

Agnes Romer Segal

**A Poet in Our Midst:
Esther Shumiatcher and her Family Circle in
Calgary Jewish Cultural Life**

The eighth entry in the Province of Alberta Register of Baptisms, Marriages, Deaths, and Funerals of Congregation House of Jacob, maintained by Calgary's Rabbi Simon Smolensky from 1917 to 1934 and currently housed in the Jay and Barbara Joffe Archives of the Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta (JHSSA), lists the marriage of "Peretz Hirshbane to Ethel Shumiatcher on December 15, 1918 at 222 4 Ave. E, Rabbi Smolensky officiating." This simple line reveals much. The name of the noted visiting Yiddish author is spelled phonetically, since he was known locally from his Yiddish works.¹ The bride is listed as Ethel, as she was called in her school days since her arrival in Canada in 1909 with her mother and nine of her siblings. She is also referred to as Shumiatcher, the name she maintained throughout the rest of her life, although in earlier records she had been known as a Smith (like her older sister Eva Smith whose September 1917 marriage to Abraham Busheikin is also listed in the Register). The wedding is registered as having taken place in the family home. This union came to have a significant impact on the cultural life of Calgary Jews.²

The Shumiatcher family home was a focal point for cultural-social activity in the Calgary Jewish community. Judah Shumiatcher and his son Morris had come to Alberta about a year before the rest of their large family. After a stint homesteading, Judah became active in the synagogue and taught in its afternoon Talmud Torah. His daughters led a typical immigrant life, going to public schools and helping with family finances. Esther worked in a meat-packing plant and in a restaurant. They also had a full cultural life. A 22 December 1916 notice in the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle* lists Ethel as secretary of the Girls' Auxiliary to the Calgary Jewish Relief Fund for War Sufferers and her sister Eva as vice-president. However, most of the cultural influences on the Shumiatcher siblings probably came from the visitors hosted by the family. Fortunately for posterity, a number of Shumiatcher descendants have recorded reminiscences of the active household. Morris C. Shumiatcher, Judah's grandson, wrote in 1980, "Every wayfaring stranger who found his way to Calgary was, in those days, put up by the Shumiatchers. . . Rabbis, writers, musicians—artists of every kind were made especially welcome in the large rambling house of my paternal grandparents."³ It should not be too surprising that Esther turned her attention to writing.

One such guest was the Yiddish writer and playwright Peretz Hirshbein, who stopped in Calgary on a speaking tour in late 1918. The *Israelite Press* reported on 25 October 1918 that Hirshbein delivered two readings to a spellbound audience.⁴ The young Esther Shumiatcher caught his attention. Her nephew Morris described the situation:

"Peretz, at that time was forty years of age. . . Esther . . . was then only nineteen, . . . and very beautiful with grey eyes set far apart—dark hair worn in long braids, a graceful figure and a pleasing voice. He was a writer and she was a poetess, and my grandmother was a magnificent cook and her table . . . large enough to

accommodate all who came to her house. . . Peretz stayed on enjoying the hospitality and the beauty and lyrics of Esther, and the fresh warm milk of Bessie, my grandmother’s red cow that was sheltered in the barn beside the house.”

Family accounts report that Hirshbein left to continue his tour, but soon returned when he fell ill to recuperate in the family home. According to Morris, it was not only Hirshbein’s age that gave Judah misgivings about the match but rather, “he claimed that Peretz had ‘no roots . . . no address.’” Indeed, soon after the marriage, the couple left Calgary and spent 1920 to 1924 travelling the world. In the 1920s Esther wrote two plays dealing with the plight of orphans in Eastern Europe.⁵ She was catapulted into the wider Yiddish literary world when a new, modern Yiddish literary journal *Albatros*, published in Berlin in 1922, took its title from Esther’s poem which appeared in the journal alongside the writings of her spouse.

פּרֶץ הִירֶשֶׁבֵּין אײן קאַלגאַרי

דער באַריכטער אַרױשער שרױפֿטשטעלער, דראַמאַטורג און לעקטאָר
קומט אויף אַ קורצן באַזוך קײן קאַלגאַרי. ער וועט דאָ
האַלטן בלױז צוויי לעקציעס

’די מעגלעכקײט פֿאַן אַ אַרױשער
רעפּובליק אין סאַױעטנפֿאַרבאַנד’

פֿרײַטיק דעם 22-טן פֿעב.

— 8:30 אױנט —

’דער עקאָנאָמישער אײן קולטורעלער
מצב פֿון אײַדן אויף דער װעלט’

מיטװאָך דעם 27-טן פֿעב. 8:30 אױנט

ביידע לעקציעס אין פֿרײַ-זאַל

קומט מקבל פֿנים זײַן דעם אײַנציקן אַרױשן שרױבער, װאָס איז אױך ענג פֿאַרבונדן מיטן אַרױשן
’ישׁב אין קאַלגאַרי, פֿרײַז װירשבינגס לעקציעס זײַנען שטענדיק אינטערעסאַנט באַגלײט מיט אַן אײַגן
אַרטיקן אײַדעלן געפֿיל פֿאַן אַ שײַנער מענטשלעכער באַצײאָנונג.

קולטור קאָמיטע
באָ דער פֿרײַז שול

PERETZ HIRSHBEIN
ONE OF JEWRY'S LEADING CONTEMPORARY PLAYWRIGHTS AND AUTHORS, WILL DELIVER TWO LECTURES IN CALGARY:

“The Possibilities of a Jewish Republic in the Russian Union”
Friday, Feb. 22nd, 1935 at 8:30 p.m.

“The Economic and Cultural Conditions of the Jews”
Wednesday, February 27th, at 8.30 p.m.

BOTH LECTURES WILL BE DELIVERED AT THE PERETZ SCHOOL.

Kultur Committee—Peretz Institute.

Poster for lectures by Peretz Hirschbein for the I. L. Peretz Institute in Calgary in February 1935. Source: Jay and Barbara Joffe Archives of the JHSSA.

Patriarch Judah Shumiatcher died in 1922 during their travels. Upon their return to North America the couple visited Calgary, this time to the new family home on Sixth Avenue. A poster dated July 17, 1924 features Peretz Hirshbein as guest speaker at the community Herzl Memorial evening. Esther's regret at not being at her father's deathbed is expressed by her poem "Tate" [Father] which appeared in her 1939 book *Ale Tog* [Every Day].⁶ She writes, "I always see before me the mound of earth where you lie. And the wind, which guards your grave, awakens my sleep. I read the letter which you set me, before you surrendered your body to the earth." She continues to describe his life's travails from escaping persecution in his hometown to hardships in the inhospitable soil of Alberta, to finally becoming a Hebrew teacher because "you did not want to sell your Sabbath for bread." The book also includes a poem, "Mame" [Mother], devoted to her mother Chasia, which describes her dedication and concern for her offspring as well as the difficult separation from her homeland to a live in a strange new place. In his own 1979 recollections of the family, Esther's nephew Judah Shumiatcher describes the family matriarch as "a strong person. She kept the family together. Any family differences were resolved by her."⁷ Poems dedicated to her mother also appear in Esther's 1956 collection *Lider* [Poems].⁸ In the poem "Mayn mame mit ire kinder" [My Mother With Her Children], Esther again describes her mother watching over her brood at night with hopes and blessings for each of the seven girls and four boys, listed by their Hebrew names. In another poem, "Fun a briv tzumayn mamen" [From a Letter to My Mother], the saddened poet addresses her mother, alone in a frozen land far from the poet's own sunny home. She lovingly recalls her mother lighting the Sabbath candlesticks, the house full of the smell of fresh baked challah bread and her mother's pleasant face full of the worries of a Jewish mother. In the final verse she thanks her mother "... for all that is holy and dear to me." Sabbath imagery and songs, especially lullabies, feature prominently in her work. Esther refers to the piety of her forebears in her poem "Avade vet mayn mame" [Certainly My Mother Will], which opens, "Certainly my Mother will not understand my words."⁹ In the poem she contrasts herself to her ancestors, referring to her grandfather, well known for his learning, and to her grandmother, who had quiet supplications on her lips.

The couple's second trip abroad in 1928 and 1929, which included a visit to Esther's hometown of Gomel, was followed by an extended visit to Calgary in 1930 much to the benefit of the local Jewish community. A *Jewish Post* article from 8 April 1930 noted Peretz Hirshbein's arrival in Calgary. The Calgary that the couple returned to in 1930 had developed significantly since their earlier visit. The Jewish community had grown by 27% in the prior decade and newly established organizations provided more cultural/social opportunities. A group of activists, including a number of Shumiatcher relatives, had successfully established the I. L. Peretz Institute in 1927 to bolster Yiddish language and culture. It supported children's afterschool classes. The I.L. Peretz School building was dedicated on September 1929 and it became a full-day school. It also soon became a cultural hub. Eva Shumiatcher Busheikin was

president of the school's Mooter Farein, [Mothers' Association] and Annie Shumiatcher's husband Leo Paperny became chairman of the school board. A poster for the Sholem Aleichem Memorial evening on 28 May 1930 promises a literary and musical program to be held at the Peretz School hall with the participation of Peretz Hirshbein and Esther Shumiatcher as well as Prof. Gregori Garbovitzky and his Symphony Orchestra. Shumiatcher family members were also avid supporters of the music scene in Calgary. A 1932 program of the Calgary Ladies' String Orchestra lists Luba Shumiatcher (eldest son Abraham's wife) and Shumiatcher sisters Annie Paperny, Bessie Shapiro and Eva Busheikin as patrons. This support extended to the Calgary Symphony Orchestra, and family names are prominent among the donors in a March 1938 concert program. Other relatives were part of the Calgary Jewish Choral Society. This involvement deepened in the next generation of Shumiatcher descendants; many of their names appear in programs of the Junior Symphony of the Music Conservatory. A number of Esther's nieces and nephews continued to be active in the Calgary music scene, both as performers and as music teachers. Some Shumiatcher relatives made their musical mark elsewhere, but came to Calgary for short stays. Esther's niece, composer and pianist Minuetta Shumiatcher Kessler, composed music for a number of Esther's poems. Minuetta herself contributed to Calgary's cultural scene with numerous concerts in her youth and on her frequent visits during and after her studies in New York. Her Alberta Concerto, composed during a visit home in 1946, was premiered on the CBC, and following a later performance she was given the keys to the city. Esther's sister Sarah played the violin and married New York musician Lazar Weiner. Their oldest son was born while they still lived in Calgary. Weiner also set some of Esther's poems to music. Her sister Bella Abbey furthered her piano studies in New York and went on to establish the Shumiatcher School of Music there.

In July 1930, it was announced in the *Israelite Press* that Abraham Pravatiner of New York had been hired as principal of Calgary's I. L. Peretz School and his wife Sarah, who was Peretz Hirshbein's sister, as teacher there. During their years in Calgary in the 1930s, Abraham directed plays and presented literary readings and Sarah often performed on stage. Esther's relatives were also active in other cultural undertakings at this time. Her sister Fanny (who played violin in the Calgary Symphony) had married Henry Ziskin in Calgary in 1928. Ziskin became Calgary correspondent to the *Israelite Press*, so we are fortunate to have frequent reports about cultural events involving Peretz and Esther and other family members. Ziskin himself often appeared on stage in concerts and plays. On 4 August 1930, Ziskin wrote an essay about Hirshbein and his stay in Calgary for the *Israelite Press* stating, "no matter where he travels . . . he will again come to us . . . to the place where. . . Esther Shumiatcher spent her growing years." The couple became the toast of the Yiddish cultural scene. Ziskin reported that on 8 September, Esther read some poems at an evening honouring Mr. and Mrs. Zalman Lubinsky (who was Abraham Shumiatcher's brother-in-law). A report from 14 October notes that Esther was invited to a meeting of the National

Council of Jewish Women chapter and that on 28 October, Peretz and Esther were guests at an evening hosted by Leo and Anne Paperny (Esther's sister) in honour of the I.L. Peretz School staff. On November 11, the *Israelite Press* was excited to report that Hirshbein would host the famed Yiddish writer, H. Leivick, and would introduce him at an upcoming lecture series. Henry Ziskin read from Leivick's work. It is possible that Leivick travelled to Calgary due to his friendship with Hirshbein. Esther has a poem dedicated to Leivick in her 1939 poetry collection.¹⁰ Another *Israelite Press* article from 30 November states that Hirshbein was occupied with writing a series of stories and completing dramas during his Calgary stay. It was in 1930 that Esther's first collection of poetry, *Inshoen funlibshaft*, [In the Hours of Love] was published in Vilna.

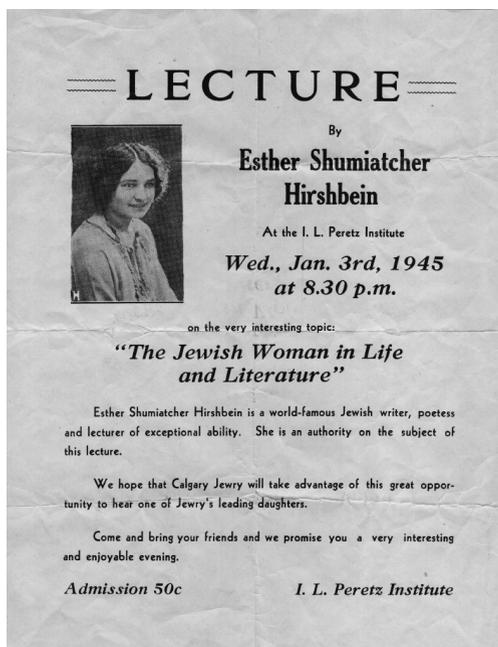
Perhaps the couple's most lasting local contribution was their direct involvement with the beginnings of the I. L. Peretz School, and especially with its December 1930 publication of *Ershte Trit* [First Steps]. A leather-bound copy of the small booklet is in the JHSSA archival collection. It opens with a short dedicatory Yiddish poem by Esther with the heading "My Blessings for you 'Ershte Trit.'"

First steps children, are shaky steps
 First steps children, they are young steps.
 First steps children, they are—blessed steps
 Because for them the world is wide
 Because the straight path leads
 Your first steps to Mother Yiddish.
 My blessing for you "Ershte Trit."
 E.S.

This poem is followed by a message by Peretz dedicated to the students. An essay in the booklet by Grade 5 student Chaim Sheinin is devoted to Hirshbein. Sheinin describes him as not only a famous writer, but also a close friend and a very good teacher, with a joke or an adage for everything, and considers him a friend of nature and of the Jewish child. Hirshbein's connection to the school is further evidenced by the fact that it had a Peretz Hirshbein Club. A notice in the *Israelite Press* on January 30, 1931 mentions the Club's banquet held at school following a skating party.

January was a busy month for the couple. Esther gave a talk about her travels for the local Junior Hadassah chapter. Peretz spoke at an evening held by the school's Mooter Farein. The *Israelite Press* announced in January that Hirshbein would tour in Western Canada and that he would later be travelling to California. The Mooter Farein organized a grand evening honouring Esther Shumiatcher on 8 February 1931. A 27 January notice of the event states that Esther "has stepped up and performed for many organizations and always inspired her audiences." The school also organized a farewell banquet for the couple on 18 February. This did not mark the end of their

involvement with Calgary. Almost a year later, on 14 December 1931, a Hirshbein Celebration was held to mark his 50th birthday. The event featured an English version of his most famous play, *Grine Felder* [Green Fields], directed by Abraham Pravatiner and featuring his wife Sarah as well as Shumiatcher relatives Eva Busheikin and Z. Lubinsky. Hirshbein returned again in 1935 and in February gave a lecture series concerning contemporary Jewish social and cultural issues for the Cultural Committee of the I. L. Peretz Institute. This visit was probably intended to introduce the couple's son Omus, born in 1934, to the extended family. Omus grew up to have a wide-ranging musical career in New York. Esther was again active in the community during a visit home in 1945. A farewell banquet was given in her honour by the I. L. Peretz Institute. The poster for the banquet states, "during her stay in Calgary she took an active interest in our community and influenced our work and thought to a great extent. It can honestly be said that she won the love and admiration of Calgary Jewry." Peretz and Esther had moved to Los Angeles where Peretz fell ill in the 1940s. He died in 1948. Esther continued to write, but devoted most of her energy to preserving her husband's legacy. From her later correspondence with her oldest brother, Abraham, it is evident that she had fallen on hard times. She did stay in touch with her family and appreciated their support. By 1940, numerous members of the Shumiatcher and Hirshbein extended families had moved away from Calgary. Six of her siblings stayed in the city.



Poster for a lecture by Esther Shumiatcher at the I. L. Peretz Institute in Calgary on January 3, 1945. Source: Jay and Barbara Joffe Archives of the JHSSA

Esther Shumiatcher's poetry gained attention in the world of Yiddish criticism and research. In Calgary, her place in Jewish cultural life has been preserved in the press

clippings, posters, photographs and personal memoirs housed in the collections of the JHSSA. Esther's connections to world of Yiddish culture helped to invigorate the local Jewish community. Her family ties brought new faces to the community, which in turn led to expanded cultural activity. The stories of their world travels broadened the horizons of local Jews. Her nephew Morris C. Shumiatcher summed up the effect that Calgary had on Peretz Hirshbein and the effect Hirshbein had on Calgary youth. Morris wrote in 1980 that "Peretz felt he could, at last, put down roots in a place he felt was home—or could be home . . . there he found warmth and love. . . We would meet in my grandmother's house almost every Sunday for an afternoon of fun and games. . . On Saturday afternoons his nephews and nieces would meet with him . . . he would regale us with tales . . . about the distant lands he had visited."

Being able to claim such noted literary figures as one of their own brought confidence and pride to Calgary Jews. The Calgary Jewish community was fortunate to benefit from the involvement of Esther Shumiatcher, her spouse and their extended family members in the development of Jewish life in the city.

1

The writer's name appears in English publications either as Hirschbein or Hirshbein. I have chosen the latter spelling because that is how it appears in most of the records in the JHSSA files.

2

Esther Shumiatcher's poetry and her place in 20th century Yiddish literature were examined comprehensively in Faith Jones, "Wandering is your fate": Esther Shumiatcher-Hirschbein writing across boundaries," *Canadian Jewish Studies* 11(2003): 15-36. The bibliography there covers the most salient research on Shumiatcher. See also: Jack Switzer, "Esther and Peretz Hirshbein—Calgary's Yiddish Celebrities," *Discovery* 11.2 (2001):1,3. My article is based largely on materials available in the JHSSA collections, with a focus on the couple's time spent in Calgary. All translations from the Yiddish are mine.

3

Morris C. Shumiatcher, "On Peretz Hirschbein" An address given at Winnipeg, January 29, 1980 for the Jewish Historical Society of Western Canada at a screening of *Grine Felder*. The JHSSA files contain a typewritten copy of this talk. All further quotes from Morris are from this source

4

The Israelite Press, published in Winnipeg, was also titled *Dos idishe vortin* Yiddish. I have

used the English title for convenience, but all the articles mentioned appeared in Yiddish. The newspaper had a Calgary correspondent and regularly featured notices on local community events.

5

Esther Shumiatcher, *In tol* [In the Valley] (New York: Farlag idish, 1920) and *Pasn likht* [Streaks of Light] (New York: Arbeter Ring, 1925)

6

Esther Shumiatcher, *Ale tog* [Every Day] (New York: Erd un heyem, 1939), 30.

7

From the written transcript of an oral history interview with Judah Shumiatcher conducted by Max Rubin in 1979 contained in the JHSSA files. Judah was the son of Esther's brother Morris.

8

Esther Shumiatcher, *Lider* [Poems] (Los Angeles: Ester Shumyatsher-Hirshbayn bukh komitet, 1956), 85.

9

In: *Di froy in der yidisher poezye* (Buenos Aires: Ateneo Literario en el lwo, 1966),247. Two other poems of hers are included in this anthology of Yiddish poetry about women.

10

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