

August 6, 1998

## Roaming Through my Book-shelves.

I want to express my satisfaction at the good care given to my book-collection by the Library of the University of Maryland and for sending me the front-pages of the Yiddish books with dedications of the authors.

In a way, the browsing through the mass of the xeroxes are a journey through years of my life. I knew many of the authors who offered the books to my late husband, Samuel L. Shneiderman, and many of them were our good friends. That is why I will write about them rather in a personal vein and stress those who played an important role in the Yiddish literature of the 20th century. Most of them did not survive the Holocaust, but their books did survive...



**Eileen Shneiderman**

I will start with the writers who grew up with Shneiderman in his hometown Kazimierz Dolny and the neighboring shtetlech and towns around Lublin.

The first who comes to mind is Shlomo Rozenberg who in the early 20's became known for his masterly Yiddish translation of the book *The Peasants* by the Polish writer W. Rejmont, the Nobel Prize laureate in 1924. Rozenberg was later a secretary of Sholem Asch and an author of popular novels about Biblical heroes in Jewish history. He was appreciated for his style and for enriching the Yiddish language.

The other close friend of Shneiderman was the poet J. Papiernikov who emigrated to Palestine and was—in Shneiderman's words—"a builder and a singer of Eretz Israel" but also a fighter for the rights of Yiddish after the establishment of the State of Israel when the official policy was the introduction of Hebrew and the elimination of Yiddish as a remnant of the diaspora or "galut". Papiernikov published 18 poetry books. Many of his poems became popular almost as folk-songs with his own music. He died in Israel at the age of 92. I am tempted to quote one of his poems in the original [English translation provided]: (view [translation and image of Yiddish text](#) (47kB)).

In the Shneidermans' book collection there are a number of works by Yiddish writers in Paris in the 30s, where we lived till our departure for New-York, in February 1940. Most of them are novels describing the struggle of the Jewish emigrants from Poland and other countries in East Europe.

Among them was B. Shlevin, R. Kope, A. Waldman and his wife M. Ram-Waldman, Lily Berger and M. Litvin the critic and translator of French poetry into Yiddish and Yiddish poetry into French.

Whenever in Paris we used to meet the poet Moshe Shulstein, born in Lublin, who was a dear friend of Shneiderman. We used to sit with him and his wife Milka in a cafe and talked into late hours.

You have a book by B. Yeushson *From our old Sources*. Shneiderman admired the efforts of this Yiddish Journalist from Warsaw in providing in Yiddish a popular source of rabbinic literature.

Shimon Apter, the author of short stories and historical novels was the secretary of the Yiddish Pen-Club, when Shneiderman was the President during the 70's. His best novel was *The Maranos Family de Silva*, published in 1982. He was a good friend and used to join us for the International Pen-Congresses.

An important place in Yiddish literature belongs to Nachman Meisel, a critic and editor of the foremost weekly *Literarische Bletter* published in Warsaw in the 20's and 30's where Shneiderman's poems and articles appeared after he came to Warsaw in 1925. Nachman Meisel knew my Father, the pioneer-publisher of Yiddish and Hebrew books, Benjamin Shimin, and I remember him since my childhood. In the dedication in his book of essays in 1962 Meisel wrote: "To my good friends S. L. Shneiderman and Halina Shimin..." His archives are now in Kibbutz Alonim in Israel where he lived the last years before his death. His most important work was devoted to Mendele Mocher Sforim (S. I. Abramovitch), the classic of modern Yiddish literature.

During his stay in Johannesburg in 1938 Shneiderman befriended two brothers, the writers Leibl and Rachmiel Feldman—authors of books about the Jewish community in South Africa, that are now in the Library of the University of Maryland.

Y. M. Weisenberg (1878-1938) [was] a powerful novelist [whose books described] life of Jews in Poland. In our book-collection you will the book of his daughter, Perl Weisenberg-Axelrod, about her father's life and work, published in Montreal, Canada in 1986. During the seven long years while working on this important book, she came several times to New York to ask Shneiderman's advice. We had great respect for her difficult undertaking.

There is in our book-collection an important book by Hilel Zeitlin about Nachman Braslaver, the "Seer of Podole", the thinker and mystic who lived in Ukraine one hundred years after the Baal-Shem-Tov, the founder of the Hassidic movement. The Braslaver journeyed to Eretz Israel in 1798 and left a detailed account of his experiences. Hilel Zeitlin perished in the Warsaw Ghetto. The book about the Braslaver was published in New York as the first volume of his collected works.

Michal Weichert was a theater director in pre-war Poland. During the war he was in charge of an underground self-help organization in Cracow, that distributed medication sent from the American Joint Distribution Committee to the Jews in the ghettos. After the war he was accused of collaborating with the Nazis, because sometimes he had to bribe them by sharing some of the medical help received from abroad. He wrote four volumes of memoirs in which he tried to clear his name. Shneiderman openly defended him.

Dr. Chaim Shoshkes was our good friend, who in the beginning of the Nazi occupation escaped from the Warsaw-Ghetto and arrived through London to New York. From him I got the last news about my parents who later perished in August 1942. Shoshkes was a writer, perennial traveler through the Jewish communities, particularly in the Middle East. When we visited him in the hospital, he took his big briefcase and handing it to Shneiderman said in a weak voice: "I cannot travel any more. Take it and continue the journeys through the Yiddish-Land..." He died a few days later. He left close to twenty Yiddish volumes that were very popular among Yiddish readers.

*From both Sides of the Ghetto Wall* by Wladka was the first document to reach New York by an active member of the Warsaw Ghetto Resistance Organization. Wladka—Geigele Peltel Miedzyrzecki—was a liaison woman who kept contact with the so called Arian side, smuggling in weapons and providing shelter for children on the other side of the ghetto wall. Her husband, Benjamin Mead, is the leader of the Survivors' Organization in the U.S. that played an active role in the movement for the Holocaust Museum in Washington.

Dr. M. Dworzecki was a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp in Estonia. He published works about Nazi doctors and their gruesome experiments on Jewish inmates, from the viewpoint of a medical doctor.

In our book collection, there are works by prominent literary critics whom we knew in New York: Dr. A. Mukdoini's book *I.L. Peretz and the Yiddish Theater* (1949); Sh. Nizer's *Israel: Nation and Land*;



**(from left to right) J. Papiernikov, S. L. Shneiderman, and Abraham Lis. ([view inscription \(55kB\)](#) on back of photo)**

A. Tabatchnik's important book about the poet Zishe Landau (1941) and a book *Poets and Poetry* (1965); and a book of essays by Abraham Lis, *Conversations in Writing* (1985).

Abraham Lis belonged, together with Shneiderman, to the group of young Yiddish writers in the early 30's who identified themselves as the leftist Zionists (Linke Poalei Zion). He was born and grew up in the city of Bialystok, an important center of modern Yiddish culture. In 1936 Lis, at the age of 22 came to Israel and started his career as a writer of literary essays. When Shneiderman came for the first time to Israel in the winter of 1939, he met his old friends—Lis and Papiernikov,

and they accompanied him on his lecture tour about the Spanish Civil War. I have found in our archives a photo of the three of them with a dedication: "To Shneiderman, at his departure from Eretz Israel—I. Papiernikov and A. Lis". A. Lis became one of the founders of the "I. L. Peretz Farlag" that is still publishing books by Yiddish writers from all over the world. Later, when the Beth Sholem Aleichem was established, Lis became the Director of this institution and under his leadership the "Sholem Aleichem House" became a depository of the archive of the great Yiddish writer. A beautiful permanent exhibition is being visited by Israelis and tourists. In 1995 Beth Sholem Aleichem Pollak Prize was awarded to S. L. Shneiderman. In the name of the jury Lis presented a moving analysis of Shneiderman's contribution to Yiddish literature as poet, essayist, author of literary reportage and journalist. I personally owe him my gratitude for his encouragement in my efforts to keep alive the memory of my late Husband.

Chaim Bez was a prominent Yiddish educator and author of text books on Yiddish literature for Yiddish schools and seminars, among them—*Writers and (their) Works* and *A Journey through the Yiddish Literature* that you can find in our book-collection. We knew Chaim Bez for many years in New York.

When in London our first call was to A. N. Shtenzl, the lonely one man publisher, editor and poet of the Yiddish weekly and later monthly small size magazine—the only, and probably the last Yiddish periodical in London. He was a pathetic figure, a dreamer, a remnant of a pre-war colony of Jewish emigrants from Eastern Europe. Here you have his book published in London in 1961 *Weitchepele Shtetl in Britten*.

Dr. Izhak Levin, a son of a prominent Rabbi, was a researcher and writer about the history of Polish Jewry. He belonged also to the United Nations Non-Governmental Representatives as a delegate from the Federation of Polish Jews. A good friend of Shneiderman, he used to inform him of important UN debates concerning Jewish problems. Our collection includes one of his many works about *Jews in old Poland—Historical essays*.

Izhak Luden is a publicist, editor of the Yiddish periodical in Israel *Lebens Fragen* (Life's Problems). He is a leader of the international Social-democratic "Bund" movement that is celebrating its hundred year anniversary since its inception in 1898. His book *Fun Cholem biz Sholem* (From Dream to Peace) is devoted to the successful negotiations between Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and the President of Israel, Menachem Begin.

I. Brat is the editor of the Yiddish weekly *Letzte Neies*, appearing previously as a daily for many years. Brat is known as the author of humoristic stories and it is difficult to translate the title of his book *Aropgelaht fun Harzi*, maybe "Confessions in Laughter"...

Our closest friends through the decades of our life in New-York were A. Almi, Jacob Glatstein and Meir Shtiker—none of them alive any more. Their works represent the high level reached by Yiddish poetry in the United States.

A. Almi—A close friend, a kind man, a wonderful free spirit. Born to a family in the poor neighborhood of Warsaw, he spent his youth among porters, horse-and-wagon drivers (balagoles), thieves and street-singers, begging with their improvised songs, who found in young Almi an admirer who even wrote songs for them. As a youngster he brought his first poems to I. L. Peretz on Ceglana Street—at the time a popular address in Warsaw for young poets and writers. Peretz encouraged Almi and also helped him to get an education.

In the introduction to a book of A. Almi's poems with a Hebrew translation, S. L. Shneiderman stressed that it was a miracle that being brought in the nest of poverty and underworld, he grew up to become a highly refined poet and essayist. Besides poems he wrote philosophical essays about Spinoza (he was a member of the Spinoza Society) and Buddhism, as well as articles in the Yiddish newspapers and periodicals. Particularly close to him was the "Freie Arbeter Stime", an organ of the Anarchist Movement, where he fought his battles against all the injustices of the moment. His poems about the Holocaust published in 1943 belong to the strongest in the memorial literature. Born in 1892, Almi died in New York by committing suicide in the 60's after suffering many years of insomnia. His death was a deep shock to us.

Jacob Glatstein, as I remember him, was a man whose very presence created a mood of celebration. He was always open and friendly, ready to start a lively conversation, or to encourage a younger writer.

Born in the Polish city of Lublin at the end of the 19th century to a family of an owner of a modest clothing-store, Glatstein always remained close to the traditions of this city that played an important role in the cultural developments of its Polish and Jewish inhabitants. In the 17th and 18th centuries Lublin was the seat of the "Vaad Arba Arzot", the parliament of the Jewish Kehilot. In the early Renaissance Lublin was a center of Polish culture and was compared to Florence. Glatstein who immigrated to New-York in 1914, just before the outbreak of the First World War, managed to get a college education and even wrote poems in English. But soon he realised that the Yiddish of Lublin is for him the natural language of expression.

As a student in the Law School at New York University,, he belonged to the founders of the "In Sich" introspectivist avant-garde movement that rejected the traditional forms of Yiddish poetry. A similar revolution was taking place in American English poetry and Glatstein admired Walt Whitman. In his poetry in free verse and surrealistic symbolism you could hear the "American rhythm". The other prominent members of the "Insichist" movement were A. Glanz-Leyeles and N. Minkoff.

Besides writing poetry, Glatstein became a prolific publicist, journalist, literary critic and editor. There was a rare friendship and mutual understanding between Glatstein and Shneiderman. They admired each other and we spent many evenings together at our home.

With all his sophistication Glatstein remained the "Jew from Lublin". In his poems you can read the history of our tragic century. After the Kristallnacht in Germany in 1938 Glatstein wrote his poem "Good Night World" that begins with the lines: "Good night, wide world,/ big stinking world./ Not you but I slam shut the gate./ With a long gabardine,/ with a fiery yellow patch,/ with a proud stride,/ because I want to,/ I am going back to the ghetto." (Trans. by Ruth Whitman).

The set of poems about Israel begins with an original scene at the airport. When the passport comptroller asks where he comes from: "Fun wanen kumt a Yid?" His answer is: "Jeder yid's funwanen/ Is fundanan" (Every Jew's "from where" is "from here").

After his trip back to Lublin he wrote many poems and essays in which he identifies himself with the historical Jewish town of his childhood and recalls with love his parents. This theme permeates his later writings. The 75th Birthday of Jacob Glatstein was celebrated with sincere admiration by the shrinking community of Yiddish writers and readers in New York. There were banquets and literary evenings for Glatstein and his wife Fanny, in which he responded with his usual humor and friendly disposition.

It was a deep shock for everybody when Glatstein suddenly died, just after the celebrations of his 75th Birthday, at the highest point of his creativity. He left 23 volumes of poetry, novels and literary and political essays. Many of his works were translated in other languages.

Abraham Sutskever is considered to be the greatest Yiddish poet of our generation. Born in 1913 he started to write poetry as a young man and since the establishment of the Jewish Scientific Institute, or "YIVO", in Wilno, he was involved in its activities. At the outbreak of World War Two the young Sutskever lived through the horrors of the ghetto before he joined a partisan-group in the Noritch-forests around Wilno. He managed to save an important part of the archives of YIVO, as well as his poems written in the ghetto, that reached Moscow, where they were received with great interest in the Yiddish literary circles and the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. Thanks to the intervention of Ilya Erenburg, Sutskever was brought to Moscow. In 1946 he appeared at the Nuremberg Trials as a witness for the Soviet prosecution against the Nazi war-crimes. Soon after, he left with his wife Freide on what was seen by the British as an illegal voyage of the S.S. Patria, and eventually reached Israel.

During our frequent trips to Israel the first visit was always to Sutskever. He still lives in the same apartment in the center of Tel-Aviv. The apartment was full of books and paintings among them works of his daughter, a talented painter. There were talks about poetry, exchange of experiences in an atmosphere of mutual understanding that was stimulating to both of us. Sutskever and Shneiderman

were admirers of Polish poetry, particularly of Julian Tuwim. In one of his books of poems in our collection Sutskever wrote in his dedication: "To Hala and S. L. Shneiderman—with wishes for many poetic Years of our friendship". (Oif lange chawerishe poetishe yorn). Another book has the dedication: "To my dear friend, the writer S. L. Shneiderman who deeply loves good poetry".

In a letter, dated Nov. 3, 1964, Sutskever wrote: "Dear friend Shneiderman: I am late to tell you, that it was good to meet you in New York and to walk with you up and down through the UN countries. But what made me write this letter, is your essay about Julian Tuwim in *Yiddisher Kemfer*. It is a wonderful essay. Warm, convincing, sincere, with a moving friendship and love to his poetry. It belongs to the best essays that I have read in the last years. Through this essay you became still closer to me".

A. Sutskever was the founder and editor of the prestigious literary Magazine *Di Goldene Keit* (The Golden Chain) where some of Shneiderman's articles were published. In a letter dated 20th of July, 1969, Sutskever wrote: "Dear Sheniderman, your "The Last Jew in Kuzmir" is already in print. It is a very moving and well written piece. When you will merzishem (with gods will) arrive—you will be able to read the galley proofs. It will appear in the 67th issue. At the same time we will have a good talk about everything. Greetings to your wife, daughter and son-in-law".

When in Tel-Aviv, Shneiderman also used to meet Sutskever every Friday morning in Cafe Exodus where Sutskever liked to meet people and even to write his poems. In later years the contact was kept mostly by telephone, as often as health permitted.

Now, when Yiddish-lovers are celebrating the 85th Birthday of Avram Sutskever and rereading his poems, we again admire his masterly reaching to the deepest sources of the Yiddish language and reflecting the pain and hopes of our generation.

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