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NEW(S) POEMS:
Y. L. TELLER'S
LIDER FUN DER TSAYT(UNG)

by

KEN FRIEDEN

Y. L. Teller's poetry underwent radical transformations in the 1930s, and its shifting forms were representative of the age. Influenced by the introspectivists, Teller excluded proper names, identifiable places, and definite time from his early poems. By the end of the decade, however, he had developed a style that drew heavily from news reports. The relationship between poetry and journalism became a matter of dispute in American Yiddish literature during these years, when Arn Glants-Leyeles and Yankev Glatshteyn were among the leading poets who dirtied their hands with newsprint.¹

Research leading to the completion of this essay was supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Council of Learned Societies, the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, and the Yad Hanadiv/Barecha Foundation. Avraham Noverstern provided helpful advice during the final stages of writing and revision.

1. In the 1930s, Glants-Leyeles contributed frequent articles to *Der tog*, while Glatshteyn wrote cultural and political essays for *Der morgn zhurnal*. Glatshteyn employed the pseudonym "Itskus" until his virulent poem "Good Night, World" was reprinted in this newspaper on May 8, 1938, and he subsequently introduced the Sunday column "Prost un poshet" under his actual name.

In 1930, at the age of eighteen, Teller published his first book of poems, *Simboln*, and also began his career as a journalist. Teller's second collection of poems, *Miniatur*, appeared in 1934, while he was writing frequent articles for *Der morgn zhurnal* on topics as diverse as American Nazi groups, Yeshiva College, and sex crimes in New York. Until this point Teller's poetry still showed no trace of his worldly employment. The moment of truth for his poetic and journalistic careers came in April 1937, when he set sail for Europe. During visits to Poland, Germany, and Austria in May 1937 and January–February 1939, he witnessed international crises and began to integrate these experiences into his verse.

The decisive period in Teller's literary activity stretched from 1937 until he published his third and last book of poems, *Lider fun der tsayt*, in 1940. These new poems were simultaneously news poems: they were *fun der tsayt*—of the time or age, and also *fun der tsaytung*—from the newspaper. While Teller did not print his poems in newspapers, instead sending them to *Inzikh* and other journals, he drew inspiration from his work as a journalist. The author never simply wrote poems about world events, but allowed his two modes of expression to interact. In any case, Teller was an unconventional newspaper writer whose diverse stories sometimes resembled fiction more than factual accounts; they often relied on interviews with anonymous sources and were occasionally referred to as “travel scenes” or “impressions.” These narrative intertexts are relevant to the interpretation of Teller's poems.

Teller gave Leyeles a copy of *Lider fun der tsayt* with this inscription:

To A. Leyeles—

Knowing full well that
Without Fabius Lind our
poetic path would
have been gloomier.

Y. L. Teller, Nov. 5,
1940.²

2. This book is in the private collection of Ken Frieden.

The dedication does not convey empty praise. Leyeles's *Fabius Lind*, published in 1937, attracted and heartened Teller; its combination of a personal tone with political contents found resonant echoes in Teller's *Lider fun der tsayt*.

One month after Teller inscribed his book of new poems to Leyeles, the older poet reviewed it favorably in *Der tog*. Leyeles wrote: “Y. L. Teller is a poet, a modern poet, and at the same time—a journalist. . . . It sometimes happens that journalistic elements steal their way into poetry—which is no misfortune. . . . None of this was understood just 20–25 years ago. The poets themselves were very naive.”³ Leyeles's review alludes to changing literary theories and practices during the previous decade: the journalistic context of Teller's *Lider fun der tsayt* had been anticipated by the writings of Glatshiteyn, Leyeles, and others. For example, based on his trip to Poland in 1934, Glatshiteyn produced the travel narratives *Ven Yash iz geforen* (1938) and *Ven Yash iz gekumen* (1940). Even more striking is his novel *Emil un Karl* (1940), which deals with the fate of two children in Nazi Vienna. Because Glatshiteyn had no direct experience of Vienna in the late 1930s, his descriptions necessarily rely on newspaper reports. Specifically, Glatshiteyn's novel *Emil un Karl* probably borrowed details from a series of articles by Teller concerning a Jewish family that fled from Nazi Vienna.⁴ By no means did influence flow in only one direction.

Two sections of Leyeles's *Fabius Lind* are especially relevant to Teller's third book: “Mornings and Nights” and “To You—To Me.” Many of these poems bear traces of Leyeles's close association with *Der tog*. For instance, the poem “War” opens with an epigraph that quotes an unnamed source concerning Filippo Tommaso Marinetti:

“Poet Marinetti, father of futurism,
also went off to Ethiopia
to enhance the glory
of Mussolini's army.”⁵

3. A. Glants [Leyeles], in *Der tog*, December 11, 1940; excerpted in Yehuda Leyb Teller, *Durkh yidishn gemit: Lider* (Tel Aviv, 1975), p. 238.

4. See Teller's articles in *Der morgn zhurnal*, November 21–24, 28, 30, and December 1, 1938.

5. A. Glants-Leyeles, “Milkhome,” in *Fabius Lind* (New York, 1937), p. 92.

Following a poetic reflection on the futurists' talk of "the function of the pen," Leyeles concludes:

Listen, poets, listen:
Have no part in these fires, no share in murder;
Just scrub, scour, and reveal
The true, the pure word.⁶

This final plea distills Leyeles's persistent attitude toward poetry and politics in the early 1930s. The poetic voice explicitly demands that poems remain unspoiled by political power, and the title "War" also names the poet's literary battle. This does not prevent Leyeles from citing, as the epigraph to another poem, "a correspondence from Moscow in an American newspaper." While the quotation deals favorably with the Soviet Five-Year Plan (1928–32), the poetic voice is skeptical:

Even more will I bless the news of the Plan
When in sun-filled homes
Contentment replaces the harshness of days,
Covering over the harsher weeks.⁷

Leyeles doubts political solutions, but he does not exclude the political dimension from his poetry. The incorporation of current news reports signaled an expansion of scope for the waning introspective school.

The poems in Leyeles's *Fabius Lind* repeatedly allude to historical places and dates, bearing titles such as "Biro-Bidzhan," "Portrait 1933," and "Moscow Night, End of December 1934."⁸ Most striking is the long meditation provoked by the Sacco and Vanzetti case, entitled "America 1927." Like many related poems, including Moyshe-Leyb Halpern's "Sacco-Vanzetti"⁹ and Yankev Glatshiteyn's "Sacco and Vanzetti on Monday,"¹⁰

6. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

7. "Trillionike vor," *ibid.*, p. 234.

8. For a translation of "Moscow Night, End of December 1934," see Benjamin Harshav and Barbara Harshav, eds., *American Yiddish Poetry* (Berkeley, Calif., 1986), pp. 153–155.

9. Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, *Moyshe Leyb Halpern* (New York, 1934), vol. 1, pp. 57–58. For translations of "Sacco-Vanzetti," see Harshav and Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry*, pp. 437–439, and Irving Howe, Ruth R. Wisse, and Khone Shmeruk, eds., *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* (New York, 1987), pp. 212–214.

10. Yankev Glatshiteyn, *Kredos* (New York, 1929), pp. 52–63.

Leyeles's poem responds to the trial and execution of a "good shoemaker" and a "poor fish-peddler." One part even takes on the persona of the condemned, in dialogue with the warden and executioner. This political direction may not have been the height of Leyeles's poetic career, yet—in conjunction with the work of Moyshe-Leyb Halpern and Yankev Glatshiteyn—it apparently encouraged the young Teller in his poetic development.

Teller's first two books of poems owe profound debts to Glatshiteyn. There are even thematic parallels, as between Teller's "Wild Song" and Glatshiteyn's "In Smoke."¹¹ The former exemplifies the tone of Teller's 1934 volume:

I will take you wild, like frost,
And draw forth sweat
From your flesh.

We will drift
Through blinding fumes
And you will soak me in
Like smoke.

Night will rush past
With clouds and rivers—
Over us, flocks
With barren cries.¹²

Here language refracts a sexual fantasy through dreamy, symbolic intensifiers. *Di Yunge* had anticipated this kind of private poetic voice, while the *Inzikhistn* introduced the experimentalism associated with free verse and unreal imagery. Teller's early poems merge subjective emotions and natural figuration, while keeping an absolute distance from contemporary politics.

Teller's collection of *Lider fun der tsayt*, in contrast, is permeated by references to political crises. Starting with "No-Man's-Land" ("Keynems-

11. Glatshiteyn's poem "In royk" forms part of *In zikh: A zamlung introspektive lider* (New York, 1920), pp. 59–60, and *Yankev Glatshiteyn* (New York, 1921), pp. 50–51.

12. "Vild gezang," in Teller, *Durkh yidishn gemit: Lider*, p. 58; this translation is my own. For another English translation of "Wild Song," see Harshav and Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry*, pp. 517–519. A Hebrew translation is contained in Y. L. Teller, *Mivkhar shirim*, trans. Dan Miron (Tel Aviv, 1986), p. 93.

land"), a sequence of poems deals with the aftermath of tragic occurrences. The present analysis deals briefly with "Jews of Brisk Speak" and "Hitler's March into Vienna," and concentrates on two other poems that approach tragedies in Jewish history: "Jud Süß Oppenheimer During His First Visit to Professor Sigmund Freud" and "Sigmund Freud at the Age of Eighty-Two." The difference between these texts comes into sharp focus in the light of the author's newspaper work. In some cases, contemporary events are necessary background for the poems, while in others the imaginative recreation attains an independent status.

Teller reached Warsaw before the pogrom in Brisk (Brest-Litovsk) of May 13, 1937. Although he did not himself witness the destruction, he subsequently visited the town and gave his report to *Der morgn zhurnal*. Teller describes Brisk as he saw it on May 18: "The streets have been cleaned up, but the shops still stand with knocked-out windows, with torn-down doors. The shops look like large dark caves. If you go inside, you still see overturned tables, broken chairs, spilled flour, torn merchandise."¹³ He also records his meeting with a tearful woman and her daughter, whose apartment is empty except for "a broken table and some crates that are being used as chairs." The mother describes what happened:

"They stole everything. . . . But worst of all is that"—and she points to her daughter, a girl who is sitting on a crate in the dark room. She is disheveled and stares straight ahead with vacant eyes. "The *shkotsim* chased her and tore her dress. Suddenly they saw how their friends across the way were robbing a large warehouse. So they ran over there and left my daughter. But since Thursday she won't wash herself or comb her hair. . . . 'I don't want to wash. For whom should I wash, for the *shkotsim*?'"¹⁴

Influenced by the conventions of both fiction and sensationalistic reporting, Teller never employed a merely factual approach; he always dealt with personal experiences, attitudes, or reactions. The course of his journalism suddenly turned, however, when his human-interest stories became part of efforts to grasp an overwhelming historical calamity, the intensification of

13. *Der morgn zhurnal*, May 31, 1937, p. 3. The general title of two articles ran: "Groyl fun der Brisker pogrom vert geshildert in tsvey korespondentsies tsum *Morgn zhurnal*"; the subtitle for Teller's article was "Sheliekh fun *Morgn zhurnal* bazukht Brisk bald nokh di geshehishn."

14. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

anti-Semitism. His poetic development was also marked by mounting tension between personal perception and historical events.

Teller's poem "Jews of Brisk Speak" is a collective monologue, assuming as its implicit point of reference the days after the Brisk pogrom.¹⁵ In the first-person plural, the townspeople describe their efforts to repair the pogrom damage:

We climb up on ladders
With nails between our teeth
And patch the broken frames.

(16–18)

The speakers also discuss their anxiety about wounds that may not heal so readily. One of the most vivid stanzas refers to a traumatized girl like the one described in Teller's news report:

Some wounds still fester.
The widow's daughter
Will rush to boiling water
At the sight of a man.

(30–33)

With sexual violence the unspoken assumption, Teller conveys a girl's sense of being impure and of needing to be cleansed whenever a man looks at her. Rather than merely repeating the journalistic language, the image—of a disturbed, compulsive reaction—reverses Teller's account of a girl who refuses to wash after narrowly escaping rape. In another case, Teller's poem portrays a man who is ashamed of his failure to resist the pogrom: "Yankl Stelmakh will never forgive / The cowardice of his oaken [*dembene*] hands" (34–35). These lines stand in a close relationship to Teller's newspaper description of a man who comments ruefully: "I have hands, I have shoulders, I have strength—but where was I when the *goyim* raged? I hid indoors. . . . I, Yankl Oak [*demb*], went into hiding."¹⁶ Teller combines his

15. "Brisker yidn redn," in Y. L. Teller, *Lider fun der tsayt* (New York, 1940), pp. 38–39, and *Durkh yidishn gemit: Lider*, pp. 100–101. Translations are my own, cited from the original by line alone. For an English translation of the entire poem, entitled "The Jews of Brisk," see Howe et al., *Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, pp. 658–662. A Hebrew translation is contained in Teller, *Mivkhar shirim*, pp. 117–118.

16. *Der morgn zhurnal*, May 31, 1937, p. 8.

diverse impressions and interviews by writing a collective monologue that gives voice to the stunned Jewish community of Brisk. His perspective was no longer that of an individual writer at home in New York, but had expanded to include that of distant pogrom victims.

The most extraordinary of the six sections that compose Teller's *Lider fun der tsayt* is the cycle of six poems entitled "Psychoanalysis." By making Sigmund Freud the subject of these poems, Teller implicitly challenges the great interpreter to explain the catastrophes of the Jewish people in the twentieth century. Teller had studied psychology at Columbia University, and even visited Freud in Vienna during his travels of May 1937.¹⁷ Teller conveys something of this encounter in the first of his "Psychoanalysis" poems, published in October 1937: "Jud Süß Oppenheimer During His First Visit to Professor Sigmund Freud."¹⁸ The persona of Jud Süß echoes Yehuda Leyb Teller's chosen English name: Judd. At the same time, the author displaces his actual meeting onto a fantasy session between this notorious Jewish personage and Freud. Rather than employ the first-person pronoun, then, Teller veils the autobiographical aspect by generalizing his recent encounter. The group portrait merges a multitude of past and present Jews, staging a scene of collective psychoanalysis in which Teller's silent Freud listens to an outcry of the Jewish people in their exilic condition.

Jud Süß Oppenheimer (1698/99–1738) was a court Jew and financial adviser to the duke of Württemberg. In 1925, Lion Feuchtwanger published a popular historical novel, *Jud Süß*, based on his life; an English translation appeared the next year, with an American edition entitled *Power* in 1927. In anti-Semitic propaganda, Jud Süß became a symbol of ruthless Jewish practices.

17. Yael Feldman inaccurately states that Teller visited Freud in 1938; see "Y. L. Teller and the Tradition of Yiddish Imagism" [Hebrew], *Moznaim* 57 (September 1983): 36. Teller refers to his visit of the previous year in *Der morgn zhurnal*, March 14, 1938, p. 3.

18. "Jud Süß Oppenheimer af zayn ershtn bazukh baym Professor Sigmund Freud," first printed in the journal *In zikh*, October 1937, pp. 91–92; collected in *Lider fun der tsayt*, pp. 47–48, and *Durkh yidishn gemit*, pp. 109–111. Translations are my own, cited from the original by line alone. I have consulted the rendering by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav in *American Yiddish Poetry*, pp. 521–523. A shorter version of the poem, entitled "Family Speaks Its Mind Before Professor Sigmund Freud," was collected in the posthumous volume *Durkh yidishn gemit*, p. 112, and translated in Howe et al., *Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, pp. 662–664. A Hebrew translation by Dan Miron is contained in Teller's *Mivkhar shirim*, pp. 122–124.

Teller's figure of Jud Süß broadens the analytic session with Freud, from the outset, by mentioning the Wandering Jew.

That's you—the Wandering Jew.
From Esau's lullaby, from the Gentiles' legend.
And I am your nephew—Jud Süß Oppenheimer.
You prophet, who see far, see clearly, and see through,
Will probably say that I—am not I,
That the one who burns for balls and *shikses*
Is not—Jud Süß.

(1–7)

In this opening stanza, Teller's persona Jud Süß identifies Freud as a representative of the legendary Wandering Jew (*der eybiker yid*), and describes himself as a close relative. Thus the psychoanalysis of Jud Süß suggests an analysis of centuries of European Jewish life. The identity of Jud Süß immediately comes into question when he anticipates Freud's observation that "I—am not I." The unconscious or collective desires of Jud Süß do not conform to his more conscious decisions; he emerges as a symbol of assimilation and the flirtation with Western culture and financial power.

The persona of Jud Süß proceeds to unfold his collective case history:

My lineage: traders in wheat and barley
Who stealthily placed false weights
Onto the scales. . . .

Talmud students who encircled themselves with barbed wire,
And—with fettered steps—
Like prisoners in an inner court,
Skipped inside a circle of negative commandments. . . .

Flatterers who carried the Torah scrolls
In processions to the bishop,
Combed the dust with their beards,
And crawled backwards
Toward him who bears the cross.

All of them—mild shadow-people
From the Gamzu tribe.

(12–14, 18–21, 23–29)

After every mishap, the proverbial Gamzu commented: *Gam zu le-tova*, "Even this is for the best." According to Jud Süß, his ancestors have been willing to cheat, flatter, and imprison themselves within the commandments for the sake of survival. They were "mild shadow-people" who sought to be inconspicuous.

Jud Süß shows a great deal of scorn and self-irony, combined with bewilderment. After painting this portrait he concludes:

And I am Gamzu's descendant.
He was a timid Jew.
And now he stirs up riots in my dreams,
Steals my voice for blasphemies,
And wants to claim his pound of flesh.

(30–34)

Gamzu returns to haunt his rebellious heir, as Jud Süß inhabits Teller's poem. The poetic voice denounces both the dishonesty and the passivity he perceives in Jewish life; repressed desires rise up against the Gamzu tradition. Unable to merely continue in the line of his ancestors, Teller's Jud Süß also recalls Shakespeare's vengeful Shylock. Following the continual waves of anti-Semitism, Jud Süß proclaims a break in the tradition of acceptance. The eighteenth-century personality next takes on Teller's perspective in 1937, anachronistically or emblematically referring to twentieth-century pogroms in Kishinev, Proskurov, and Brisk:

In the wee hours with a Gentile girl,
He [Gamzu] conjures up my violated sisters
(Kishinev, Proskurov, Brisk),
And my limbs rage to rape.

(35–38)

Even apart from this anachronism, Jud Süß sounds like the poet-psychologist Teller when he comments: "The still-unspoken syllable terrifies me, / That which I never yet have guessed" (39–40). Freud's "talking cure" traced mental illnesses to unacknowledged thoughts, wishes, traumas, longings. Thus the poem, analogous to a psychoanalysis process of free association, strives to overcome resistances and facilitate expression of what has been repressed.

Until this point, the mock-psychoanalytic interview places Sigmund

Freud in a position to interpret Jud Süß. The timeless character of this imaginary encounter emerges as Teller's Jud Süß depicts Freud as a medieval miracle-worker: "They say that at night / You mix herbs in boiling water" (45–46). Here and at the start of the poem, Jud Süß addresses Freud as the Wandering Jew, associating psychoanalysis with myths of the Jew "in Gentile legend" (2). In his first visit to Freud, then, Jud Süß turns the tables and begins to analyze the professor, figured as a medieval healer. Later identifying Freud with the biblical Joseph, who interpreted Pharaoh's dreams as prophesying famine, the poem asks Freud to play the prophetic role he always refused:

The dream is gnawing at me,
As the sea devours the land.
You who see clearly, see through,
Take me like grains in your fist,
Or like an egg against the light. . . .

Interpreter of dreams.
Draw from me a stalk.
Try me
Like barley at a fair.

(41–44, 51–54)

Interpretation is itself an issue in Teller's poems: they invoke Freud as the master of dreams who should be able to discover the meaning of cultural phenomena. In the Nazi period, however, Jud Süß can no longer rest content with knowledge of the origins and ancestry of "civilization and its discontents." This persona poem calls on the father of psychoanalysis to explain this moment of crisis, or at least to interpret the violent way in which "I," the Wandering Jew's nephew and Gamzu's grandson, feel compelled to respond.

Through the imagined voice of Jud Süß Oppenheimer, Teller probes the interrelationships between himself, Freud, and Judaic traditions. This poem is Teller's invocation to the vanquished Freud at the same time that it merges the Viennese Freud with the legend of the Wandering Jew. A latter version of the poem asserts that "we are of one lineage."¹⁹ Teller apparently

19. See Yehuda Leyb Teller, "Family Speaks Its Mind Before Sigmund Freud," in *Durkh yidishn gemit*, p. 112, line 16.

identifies with the characters in his poem, and brings them together in an effort to come to terms with anti-Semitic destruction.

Not until almost a year after his actual meeting with Freud, on the occasion of the *Anschluss*, did Teller produce newspaper articles about Freud and the Jews in Vienna. The New York Yiddish newspapers followed the news from Vienna with banner headlines, and emphasized the Jews' precarious position. On March 13, 1938, the front-page headline of *Der morgn zhurnal* ran: "HITLER PROCLAIMS AUSTRIA'S ANSCHLUSS WITH GERMANY." The next day the headline announced: "AUSTRIA BECOMES A STATE IN HITLER'S EMPIRE / HITLER BEGINS TO IMPLEMENT DECREES AGAINST THE JEWS OF AUSTRIA." On March 15, the headline concentrated entirely on the Jews' situation: "ANTI-JEWISH LAWS ARE PROCLAIMED IN AUSTRIA." The next day brought the news: "AUSTRIAN JEWS ARE DEPRIVED OF CITIZENSHIP." The synopsis in large type includes the (incorrect) report that "Famous Scholar Freud [is] Among those Arrested." The article, not by Teller, begins: "Vienna, Tuesday—The entire force of the Nazi catastrophe that has occurred in Austria has fallen upon the Jews. The Nazis have never before shown such brutality in Germany itself as they now do to the Jews of Austria." And the far-right column contains a photograph of Freud with the caption: "Dr. Sigmund Freud / Famous Jewish Scholar Arrested in Vienna." The story goes on to refer to the "82-year-old famous Jewish psychiatrist, Professor Sigmund Freud, who is so ill that his family had withheld from him the news concerning the Nazification of Austria."²⁰ Such reports led Glants-Leyel to publish an essay in *Der tog* on March 19, with the title: "Sigmund Freud under Hitler's Swastika."²¹ They no doubt also inspired Teller to write the poem "Sigmund Freud at the Age of Eighty-Two."

Immediately following the *Anschluss* with Germany, *Der morgn zhurnal* printed an article by Teller entitled "The Jewish Community of Vienna, Which Now Stands in the Shadow of Hitlerism."²² Teller did not witness the Nazis' arrival, and he could only invoke salient, representative images: "The

boots of the storm troopers tread upon the streets of Vienna. Austrian women already walk arm-in-arm with the conquerors. Swastikas flutter above all the buildings." The remainder of the article recalls the history and current state of the Jewish community in Vienna. Teller describes Chassidic courts alongside anti-Semitism and poverty under the Schuschnigg regime. Several aspects of Teller's portrait are also present in a contemporary poem he wrote, "Hitler's March into Vienna." His newspaper article refers to Vienna's traditional role as leading city of Galicia, Hungary, and Bohemia: "Jewish students, bookkeepers with *tsvikers af der noz* and with leather purses under their arms, dreamed of studying at the University of Vienna." Similarly, the poem calls Vienna the "dream-city of Galician students / With *tsvikers af der noz*."²³ The news account describes the second district, Leopoldstadt: "That area is from older times, from ghetto times. . . . The signs—a mixture of *loshn koydesh* and *daytshmerish*." These signs also haunt the poem, creating "fumes of *daytshmerish*, Torah, and trade" (17). Even more striking is the poem's subsequent image: "Alleys with grotesque lights and shadows / Search for the Wailing Wall" (18–19). This allusion to the Jerusalem *koysl-maarovi* corresponds to a sentence in the newspaper account: "The streets and alleys in this area are medieval, and wander up and downhill, as if they were searching for the Wailing Wall."²⁴ The parallels attest to the close interaction between the author's poetic and prose writing. Yet it is impossible to determine whether the poem or the news report was written first; it is as true to say that the poem contains journalistic elements as that the news report contains poetic elements. In other words, the language of the two juxtaposed texts is continuous rather than diametrically opposed.

Toward the end of the same article, Teller recalls his visit to Berggasse during May 1937.

I remember a day in the office of Professor Sigmund Freud. A small man, with a stone-gray face, with clever Jewish eyes and a vest buttoned up to his tie. The great psychologist, the great expert on the soul, the seer [*choze*] of human depths. He dropped a remark about Vienna: "It is a city whose senses are

20. *Der morgn zhurnal*, March 16, 1938, p. 6. In fact, Freud was eighty-one.

21. A. Glants, "Sigmund Freud unter Hitlers svastika," *Der tog*, March 19, 1938, pp. 3 and 7.

22. Y. L. Teller, "Di yidishe kehile in Vin vos shteyt ist untern shotn fun hitlerizm," *Der morgn zhurnal*, March 14, 1938, p. 3.

23. "Hitlers araynmarsh keyn Vin," in *Lider fun der tsayt*, pp. 31–33, and in *Durkh yidishn gemit*, pp. 94–95, lines 45–46. Henceforth cited by line alone. The word *tsvikers* apparently refers to *pince-nez*.

24. *Der morgn zhurnal*, March 14, 1938, p. 3.

already completely dulled. Such a condition borders on madness." Nazi rule—that is the madness that hung over Vienna like a nightmare even a year ago.

Later in the week of the *Anschluss*, Teller wrote another article for *Der morgn zhurnal*: "Freud a Thorn to the Nazis in Vienna as was Einstein in Berlin."²⁵ The article expresses Teller's reactions to news that Freud's house had been searched by the Nazis and that he had been arrested. The Nazis claimed to be searching for "weapons" in the psychoanalyst's home; Teller ironically comments that "Freud's works are the greatest weapons against Hitlerism. Whoever is familiar with Freud's interpretation of mental life can easily understand the apparent riddle of Hitler." Teller then attempts a brief psychoanalytic explanation of Hitler and Nazism.

The last in this series of articles appeared when news arrived that Freud had escaped Austria and had arrived safely in London. *Der tog* marked the event with an editorial on June 7, 1938, together with an essay by Glants-Leyeles: "Sigmund Freud's Revenge."²⁶ The following day, in *Der morgn zhurnal*, Teller also returned to this subject: "Sigmund Freud, Driven Out of Vienna by the Nazis."²⁷ Teller begins his article with a paragraph suggesting the way in which a future biographer will conclude his "description of Freud's last years": "Unable to stand the air in Hitlerized Vienna, Professor Freud left the city on June 4, 1938. . . . He left Vienna without financial means and with a study on the Bible in the light of psychoanalysis." The article continues in Teller's own voice:

Vienna never appreciated Sigmund Freud. . . . Freud never devoted himself to political activity; he almost never came out with a political statement. . . . The most pathetic thing in the dispatches about Freud's departure from Vienna was the remark that lately he had avoided walking on the streets of Vienna because he was afraid that someone might call him names [*zidlen*]. Freud and fear—they don't go together. All of psychoanalysis is the science of courage. . . . The great, bold spirit, Sigmund Freud, was afraid to go out onto the

25. Y. L. Teller, "Freud a dorn di Nazis in Vin vi Einstein iz geven in Berlin," *Der morgn zhurnal*, March 17, 1938, p. 3 and 10; the identical essay was reprinted in the same newspaper on the following day, possibly as the result of an editorial error.

26. A. Glants, "Sigmund Freuds nekome," *Der tog*, June 7, 1938, p. 6.

27. Y. L. Teller, "Sigmund Freud vemen Nazis hobn fartribn fun Vin," *Der morgn zhurnal*, June 8, 1938, p. 7.

streets of Vienna! . . . It seems that the barbarism on the Viennese streets is more horrible than the barbarism which Freud discovered in the mythology of ancient peoples.

Several details in Teller's "Psychoanalysis" cycle draw from these observations, especially in regard to the elements of name-calling and fear. Other significant points of contact are the remarks concerning Freud's apolitical stance and his "study on the Bible."²⁸

Soon after Freud's eighty-second birthday, Teller published the poem entitled "Sigmund Freud at the Age of Eighty-Two."²⁹ He now imagines Freud one year following their meeting, after the Nazis had invaded Vienna. The occasion was less Freud's birthday (on May 6, 1938) than the *Anschluss* two months earlier, and the subsequent harassment and persecution of Austrian Jews.³⁰ Teller leaves New York behind in order to imagine the situation and mental state of Sigmund Freud at the time of Hitler's march into Austria. The opening strikes a dreamy, unreal note, employing rhythmic lines that alternate between pentameter and tetrameter, iambs and troches. This metrical irregularity, in a sequence of one-line sentences, gives the impression of troubled fragmentation.

Birds scream with Mama's voice.
Papa throws himself beneath the wheels.
A frog crawls out of the young boy's hair,
Do you recall the dream of little Sigmund?

(1–4)

Alluding to both Freud's childhood and his professional case studies, the poem prepares the scene of the Nazis' arrival. The first line hints at an anxiety dream that Freud retells in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900): "It was quite vivid and showed *my beloved mother with a peculiarly calm, sleep-*

28. Teller alludes to *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* [1937–39], collected in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 16 (London, 1950), pp. 101–246.

29. "Sigmund Freud tsu tsvey un akhtsik yor," first published by *Inzikh*, June 1938, pp. 142–143; collected in Teller, *Lider fun der tsayt*, pp. 54–55, and *Durkh yidishn gemit*, pp. 118–120. Translations are my own, compared with "Sigmund Freud at the Age of Eighty-Two," in Harshav and Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry*, pp. 529–533.

30. For an account of the Nazis' entry into Freud's house, see Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud* (New York, 1957), vol. 3, pp. 218–219.

ing facial expression, being carried into the room and placed onto the bed by two (or three) people with birds' beaks."³¹ Freud recalls that he dreamed this at the age of seven or eight, influenced by depictions of Egyptian gods with bird beaks in the Philippson Bible. Teller significantly begins his poem of an historical trauma, then, by referring to the anxious "dream of little Sigmund." The distance between Freud's dream (1863–64) and his interpretation is reproduced in the gap between Freud's published interpretation (1900) and Teller's allusion (1938). With five succinct words, Teller suggests that now, at the age of eighty-two, Freud is thrown back to his childish nightmares. Even if he has learned to interpret phobias, such as in the case of Little Hans³²—to which Teller alludes in the subsequent lines—Freud cannot escape a partial return to an almost childish helplessness and fear.

The poem next describes the aging master, initially from the standpoint of his rational self-control:

Now, at the age of eighty-two,
His nights are dry and clear
And grate with silence.
Sleep has been purified;
The complexes smoked out.

Every fear is shackled.
Every fright is bolted up.

(5–11)

Through his self-analysis, Freud has presumably worked through his own neuroses and resolved his unconscious conflicts. In connection with the anxiety dream he relates, the middle-aged Freud even comments that he has not had any dreams of this kind for decades. As the poem asserts, "To subjugate oneself is more / Than Charcot's hypnosis" (51–52). This paraphrases a Freudian view: hypnosis cannot cure underlying conflicts, which instead demand more thorough treatment by the psychoanalytic "talking cure."

31. Translated from chap. 7, sec. D, of Sigmund Freud's *Die Traumdeutung*, in the *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2/3 (London, 1942), p. 589. Compare Miron's comments in his introduction to Teller's *Mivkhar shirim*, p. 51.

32. See Sigmund Freud, "Analyse der Phobie eines fünfjährigen Knaben" (1909), in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 7 (London, 1941), pp. 243–377. The first English translation was published in Freud's *Collected Papers*, trans. Alice Strachey and James Strachey (London, 1925).

Teller's poem questions basic Freudian assumptions. Psychoanalysis, as Freud envisioned it, is largely ahistorical, apolitical, and relatively unconcerned with cultural differences. "Sigmund Freud at the Age of Eighty-Two" shows the limitations of this attitude, in light of the Nazis' rise to power. Beyond self-control, other forces threaten destruction.

But in the eaves of nightly rest
Rustles the fear of death.
Like birds in flight, like wind among the trees,
Everyone has grasped it:
Patriarchs, warriors, and holy men.

(12–16)

Even Freud's methods cannot abolish the noxious aspects of human experience, such as the dark impulses Freud called *thanatos*. While Freud himself chose to associate his young science with Greek myths, Teller situates the more primordial fears in a biblical context, referring to the last days of Isaac, beguiled by his son Jacob.

Not even Rebekah did the blind Isaac trust;
Wisely did the aging Jacob speak,
And tears filled up his eyes
When he wanted to enliven his old thigh
With the touch of Joseph's young hand.

(17–21)

These biblical references to Isaac and Jacob place the aged Freud in narrative contexts that underline the weakness associated with old age. "Joseph's young hand" is also the hand and power of the biblical dream interpreter with whom Freud sometimes identified.³³

In this instance, Freud encounters a danger that is far more specific than the universal struggle against death. According to Teller's fantasy, based on reports that Freud was afraid to leave his home lest he be called names, the appearance of the Nazis in Vienna forces upon Freud a new recognition. Teller's Freud has been sheltered from the political news, yet he senses the disaster when he looks out from his window.

33. See *Die Traumdeutung*, chap. 6, sec. H, in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2/3, p. 488n.

It is not death. To trail death boldly
 He has already learned
 To gird up his loins,
 Locking his knees in armor.

It is something else, and just as old.
 By day he peered out from his window,
 Saw the saluting hands.
 The Swastika. He smelled with his shrewd nose
 The old bad blood
 In young Aryan louts.

(22–31)

The poetic voice explodes the narrow, psychoanalytic world-view by imagining Freud's predicament in Vienna. This encounter with Nazism epitomizes the crisis of world Jewry in the twentieth century. Teller tries to imagine Freud's state of mind between March and May 1938, confronted by a force of evil that is directed against him precisely as a Jew. The reference to "young Aryan louts" (*yunge arier-shkotsim*) provides direction for the remainder of the poem: in Teller's imagination, Freud's gaze has alighted on the Nazi youths who were brought to Vienna in trainloads to salute Hitler's triumphal march.

The subsequent lines of the poem represent Freud's reactions. He reverts to traditional, often pejorative epithets, repeatedly employed by Jews in reference to Gentiles. As if to counter the anti-Semitic clichés leveled against the Jews, Freud returns to stereotypical Hebrew and Yiddish words of separation and scorn:

Shkotsim. In Hebrew-Jüdisch-Yiddish
 Those whose name he bears have
 Chewed the word like *matse*, kneaded it like *khale*.
 Braided it like a candle for *havdole*—
Orl, Esau, *Goy*.

(32–35)

Teller's Freud—despite his enlightened science of psychoanalysis and his Viennese culture—can only fall back on an archaic litany that separates him from non-Jews. Apart from this language of scorn, the poem insists on

numerous contacts between Judaic origins and Freud in Vienna. Referring to Freud's psychoanalytic theories, Teller writes that

As Adam named the animals, he named every malice,
 Wrote his own commentary
 On Cain and Abel and the binding of Isaac.
 But now, like the Patriarch who relished his son's fresh catch,
 He appreciates the simple Hebrew-Yiddish:
Orl, Esau, *Goy*.

(36–41)

Freud's psychological "commentary" (literally his "Rashi," *an eygenem Rashi*) provides novel explanations for Cain's hostility and Abraham's near-sacrifice. He is like the aging Isaac who blesses Jacob instead of the firstborn Esau, thus intensifying—at least in a rabbinic tradition—the archetypal dichotomy between Jews and non-Jews. With the return of anti-Semitism, Teller's Freud reappropriates the ancient terms by which Jews have separated themselves from inhospitable surroundings. The poem ends with Freud the rationalist expressing his hatred of the Nazis:

Sigmund Freud at the age of eighty-two
 Climbs out of the Swastikas, repeats:
 Haman. *Orl*, Esau, *Goy*.

(53–56)

Even the self-analyzed Freud, with his "complexes smoked out," rises to the occasion with a vigorous response to the Nazi intruders. Teller projects upon Freud a radical turn that is analogous to the new tone of Teller's poetry.

Early in 1941, in connection with Teller's third book of poems, Shmuel Niger referred to the change that was occurring in Yiddish letters: "Those who demand relevance from poetry, who want the poet to get involved in politics, and who maintain that he must react—at least to major, extraordinary events of the time—can have no complaints with today's Yiddish poets. With the exception of Mani Leyb, all of them write *Poems of the Age* [*Lider fun der tsayt*] or simply occasional poems [*tsayt-lider*]." ³⁴ An entire

generation of poets gave expression to its traumatic encounter with the return of anti-Semitic violence.

Recurring phrases, motifs, images, and experiences associate Teller's poetry and journalism. Teller was intensely aware of the growing anti-Semitism and made it a primary theme of his verse and prose. He particularly identified with the educated, assimilated Jews of Vienna, of whom Freud was the foremost representative. In his efforts to grasp the meaning of recent events, he invoked the interpreter Freud, at the same time questioning whether—under present circumstances—Freud would have to modify his psychoanalytic outlook. Freud's apolitical posture had become increasingly untenable; Teller wrote poems that drew the political crises inward, to their center.

Teller's literary work in the late 1930s is an extreme case of the interdependence of journalism and poetry. Numerous poems relate directly to articles published in *Der morgen zhurnal* between 1937 and 1939; even more effective are the poems in the "Psychoanalysis" cycle, which convey the historical and journalistic background indirectly. Ephraim Auerbach acknowledged that Teller was occasionally successful in *Lider fun der tsayt*, but he objected that journalism rarely benefits poems: "The journalistic reality is much stronger than journalistic poetry, and therefore, it seems to me, poetry must distance itself from journalism with ten years of fantasy, in order to be able to look into it afterwards with eyes that see deeper, and glimpse eternity in events."³⁵ Sometimes an actual phrase or image recurs in poetic and journalistic texts, but Teller was most original and successful when events gave rise to highly mediated inspirations.

Teller's *Lider fun der tsayt* demonstrates the benefits and hazards of a poet's close dependence on historical occurrences. On the one hand, Teller was able to reestablish the link between Jewish literature and history that had been challenged by the introspectivists; on the other hand, his verse was sometimes overburdened by the immediacy of its response.³⁶ Auerbach suggests that poetic imagery can add little to the sensational effect created by factual reports. Yet Teller accomplishes imaginative transformations of

enduring significance in his poems dealing with Sigmund Freud and Jud Süß. Beyond merely employing journalistic details in his poems, he incorporates Freud into an elaborate mythology, a reworking of Jewish history. Even where verse and prose employ identical verbal constructions, the context alters their meaning. Moreover, only a relatively small number of Teller's news articles have echoes in his poetry; a strict principle of selection was at work. And in some cases the poetic text had priority: Teller did not write a prose account of his first visit to Freud until five months after he published his poem on Jud Süß during his first visit to Freud.

As poet and journalist, Y. L. Teller produced some of the most incisive and committed American-Yiddish writing in the period leading to the Second World War. While other New York poets reacted to history in general terms, Teller created directly and indirectly from his unusual travels in 1937 and 1939. Teller cultivated a style of news reporting that focused on individual perceptions, and simultaneously wrote poetry that was increasingly based on subjective voices under the impression of catastrophe. Disparate literary forms came together in *Lider fun der tsayt*, and collided with such force that—perhaps for lack of any clear means to reconcile the *tsayt* with the *lider*, or the times and timelessness—this book in effect marked the end of Teller's poetic career at the age of twenty-eight.

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34. *Der tog*, March 9, 1941. Quoted from the collection of critical appreciations in Teller, *Durkh yidishn gemit*, p. 237.

35. Ephraim Auerbach, "Af der vogshol," *Der morgn zhurnal*, December 10, 1940, p. 4.

36. See Miron's introduction to his edition of Teller's poems, *Mivkhar shirim*, pp. 16 and 60.