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A Daughter of the Mother Tongue

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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: *heyim* 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 *hoys* 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.

— Irena Klepfisz

A Daughter Of the Mother Tongue

A Few Words in the Mother Tongue: Poems Selected and New (1971-1990)

By Irena Klepfisz
The Eighth Mountain Press, 251 pp., \$11.95

Dreams of an Insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches and Diatribes

By Irena Klepfisz
The Eighth Mountain Press, 219 pp., \$11.95

By KEN FRIEDEN

Irena Klepfisz was born in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1941. Two years later her father was killed while heroically battling the Germans. Hidden in an orphanage, she survived the war and entered the United States with her mother in 1949. Her first language was Polish, her second Yiddish, and her third English.

"A Few Words in the Mother Tongue" spans 20 years and five sets of poems: "Early Work" (1971), "Periods of Stress" (1975), "Two Sisters" (1978), "Keeper of Accounts" (1982), and "A Few Words in the Mother Tongue" (1983-1990). In the opening poem, "Searching for My Father's Body," the poet attempts to reconstruct a memory of her long-deceased father on the basis of chronicles. The second group of poems returns insistently to the Holocaust, refers to the murder of innocent children, and ponders the enigma of survival: "somehow/ I managed/ to escape that fate." Ms. Klepfisz experiments with taking on other voices, commenting elsewhere that "I still cherish poetry that tells a story, especially the dramatic monologue." Examples are "herr captain," which assumes the perspective of a woman in a concentration camp, and "From the Mon-

key House and Other Cages," transposing human experiences into the animal kingdom.

Ms. Klepfisz writes lucid city poems. When nature does appear, it takes on symbolic weight, as in "Royal Pearl," inspired by the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens: Like a creative artist, exceptional tulips break norms. "Lithops," a poem about the stonelike plant with its "strange blossoms," points to "the ancient sign that every life/ has its secret longings/ to transcend/ the daily pressing need/ longings that one day must flower." While Judaic literature has seldom produced nature poetry, Ms. Klepfisz initiates a vigorous approach to this genre in her poetic cycle entitled "Urban Flowers."

The verses that portray her mother are as highly charged as Yehuda Amichai's Hebrew poems about his father. In the first section of "A visit," Ms. Klepfisz describes her mother. "During World War II she developed a canniness for detecting Jews... she cannot wander far from her Jewish/ neighborhood before she begins assessing who are/ the safes ones and who are not." Upon her mother's departure, she muse



LINDA EBER

Irena Klepfisz

that "I am all anxiety. Departure: swell old undefined fears in me the fear of permanent/ separations. These and other phrases reflect the growing literature of second generation Holocaust survivors who have explored new themes and expressed unique sensibilities.

Ms. Klepfisz's most innovative effects employ the device of self-translation. The title section, "A Few Words in the Mother Tongue," contains half a dozen poems that experiment with bilingual verses, reflecting the author

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consciousness of an internal rift. "Etlekhe verter oyf mame-loshn," "A Few words in the Mother Tongue" is a poem that defines individual Yiddish words before being transformed into a fully Yiddish sequence. It opens with seemingly random terms, as if emulating a Yiddish lesson:

lemoshl: for example

di kurve the whore
a woman who acknowledges her passions

di yidene the Jewess the Jewish woman
ignorant overbearing
let's fact it: every woman is one

di yente the gossip the busy-body
who knows what's what
and is never caught off guard

di lezbianke the one with
a roommate though we never used

the word

dos vaybl the wife
or the little woman

Klepfisz examines language and its implicit stereotyping of women; later in the poem she comments that

a froy kholmt a woman
dreams *ir ort oyf der velt*
her place in this world
un zi hot moyre and she is afraid
so afraid of the words

The poet marks the highly charged point of contact between her verbal craft and her identity, fixed in established languages that are at times unyielding.

In the companion volume to "A Few Words in the Mother Tongue," entitled "Dreams of an Insomniac," Ms. Klepfisz confronts and renders more explicit many of her underlying poetic themes. At the same time, she views the essay format, like casual disputation, as a "free associative, open-ended, unpredictable and always unstructured process." No admirer of "seamless" essays, she suggests that "by retaining the difficult process by which we reach conclusions (through digressions, free association, interruptions, new beginnings, reiteration) we endow ideas with a three-dimensional reality which makes them accessible and operative in the world."

The primary tone of Ms. Klepfisz's essays is personal, autobiographical. She explores the choices she has made — from remaining childless to writing "bilingual Yiddish/English poetry," and from maintaining a secular Jewish identity to rejecting current Israeli policies on the West Bank. Her experiences have enabled her to share diverse perspectives: after she received a doctorate in English literature at the University of Chicago, she worked as an assistant professor until financial pressures eliminated her position, became an office worker for a decade in "what seems an infinite number of jobs," taught Yiddish in the Summer Program sponsored by YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, edited lesbian/feminist publications, and continually wrote poetry.

There is a poignant symmetry between her early education by the Workmen's Circle school and her mature grasp of the hardships encountered by office workers.

Ms. Klepfisz is intensely aware of the problems of American Jewish identity. She briefly muses on this divisive issue, asking: "Who is the *real* Jew in this room? The orthodox Jew? The Biblical scholar? The Holocaust survivor? The child of Holocaust survivors? The one who lived on a kibbutz for two years? The one who speaks Yiddish? Hebrew? Ladino? The one who knows the *shabes* prayer? The one who studied at a *yeshiva* for six months? The heterosexual? The Ashkenazi? The *sabra*? The one with the Jewish mother? The convert who learned what most born into Jewishness never bothered with?" With such penetrating questions Ms. Klepfisz probes the hidden insecurities that often disrupt Jewish communal life.

Ms. Klepfisz also resists the way of nostalgia. She

Ms. Klepfisz is intensely aware of the problems of contemporary American Jewish identity

strongly supports the Yiddish institutions that advance secular Yiddish culture, yet she comments that they "unfortunately often foster the nostalgia in which Yiddish is becoming increasingly enveloped." She likewise rejects an approach to the Holocaust that would make it "the core of Jewish identity." Steering between these inadequate options, Ms. Klepfisz proposes an enhanced educational program: "We will guarantee another generation a Jewish future if we educate ourselves about the history of the Jews, ancient and modern, about Jewish literature — probably in translation from Ladino, Yiddish, Hebrew and all the languages in which secular Jews and observant Jews wrote." She hopes for changes that will bring about Americans' deeper and broader knowledge of Jewish culture, in turn facilitating new artistic expressions.

Ms. Klepfisz is a ventriloquist, poet and essayist with a wide range of voices. Increasingly recognized in feminist circles, her work is now receiving the attention it deserves among American Jewish readers.

Mr. Frieden teaches Yiddish literature, Hebrew literature, and Jewish literature in other languages at Emory University