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HOME AND HOMELESSNESS IN THE POETRY OF ROKHL KORN, 1898-1982

The exodus of Jews from Europe, both during and after World War II, brought a host of Yiddish writers to Canada. Among those who came between 1941 and 1948,[i] the most prominent was Rokhl Korn—poet, essayist, and writer of short stories. Her arrival in Montreal in 1948 was greeted with joy and anticipation by Yiddish writers and intellectuals from across Canada and the U.S. Marking the occasion, J.I.Segal, the well-known Yiddish poet, wrote: "This is possibly the first time in the history of Yiddish cultural life in Montreal and perhaps the first time in the entire history of Yiddish literature, that a Yiddish poet is greeted by so many well known colleagues with such excitement and wonder."[ii] Characterizing her work as a living link between a war torn Europe and Canada, Segal anticipated that both her arrival and her international reputation as a poet would establish Montreal as vital centre of Yiddish literary activity.

Segal noted not only her amazing survival from the Nazis and the Soviets, but also lauded her talent as "a Yiddish woman poet," writing in a field which for the most part had been dominated by men. Korn, however, resisted Segal's narrow characterization of her as "a Yiddish woman poet." She wanted, instead, to be more broadly recognized as "a Yiddish poet." This was despite the fact that, during the 1920s, she and many of her female counterparts had published erotic love poems, an activity which was perceived by male critics of that time as characteristic of "female" poets who were more interested

in narrow and personal topics than in aesthetic literary issues that were becoming the hallmark of modernism.

The widespread controversy concerning Yiddish women poets came to a head in the late 1920s, with the publication of an anthology, *Yidishe dikhterins* (Yiddish Women Writers [Chicago, 1928]), editied by Ezra Korman. The male critical response to this literary breakthrough was especially telling. Citing Melekh Ravitch's article, "Meydlekh, froyen, vayber—Yidishe dikhterins" (Girls, women, wives—Yiddish poetesses), the critic Anita Norich has argued that "Ravitch sexualized the discussions about women, [by] referring to chastity, seduction, flirtation, fecundity." Norich also cites Sh. Niger's dismissive comments that many of these female poets "might have been able to do more useful things." Norich further notes that mothers continued to be seen, almost exclusively, as a conservative force in Yiddish life, holding "home and tradition intact."[3]

Decades after the publication of this anthology, in 2008, Avraham Novershtern, in "The Voices and the Choir,"[4] analyzed the poems of three prominent Yiddish poets of the inter-war period, one of whom was Rokhl Korn. Novershtern also challenges the implication that Korman's anthology had raised, namely, that the poetry of Yiddish women poets that had emerged between the two World Wars represented a distinctive literary corpus.

In discussing Korn's poetry, Novershtern first divides it into two main categories: village poems and love poems, noting that these two themes appear both in her pre-Holocaust and post-Holocaust collections. Novershtern also makes note of the fact that in her pre-Holocaust collections, these two themes appear together, with the love poems positioned first, whereas in her post-Holocaust oeuvre, they are located in two separate collections. He points out that most of her village poems appear together in a larger collection, *Heym un heymlozikayt* (Home and Homelessness [1948]), while her love poems appear in a far smaller collection entitled *Bashertkayt* (Fate [1949]). In a close comparison of these two themes, Novershtern notes that

the characters in the village poetry have no real emotional bond to one another; only a bond to the land, one that arises out of necessity. He also describes the atmosphere in the village poems as heavy, even arid, and their literary tone, detached. He contrasts this with the love poems in which an emotional bond exists between the characters. Here, the atmosphere is richer, more optimistic, and the tone is far more personal.

Interestingly, Korn's village poems were what had established her literary reputation in Poland prior to World War II. Indeed, the Yiddish literary critics of that time considered these village poems to be especially innovative, as did Korn's later critics. Her love poems, however, attracted considerably less critical interest throughout her entire career.

While I am essentially in agreement with Novershtern's division of Korn's poetry into these two thematic groups, I would argue that Korn ultimately succeeds in fusing the village theme and the love theme. This becomes especially evident in two of her poems: "Mayn heym" ("My Home") and "Fun yener zayt lid" ("On the Other Side of the Poem"). The first poem was originally published in 1936 in the collection, *Royter mon* (Red Poppies) and re-published in 1948 in the collection, *Heym un heymlozikayt* (Home and Homelessness). *Fun yener zayt lid*, the second poem was published in 1962 in a collection bearing the same name.

Together, these two poems not only capture and intricately interweave the most significant and characteristic features of Korn's village and love poems, but also enable her, poetically, to recapture and reconstruct the dislocation, destruction, and despair that had marked much of her life.

The extraordinary poetic creativity that is so evident in these two poems had its roots not only in Korn's early childhood but also in her subsequent and highly turbulent history. In her post-Holocaust essays and interviews,[5] Korn, born in 1898, attributes the source of her poetic talent to her upbringing on a rural estate, Sucha Gora (Dry Mountain), located near the village of Podliski in East Galicia. There, to ameliorate

her loneliness, she treated the objects of the natural world that surrounded her as friends and playmates. Her parents were prosperous and owned farmland that had been in the possession of the family for generations. After her father's death when Korn was 10 years old, her mother took over the running of the estate. Korn was 16 when WWI broke out in 1914. The family escaped to Vienna where they lived until 1918, when the War ended. They then moved to the town of Przemysl in Poland, where they lived until 1941.

Korn, whose mother tongue was Yiddish, had also been tutored in Hebrew. She made her literary debut in Polish in 1918 and, as well, had studied Polish classical literature. Not long afterwards, she met Hersh Korn, a doctor, who introduced her to Yiddish as a literary language. In 1918 a Polish mob pillaged the Jewish quarter of Lemberg (now Lviv, Ukraine). During the next year, pogroms increased in frequency and antisemitism intensified. Shocked by these events, Korn, vowing never again to write in Polish, began writing in Yiddish.

When Germany invaded Poland in 1941, Korn happened to be in Lemberg, visiting her daughter Irene. Luckily, they escaped together to the Soviet Union. Sadly, however, Korn was forced to leave her husband and other family members behind, all of whom later perished in the War. The War years sent Korn and her daughter wandering eastward thousands of miles across Soviet Russia, suffering hunger and sickness along the way. On their arrival in Moscow in 1944, Korn found herself welcomed by the most important Soviet writers of that time. It was during her two years in Moscow that Korn wrote some of her most powerful poems.

In 1946, she and Irene returned briefly to Poland. Not wishing to remain, however, they moved first to Sweden and, in 1948, to Canada. Korn settled in Montreal with her daughter, now married, and her son-in-law. There she remained until her death in 1982.

The two poems I have selected have been translated into English by Seymour Levitan and appear in *Paper Roses*

(1985)[6]. I shall first discuss "Mayn heym" (My Home), which represents a shift from the village locus to the cityscape.

"Mayn heym" ("My Home") illustrates how Korn grappled poetically with the deeply felt events of her life during and after WWI—the rise in antisemitism in the 1930s and the loss of her village home. It also reveals her efforts to find a strong personal voice to rail against the experience of homelessness.

מײַן היים

מײַן מאַמע האָט צעטיילט אירע יאָרן
צווישן הונדערט יאָך פֿעלד און אירע דרײַ קינדער.
עס האָבן זיך אירע אײַנזאַמע, יונג־אלמנה־נעכט
געבערגלט מיט טרוימען פֿון געריטענעש זאַטן
און אונדזערע קײַלעכדיקע, רויטע קינדער־בעקלעך.
אירע שעהען, ווי בינען האָבן געזשומעט מיט טויזנטער זאָרגן,
און ס׳האָט איר אַרבעטספֿולער טאָג
געצייכנט דעם זונווּעג פֿון פֿרימאָרגן ביז אָוונט
מיט ריטשקעלעך שווייס אויף איר פּנים.
דורך אירע שבתים איז געפֿלאָסן, ווי געשעפּטשעטע תּפֿילה
די האָפֿנונג פֿון צעכוואַליעט־געלע טײַכן תבואה,
און איר האַרץ, ווי אַ ליפּ
האָט אויסטרינקען געוואָלט די שוואַרצע האָגל־כמאַרעס,
וועלכע האָבן גאָר אָפֿט אין זומערדיקע טעג
זיך אַרויפֿגערוקט אויף אונדז פֿון אונטערן וואַלד,
ווי צערייצטע, שווער לייביקע קי–
געוואָלט צעטרעטן די וועלט אונטער זיך
און יענע פֿופֿצן יאָך פֿון צײַטיק־געלן ווייץ,
וואָס איז געשטאַנען נישט באַוואָרנט אונטער פֿרײַען הימל,
בלויז מיט זאַנגען, ווי מיט גראָבע און הילפֿלאָזע פֿינגער
געטיילט אַרויף אין שרעק און דערשטוינונג.

און אַז ס׳האָט דער ערשטער, פֿאַרנער ווינט,
ווי אַ קאַץ פֿאַרטייעטער צום שפּרונג
אויפֿגעהויבן פֿון דער ערד די היץ
ביז צו די ביימער־שפּיצן,
און אַ ריס געטון די ערשטע, בלאָנדע זאַנג

פֿון מאַנדעלן מיט קאָרן,
וואָס זענען געגאַנגען אין מיטן פֿון פֿעלד,
ווי אַ שורה געגנדז צום קלייַנעם, בלאָען טײַכל פֿונעם הימל,
אײַנגעקלעמטן צווישן ברייטע ברעגעס פֿון די כמאַרעס–
האָט זי אונדז באַהאַלטן דעמאָלט ערגעץ אין אַ ווינקל,
וויַט פֿון פֿענצטער בליץ־צעאַקערטע, פֿון קוימענס און טירן,
און ס׳האָט זיך שוין איר קול געראַנגלט מיטן שטורעם
בײַם צונויפֿרופֿן פֿון פֿעלד ס׳בהמות מיט די היטער ...

עס האָט איר האַרץ געבלוטיקט מיט אַ יעדן צוויַג,
וואָס ווילדע שקצים האָבן אָפּגעבראָכן אינעם סאָד,
אַזוי ווי דעמאָלט, ווען זי האָט דערזען מײַן האַק־צעשפּאָלטענע באַק
אונטערן סאַמע אויג.

נאָר ס׳איז אומזיסט געווען איר גאַנצע מי און זאָרג,
עס ווינען הײַנט שוין פֿרעמדע מענטשן אין מײַן היים–
פֿון וואָהאָניעס ברייט־צעאַקערט אונטער בוראַקעס און קלעע
זענען איצט געוואָרן שמאָלע פּויערן־בייטלעך,
וואָס קומען מיט איעדן זומער נענטער צו דער שוועל פֿון הויז
אויף דאַרע פֿיס פֿון די פֿאַסאָליע־טיקעס.

איך האָב געהערט, אַז ס׳פֿעלט איבער דער שטאָל אַ האַלבער דאַך,
און ס׳זענען אַ ל ע קאַרשנביימער אויגעפֿרוירן אינעם סאָד.
ס׳האָט אָבער נישט געקענט, ס׳האָט נישט געטאָרט זײַן אַנדערש–
מיך האָט אַוועקגעיאָגט מײַן אומרו פֿון מײַן היים,
פֿון גרינע לאָנקעס און פֿון קאַרשנביימער
אין שטעט, וואָס ברענען מיט אַספֿאַלט די פֿיס אַפֿילו דורך דעם
שטאַרקסטן לעדער.

עס איז מײַן לעבן, ווי אַ הויז אָן פֿענצטער און אָן טירן,
פֿרײַ פֿאַר אַלע ווינטן און פֿאַר אַלע שטורעמס,
און מײַן האַרץ, ווי אַ ליפֿ,
וויל אויסטרינקען די שוואַרצע כמאַרעס איבער קוימענס פֿון
פֿאַבריקן,
וואָס האָגלען מיט האַרטע טראָפּנס מענטשן־שוויַיס
און רעגענען מיט קינדערישע טרערן.

"Mayn heym" (My Home) begins from the perspective of the poet-narrator as an adult child: "My mother divided her years between her fields and her three children." Linking mother and nature to evoke the mother as a tender of children and fields, Korn plays on the similarity of sound between the words *yor* (year) and *yokh* (yoke) in the Yiddish to evoke the hardship and endurance associated with an environment which only erratically delivers "full harvest and round cheeks." The first several lines recall the ties between the human and the natural worlds apparent in some of her earlier village poems and evoke an atmosphere of growth and harmony. Soon, however, the poem begins to unfold the danger of a nature grown less fecund. Burdened by her concerns, the mother eases her worries with Sabbath prayers. With her "heart like a lip" and, holding up her hands to pray, she tries "to drink up the storm," i.e., to absorb the threat posed by the natural world. However, nature grows ever more violent. The mother, in hushed voice, can no longer protect her land and her children from the ravaging storm, for nature, now a force of destruction, cannot be absorbed by traditional prayer. Undaunted, the mother seeks another resource. Becoming one with the storm, she challenges its destructive power with a force of her own, releasing her strong voice to compete with its thundering power. But the struggle between mother and nature ends, along with her hopes, when some local boys destroy the branches in the orchard. At this moment, "her heart bled as it bled for me when I was hit by an ax and she saw the split in my cheek under the eye."

After a break in the poem's continuity, the poet-narrator continues: "But all her [her] trouble and worry were useless, strangers live in my home." Separated from mother, from nurture, from nature and from home, the poet-narrator laments: "I've heard that half the barn roof is gone-that all the cherry trees froze-it is no longer home." The natural world as dwelling place has been destroyed by human violence and has left the speaker alone and unprotected: "my life is like a house with-

out windows or doors open to all winds and all storms." Now unmoored, the poet-narrator ends the poem, reiterating, but in a new way: "my heart like a lip wants to drink up the black clouds over the factory chimneys that hail hard drops of human sweat and rain childish tears." Now located in a modern urban world of darker industrial forces and, like her mother, with a "heart like a lip," the poet-narrator wants "to drink up the black clouds over the factory chimneys." The poet-narrator, however, seeks to drink up a far darker threat than did the mother, in order to respond both to the forces of human destruction and the experience of homelessness. Thus threatened by the loss of harmony with nature, aggression, and her dislocation from home, the poet-narrator distances herself from prayer, the traditional form of consolation. Instead, finds another form of consolation: her now strong voice.

In "Fun yener zayt lid" (On the Other Side of the Poem), published in a 1962 collection of the same name, the focus is on loss and destruction. It condenses features that are evident in many of Korn's other poems, including those found in "Mayn heym" (My Home). Here, the poet-narrator returns to depictions of the now vanished village, to the figure of the mother, and to the creative force of the voice. The poem is:

> Dedicated to the hallowed memory of my mother Khane Bas Rivke. My mother, was the most committed listener of my early poems. She cried with me as I wrote about the terrible lot of the poor and the shamed. She always hoped that I would dedicate a collection to her in her lifetime, but that was not her destiny. She lies somewhere in a forest with a German bullet in her heart, a heart that was filled with love to man and animal alike, to field and forest and every tiny blade of grass. My poems are a living legacy to her life cut short too early.[7]

The title of the poem suggests that Korn's aim was to extend the borders of the poem to "the other side." Formally tighter and more economical than her earlier works, the poem

incorporates the tragedy of the Holocaust and the pain of exile. It also broadens its borders so as to include what has been destroyed. In this way, Korn seeks to remember what had died, while yet keeping the two worlds separate. Eventually, however, the power of her mother's creative voice thrusts the poet-narrator back into the side of the living, leaving the dead behind.

פֿון יענער זײַט ליד

פֿון יענער זײַט ליד איז אַ סאָד פֿאַראַן
און אין סאָד אַ הויז מיט אַ שטרויענעם דאַך—
עס שטייען דרײַ סאָסנעס און שווײַגן זיך אויס
דרײַ שומרים אויף שטענדיקער וואַך.

פֿון יענער זײַט ליד איז אַ פֿויגל פֿאַראַן,
אַ פֿויגק ברוין־גרעל מיט אַ רויטלעכער ברוסט,
ער קומט דאָרט צו פֿליען יעדןווינטער אויפֿסניי
און הענגט, ווי אַ קנאָספּ אויף דעם נאַקעטן קוסט.

פֿון יענער זײַט ליד איז אַ סטעזשקע פֿאַראַן,
אַזאַוי שמאָל און שאַרף, ווי דער דין־דענסטער שניט,
און עמעץ, וואָס האָט זיך פֿאַרבלאָנדזשעט אין צײַט,
גייט דאָרט אום מיט שטילע און באָרווועסע טריט.

פֿון יענער זײַט ליד קענען ווונדער געשען
נאָך הײַנט, אין אַ טאָג, וואָס איז כמאַרנע און גרעָ,
ווען ער דופֿקט אַרײַן אין דעם גלאָז פֿון דער שויב
די צעפֿיבערטע בענקשאַפֿט פֿון אַ ווונדיקער שעה.

פֿון יענער זײַט ליד קען מײַן מאַמע אַרויס,
און שטיין אויף דער שוועל אַ ווײַלע פֿאַרטראַכט
און מיך רופֿן אַהיים, ווי אַמאָל, ווי אַמאָל:
— געגנוג זיך געשפּילט שוין, דו זעסט נישט? ס׳איז נאַכט.

The poem begins: "On the other side of the poem there is an orchard and in the orchard a house with a roof of straw

and three pine trees, three watchmen who never speak, standing guard." Korn places poet-narrator and reader in the same space, in a nether world which is both real and unreal. The landscape is familiar from her earlier works, as are the images, but as we follow the speaker through the silence and along a path like someone lost in time**,** we are haunted by sounds that do not speak. Korn's return to earlier images and themes adds an extra dimension to the poem and establishes a dream-like space in which "amazing things may happen, even on this overcast day," in "this wounded hour that breathes its fevered longing in the window pane."

The poem sets up the real/unreal world as a space within which the intensity of longing and the wound of pain heighten the speaker's search for a sound in the silence. The poet-narrator, "breathing" with longing reaches to the other side of the poem, where "my mother may appear and stand in the doorway for awhile lost in thought and call me home as she used to call me long ago: You have played long enough, don't you see? It's night."

Summoning up the posthumous voice of the mother allows Korn to reclaim the familial ties that bind the living and the dead, which returns to the poet-narrator the nurturing voice, and its power to break into the silence. It returns the mother as a protective presence, offering the poet-narrator the necessary sounds and imperatives to move out of the night and recapture her life.

What made Korn's contribution to Yiddish poetry so outstanding was her creation of a powerful personal voice. With this voice, she helped lift the critical constraints that had long been imposed on Yiddish women's poetry. Further, in the two selected poems, Korn created a powerful image of 'the maternal'—both as mother and as poetic muse— thereby reconstructing the characteristics that traditionally had defined 'the feminine' in the village experience. Through her internalization of 'the maternal,' the poet-narrator establishes an emotional bond between herself and 'the mother,' a bond which endures

despite the severe discontinuities of life. She thereby repairs the loss of home and her disconnect with nature with an emotional bond with her mother, thereby creating a new home for her mother and herself in the poem itself.

Endnotes

[1] Among these writers were Melekh Ravitch, Peretz Miransky and Chava Rosenfarb.

[2] J.I. Segal, "Tsum hayntikn Rokhl Korn ovnt," *Keneder adler,* October 15, 1948.

[3] *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia* , s.v. "Yiddish Literature in the United States" by Anita Norich, accessed February 25, 2010, http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/yiddish-literature-in-united-states.

[4] Avraham Novershtern, "יתש ויב שידייב מישנ תריש : הלהקמהו תולוקה סלועה תומחלמ" (The Voices and the Choir), תונשרפו תרוקב 40 (2008), 61-145. Translation by Elay Kornecki.

[5] Seymour Levitan, *Paper Roses* (Toronto: Aya Press, 1985).

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.