtok" and the Language of Hyphenated Identity

Fradel Schtok

Yiddish writer. B.1890 in Skale, Galicia. Emigrated to New York in 1907. Became known when she introduced the sonnet form into Yiddish poetry. Author of *Erzeylungen* (Stories) in 1919, a collection in Yiddish. Switched to English and published *For Musicians Only* in 1927. Institutionalized and died in a sanitarium around 1930.

Language is the only homeland.
– Czeslow Milosz

They make it sound easy: some disjointed
sentences a few allusions to
mankind. But for me it was not
so simple more like trying
to cover the distance from here
to the corner or between two sounds.

Think of it: *heym* and *home* the meaning
the same of course exactly
but the shift in vowel was the ocean
in which I drowned.

I tried. I did try.
First held with Yiddish but you
know it's hard. You write *gas*
and *street* echoes back
No resonance. And – let's face it-
memory falters.
You try to keep track of the difference
like *got* and *god* or *hoyz* and *house*
but they blur and you start using
alley when you mean *gesele* or *avenue*
when it's a *bulevar.*

And before you know it
you're on some alien path

standing before a brick house
the doorframe slightly familiar.
Still you can't place it
exactly. Passers-by stop.
Concerned they speak but you've
heard all this before the vowels
shifting up and down the subtle
change in the guttural sounds

and now it's nothing more
nothing more than babble.
And so you accept it.
You're lost. This time you really
don't know where you are.

Land or sea the house floats before you.
Perhaps you once sat at that window
and it was home and looked out
on that *street* or *gesele*. Perhaps
it was a dead end perhaps a short cut.
Perhaps not.
A movement by the door. They stand there
beckoning mouths open and close:
Come in! Come in! I understood it was
a welcome. *A dank! A dank!*
I said till I heard the lock
snap behind me.

1. Fradel Schtok, the Speaking Poetic Voice

This poem[1] speaks to us about language and place through the poetic voice and persona of a forgotten Yiddish writer. It uses simple words in two languages, English and Yiddish. Before the poem begins, the writer provides us with some information about Fradel Schtok. She was one of the two million Jewish immigrants who came from Eastern Europe to the United States between 1890 and 1925, driven from their homes because of murderous pogroms against the Jews in the *shtetl*, the raping of Jewish women, restrictions placed on trade and geographic mobility, and the expulsion of Jews from schools and universities. In the United States the Jewish immigrants settled in the big cities, mainly in New York, in extremely crowded areas yet in the neighbourhood of each other, and they worked mostly in the textile industries.[2] One of the traditions the Jewish immigrants brought with them was their high esteem for education, something which is tied up with Jewish religious beliefs and practices. In the course of the secularization and cultural

adaptation which took place in the new surroundings, education, which had earlier been reserved primarily for men, became increasingly available to Jewish women. This resulted in an increasing number of women writers like Mary Antin[3] and Anzia Yezierska.[4] Most of them wrote in English, but some women writers like Fradel Schtok started out in Yiddish. At the beginning of the century, Yiddish was widely spoken in the streets of the densely populated Jewish districts; it was also the language of several daily newspapers like the *Forwerts* and of a popular tradition of Yiddish theatre. Pressures towards assimilation to an all-American norm, however, led to a rapid decline of the use of Yiddish and of familiar religious practices. On all cultural levels we can observe the effects of cultural displacement, in geographic, linguistic, religious terms, but also in terms of class affiliation and gender norms.[5]

The Fradel Schtok of the poem speaks about the experience of dislocation in many ways. She is clearly identified as the central speaking subject, not only through her use of the personal pronoun "I" but also by her use of colloquial expressions (e.g. "let's face it" – l. 15, "you know it's hard" – ll. 12-13), through her use of simple words and of the inclusive "you" through which she both addresses a listener and generalizes beyond her personal experience. One of the most prominent features of the poem, its specific rhythm, also refers directly back to a reflecting central persona. It is a slow, persistent rhythm, typographically marked by the enlarged spacing between words and phrases, and it is a probing rhythm which halts and listens to the reverberations of words. This rhythm underlines the search for sounds and meanings, but also for something else, a hint of which is already given in the epigraph of the poem.

The kind of dislocation that is most explicitly addressed is that of language. The speaker uses a Yiddish word, and an English one echoes it. The familiar becomes unfamiliar. It is less the exact reference of the word than first of all the sound which brings about a sense of estrangement, which leads the speaker on "some alien path" (l. 23) and into a language which does not produce the same sounds when spoken. The very difference between "*heym*" and "home" (l. 7), which only lies in the vowel, carries the weight of the dislocation of the speaker and of the necessary relocation in another cultural surrounding. Their difference is articulated in spatial terms, cast into the image of an ocean in which Fradel drowns. Another Jewish immigrant to North America, Eva Hoffman, reflects the same feeling when she titles her autobiography *Lost in Translation*.[6]

What is it that gets lost in translation? The persona first speaks of differentiations of meanings, the subtle distinctions each language makes like those between "*gas*" (l. 13), "*gesele*" (l. 20), and "*bulevar*" (l. 21) and between "*heym*" (l. 7) and "*hoyz*" (l. 18), a network of distinctions within which the speaking

subject situates herself and which makes it impossible to translate one single term neatly into another one in the other language. Which correct term would there be for "*gesele*" for example? Would the American "*alley*" (l. 20) do? Moreover, by insisting on the value of sounds, the speaker addresses something beyond the search for the correct meaning. She alludes to the importance of the pre-verbal in a spoken language. Before the child is able to form words, he or she is deeply affected by the very sounds of a language, the reassuring, caressing, imposing sounds of the first intimate relationships. Many Jewish American literary texts from the beginning of the 20th century deal with the sounds of Yiddish in the tenement streets.[7] On a collective level it is the reassurance of being rooted in a surrounding culture. In the situation of exile, emigration and immigration, both the echo of intimacy and a pre-conscious certainty and hope[8] that one is able to express oneself and will be understood become disturbed or get lost.

2. *Language and Space*

If we look at the very words that are chosen to explain the speaker's feelings of loss and disorientation we realize that except for "*got*" and "*god*" (l. 18) all the terms are spatial ones: *heym*/home, *gas*/street, *hoyz*/house, *gesele*/alley, *bulevar*/avenue. They unfold a topography of home and the ways to and from it. Another topographical dimension is introduced by the analogies and images the speaker tries to find for her searching. "[T]o cover the distance from here / to the corner" (ll. 5-6), to "keep track" (l. 17), to be "on some alien path" (l. 23) and "you're lost" (l. 35) refer to actions in space which are used in a metaphorical way but still very close to everyday speech which has 'normalized' these metaphors by frequent use. The poem continually wanders from language to space and back again, opposing home and familiarity to unfamiliar territory and sound, making concrete in the speaker's movements what is said in the epigraph from Czeslow Milosz: "Language is the only homeland."

For the speaker, who has to situate herself in a new homeland, the distinctions she set up initially are increasingly blurred. The movements and oscillations between language and topography quicken in the fourth stanza, the house is no longer the image of something firm and fixed but "floats" as the persona drifts away into the new language. At the very point when she can no longer hear anything but babble she is completely lost in the landscape. Her memory fails ("perhaps" is repeated four times), and we can no longer be sure if it is still the old Eastern European *shtetl* that is evoked by the Yiddish words. As readers, we too become lost in the geography of emigration and immigration. In the end we do not exactly know who is meant by "they" either: are "they" the inhabitants of the country of immigration, those that speak the strange

language and maybe also those that lured the historical Fradel into the mental institution? The speaker herself is confused and responds to the invitation from "them", even thanks them in her own language until the door shuts behind her. "[S]nap" (l. 48), though, indicates that it is less a homecoming than an imprisonment.

3. *The Author Irena Klepfisz*

This poem, which tells about the complicated and painful process of forced transition from one culture to another and which refers to a 'real' historical persona, has been printed and reprinted several times in the United States;[9] it has been presented at readings and often commented upon. Thus we can assume that there is an agreement between the author and her public which goes beyond that of just recounting a historical personality's fate. When we search for the specific cultural meanings of this text, we have to consider the author's cultural position and the roles she assumes and through which she speaks to her public.

Irena Klepfisz is a Jewish-American poet and essayist, university teacher of English and Yiddish, and political activist engaged in the struggle against anti-Semitism, and who has taken a stand against the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, against homophobia and against patriarchal power. She was born in Poland in 1941. Her father was active in the Jewish Labor Bund[10], a socialist organization which was mainly responsible for the Jewish resistance during World War II. He was killed by the Nazis in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in April 1943 when he tried to prevent the use of a machine gun by a German officer; and most of her family was murdered in Treblinka. She and her mother survived by hiding and 'passing' as non-Jews, under hardly bearable conditions. They emigrated via Sweden to the United States when Irena Klepfisz was eight years old. Both her poetry and her essays reflect this history of loss and emigration and the finding of a place for herself in a new country. This she shares both with many other survivors of the holocaust and partially with those who came with the first wave of immigration after the turn of the century.

4. *Keeper of Accounts*

"A Klepfisz poem lives amid complex tensions, even when its texture may appear transparent", writes Adrienne Rich.[11] The roles Klepfisz assumes as a poet and essayist have grown out of her biography and historical awareness. They reflect the tasks of mourning, of keeping memory alive, of warning and of preserving and recuperating what can still be found of a destroyed heritage, and of the search for new cultural space. We can identify these authorial com-

mitments behind the speaking voice of our poem. Klepfisz writes of her childhood:

> As a child, my first conscious feeling about being Jewish was that it was dangerous, something to be hidden. [...] My sense of danger was rooted in a total physical and emotional knowledge of the war.[12]

In one of her poems she calls herself a "keeper of accounts", re-appropriating an old anti-Semitic stereotype by turning it into a task she has to perform as legacy and responsibility of the survivor: "Like these, my despised ancestors / I have become a keeper of accounts", she says in a stance that runs like a refrain through her prose-poem "Bashert".[13] In poems like "Searching for My Father's Body", "The Widow and Daughter", "*Di rayze aheym*/The Journey Home", "Warsaw, 1988: Umschlagplatz" and "death camp"[14] she searches for information about her father's death and the location of his grave, she re-visits the places of her childhood and those associated with her murdered family, and their hiding places when neither she nor her mother could speak openly or reveal their identity to anyone:

> [...] During this time she learned survival
> depends on complete distrust. Even today she is still
> fierce in her refusal to rely on others. Some would call
> it alienation. Others pride. I think it's only
> the necessary stance of any survivor.[15]

This is exactly the lesson Fradel Schtok of our poem has not learned and realizes it only too late, after the lock has snapped shut. Yet the poet keeps account of Fradel's fate.

5. *Geographies and Identities: the 'Point of Equidistance'*

There is another refrain-like line in "Bashert" which reads like a commentary on our poem: "I am almost equidistant from two continents". Again, as in the poem, Klepfisz uses geographic terms to signify something else. She speaks of "heritages", "histories", "legacies"[16] of two cultures ("two vast land masses touch") which she has to balance and which make up her present identity, for she not only lives in the past and in the old geographic and cultural space but also in the present and in a new country. As for many other Americans, her sense of self is based upon a composite identity, one which implies balancing acts and constant re-definitions which are reflected in the use of two languages and the references to two territories. Repeatedly Klepfisz refers to the Chicana writer, Gloria Anzaldúa, who writes in a mixture of Spanish and English. Only since the eighties has it become possible to articulate the duplicities, the differences within, the complexity of what has been called the "hyphenated identity" of American minority groups, yet one no longer considers this

merely as an exception to the hegemonic norm. The earlier US-American model of a unified, consolidated, all-American identity that incorporates differences but merges them together, has increasingly been questioned. For Fradel Schtok, the pressures from this model of assimilation were much harder than for the author; Americanization and the giving up of her cultural differences were the only way out for Schtok, but she 'drowned' in the ocean of difference.

Clearly, Klepfisz's 'point of equidistance' does not refer to this model; her position acknowledges difference. Warsaw, Brooklyn and Chicago are recurring placenames in her poems. "There have been many plots of ground / that formed me", she writes in "Solitary Acts"[17], and although the question of what 'home' means remains a troubled one in her search through playgrounds, cemeteries, death camps, the *shtetl*, New York tenements and the Chicago university library, it is at the same time something which has to be worked out in a lifelong process. Images of dislocation and re-location abound in her work, yet there is no nostalgic search for one coherent identity or for one single geographic locale. Given this point of view, which was typical of the eighties, it is no longer necessary to "conflate geographies and identities and link both to a historical determination of the homogeneous, collective and shared nature of cultural enterprise"[18], and she can then venture back and present a historical persona for whom identity and geography were still inseparably tied together. Of herself and her group Klepfisz says: "We are in transition. Most of us are not trying to preserve traditions; rather, we are trying to discover and learn them and also reinterpret them from a contemporary perspective."[19]

6. mame-loshn: *its Poetics and Politics*

For Fradel Schtok Yiddish was the language she grew up with and which she had also used in her early writing. For the author of the poem her relationship to the Yiddish language is more complicated because she also had to learn to speak Polish in order not to give away her Jewish identity. She later grew up in a mixture of Yiddish and English, where, as she says, "a very large number of the *lebn geblibene*, survivors, lived in the same cooperative houses in which my mother and I lived, all within a few blocks of each other – a small, tight group in the midst of a Jewish, American-born, working class neighborhood".[20] Yiddish has both a symbolic and a concrete value: For her

> Yiddish is *mame-loshn*, mother tongue, the language of the Jews, the medium through which Jewish culture and politics are to be transmitted. *Mame-loshn* was the language that gave all the tenets which I'd been taught form and substance.[21]

For those, like Klepfisz, who see themselves as secular Jews and declared Anti-Zionists, the political dimension of language becomes more acute, because neither orthodox religion[22] nor territory can serve as a basis for group identity. Fradel Schtok's and Ceslow Milosz' sense of language as "the only homeland" has implications which we cannot find for any other group.

In her essays, Klepfisz writes about the rapid decline in the use of Yiddish and of a once living culture. Torn between mourning and determination she makes up her mind to revive this language, which is not just vanishing because it goes somehow out of use but because it has been violently disrupted by the extinction of the Eastern European Jewish culture in World War II. Among her projects is the translation of Yiddish women writers into English, one of these being Fradel Schtok[23], thus making accessible their work to an audience who does no longer understand the language. Another aim that runs parallel to this is to use Yiddish in her own writing. Her audience responds positively to this: "The intensity and emotionalism of that response takes me aback. Just a few Yiddish words, the very sound of the language evokes very strong feelings and memories"[24], she writes. In these poems Klepfisz is not just speaking for herself, but in the name and on behalf of others who can no longer speak. Fradel Schtok is used as a medium for this recuperative act, a poetic voice that remembers and reminds and admonishes. At the same time, because of her political engagement, Klepfisz uses Yiddish as "a symbol of resistance to assimilation".[25]

A contextualized reading like the one I have been trying to produce here cannot stop at this point. My attempt has been to make accessible a poem that speaks of a specific culture and of specific historical moments, those of a Jewish immigrant in the United States at the beginning of this century and of a Jewish-American writer who is concerned with the composite identity of US-American ethnic groups, of migrants and exiled people. Yet where are the readers? Here in this text, the actual readers are myself and the group of German students of English and American cultures this book aims to reach, and we construct our own meanings of what we read, meanings which are necessarily influenced by our own cultural heritage. As Germans, our position with respect to the contents of this poem is tied up with our own historical legacy, a legacy which imposes specific demands on the postwar generations, and we must be ready to deal with texts that evoke this past. Moreover, against the background of those who, despite of this historical legacy, are still trying to preserve, or construct, a unified, undisrupted 'German' identity, it may well be worth dealing with the writings of those who have multiple cultural affiliations[26], who have no single mother tongue, who see themselves, by necessity or choice, as migrants with identities that may be called hyphenated and who situate themselves within complexities that do not lead to one single position.

1 I. Klepfisz: "Fradel Schtok". – In idem: *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue. Poems Selected and New (1971-1990)*. Portland, 1990, pp. 228-229.

2 See, for example, M. Rischin: *The Promised City. New York's Jews 1870-1914*. Cambridge/Mass., 1962; and I. Howe, K. Libo: *How We Lived. A Documentary History of Immigrant Jews in America. 1880-1930*. New York, 1979.

3 See, for example, M. Antin: *From Plotzk to Boston*. New York, 1985 (1899); and *The Promised Land*. Princeton, 1985 (1912).

4 See, for example, A. Yezierska: *Hungry Hearts and Other Stories*. New York, 1985 (1920).

5 While most of the accounts of immigrant life are focussed on Jewish men, a few more recent books look into the complicated situation of Jewish women immigrants. See C. Baum, P. Hyman, S. Michel: *The Jewish Woman in America*. New York, 1977; E. Ewen: *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars. Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925*. New York, 1985; see also my articles: "Einzug in das *Promised Land* oder *Lost in Translation*? Osteuropäische Jüdinnen auf dem Weg vom Schtetl zum American Dream". – In S. Schilling et al. (Eds.): *Jüdische Kultur und Weiblichkeit in der Moderne*. Köln, 1993; and "'No One Could Have Told Her Race'. Assimilation, Dissimulation and Memory in Jewish-American Women's Texts". *Annales du CRAA* 18, 1993, Special Issue: "*écrire la différence. Interculturalism and the Writing of Difference*", 149-160.

6 E. Hoffman: *Lost in Translation. A Life in a New Language*. New York, 1989.

7 For a description of Jewish life in the American cities see, for example, I. Howe: *The World of Our Fathers*. New York, 1976; and S.A. Glenn: *Daughters of the Shtetl. Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation*. Ithaca, 1990.

8 We rather have to speak of 'hope' than of certainty, because philosophic and psychoanalytic theories of language have made quite clear that the intention of the speaking subject and the linguistic expression never come together. The problem then becomes exaggerated in the case of a 'foreign' language.

9 In M. Kaye-Kantrowitz, I. Klepfisz (Eds.): *The Tribe of Dina. A Jewish Women's Anthology*. Boston, 1989, pp. 160-161; also in *Moment*.

10 The Jewish Labor Bund was founded in 1897; it was a socialist movement whose members predominantly came from the urban Jewish working class in Eastern Europe.

11 I. Klepfisz: *Poems*, p. 25.

12 Idem: *Dreams of An Insomniac. Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches and Diatribes*. Portland, 1990, p. 61.

13 Idem: *Poems*, pp. 183-200. In her introduction to this volume, Adrienne Rich writes: "'*Bashert*' is a poem unlike any other I can think of in American, including Jewish-American, poetry, in its delineations not only of survivor experience [...] but of what happens after survival" (ibid., p. 19).

14 All the poems are printed in I. Klepfisz: *Poems*.

15 "A Visit". – Ibid., pp. 173-174.

16 Ibid., pp. 196-197.

17 Ibid., p. 206.

18 I. Rogoff: "Geographien und Identitäten. Zum Diskurs des Exils". *Babylon* 10/11, 1992, p. 25. I am quoting from the original paper upon which this article is based.

19 I. Klepfisz: "*Khaloymes*/Dreams in Progress: Culture, Politics, and Jewish Identity". – In idem: *Dreams of An Insomniac*, p. 206.
20 Idem: "Secular Jewish Identity". – In ibid., p. 145.
21 Ibid., p. 143.
22 Much has been written about Jewish secularism; perhaps here it is only necessary to say that it does not mean giving up all Jewish rituals although they are based on religion or the commemorative days and the festivities.
23 See F. Schtok: "*Opgeshnitene hor*/The shorn head". Transl. I. Klepfisz. – In M. Kaye-Kantrowitz, I. Klepfisz: *Tribe of Dina*, pp. 190-193. Another woman writer whose Yiddish literature she translates is Kadja Molodowsky.
24 I. Klepfisz: "Forging a Woman's Link in *di goldene keyt*: Some Possibilities for Jewish American Poetry". – In idem: *Dreams of An Insomniac*, p. 173.
25 Idem: "Secular Jewish Identity", p. 155.
26 Further reading may be found in volumes like R. Ferguson et al. (Eds.): *Out There. Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures.* New York, 1990.