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**The Many Facets of Poetry at the Alex Dworkin  
Canadian Jewish Archives**

Poetry is not often at the forefront when I describe the holdings at the Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives, as we are far better known for our social history collections. When I am asked about how to research Yiddish poets and Jewish literary figures of Montreal and beyond, I first direct researchers towards the Jewish Public Library of Montreal, which houses significant collections of papers from numerous literary figures. Nonetheless, when this theme is interpreted in a fashion that goes beyond a study of the writings of renowned published authors, several avenues for potential research are revealed. In this overview I will discuss the poetry holdings here from three angles: the works of known poets, as-yet-unstudied poetry resources, and poetry as a means of confronting trauma.

A.M. Klein, a widely known and respected Canadian literary figure, turns up in the Canadian Jewish Archives in published books of his works such as *The Rocking Chair* and *Poems of French Canada*, and through his prose for the *Canadian Zionist* newspaper, which he edited in the 1930s. He is also represented through the speeches he ghost-wrote for CJC President Samuel Bronfman during the Second World War. These sideline occupations may provide further insights into Klein's more artistic writings.

The most voluminous archival fonds we hold that pertains entirely to the subject of a Montreal poet is one donated by the estate of Ken Hertz. Born in 1945, Hertz was a poet, author, and publisher in Montreal. Afflicted with severe Parkinson's disease, with the help of his supporters Hertz spent the last ten years of his life fighting for the right to extensive home care under the Quebec Medicare system until he died in 1996. This collection contains correspondence and news articles about Hertz's struggle as well as some papers relating to publishing projects but very little in the way of his actual original poetry, although the Archives' reference library has copies of his published book *The Cracked Cellar*.

Some of the well-known Yiddish poets represented at the Jewish Public Library left original material at the Canadian Jewish Archives as well. This overlap can be traced to the influence of historian-archivist David Rome, to whom poets may have sent their writings while he was Press Officer at the Canadian Jewish Congress in the late 1940s. Rome was a close friend of CJC's poetry-supporting General Secretary H.M. Caiserman, whose papers also include manuscripts of Yiddish poems by various authors. Writers were subsequently drawn to Rome at the Jewish Public Library when he became director there from 1953-1972, and no doubt some followed him back to the Canadian Jewish Archives (then called the Canadian Jewish Congress Archives) when he returned as the official archivist-historian from 1973 until his death in the 1990s. In this way we find ourselves in possession of folders of original manuscripts for poetry books by J.I. Segal, and an envelope of handwritten poems (possibly unpublished) by Noah Gotlib, among many other small collections of this

type. An in-depth study of this material by a scholar familiar with literary and handwritten Yiddish could be a fruitful endeavour.

The three selections which follow are examples of our many other collections containing a number of works by lesser-known poets: An interesting grouping of writings by little-known Jewish women writers and poets of Quebec came to us through the late Michael Benazon, who donated the material he had accumulated about forgotten female authors of the 1930s such as Regina Lenore Shoolman. The archival collection documenting the life's work of late Montreal activist Gertrude Katz includes many of her poems, which were published in poetry journals and in her 1982 book *Duet*. Katz taught poetry to prisoners at the St. Vincent de Paul penitentiary in the late 1960s and compiled their writings in a 1970 book called *The Time Gatherers*.<sup>1</sup> Poetry written in Russian by newly-arrived Montreal immigrants from the former Soviet Union is one of the major themes of the Russian Jewish Archives Project files collected for the Canadian Jewish Archives by Tatiana Jour between 2004 and 2006.<sup>2</sup>

A recently-catalogued cache of previously overlooked Canadian Jewish Congress material dating from the 1950s to the 1970s includes several files about poetry without providing any context for their presence. Two files in this "CJC-Y" series contain several dozen Yiddish poems translated into English by Percy Matenko, a former Montreal resident who went on to become a professor at Brooklyn College and the founder of the Yiddish Cultural Association there.<sup>3</sup> Canada often figures as a theme in these translated poems, most of which are by well-known Canadian Jewish writers such as Rochl Korn, J. I. Segal, and Sholem Stern. Whether these translations eventually made it into print is not evident.

Another file in the CJC-Y series contains many dozens of handwritten Yiddish poems in tiny script on scraps of paper, as well as some official documents in German, numerous scribbled English phrases suggesting language lessons, and a few snapshot photographs, all pertaining to a man named Abraham Labkovski. A Canadian naturalization certificate in the file notes his year of birth as 1888, in Russia, and says that he was a teacher. The last document in the file is dated 1962, and it is possible that this material was donated to CJC shortly after Labkovski's death. Any additional information about him - and about the themes of his poetry - would be welcome!



Snapshot of Abraham Labkovski with the University of Montreal seen in the background

In addition to manuscript, typescript, and published copies of poems by recognized poets, the theme of poetry appears in many archival collections in more unexpected ways. Most of these latter authors are unpublished. Their writings were often a way of expressing strong emotions and reactions to traumatic events.

One example of this is the Yiddish poetry of Montrealer Leah “Bas Alchanan” Wiseman, written between the 1930s and the 1970s, for which we have translations into English provided by her grandson Herb Alexander. Family matters were often a subject of her compositions, and during the Second World War her worry over her son’s military service inspired some of her most poignant verses. A translated excerpt from her 1942 poem “Dovidl, My Son”, written when Canadian troops were sent to help England in the Second World War, reads:

*(...) I'm a mother. I'm paying for a sin;  
For a stranger's sin. I must send my child  
To war against the enemy, with sword in hand  
To loyally protect a foreign fatherland  
(...)  
The flames of war have lit my heart  
I am a mother with a heart full of wounds.*

DOVIDL MY SON by Leah bas Alchanan

I'm a mother. Woe is me.  
A terrible storm is endangering my child.  
Wild monsters are sharpening their teeth.  
My son lies in danger. I cry and cry.

I'm a mother. I'm paying for a sin;  
For a stranger's sin. I must send my child  
To war against the enemy, with sword in hand  
To loyally protect a foreign fatherland \*

My heavens grow dark.  
Woe to my world.  
Have I sent him to perhaps kill a brother?  
I have other children whom I must feed.  
Oh God, will I see my child again?

I'm a mother, woe is me.  
With deep longing I long for my child.  
The flames of war have lit my heart.  
I am a mother with a heart full of wounds.

\* (CANADIAN TROOPS SENT TO HELP ENGLAND - WW II)

לילך די טאג די-העכטן. /42 צאָלע מיין זון

איך בין א מאמע, ווי און איך מיר, און ליין  
א ברודער מיין זון, עס צעליבט מיין זון  
18 וואסע א מאנשטערס, זיי שיקן די זון,  
מיין זון, און סכנות, וויין איך און ליין

איך בין א מאמע, ז' באליבט פארט זון,  
פארט פראצעדער טעם, ז' איז מיין זון,  
און פארט גען פארט, מיט שווינדערט צו די פארט,  
פארט זון צו פארט א פראצעדער פארט זון.

עס איז מיין הימל, פארט מיין זון, און  
געט מיין זון, צו פארט און איינצו פארט  
געט מיין זון, צו פארט און איינצו  
און זון, און איך זון, צו פארט און איינצו?

איך בין א מאמע, ווי און איך מיר, און  
פון זיפערט שריפט, איך זון, און זון  
צו די זון פון א מאמע, מיט מיין זון, און זון,  
איך בין א מאמע, און פארט פון מיט און זון.

The Yiddish and English versions of "Dovidl, My Son" by Leah Alchanan Wiseman

Poetry by survivors of the Holocaust figure prominently among the Canadian Jewish Archives' collections, including published books by Joseph Rogel, who wrote *Confessions of an Auschwitz Number*, *Poems for my Mother*, and *Soliloquy of a Shadow*.

Less well-known is an unpublished collection of short poems called « Aphorisms » by Adam Gutman, who as a violinist and composer used the name George Adams. In a poem called "The survivor's strife," Gutman begins:

*I "danced" my way  
Through life  
And the dance is called: -  
A survivor's strife*

(And concludes)

*Liberated I found  
My way out.  
And it's hard for me  
To talk more about.*

**No "D"-12  
The survivor's strife...**

I "danced" my way  
Through life.  
And the dance is called:—  
A survivor's strife;  
The melodies were pulsating  
With sadness...  
A lot of terrible surprises  
And sheer madness...  
The rhythm unrhythmical,  
With disturbing hick-ups,  
KODDING freedom  
In cruel stick-ups!...

Liberated I found  
My way out,  
And it's hard for me  
To talk more about.

The Second World War is reflected through the eyes of a child survivor, Sophie Soil, whose memories of life before and after coming to Canada are expressed poetically in two printed volumes in prose poetry style; *Bygone Daughters of a Lesser Fate: a poetic memoir*, and *Ashes Left to Linger: a poetic search for closure*, as well as one unpublished collection called *Yesterday Runs Always Though It: Poetic reminiscences of my life and times*. In a poem from the latter called “Wartime Childhood”, she begins with the lines:

*I would hide away into a corner, under a table, crouch  
behind a wardrobe, the door, lie down and sulk,  
weep or keep deathly still, too deep into myself to grasp  
the meaning of dolls or toys or the hearts of the other  
members of the family – (...)*

(And concludes)

*You want picket fences  
with tacked-on benedictions; you want a life that includes a child  
walking through a green meadow wearing a dream on her  
lapel – not a yellow star – or on some beach without strangers  
plotting to snatch your piece of sky away and turn it black...<sup>4</sup>*

The late Montreal printer Ed Binder, who came to Canada as one of the Refugee Youth Project War Orphans in the late 1940s, used humour as the primary tone for his self-published poetry and prose writings called *Sweet and Sour*. For example, his satiric poem about the Meech Lake Accord of 1987 ends with the observation:

*And after each and every VIP in the team  
Expounded his vision of the Canadian dream,  
They all sang the National Hymn,  
And jumped in the lake for a swim.*

However, the haunting legacy of the War overrides Binder’s light-heartedness in this short poem titled “Rosa Binder”:

*No pain, no fear to mar her face,  
Perhaps ... a trace of child-like wonder,  
As though she heard a cherished voice,  
As though she saw her long-lost mother.  
I gaze upon her placid face  
And I do also wonder ...  
Has she found a kinder place?  
I pray so ... Rosa Binder.*

In 2005 Harry Finkelstein (a.k.a. Harry Kel) self-published a volume of poems titled *IT – The Holocaust and Depression*, which he described as a product of “1. My parents’ experiences as WWII Holocaust Survivors, and 2. My experiences as a long time sufferer of bipolar disorder mental illness.” While emphasizing in his introduction that he does not intend to in any way diminish or trivialize the memories of those who lived through or perished in the Holocaust, he invokes its imagery as a way to convey the “painful and despairing state of mind” that the sufferer of mental illness has to bear. His poem titled “Hell” written in 1987, ends with the stanza:

*From paradise to hell–  
The Second Generation,  
Destined to carry the burden,  
And create a new generation.  
These Golden seeds of hope  
Prove that Rebirth  
Takes more than one generation.<sup>5</sup>*

As a final example of poetry’s ability to sum up in a few words the legacy of war on survivors and their children, I conclude with this chilling short poem, reproduced here in its entirety, which was written by Henriette (Yetti) Kallus, a poet and Yiddish to English translator, who was born in Holland to Holocaust survivor parents and passed away in 2022.

*You never could have made it  
through Auschwitz  
Said Mother to me naively  
But she blasphemed  
One can also live in an Auschwitz  
Of the mind <sup>6</sup>*

The selections in the latter part of this overview demonstrate that poetry often serves an emotional purpose which transcends literary criteria for analysis. These writings can add to our understanding of the psychology of post traumatic stress and mental illness.



**1**

Katz, Gertrude; Morgenthaler, Henry. Archival material held by the Canadian Jewish Heritage Network, donated April 6, 2017. <https://www.cjhn.ca/en/permalink/cjhn88132>

**2**

Examples of poetry written in Russian by newly-arrived Montreal immigrants from the former Soviet Union collected for the Canadian Jewish Archives by Tatiana Jour between 2004 and 2006. <https://www.cjhn.ca/en/list?q=i0088+poetry&p=1&ps=20>

**3**

Fogel, Joshua. Blog entry: 'Yiddish Leksikon', last modified September 7 2017, <http://yleksikon.blogspot.com/2017/07/peysekh-percy-matenko.html>

**4**

Soil, Sophie. Archival material held by the Canadian Jewish Heritage Network, donated December 4, 2014. <https://www.cjhn.ca/en/permalink/cjhn75975>

**5**

Finkelstein, Harry. Archival material held by the Canadian Jewish Heritage Network, donated November 2005. <https://www.cjhn.ca/en/permalink/cjhn304>

**6**

Kallus, Henriette Yetti. Archival material held by the Canadian Jewish Heritage Network. Unpublished poems and manuscripts written between 1970 and 1980. Date of donation not provided. <https://www.cjhn.ca/en/permalink/cjhn204>