Contemporary Authors

Autobiography Series

volume 9

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Mark Zadrozny
Editor

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Menke Katz

1906-

Menke and Rivke Katz, 1987. "L'chaim!"

Lithuania—land where my forefathers and foremothers lived hundreds of years. I was born in 1906 in the shtetl (small Jewish town) of Svintsyan, the third son among three brothers, Elchik, Berke, and Yeiske, and a sister, Bloomke. (Most local names in our area ended with "ke.") My father, Heershe-Dovid, was a descendant of a family of millers who had operated the same watermill through the ages in the hamlet of Stratche, near the village of Sveer. My mother, Badane, was the proud daughter (one among ten sisters and brothers) of a forester, a mighty timber and river man.

We lived in the shtetl Svintsyan only a few years, but my family had lived for centuries in the neighboring village of Michalishek, hence the roots of my poetry are where my forefathers laughed, cried, dreamed, made the poor village rich with homespun folk songs, folk tales, folk dances.

The folk were lovers of myth, fable, allegory, fortunate that so many legends were handed down to them by the goodwill of destiny. There was also a minyan (a prayer quorum of ten male adults) of Cabalists in the village, believers in an occult theosophy of mystical interpretations of the Bible. (I consider myself a Cabalist, it certainly influenced my poetry.) They believed that with the wonder of words they could delve into the beyond of all beyonds. For the Cabalist, words are wings to fly back to Adam or on to the end of all life on earth, to the Messiah. I always see the village of Michalishek as an endless world, bigger than cities, countries, because it stood in a dream. Is there a land which can outdistance a dream?

Michalishek was embraced by the Viliya River. To get out of the village we had to shout ourselves hoarse to reach the ears of the barefoot boatman across the river, until we could finally hear the old barge sighing, propelled by tide-worn dragropes.

The fare for carrying folk across the river was half a penny per family. None of the bargemen could

afford to lower the price, nor had they raised it since the birth of the barge, ages ago when the logs were still fresh with the scent of felled birch trees from the nearby forest.

The forest of Zaborchi across the river seemed to have no end, with bush and jungle and large powerful beasts with the proud blood of their family, *Ursidae.* The bears moved slowly, awkwardly, when they ate fruit, nuts, berries, acorns, bird's eggs, or honey from ripped beehives, but they could run at awful speed after a stray woman, man, or child. It was said that of the women were left only twisted strands of their braids and the shock of a bear hug; of the men were left only torn beards which fluttered in the wind like broken wings. It was rumored that children were quickly devoured, leaving only the terror of their small footprints.

Hungry robbers lived in the underworld of the forest and died in the hollow trunks of the ancient trees. My grandfather Aaron-Velvel fought a gang of robbers with a whip in the forest when they tried to take his horse away. He was lucky to come home with the horse, but soon died.

My aunt Beilke, the champion storyteller of the village, saw the summers as blooming fools, the true blossoms unfolding in the below-zero winters on the icebound windowpanes. I was her best listener. I saw the lost princes armed with frost bows sail to their castles in boats built by frostwork. When she told her stories, even the so-called business folk closed their penny businesses to listen.

One of my first poems was about sleepwalkers, led by the moon over roofs made of straw, rushes, reeds. The clusters of huts resembled Sleepy Hollow, the village which still stands safely in the dreams of Washington Irving.

On moonlit nights my aunt Eetke was busy chasing the milk ghosts away, they would not suck the last milk out of her old goat. When my cousin Yankele was killed by a rival suitor, my aunt feared that he might sneak out of his grave and take his bride away while she was under the canopy with her new love.

The village of Michalishek was the isle of potatoes. We all ate mostly potatoes. The crooked alleys echoed with songs about love-starved maidens, about dew which was the tears of fallen angels, and potato songs which poked fun at themselves, such as, "Sunday potatoes, Monday potatoes, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday potatoes. Friday, in honor of the Sabbath for a change, again potatoes."

The potatoes of the village were not as prosperous as Idaho potatoes, queen mountain potatoes, or King Edward VII potato apples. Many of our potatoes

"Aunt Beilke, champion storyteller of Michalishek, killed by the Nazis"

lay ill in beds of stingy earth, attacked by an early or late blight. O the earth of Lithuania was a wretched miser, but the folk were content with their potato goodies.

Here is one of my hymns to the potato:

Hymn to the Potato

O my first hymn was to the potato,
lure of my childhood, fruit of the humble,
the diurnal festival of the poor.

No fruit is noble as the potato.
Cherries are coy, plums have hearts of true
stone.

The wind is a drunk fiddler at the grape.

The potato knows how much light there is
in the fertile darkness of seeded earth,
kissing the dust to which Adam returned.

On the hungry alleys of my childhood,
the Milky Way was a potato land.

The most welcome guests were the wandering beggars. Their aged clothes gave the village the appearance of an outlandish rag fair. The beggar bags on their shoulders were filled with crusts of bread, with the skeletons of herrings, with faded onions gnawed by the onion fly, and many other

dismal delicacies.

During winter nights we sat near the huge burning oven. Aunt Beilke always came to us after she had cheered Beggar Alley with goodies, to tell us one of her twenty-eight-chapter stories about an enchanted bride whose beauty lured the angels out of heaven to see her face-to-face.

Outdoors there was a chorus of winds: winds, soloists—lonely winds, winds—invisible singers in concert with the songs of the folk which they named *dainos*; winds—forlorn nomads lost in snowbergs; winds which told of the days when the land of Lithuania (as large as South Carolina, with half as many people) was an empire.

My hymn to the legends of my childhood: Legends wander from land to land, through space and time. I heard stories in the alleys of my village in Lithuania similar to the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* of the days of yore. Only the names differ. Instead of the Germanic monster Grendel it was Cain, the first killer on earth. (All monsters are descendants of Cain.) In the village story it was Satan instead of the dragon. The whole life and death of the beheaded monster are very similar. Even the various versions of the tales which inspired Shakespeare to write King Lear I heard in myth-loving Michalishek. Instead of King Lear's three daughters, there were the seven daughters of Jethro (Moses' father-in-law), and in the village tale almost all the main characters die at the end. The village story has a happy ending, King Lear an unhappy ending.

"Menke at three, just before his first haircut. (No one in the village owned a bicycle—it belonged to the itinerant photographer.)"

When I was five years old, a belfer (an assistant teacher) came and carried me to heder (Jewish religious school for children). He sat me up on a high chair and told me that an angel stood behind me and would throw candy for me. I was as much overjoyed as frightened. I saw every child get a candy, but I got two. I shared the second candy with my closest friend, Yoske, who had already been in heder a year. Both of us can still feel the heavenly taste of the candy in our mouths. (Yoske is now a medical doctor in Virginia.)

Yoske and I were such great friends that it was said our friendship had been destined in heaven before we were born. Even the weary houses where we lived were so close to one another, twinned as our inseparable friendship was. (Yoske never saw his father; like Charles Dickens's David Copperfield, he was an orphan six months before he was born.)

Older children who had already learned Aramaic and peeped secretly into the Cabala (Jews are not allowed to read the Cabala until the age of forty) told us about each one of the seven heavens and that we could choose to live in any heaven we like after we die. It took five hundred years to fly from one heaven to another. However, because we would live forever, five hundred years in heaven was like five minutes on earth. Yoske and I were wonderstruck. We decided to choose the third heaven, the Heaven of Manna. Manna fell in the third heaven night and day. The manna might consist of whatever we wished, even ice cream, which we had heard about but never tasted. Yoske and I swore to be friends forever and ever. (I kept my oath somewhat by naming my first book of poems in English *Land of Manna.*)

The children came to heder in the morning and left at night carrying homemade lanterns with flickering wicks, which sometimes had to fight winds and snow-devils. When we studied Genesis (the Rabbi translated the Hebrew into Yiddish word for word), I was fascinated by the mystic power of the words with which God created the world in six days. (We heard there were also 196,000 other worlds, but we were now in this world, where we would all live awhile.) I learned how enchanting words are. All God had to do was to tell the waters to gather into one place, and the earth appeared.

We heard from the storytellers of the village that

it had not been easy for God to create the earth. The waters refused to give up their identity. Rahab, the giant of giants of the seas, refused to open his oceanic mouth to swallow all the waters which covered the face of the earth. The armies of all the seas were roaring through tohu-bohu: "Death to God"—until God killed Rahab the Ashmedai of the seas, defeated the mighty waters, and the earth was born.

The storytellers also told about the birth of the sun and the moon. They said, when God created the sun and the moon both had the same light. The moon demanded a greater light than the sun. God punished the moon, reduced its light to one sixtieth. The moon complained that the punishment was too severe, that it would be lonely wandering alone across the skies. God pitied the moon and made the stars to keep it company.

We heard stories about almost every animal which God had created. Here is just one about the sheep which complained to God that it had nothing to defend itself, anyone could kill it. God said: "I will give you claws and horns to fight your enemies," but the sheep wanted to be a kind, peaceful animal. Then God said: "I will give you wool which man can use, and he will protect you." As a vegetarian child I already knew that man was the sheep's greatest danger, it would be killed, not protected.

The legend weavers told us how difficult it was for God to create the first man out of dust. Dust refused to turn into man. When God sent the angel Gabriel to bring dust, it blinded his eyes. God himself had to take dust from all four corners of the earth to create Adam.

Among my brothers I felt closest to my oldest brother, Elchik, who was already sixteen. He confided to me that from his head to his toes he was in love with the dimpled, ever-smiling Dveirke. He wrote three or four love letters a day to her, which I delivered secretly. Dveirke, barefooted, with long braids ornamented with a garland of wildflowers, adorned every letter with a daisy from her hair.

One day he told me that on the next moonlit night they would both swear before the Torah that their love was eternal, as God and I would be the witness. We had to sneak into the synagogue. If we were caught, we would be the shame and disgrace of the village. Elchik stealthily opened one of the color-rich windows and we all climbed into the Godful synagogue. I shall always feel the sacred fright that I felt when I saw Elchik and Dveirke stand at the open ark and swear that they would love each other forever and a day; in life or in death, neither would be touched by another lover.

In the imagination of the folk here, America was a legendary land. Mothers lulled their infants to sleep singing such lullabies as "Sleep my child, sleep, in America you will eat hallah, raisins, and almonds every day" (hallah, braided white bread eaten in honor of the Sabbath).

Sorke was a professional letter writer. She wrote letters for those who had fathers or distant relatives in America. For an ordinary letter she charged half a kopeke (a half cent), for a kopeke she added rhymes such as "The birds are singing / The ears are ringing" (a sign of good luck). To make a "living" Sorke was also one of the cry women at all funerals.

Here are a few lines from my book *Burning Village* which tell how my three brothers, my sister, and I imagined America.

> Heaven on earth is in the children's eyes.
> Who is richer in gold, America
> or the sun? Elchik says: at dawn, the sun
> is richer, at twilight, America.
> Berke tells of a street—a dream in New York,
> paved with silver dollars like little moons.
> Menke in "heder" confides, his father
> Heershe Dovid (tall, yearning and handsome)

"The only picture left of Menke's oldest brother, Elchik (from his mother's locket)"

sailed the seas to change his jaded horse
for a gallant filly, the squeaking wagon,
for a two-wheeled pleasure carriage; to trade
the cow with the drying udders, hardly
enough for milksnakes,—for a herd of an
aristocratic breed with teats like milkwells.
Sunset. Yeiske sees the clouds sail like boats
with gold which dad sent from America.
Bloomke fears there may be a shipwreck in
the clouds and flood the village with gold.

When I was eight my father left for America with the hope of returning in a couple of years a well-off man. However, before the boat reached America, the First World War broke out. We did not hear from him for six years. The village of Michalishek, like hundreds of other villages and little towns, was awakened with horror after ages of calm by German guns. We lived through hunger, disease, death. My brother Elchik was taken away by the Germans to "work."

Months passed in the desperation of futile waiting, with no idea where Elchik might be. My mother, Badane, on sleepless nights walked through the winding alleys of the village looking for him, at times calling him, hoping in vain that by some miracle he would suddenly appear. She always imagined that she heard him calling her, crying for help. The nights were filled with the meows of pitiful stray cats, mingled with the steps of German soldiers guarding against a sudden attack by the Russians.

Pretty Dveirke lived night and day in deep yearning for her beloved Elchik. Her braids had been flowerless since she saw him the last time. It seemed to her that all flowers had faded forever, as had her hopes of seeing him again.

Hope returned when a wandering beggar arrived with a long white beard, a walking stick, and a beggar bag on his shoulder. He was familiar to the village folk. It was rumored he might be the prophet Elijah. He brought news about our lost Elchik. He said he had seen him all alone in the village of Boovitz, forsaken by everyone, even God. He said he had found him hungry, sick, longing for his mother, brothers, sister, and his love, Dveirke. The beggar had given him bread from his beggar bag, brought him water from the well, and promised he would visit his family and let us know where he was.

My mother prepared a bag of healing herbs, some food, some warm clothes, and took me along on the long, many-miles walk to the village of Boovitz. The war was still on. Bullets whistled over and around us. We heard villages bombarded, ages left in ruins.

It was one of Lithuania's below-zero winters. The frost cracked the heartwood of the pine, birch, and spruce from which the street fiddlers made their sobbing fiddles. At the end of day kind Lithuanian peasants allowed us to sleep in their barns together with the cattle.

We finally reached the village of Boovitz. We did not hear the sound of a living soul. We saw many barracks, but in the first barrack we found Elchik lying on a heap of straw, with a pencil and scribbled notes next to him. At first we thought he was sleeping, but we soon realized it was the sleep of the eternal. My mother and I broke the silence with cries which must have frightened even God.

Night. The moon sneaked out of the clouds, spreading shrouds all around us. It seemed it was the last night on earth.

In 1920 we received the first letter from my father, saying that he wanted us to come to America, and he asked, of course, how everyone was. My mother did not want to shock him with my brother Elchik's death. She wrote: "I and our four children are well." (We were five children when he left.) My father answered that he knew who had died, he had seen Elchik dying in a dream.

It took us six months to get to America. The war still lingered in countries through which we had to travel, often by horse and wagon.

When we finally reached America (Passaic, New Jersey) we were bitterly disappointed. We found our father a very poor man, a factory worker in the Lodi silk mills. We quickly learned that the land of gold and hope was for us the land of illusions.

My father, Heershe-Dovid, working at a minimum wage in the silk factory in Lodi, New Jersey, could not alone support his wife and four children, and she was pregnant with the fifth child. He had to take my older brother Berke and me to work in the silk factory to help him keep the family fed, clothed, sheltered. I was fourteen, my brother Berke sixteen. We all worked very hard. The huge gloomy factory with the high, darkly lit ceilings reminds me now of the maximum-security Greenhaven jail, where I taught poetry to prisoners. (I also taught poetry in the Napanoch prison, which from a distance looks like a forsaken castle with a sleeping beauty in it.)

Many workers had come from various countries and spoke very little English. I felt miserable in the factory and yearned for my beloved war-torn Lithuanian village of Michalishek. I didn't know how long I would waste my boyhood days in this factory. I wanted to learn English, write poems.

I was fascinated by the ever-climbing city of New

"Menke's uncle Avremke, who taught him watchmaking in the village of Michalishek"

York when my cousin Avromelke took me with him once. He was an old bachelor, lived on the Lower East Side fixing Singer sewing machines. I saw New York crowned with the glory of a man-made Genesis or as one of the lands of giants lured out of the stories which my aunt Beilke, the champion storyteller, had told us in her dreamful hovel.

I asked my cousin if I could share one of his two rooms with him and was happily surprised to hear an enthusiastic yes! My parents finally agreed. Great! I now lived in New York, went to Passaic on weekends and holidays to visit my parents, my brothers, Berke and Yeiske, and my sister, Bloomke.

I worked as an apprentice watchmaker, I really was not an apprentice. My uncle Avremke, who was famed in many towns and villages of Lithuania as one of the greatest watchmakers, had taught me watchmaking since I was eleven. However, in New York I was told I was a primitive watchmaker. My boss made fun of the names I used for the wheels of the watches. For instance, the center wheel I called an attic wheel, because, as my uncle explained, it resembled an attic, etc. In a couple of months I had learned so-called modern watchmaking and was considered an expert watch and clock maker.

In the evenings I learned English in night school for foreigners and studied until late, night in, night out. The two rooms which I shared with my cousin Avromelke (at 251 East Second Street, near Avenue C) reminded me of the hekdesh—the flophouse for beggars in my village. Our rooms were so dark we had to use candles even during the day. I wondered—even in America, there was no electricity in the whole house. The walls were black with smoke, smoke-eaters which did not allow the sun to peep into the rooms. Only at sundown did the last reflections of the dying day sneak in and we saw a patch of sky. At night some stars went astray, for a while scared the darkness away.

There was only a sink here which never stopped babbling, drip-drop-drop-drip, as if it were trying to teach us the language of ghosts. There was no shower, but there were public showers in the area. For a nickel I stood under a cold or hot shower with a piece of soap and a towel by my side. Every Friday, in honor of the Sabbath, my cousin and I went to the Russian-Turkish bath. He taught me how to rub his back with a soft, soap-filled brush, he did the same to me.

On one of my visits to my parents I was told that Mother had just given birth to a new son, a new brother, a new human being, the only one of us born in the United States. We named him Elchik, but it would have been hard to call him by the name of my oldest brother, who had died at seventeen only a couple of years before, hence we also named him Moishe, after my uncle who had died a few months before he was born. We now call him Meishke. He grew up in Passaic with my parents' every charm, as if he had been born in the village of Michalishek, in Lithuania. (He achieved the American dream and is now the president of the Amalgamated Bank of New York.) My brother Yeiske is a noted engineer, an intellectual and a dreamer. My brother Berke, who died at the age of fifty-eight, owned a paint factory. My sister, Bloomke, is an executive assistant with a firm of attorneys. She is a stormy believer in unpopular truth.

When I received a sort of diploma stating that I was a graduate of the night school for foreigners, I entered Manhattan Preparatory School on Second Avenue. I studied from nine in the morning until five and worked as a watchmaker in the evenings.

In this school I learned not only English, but also history, biology, arithmetic, algebra, geometry. After a year I graduated from Manhattan Preparatory School. I was hungrier than ever to learn, to write poems.

Then I passed an examination at DeWitt Clinton High School (at Fifty-ninth Street and Tenth Avenue)

and was accepted into the fifth term. At the time it was a boys' high school. I was a diligent student, deeply interested in English grammar. Now I believe it would be good to get rid of much of the grammar, particularly in poetry. Grammar was taken from language, not vice versa.

Before classes began at DeWitt Clinton High School, there was an "official class," where students demonstrated their talents. I read my poems almost every morning for a small audience of students. Then I wrote only in English, because I did not know there was a Yiddish literature. Until I came to the United States I studied only the Bible and the Talmud, I began to "sin" at ten by reading the Cabala.

As soon as I was aware of the great Yiddish literature—writers, novelists, poets—I stopped writing English poetry and over the years wrote nine books of Yiddish poems. Here is one of my teenage poems in English:

At a Patched Window

I am a lover, a pauper, and a poet.
My heart is clean beneath the threadbare shirt.
I learned wisdom from the Talmudic skies of Lithuania.
I am gracefully uncouth.
I cleaved my grace from the slums of New York.

My father like Columbus dreamed of America, when I was born.
My childhood wanned at a patched window,
where I imagined a cake soaring like a cherub,
where I saw candy, toys, and cocoa,
under the wings of a nymph only.

The cruel hand of destiny led us through hunger, war and plague.
We were four little brothers and a scrawny sister.
In the autumn garret we heard the song of Spring,
as crawling doves would hear the giggle of their craven victor.
The wind through redolent meadows was a bleak laughter.

O our weary mother carried us
through the prosperous thorns of our scared little town, Michalishek,
From a fairy tale came the night—a spectral undertaker,
to bury the thorny day of Lithuania.
God was the baker from Eden who baked the tasty stars.

If I were asked where I had enjoyed myself more than anywhere else throughout my life, I would say in New York cafeterias, with friends over a cup of coffee, at a cozy table. (There were cafeterias all over New York years ago.) I love tables and I think tables love me.

Some of my best poems I wrote during the summers of 1952 and 1953 near Beacon, New York, on a hill overlooking the Hudson River. I wrote the poems on a table, in the open air, sometimes under the stars. At the end of the second summer I asked the owner if I could buy this table, which was precious to me because I had written so many poems on it. He said: "I will give it to you as a gift."

The table is still with me and will be as long as I live. Beyond me, when I will be all heaven, my son Heershe Dovid will inherit it, will continue writing his Yiddish linguistic works on it. I always see this wooden table as a part of a tree on whose branches birds made love, built nests for baby birds. This tree had a lucky death, it was resurrected as a table on which a poet writes poems.

During the depression years of the early thirties I was one of the millions unemployed. I lived through, at times, as much hunger in New York as in my childhood in our village, in Lithuania. I often missed coffee more than food. It was sad to chat with friends at a table in a cafeteria without a cup of coffee. Here are two tankas from a series of poems in my first English book of poetry—*Land of Manna*:

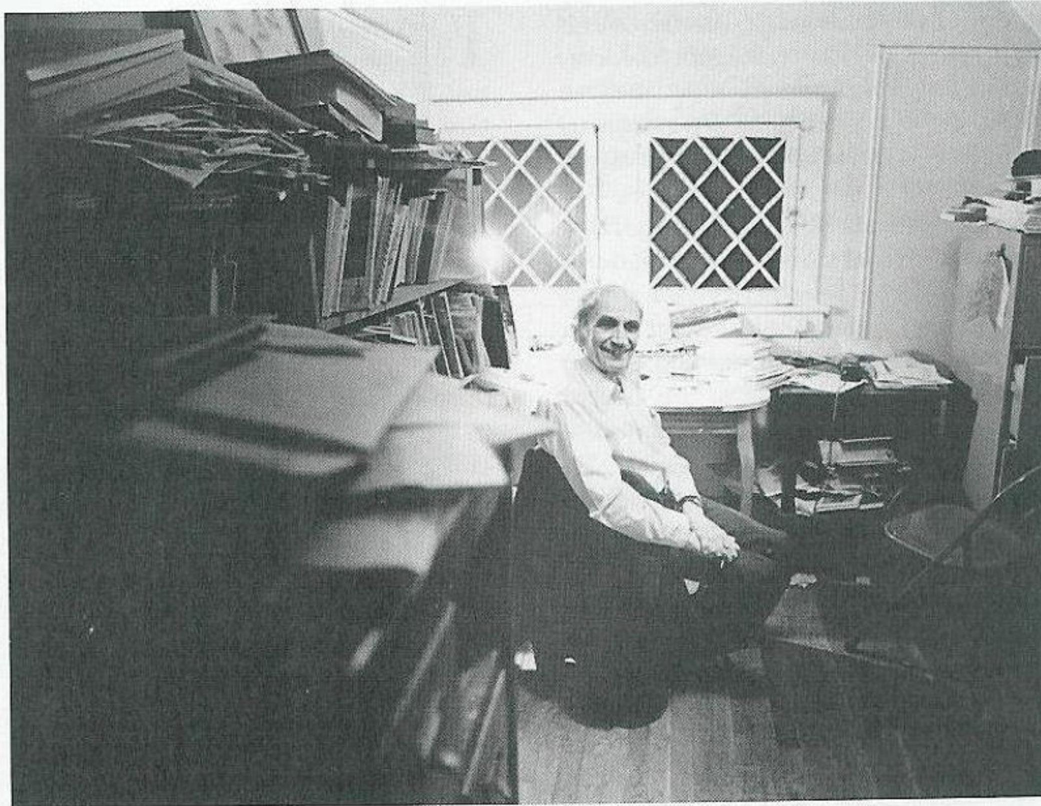
To Yeiske, at a Cup of Coffee

A cup of coffee
is my shield. A trance
eludes the jam at Times Square.
It is coffee-time, chat-time
from dawn to dawn in New York.

O the humble joy
of a cafeteria,
detouring hell with
you and glowing friends, at a
cup of coffee—cup of dreams.

We could not afford to pay a nickel for a cup of coffee. For a nickel we could get four rolls in an East Side bakery or we could walk fifty blocks to Mac Fadden and get a small plate of vegetable soup for a penny. For a nickel we could get an apple on the streets of New York. The sixty-four-dollar question was, how do we get a nickel?

I lived temporarily with my friend the Yiddish poet Yosl Greenspan in two dilapidated rooms on the Lower East Side. We were supposed to pay eight



"The garret in Borough Park, Brooklyn, where Menke wrote poems for over thirty years. (The black table near the file cabinet is the one from Beacon, New York.)" 1973

dollars a month rent. For us it was an astronomical price. After many months of not paying the rent we were evicted with our satchels filled with poems, diaries, dreams.

It was utterly impossible to carry it all with us. We left our poetic riches on Monroe Street, in the hands of the landlady, with a promise to pay her a dollar a month. However, after many months there was still no hope of paying the debt. We could not get hold of a few dollars to free our lives' poetry savings from where they were buried under dust and ashes, rusty stove pokers, among all the ancient junk of the cellar. The most tragic loss to me was my brother Elchik's diary, which my mother and I had found where he died, at seventeen, in no-man's-land, during the First World War.

My friend Yosl Greenspan and I were now homeless. We "slept" on benches on the Williamsburg Bridge. At night we saw a barge on the East River under a moonlit sky. At first, we thought it might be loaded with lumber, oil, coal, but we soon realized that dead homeless people had been dumped on it, on its way to Potter's Field. We both wrote poems about the deathful barge. I named my poem "Brother Island." It is in my Yiddish book of poems *Der mentch in togn* (Dawning man).

After a desperate search everywhere for any kind of a job, it seemed incredible that I would ever get one. It was as hard to believe that it was possible to get a job as it was then to believe that there might one day be a man on the moon.

I read with hope an ad in a local newspaper: "Man Wanted, no experience necessary." I rushed to this rare opportunity in mid-Manhattan. When I arrived I saw busy workers giving birth to a new building. I saw bricklayers, plasterers, steamfitters, men erecting beams, trusses, girders, fitting baseboards and casings, putting in locks and doorknobs, all experts in the building trade.

I asked the foreman what I could do among these construction experts, without any experience. He said: "You will carry bricks." I had no idea I had to climb ladders, but I did. I followed other men who were climbing as naturally as monkeys, handing bricks to each other. When I reached the top of the huge stepladder and looked down, I saw how high I was from the earth. I was petrified, death seemed unavoidable, just one step down and I would fall through Dante's nine concentric circles of hell.

Some workers were kind enough to try to help me down the stepladder, to no avail. I did not let them help me. I could not believe they would bring

me down in one piece. The fire department had to be called and they brought me down to earth. I ran away through crowds of people, through the danger of speeding automobiles—"home" to the Williamsburg Bridge.

From then on I did not look for jobs with "no experience necessary," but I did get a job as a delivery boy (I was no boy but a man of twenty-five) in a dry-cleaning store. I had to deliver suits to customers. It seemed a job easy enough for anyone, but I have no sense of direction. I often got lost. I earned eight dollars a week, was also given a nickel, sometimes a dime, as a tip.

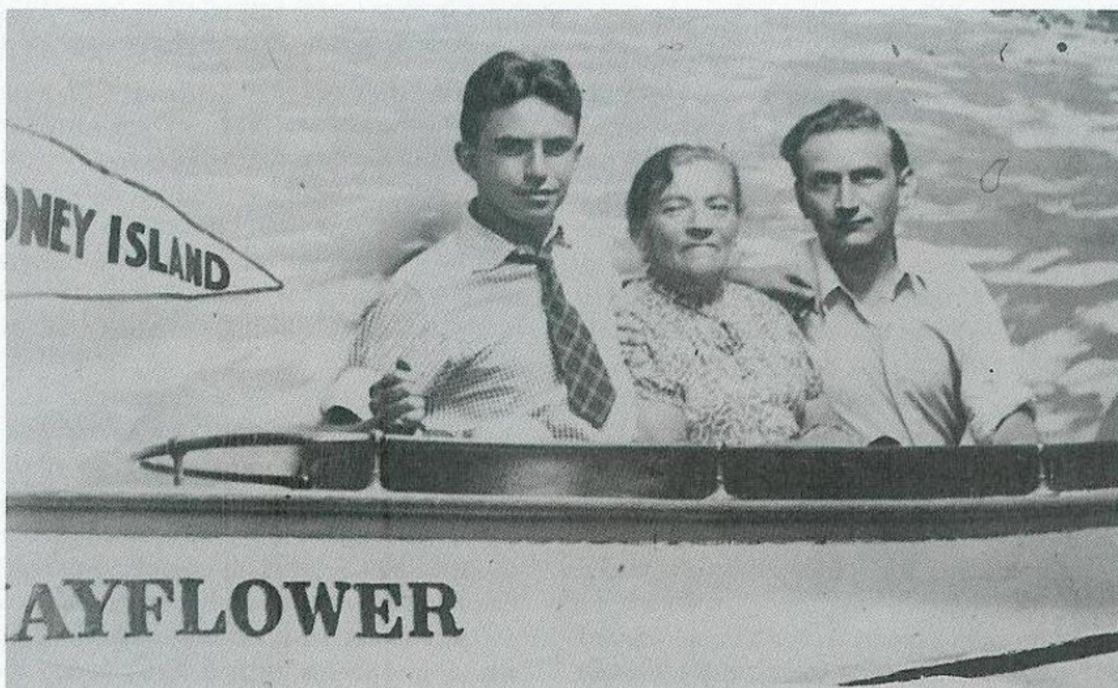
The last suit I took to an unusually tall man, who gave me, I think, the biggest tip any delivery boy ever received: a hundred-dollar bill. He told me his name was Guy Murchie, a writer, and he thought that I was also a writer. We quickly got acquainted. I gave him my new address. After getting a job I had again rented two dingy rooms on the Lower East Side. I told him I was a poet and a watchmaker. He illustrated one of my poems ("The Hunger Dance") for my first Yiddish book of poetry, *Drei shwester* (Three sisters), which was published in 1932.

With his hundred-dollar tip I opened a clock and watch repair shop at 218 Avenue A, with the sign Expert Clock and Watchmaker, Nothing for Sale.

Guy Murchie and I met often in 1932 until we lost track of each other. Fifty years later, in 1982, when I lectured at Bates College, Maine, we met again. From then on we have corresponded. He published a number of books, is a follower of the Bahai religion. I shall be thankful to him all my life for helping me in time of dire need.

I enjoyed my work very much in the watch and clock repair shop. When I was a child I never saw a train in the village of Michalishek, here I felt like a trainman conducting the trains of wheels of clocks and watches. I often had to perform small operations to keep the wheels moving. For instance, at times I had to cut out an old decayed tooth in a wheel, solder a new tooth into it, file it around so finely that the new tooth seemed to have grown into the wheel. At times, I had to heal the injured mainspring, place it into its barrel to convey power from wheel to wheel. Sometimes I had to adjust the escapement to control the speed of the trains of wheels. I used the methods of so-called old-fashioned watchmaking, which I prefer to the modern. I feel almost Godly whenever I give life to a dead watch.

I listened to the heartbeat of every watch as if it were my own. Clocks and watches are more humane than people. All the different races of clocks and watches in my repair shop lived together, without prejudice, in peace and harmony. There are very many kinds of watches which speak different languages, but they understand each other's joy and sorrow, love one another. I am a linguist of clocks and



Menke, his mother, Badane, and his youngest brother, Meishke, 1937

watches, I understand all their languages.

Some watches are pessimists, some optimists, some philosophers. The pessimistic watch gets tired of a long life, it believes time itself is too weary to continue through endless dawns and dusks, nights and days, through singing summers and storytelling winters, without a moment of rest. I sometimes think such watches are right, perhaps even birds tire of listening to the same repetitive songs all their lives. Some watches, pessimists, are eager to stop and finally die or perhaps commit suicide.

I heard a watch, a philosopher, say: "All life will end when all watches on earth stop, the earth will then refuse to whirl around the sun." I heard a watch, an original poet, say to me: "I am weary, Menke, of going forward, make me go backward." I did. I made this clock go backward. Time on this clock gets younger, moment by moment, on its way to the beginning of all beginnings, beyond Genesis, where there is nothing-nothing, so God can start a new world, without the years of depression, without Cains, without wars, jails—an Isaiah world.

I know such thoughts, visions, are not down-to-earth. After a few weeks I had to give up my repair shop. People engrossed in their daily struggles to survive did not give a hoot if their clocks or watches were dead or alive.

It was depression time. I saw mighty men with useless hands, hungry women, asking: Brother, sister, can you spare a dime? I was again penniless, about to be evicted, about to be homeless, but I could always go "home" again to the Williamsburg Bridge.

When I was in my lowest mood, my good old friend Aaron came with surprising news. He said: "Menke you never have to worry about a job again. My uncle, the rich poet, wants you to translate all his English poems into Yiddish. Every week I will bring you one of his poems and fifteen dollars." I asked: "How many poems does your uncle want me to translate, Aaron?" "I think hundreds, Menke." He gave me fifteen dollars and one of his uncle's poems.

I suddenly felt rich. I took all my friends to the Crusader Cafeteria (Fourteenth Street near Union Square), treated them all to coffee and goodies. Everyone looked at Aaron as a savior.

When I came home I told the landlady that I would soon pay my debt, would pay her the eight-dollars-a-month rent regularly because I now had a job.

I had been wondering why Aaron's uncle wanted his English poems translated into Yiddish. Yiddish had been downtrodden through the ages by Jews as well as non-Jews, debased by enemies who called it jargon. The Jewish folk, the true lovers of Yiddish, could not imagine why anyone would insult their mother tongue, in which they laughed, cried, fought for everything just and beautiful. The six million Jews who were gassed, shot, their skins turned into lampshades by the Nazis, died with Yiddish on their lips. The Yiddish folk used the word jargon as a compliment. My parents always referred to Yiddish as a beautiful jargon. Because of my great love for the language, here is one of my hymns to Yiddish:

A Yiddish Poet

I am a Yiddish poet—a doomed troubadour,
a dreamsmith jeered by the soft-voiced yokel,
the smooth snob with the swinging lash
shrieking: jargon!
O are the mocked tears of my people a jargon?

Yiddish,
formed as Adam of the dust of the four corners of the earth;
the quenchless blaze of the wandering Jew,
the thirst of the deserts.

My mother tongue is unpolished as a wound, a laughter, a love-starved kiss,
yearnful as a martyr's last glance at a passing bird.
Taste a word, cursed and merciless as an earthquake.
Hear a word, terse and bruised as a tear.
See a word, light and lucent, joyrapt as a ray.
Climb a word—rough and powerful as a crag.
Ride a word—free and rimeless as a tempest.

Yiddish,
The bare curse thrown against the might of pitiless foes.
A "black year" shrouding dawn after a massacre.
The mute call of each speechless mouth of Treblinka.
The prayer of stone to turn into gale.

The poems by the "rich uncle" which I translated into Yiddish were rather poor, though every poem was written in the difficult form of terza rima (third rhyme), which Dante invented for his *Divine Comedy.* This form is so complicated that most poets had hardly used it since the fourteenth century. It was comical to see such a heavy form in light verse. He wrote his poems with a light hand, did not take Horace's advice to use unsparingly the "labor of the file."

The poems handed to me for translation were all overburdened with clichés such as silver moon, golden sun, purling brook, ruby eyes, whispering breeze. It reminds me now of the student who read his poems, with so many clichés, at one of my poetry workshops at Grove City College. I said: "You are a genius of clichés. What is your name?" "Mr. Cliché," he answered.

At times, I felt very sad when I had to translate trashy poetry instead of writing my own poems. It was particularly tiresome to frame such boredom in terza rima, the majestic form used by Boccaccio in his *Amorosa visione,* Petrarch in *Trionfi,* Chaucer in *Complaint to His Lady.*

Nonetheless, I was content that I was wasting only hours on translating one of his poems into Yiddish, not hungry days on the streets of New York in search of the impossible—a job. Fifteen dollars a week for translating one poem was good pay, almost twice as much as I had earned as a delivery boy working eight hours a day.

I hoped I would now have the time and peace of mind to get deeper involved in my narrative Yiddish book of poems: *Brenendik shtetl* (Burning village), volume two. (I regret that, many years later, I also named my English book of poems *Burning Village.* I should have named it *Bread of Famine,* as I intended, to avoid questions as to whether it was translated from my Yiddish books. It was not.)

After a few lucky weeks as a translator I received twelve poems with only fifteen dollars, which was supposed to be for translating one poem. He also sent a long letter with a phraseology which he thought would show him off as a great scholar of form, but it scared me out of my wits when I realized that he wanted me to use this tedium in my translation. (He sent this letter to me fifty-five years ago, I still keep it among my crumbling bygones.)

Here is just a short quotation from his long letter, only a handful of forms, which gives an idea how much labor, how much sweat and brain, he expected me to sacrifice to star his poems through my Yiddish translations:

> Dear Translator:
>
> I explain here which form I want you to use for every one of my twelve poems. For the first poem: "Sweet Old Bride," in honor of the eighty second birthday of my wife, follow strictly the same six foot hexameter in Yiddish as I do in English, in catalectic, dactylic lines. The fifth line should be spondaic, the last syllable may be accented or unaccented. The major pause should be in line three, penthemimeral after five half feet. Line six should have two minor caesuras, heptemimeral or trihemimeral, after five half feet. You may use diaeresis in foot endings. Like Homer I want to avoid the two pauses in a four foot spondee (bucolic diaeresis or in a three foot dactyl).
>
> I do not always agree with Homer, I do not use in foot three the feminine caesura.

He ends his long letter with a promise that from now on he will send me twelve poems and fifteen dollars weekly.

Here is my answer to the uncle:

> Dear Uncle,
>
> In your style of unspeakable language I must say, your vocabulary is too dominious for my copious comprehension. To follow your orders to translate your poems, choked with form, twelve every week, means to perform the twelve labors of Hercules. Hercules was not freed even after he completed the twelve labors. He was forced to dress like a woman and do spinning and weaving. However, I am sending you here the thirteenth labor:
>
> *The Thirteenth Labor*
>
> Hercules' thirteenth labor was to turn into a fly, snarled in
> the noose of a cobweb and wing out as the king of giants,
> but the fly fought, in vain, to free itself of the death trap.
> A star sneaked into the cobweb to swear eternal
> love to the fly. A host of stars followed, changed the
> cobweb into a heaven of light. The fly
> prayed to every star: O vanish my love,
> death is a spider with Satan's eyes,
> silk fingers. Let my enemy
> hide me in night shrouds. Your light
> outhorrors all deaths.———Then,
> mighty Hercules:
> a dead fly, met
> his true love—
> darkness.

It was an exalting experience for me to meet my friend Aaron in his old mother's house in the depths of Brooklyn. She was almost a century young. When-

ever I came she made me feel that I was a special guest. She showed me a decorated card on the wall with one of my remarks: Only Bores Get Old.

The mother was highly intelligent, a voracious reader, particularly of old Greek comedies. When she was nearing a hundred she took off her glasses and said: "I can read better without them." At the time she was reading *The Clouds* by Aristophanes. She thought it was the finest of his comedies, he should have gotten first prize in the "Knights of the Year" in 423 B.C. (He won third prize). She said Kratinos, the "doddering drunkard," did not deserve first prize.

Aware of my difficult plight she changed the subject: "I am glad, Menke, the uncle will not be able to buy your talent anymore for some baked potatoes and a few pots of coffee, but how will you survive?" Aaron added: "Menke, the penny-pinching uncle never gave you a red cent for translating his poems. Your brother Yeiske did not want you to know that he gave you the money, so he made believe it was the uncle."

To say the least I was amazed, ha-ha! I thought the uncle paid me fifteen dollars weekly for translating his poetic rubbish—so it was my brother Yeiske who secretly gave me half of his salary.

The sixty-four dollar question came up again. How could I earn a nickel to buy four rolls at the East Side bakery? There was no hope of getting a job here. I thought, perhaps I should leave New York, my beloved city, and try my luck elsewhere. Change might be hope. I took along some of my watchmaking tools and hitchhiked without a definite aim or direction.

In almost every town I was able to find a clock or a watch which needed repair. I managed somehow to earn enough for a couple of sandwiches every day and a few dimes for a cheap hotel at night.

After a week on the road I saw that I had made little headway, as if I wasn't hitchhiking by automobile, but traveling by horse and wagon through Lithuania. I was anxious to get to the wide-open highways. After waiting hours on a lonely byway I was suddenly lucky enough to get a ride as far as Miami, Florida.

In Miami I was told that a vagrant had to show that he had some means of subsistence, that he or she would not be a burden on the public. I had not been bothered by anybody. I searched for a job as for a hidden treasure and was delighted to find an ad in a local newspaper saying that jobs were available in Key West for men who were interested in being sailors.

When I finally reached Key West I rushed immediately to the office of the ship company. After answering a few questions I signed a paper without even reading it, was given a sailor suit, and was considered a sailor. I was housed with a group of jobless men who wanted to be sailors not out of choice but out of need. We were all awaiting the call to sail to Cuba.

Menke and his brother Yeiske in the 1930s

The first day in Key West I felt strange and lonely among the men because they were so different. One enormous man, simple-minded, with obvious physical strength (nicknamed Slim), reminded me of the retarded Lenny who loved petting mice in John Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men.*

There was also a "nature lover" who loved to kill beautiful butterflies and large moths. He said he killed them so gently that they didn't feel any pain. He was a painless killer. He considered himself an expert on moths and butterflies. Butterflies, he explained, fly only during summer days, are lovers of sun; moths hide until dusk, are lovers of darkness.

The next day I met Ernest Hemingway. He impressed me not only as a great writer but also as a genuine human being. I read some of my poems to him. He praised them generously, but I think he would have given similar praise to any other poet.

Hemingway was very much loved in Key West. He helped the poor, was a close pal of every Tom, Dick, and Harry.

I sent a letter to my brother Yeiske about my adventures. He came by plane immediately. We spoke long letters. He insisted that I return to New York with him. I agreed. However, I thought it might be hard to drop this job, I might not be able to void my signature.

We both went to the office of the ship company, I in my sailor suit, my brother Yeiske overdressed like

a yokelish gentleman to make an honorable impression. (Most men came to the ship office dressed like homeless people.) He spoke about me as a brother and a lawyer. He described in detail how unfit I was. He pleaded with them: "Don't allow my brother to be a sailor." He even tried to joke with them. "The boat will sink with such a sailor as my brother, and he will be swallowed like Jonah, living in the belly of a huge fish."

One pompous officer said: "Your brother signed a paper that he would be a sailor at least a year. Only rats abandon ship." But the chief said: "There are plenty of clumsy good-for-nothings who want to be sailors. We don't want such creatures. Take your brother away from us. Let him return the sailor suit, and good riddance."

We both returned to New York. Our friends met us triumphantly in the cafeteria at Twenty-third Street and Seventh Avenue. I had never liked to travel. I now felt that traveling through a chat with friends over a cup of coffee was more fantastic than sailing around the world.

A Chat around the Table

A chat
around the
table is the
oldest voyage on
earth, since winds were trains, clouds—
boats, Jonah's whale, the first sub
marine on its maiden trip to
torpedo the sins of Nineveh.
O traveling with you through time and space,
at a cup of coffee, we reach the end of
grief. I see a prison, vision-struck turn into
a castle where my enchanted love will dream of me
a thousand years, until I come to wake her with a kiss
and lead her to the island of our neverland: our table.

Whenever any one of my friends wanted to find me throughout the long winter nights, he or she knew where I was: either in the Stewart Cafeteria on Twenty-third Street or the one on Fourteenth Street, both on Seventh Avenue. My friend Yosl Greenspan, the Yiddish poet, was almost always with me.

On one of the bleak December nights when we spent all our nickels on coffee, read all our new Yiddish poems to each other, chatted about life and death, love affairs, present, past, and future, we suddenly saw a pretty-pretty girl turning toward us through the revolving door of the cafeteria. Yosl said, "She walks in beauty like the night," in iambic pentameter. Lord Byron must have had her in mind when he wrote his poem on beauty.

She came into the cafeteria like a jewelled bride of an ancient prince, as if out of my aunt Beilke's midnight stories. The cafeteria at almost 4:00 A.M. was half forsaken. There were only a few night lovers left. She drank coffee alone at a secluded table and read Ovid's *Art of Love.* We seemed to be unwelcome guests when we joined her at the table. It was hard to get acquainted with her. She wouldn't even tell us her name. Nonetheless she finally asked us to read some of our poems, after we told her we were poets.

We wondered why she came with an earthen jug, opened all the sugar bowls in the cafeteria, put in some tiny living things, and closed them again. We asked her: "Are you putting ants into the sugar?" "Yes," she answered, "They love sugar."

She did not allow us to escort her when she left. The hours spent with her remained with us. We tried to guess who she was. Was she one of the joy-girls around here selling love bargains, for two bits a ride to Eros, a minute in heaven? No, a prostitute could not afford to be so jewelled, certainly not now in the depression years, though the oldest profession was in full bloom around here. We stopped guessing who she might be and started reading the poems of the prince of Yiddish poetry, Mani Leib, until the night met its enemy—dawn.

On the streets there were no masses of people rushing to work. Jobless men and women were trying to sell Hoover apples. We heard one of the apple sellers, a woman as fat as the Dutch midwife, Madame Haupt, in *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair, announcing: "Buy golden apples. For a nickel you can add light to every one of your five senses. These are the same kind of apples which Adam and Eve ate in Eden."

She angered my friend Yosl. He said: "How can you throw out, in these days of Hoovervilles, breadlines, and hunger marches, such a pack of lies? Hoover apples are Sodom apples, they dissolve into smoke and ashes after they are eaten. Let us all join the hungry battalions who march on cities, towns, and farms for jobs, homes, bread—for a new America!"

A dozen nights later we saw the unnamed girl walk into the Seventh Avenue cafeteria with a different charm. In contrast to her queenly first visit she now looked like a simple peasant girl, in a linen dress decorated with wild tiger lilies—the pride of skilled needlework. She brought the freshness of the fields into the cafeteria.

Night in, night out, she came as if to show us how

she alternated between opposite personalities. One night she seemed like Cinderella on her way to dance at the royal ball; the next night, a peasant girl who had bathed in the rushing rivulet of my village.

We pleaded with her to tell us a bit about herself, but she said: "Please don't ask anything about me. Poets should like a mysterious girl." Whenever I invited her to my room across the street from the cafeteria, she always came. I gave her a key to my room; when she failed to come some nights to the cafeteria I often found her at daybreak in my room. Whenever my friend Yosl, who was almost always homeless (slept at the Jewish University), invited her to his homeless home she also came.

Without giving us any reason she stopped coming to us. We thought she had vanished.

During the difficult hunger years, from 1931 to 1934, my friend Yosl Greenspan and I attended the Jewish University (at 208 East Fourteenth Street), where we studied Yiddish, Hebrew, Jewish history, the history of civilization, Jewish and world poetry. After we graduated in 1934, we continued studying another year at the same university. During these four years of struggle, my friend Yosl had to sleep on the hard floor of the university. (There were no beds, no pillows there.)

Summer again. The almost forgotten nameless girl surprised us with an unexpected visit. She explained she had not come for so long because she wanted to know how much she would miss us. She said: "I lived in yearning, solitude. During the months that I didn't see you I communicated with you in my dreams. Now I know I love you both. I could not live without either of you."

We spent the night in the Crusader Cafeteria until we heard the subway trains roaring: dawn is here, a new day has arrived. The three of us walked together to Union Square. She said: "Menke, let us take Yosl home to the Jewish University, then you'll take me home."

I was thrilled. She would now take me to her home. Yosl and I were so eager to find out a bit about her concealed life, now we might know it all. She walked with me to the Lower East Side. On Orchard Street she said: "Menke, wait, I will return soon." I saw her getting lost in the crowd as she waved goodbye with both hands, until I lost sight of her. It was clear she wanted to part forever. We found and lost her as in a dream.

I was suddenly struck with a desert thirst. A jobless man was selling Hoover juice for a penny a glass. I held the glass of Hoover juice like Socrates holding the cup of hemlock, drinking a toast to the vicious gods of Hoover.

A few days later we received the following note from her:

Dear Yosl and Menke,

> "What woman says to fond lover should
> be written on wind and running water."
>
> Catullus

The tragic death of my brother Elchik influenced much of my poetry. I did not want to write in comfort, at home, about the last days of his life, in a barrack, in no-man's-land. I wanted to live through his solitude, his isolation, the yearning for his loved ones.

In the winter of 1968, I lived all alone in a cold, deserted bungalow in Accord, New York, in the midst of naked woods and giant mountains, climbing as if to overtop the tower of Babel, the gate of God.

It was a harsh winter, though not as merciless as the winters of Lithuania. The shaky bungalow struggled to stand against the wind-guns, under an army of snow-devils over its roof. One loose board knocked back and forth as if in self-punishment. I heard Elchik's unlived tomorrows howling in the wind. Broken branches of crippled trees performed a ghost dance for the evil-hearted.

The bungalow always reminded me of Elchik's barrack, but without his misery; I did have a burning stove, a lamp with an oil reservoir, and the flame of a wick which could fight the darkness of the long winter nights. I did not undergo his hunger. I could walk a mile every day to a mini–country store to get a sandwich and a hot cup of coffee. (I always imagined I was sharing it with my brother Elchik.) I did not face his fear, his inescapable death.

In daydreams I saw Elchik and Dveirke again and again in the moonlit synagogue when they swore eternal love at the open ark. Dveirke kept her oath after he died. She never married. We corresponded until the Nazis killed her. She was one of the six million Jews who died in the gas chambers.

I experienced a beautiful loneliness when I wrote poems away from cities, from the greedy gods of gold calves, away from the petty truths of smart presidents, away from dwarf giants hoorayed by shouting throngs.

Even the footfalls of suspicious animals which prowled through the nights were an exciting inspiration. I began my hermitage with a poem, "Elchik and Dveirke," in a Chant Royal, one of the most complicated forms in poetry, because I like challenge. I love to experiment with form. Eustache Deschamps (fourteenth century) tells us that the Chant Royal should

have five stanzas, eleven lines each, an envoy of five lines, with five rhymed sounds, and a refrain at the end of every stanza. But I believe it is about time to leave the rhymes in the nursery, also to avoid the monotony of the refrain, hence my Chant Royal consists of fifty-five unrhymed, unrefrained lines, with a five-line unrhymed envoy.

I also wrote, in my self-imposed exile, twenty poems, "From Elchik's Diary," the last chapter of my twelfth book of poetry: *Burning Village.* I consider all of these poems sonnets. Here is just one.

Elchik's Last Prayer

God, curse
me not with
the spectered light
of heaven, bless me
with yearning, trance, conflict:
the living darkness of man.
No, not an eternal ghost in
Eden, a bluehearted seraphim,
rather, a stung scorpion on earth, a
wretch under thronged, brotherless feet. Let me not
pray to you with a mouth of dust but with a voice
of drought. Let me cling to the horn of this new moon, to
Satan's teeth, to life. Give me gutterblood, pour me like waste
waters, free to dream, I am a river sailing to the sea.

I know most poets and lovers of poetry will not agree with me, will wonder why I call this poem a sonnet. It is not a Petrarchan, Spenserian, or Shakespearean fourteen-line sonnet, in iambic pentameter. It is an unrhymed fourteen-line *Menke-sonnet.* I only took the name and the number fourteen.

If you carefully examine this sonnet, you will see that I add a syllable to every line. I begin with two syllables, end with fifteen. (I also begin sonnets with fifteen, end with two.) Of course, it is not only a syllable count. The rising and falling mood of the poem is in full harmony with the iamb and its reverse—the trochee. (The iamb is most suitable for English verse, the trochee for Yiddish. The trochee was not used in English verse until the sixteenth century.) You will also find the contrasts between the anapest and the dactyl commensurate with the content in all forms of my rhymeless poems. (A dactyl is like a bent finger; if you bend any one of the fingers, except the thumb, you will see the three joints of the dactyl, the first accented, the other two unaccented.)

With daughter, Troim

I love to be a pathfinder, to walk alone on my own path. I think if the masters were alive today, they would also tire of always following in the footsteps of other poets through the ages.

When I married the first time, I was eighteen. My first wife, Haske, and I lived together a couple of years and had two children. The last time I saw my son Noah he was eight, he died at an early age. I named my daughter Troim—a dream. She deserves the name, she was a sensitive, dreamful child. I appreciate the fact that she has never changed her name. Tradition tells us that the Jews were freed from Egypt after hundreds of years of slavery because they did not change their names.

After her mother remarried, it was difficult for me to see my daughter, Troim. To paraphrase Plutarch I may say that, for Troim, living together with a stepfather was like living with a spiritual cripple, and she was in danger of beginning to limp spiritually herself.

I could not see her between the ages of ten and sixteen. When I met her, after six years, on a bus from New York to Passaic, New Jersey, I did not recognize her. She was a sixteen-year-old young lady, looked extremely familiar. I asked her whether she was one of my students. "Student!" she said, "You are my father!" I was overcome with emotion, shame,

and shock. She is now an English teacher at Port Jefferson Junior High School. My daughter, Troim, and I are close friends. The loveliness which she had as a child is always with her.

I lived alone from the age of twenty to forty-four, when I met by chance the petite, attractive girl Rivke, who became my wife ten days later. She was twenty-eight.

In the early fifties I lived through a very difficult period in my life. I did not write poems for many months. I have always believed that when a poet stops writing it is time to die. I thought, aside from Yiddish I should also try to write poems in another language, perhaps English or Hebrew. I decided to return to English, in which I had written my very first poems when I was in my teens.

Interesting—I began to write English poems again during the three years (1954–56, again in 1959–60) when my wife Rivke and I were in Israel, in Safad—the cradle of the Cabala. I wrote poems in both languages: Yiddish and English. My English poems were soon accepted by the *Atlantic Monthly,* the *New York Times,* etc. I also wrote my ninth book of Yiddish poems there: *Safad.*

As a Cabalist I enjoyed living in Safad. It is an ideal town for the Cabala. The alleys in the old part of the town are so narrow no horse and wagon can go through. Only donkeys could climb over the hills of Safad, stepping like people. Jews and Arabs rode on donkeys for their livelihood and sometimes for fun.

We lived in a sort of a hut near the graves of the Cabalists of hundreds of years ago. Looking through our small windows at sunset we saw a splendor which was almost frightening, it seemed we saw God. I think the most beautiful sunsets on earth are in Safad. It is a sacred experience to visit in Safad the grave of Holy Ari (1534–1572), one of the greatest Cabalists. It was inspiring to know that in the neighboring town of Miron was the grave of Shimin Bar Yochai (second century), who escaped from the Romans, hid with his son Eliezer in a cave for thirteen years, and wrote the Zohar—the light, heart, and soul of the Cabala. Living in the depths of the Zohar it is easy for me to believe that life will begin after my last sunset. It is easy for me to believe that the tiniest blade of grass, pale and forsaken, never knew that grass may be green—has an angel who guards its life, it should live to the end and beyond time. I believe that not only man, but even the mouse, elephant, the worm, have God's image, or God would have not created them.

My wife Rivke and I had to return to the United States when she was in the seventh month of pregnancy, because my older brother Berke was mortally ill with congestive heart failure.

My son was born in Brooklyn when I was fifty. God could not have given us a greater gift than the birth of our son, Heershe Dovid (named after my father). My poetry in Yiddish and in English is hymned with poems to our son. I wrote these lines on the day he was born:

On the Birth of My Son

My son, I am so
affluent with beginning
that if I die now
God will see me as first light
and he will say: "It is good."

I wrote the following poem to my son, in Yiddish, when he was three days old, translated by my wife Rivke:

My Three Day Old Son
(for my son Heershe Dovid)

Three days and three nights old are you my son.
You are all the gold of three twilights, three dawns.
You are all Genesis, the world is three days old.
A newborn sun is just learning to dawn.

A butterfly at your age would already be a zaydeh,[1]
would find an elf-bed of glass on a windowpane:
already weary of pranks and frolics in the sun,
would pray: grant me God a bit of night.

Who understands like you the mute language of thorn and stone?
You cry out each craving of the first man on earth.
Could be your cries echo Adam's first throes.
O which laughter like your cry is blessed?

Be fantastic like a deer, like David a poet.
May you learn from dawn to scour shadows off each ray;
may your mouth be full with Yiddish as with flow the rivulet.
O be worthy of my father's name, my little son.

I wanted my son to know, to love, my mother tongue, Yiddish. It seemed hard, when I met my wife Rivke she did not know Yiddish. I spoke to him in Yiddish from the time he was able to say mamme, tatte (daddy).

Day in, day out, I told him beautiful stories in Yiddish. The stories I told him when he was a little

[1] Grandfather

child not only made him love Yiddish, they had a great influence on his imagination, on his adult life.

He always asked me to retell the story about King Nimrod, who threw Abraham, the first Jew, into a fiery furnace which burned three days and three nights, because he broke the idols.

Three days later, when King Nimrod came to take the ashes, the leftovers of Abraham, as souvenirs, he was surprised to see the fire burst into bloom. The burning furnace turned into a wondrous orchard. Some flames changed into red roses, some into apple trees, from which Abraham ate with God's blessing during the three days that he was in the fiery furnace.

Our son, Heershe Dovid, loved my stories so much he wanted to hear them all night. We had to turn the hands of the clock ahead from nine in the evening to three A.M. to show him it was time to get some sleep, almost time to go to school. Our efforts were not in vain. At twenty-six he received his doctorate in Yiddish linguistics at the University of London. Now, at thirty-two, he is the director of Yiddish studies at Oxford University in England.

Looking at poetry in a broader sense, I think almost everyone in the Lithuanian village of Michalishek

With two-year-old son, Heershe Dovid, 1958

was a poet. The blind beggar girl with a beggar bag on her shoulder was a poet when she sang heartrending folk songs from door to door:

> Was I not born of a mother?
> Was I born out of a stone?

Even the homeless dog was a poet when on moonlit nights he barked against his fate to a deaf sky.

I was a poet at the age of five when I saw angels as next-door neighbors; when I heard the ancient Talmud melodies of the Yeshiva students, who "ate days." (They ate potato goodies, a day here, a day there, in the poor homes of kind people.) These melodies echoed throughout the village and still reecho in many of my poems. We were all poets when cherubs, beggars, and the Messiah were part of our family on the crooked alleys of my childhood.

No reality seemed as real as the dream. I listened with awe to the stories which the Rabbi told us about the great dreamer Joseph. It is sometimes dangerous to tell others your dreams, said the Rabbi. Joseph almost paid with his life for telling his dreams to his brothers. When they saw him they said: "The dreamer cometh, let us slay him." They threw him into a pit, in the wilderness, sold him as a slave to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver.

The father, Jacob, took what was left of his most beloved son Joseph, only his many-colored coat dipped in the blood of a slaughtered kid.

When we children heard about the dreams of the good King Pharaoh (there was also a cruel Pharaoh in Exodus), we admired the seven skinny cows who swallowed the seven fat cows, also the seven lean ears of corn, blasted by the east wind, which swallowed the seven full stalks of corn. The Rabbi explained that the dreams showed the weak can defeat the strong, just as the shepherd boy David killed the Philistine giant Goliath with only a smooth stone from the brook.

I was fascinated by the number seven in Pharaoh's dreams. I added a few sevens to the dream sevens in this poem:

Seven

> Wonder
> times wonder
> is seven. There
> are seven heavens,
> seven earths, seven seas,
> seven worlds. Seven women
> got hold of one man's coat in the
> far nonevil land of Isaiah.
> Seven sleepers of Ephesus slept two

hundred years in a cave of the Koran.
Seven, seven et cetera, et cetera.

Only Joseph was able to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, that seven years of famine would follow seven years of plenty. No wonder King Pharaoh was so pleased that he put his ring on Joseph's hand, a gold chain around his neck, and made him ruler of the land of Egypt. I tried as a child to learn from Joseph how to interpret my own dreams about life after death, about the coming of the Messiah for whom we all waited, though he may come a bit late.

I often write poems in my dreams. When I awake I quickly jump out of bed and scribble down the poem. However, many lines escape, join the unborn in a world known only to them. I feel Godly when the blank paper begins to live the life which I created. I live forever while writing a poem.

I have loved dreams all my life. I meet in my dreams people who died generations ago, my father and mother, my oldest brother, Elchik, who died at seventeen, my older brother Berke, who died at fifty-eight, women I loved who died young. I always see them in my dreams alive as if they had never died.

All great dreams are infinite and as nearby as dawn. Only in dreams can we see the world for which man has striven since the beginning of life on earth.

Most people feel that, even when sleep is blessed with rest and peace of mind, it still shortens their lives by a third. But sleep is wondrous, it brings dreams. In my dreams I wrote poems about my son's grandson (my great-grandson), who will be born generations hence. He walked into my dream as real as my son Heershe Dovid. My son, who is now thirty-two, his still unborn grandson, and I, we are all one. On the road of eternity a couple of generations more or less is only a small child's step of time.

My son's grandson said: "I am named after you. My name is Menke. I am also a poet, the poet laureate of your life and death." He read to me some of his poems, which are (with some variations) included in my fifteenth book: *A Chair for Elijah.*

We were generations together during the minutes when my great-grandson visited me. I had no idea it was a dream.

It was fortunate for both of us that we met, Harry Smith (poet, essayist, publisher) and I, almost a quarter of a century ago when I was a novice editor of the poetry magazine *Bitterroot.* He was then the editor of the first issue of the *Smith.* We became friends immediately. The influence on each other's poetry is wide and deep.

He encouraged me to write my narrative book of poems, *Burning Village,* about my tragic childhood during the First World War. His three children enjoyed the stories I told them about my village in Lithuania. They influenced me to write my only book of stories: *Forever and Ever and a Wednesday.*

Menke Katz and Harry Smith—drawings by Rivke Katz from the dust jacket of Two Friends, *volume one*

Rivke Katz

Our poems influenced each other. For instance: At a *l'chaim* (a toast to life) we argued talmudically about which wine was more alluring, red or white wine. At first I preferred red wine, Harry white wine. Then I switched to white wine, Harry to red wine. White wine, red wine: the result, we wrote four poems on red and white wine.

Harry Smith published a number of my books. Together we wrote two books of poems: *Two Friends,* volumes 1 and 2 (just published). We continue to meet now as often as we have through all the past years, at our forest house in the foothills of the Catskill Mountains. Our friendship has grown constantly, and will eternally, since the day we met. Few poets enjoy such great friendship.

Since 1962 I have been the editor of *Bitterroot.* It was a quarterly until a few years ago, now it appears three times a year. The first ten years were the easiest for me, all the technical work was done by my assistant editor, Sol Karp, an old bachelor in his high eighties.

He printed *Bitterroot* himself in varitype. A paper company was kind to him, gave him paper for our magazine as a gift. He rented an abandoned store under the elevated trains, in a poor neighborhood of the parkless Borough Park of Brooklyn (5229 New Utrecht Avenue). Some years ago it was a flower store. Flower boys and girls were sent from here to sell flowers through the streets, on roads, highways—blue irises born and bred in swamps and damp meadows; pansies, flowers like faces in a dream; bird-of-paradise flowers with petals like birds flying through Eden; forget-me-nots, love and friendship flowers; flowers with a sadness fit for funerals; flowers overwhelmed by joy, which little girls strew at weddings before brides.

The dreary back of the forsaken flower store was his home, his library, the region of reveries. He had two signs in the front window: *Bitterroot,* Quarterly Poetry Magazine, $2.50 a Year and Expert English Teacher, $2.00 a Lesson. Together with the bits of money received from subscribers, he managed to "support" himself.

Sol Karp was a sort of a Cabalist, poet, hermit. He printed some of his own poetry books. I visited him two to three hours every day, whenever I missed a day he kept a record of the hours I owed him.

He was an ethical and health vegetarian, an admirer of the Jains, a Hindu sect which influenced Gandhi. With almost no schooling, he was a "professor" of nutrition. He lectured to *Bitterroot* readers on longevity, how to keep the body in natural repair.

He placed his readers in various zones. Those who drank alcohol, used medicines, smokers, were in the danger zone. Those who ate the flesh of dead animals, the bodies of dead fish, were in the nightmare zone. He warned his listeners that every dead animal which they eat would come one day in their dreams and demand its life. The rivers from which the mystical fish were fooled, trapped, choked in nets, will one night flow like rivers of tears in their nightmares. He was in the health zone, he believed he would live at least a hundred and forty years.

Sol Karp was a glowing lover of poets of long ago. Books overflowed the table, scattered on the blackened floor, which hadn't tasted a lick of fresh water in years. The pages of the ancient books, yellowed by time, crumbled as he turned them again and again to his favorite two eighth-century poets: Hitómaro and Akáhito of the golden age of Japanese poetry.

The back of the store was filled with *Bitterroot* magazines and empty flowerpots which remembered the days when flowers competed with beauty and form.

In 1972, when he was in his high nineties, he moved to Israel because rough street kids made fun of him, pulled his coat, sometimes gave him a beating.

In every letter to me he wrote: "I don't miss America, Menke, I miss you." He died in Israel when he was almost a hundred. Since he died it has been a Herculean job for me and my wife Rivke to publish *Bitterroot.* It is a constant financial burden. We receive packs of letters filled with poems every day. We publish over a hundred poets in every issue. We do not send printed rejection slips, which are an insult to the poet. We always answer personally, nonetheless *Bitterroot* did have a tragic experience.

A poet committed suicide because his poems were not published in *Bitterroot* or anywhere. His father called the next day and blamed *Bitterroot* for his son's death.

We have also received threatening letters. One poet whose poems were always rejected was so desperate he said he would load his revolver and kill people on the streets at random.

It is exciting to discover unknown poets. It is inspiring always to be in the company of poets who live in various countries, poets in jails, poets behind the iron curtain.

I had a chance to delve into the dark souls of prisoners: murderers, rapists, kidnappers, to whom I taught poetry in the Napanoch and Greenhaven jails. I think even such hardened criminals can be made worthy of God's image if they are treated with a human approach.

After my two-hour lectures three times a week, some of the prisoners were conscience stricken. They always said: "When Menke comes, there are no more chains, no more prison walls." We published a special *Bitterroot* prison issue.

I got acquainted with poets on death row. I wrote a foreword to the book of poems *Waves and Licenses* by Stephen Todd Booker, a talented poet

who wrote his last poems in the shadow of the electric chair. The emotional strength in his poems as he faced death is to be marvelled at. He may be compared to the French fifteenth-century poet François Villon, who wrote poetry as he waited for the hangman's noose.

Villon is still living in the world of poetry. He will live as long as Robert Louis Stevenson's short story on Villon's life: "A Lodging for the Night." Stephen Todd Booker is already a forgotten poet.

During my appearances at various colleges and writers' groups throughout the United States I have been mostly interested in poetry workshops which consist of a chat around a table about the poems of poets who were strangers a while ago and are now friends for at least an hour.

When I speak from a stage I always feel there is an invisible wall between me and the listeners, no matter how much I try to be personal. Speaking face-to-face at a table invites an intimate mood. I rejoice when I hear the poems of a promising poet who may one day take an important place in American poetry.

However, there is a mood swing at a poetry workshop when a rhymester or a rhymeless scribbler or even worse, a grapho-imitator without a spark of talent, reads his or her poems. Imitators are usually bookish, like to show off how knowledgeable they are. One might read a poem "after Thomas Hardy" and also add that "Hardy was among the last survivors of the elder Victorians" and, looking at my long gray hair, say, "Hardy at your age wrote a great work of poetry."

It was comical and tragic to hear an imitator in one of my poetry workshops "improve" Gertrude Stein's famous line "a rose is a rose is a rose" into "god is a god is a god," simultaneously imitating e. e. cummings, who rarely used capital letters. (Sometimes he used capital letters in the middle of a word.)

Gertrude Stein's imitator probably did not realize that he had made out of God a god-awful idol, which Abraham the idol breaker would throw onto the pile of Terah's broken idols.

e. e. cummings, who did not capitalize even God, also wrote: "ye! godless are the dull and the dull are the damned." I think cummings has more imitators than any other poet. If cummings chops up a word like this:

> anguish clim
> b ing,

he is still the most "unconventional poet ever to achieve world recognition" (I may also add, the most eccentric, most controversial, poet). His imitators do not chop up words, they mutilate his style, form, his credo that "poetry and every other art was and is and forever will be strictly and distinctly a question of individuality." (I am no admirer of e. e. cummings.)

One of the rhymists read a poem flooded with overused rhymes. As the leader of the workshop I took the rhymes out of the poem as a test to see if it was still a poem, but the rhymes were like the web of a spider which kept the poem together; without the rhymes the poem fell apart like shredded imagery (not a "mine of imagery"). The poem was like a bloodless body without flesh and bone.

Then I showed the students that when you take the rhymes out of Shelley, Keats, Byron, Swinburne, their poems scintillate as they did with the rhymes, because their best poems will always remain like gold, with or without rhyme. No matter in which fire you melt gold, it can never lose its quality.

Of course, poets are influenced by other poets. Ezra Pound's poems were influenced by Browning and Yeats, also by Swinburne and William Morris, but no one would call him an imitator.

There is an interesting anecdote about the sculptor Rodin. It was said that he once created a great sculpture out of manure; imitators also tried to create sculptures out of manure, but the work of the imitators stank. Hence we may conclude: Manure is manure is manure. Gold is gold is gold.

In the Year of Two Thousand

Dovid,
my twenty
eight year old son,
good to see you in
the year of two thousand,
in mid-August of your life,
when I will be a near and far
memory to you. O I know how
I will yearn for you, biting my own dust.

You may
still dream of
me as a torn
leaf dreams in wind to
return to its father
tree. You may see my poems
burn, in late autumn, in the sad,
flickering gold of the tamaracks,
before the needles fall in splendid death.

O see
my life cleansed
by the brisk light
of the first frost, at

dusk, when the scorched sun wheels
as a windfall apple, hear
me calling you as a brook locked
beneath ice: O-Ho Heershe Dovid
you are beyond my last night, my first dawn.

Judah, the son of Tema, tells us in the "Ethics of Our Fathers": "At eighty God gives us the gift of special strength." I would add, also the gift of special youth.

Now, at eighty-two, I am well aware it is late sunset in my life. There are not many years left for me, but if I have three more years to live I am extremely rich in days: three times three hundred and sixty-five days. I would not change one of my days for the year of a bore or a turtle. Hence, if I live three more years I have more days than Methuselah had years. (He lived nine hundred and sixty-nine years, more than anyone on earth.)

I would also add: At eighty God gives us the gift of special joy, the joy of rising at five-thirty in the morning, when the earth spins toward the east, to feel as young and as joyous as dawn.

When I write, I am alone, undisturbed, in my poetry room. Even the telephone is deaf and mute during the Godly hours when I write poems.

We take long walks during the summer afternoons, my wife Rivke and I, in the area of our forest house. We find an inspiring nook where I write and Rivke paints landscapes in watercolors or oils. She is a modest, God-blessed artist.

I love the dreamful nights no less than the days. My sleep is not disturbed by the images of memories which many would like to forget. My dreams are mostly beautiful. (Only when I live through tragedy, the death of a loved one, am I attacked by the dread and terror of a nightmare.) Even my first love, whom I met in a dream at a waterfall when I was sixteen, who was not born yet or may never be born, is as real as the light of sunrise. She told me her name was Paragoolt, that she had been waiting for me since God created the seas. I have written many poems to her. She lives in my poems and in every waterfall. We swore eternal love like my brother Elchik and Dveirke, neither life nor death can separate us. Our love is as eternal as life, beyond my last thought of her, infinite as God.

Now, at my age, time is more precious than ever before. Now I can't afford to waste an hour as I might have done when I was half my age. When I meet the champion bore of Spring Glen (the hamlet where we live), who always asks me how the poultry business is,

Alan Tepper

Menke, Rivke, and Heershe Dovid Katz. "The art work on the walls is Rivke's." 1973

I take the advice of Jewish wisdom not to answer a fool, because you become a greater fool than he is. I merely say: "I am late, must rush."

I keep myself so busy I have no time to be sick, have no time to die. There isn't anything I can't do which I did at any other time of my life. I enjoy, as I did in the past, lecturing, poetry readings, poetry workshops at various universities and writers' groups throughout the United States. (I also taught Yiddish, and Jewish studies, for over forty years.)

I never learned to drive an automobile. (I am a good bicycle rider.) My wife Rivke is my "chauffeur." She takes me everywhere to my poetry appearances as far as Jackson, Tennessee; French Canada; etc. She helps me with great devotion to guard my poetry before it finds a home in a book. She types my poems, locks them in a bank vault. I am as negligent and clumsy as a rock.

I am fortunate to have a family I love as much as my poetry. The many family parties at the home of my brother Meishke, at the home of my daughter, Troim, or at our forest house, are masterpieces of humor, laughter, *l'chaims*, and folk songs which I accompany on the mandolin.

We feel as close to one another in life as in death. We have a plot in the cemetery in Lodi, New Jersey, where my father, Heershe-Dovid, and my mother, Badane, await us. I will rest there next to my wife Rivke, my son Heershe Dovid, my brother Meishke, and his wife Phyllis. To cheer a bit the mournful earth where our graves will be, we have planned a party where all kinds of goodies and wine will be served, to drink l'chaims to death as well as to life.

I am now the oldest among my brothers and sister. I know the sun must go down. It is sundown time. I am saddened that it is not likely that I will be here in the year two thousand to celebrate the new century with my loved ones.

I would not want to be here in the year two thousand. I would not want to live that long. I do not think twelve years from now, at ninety-four, my life would still be meaningful. Montaigne said that the fear of death is worse than death. I think the fear of becoming a burden on anyone, the fear of reaching a low where I cannot write poems anymore, is more frightening than death. I do not yet see the wine of my life leaking drop by drop as through the cracks of a broken jug. I hope I still have many days to live as young and creative as I am now.

Cinquain

O leave
for me, my love
each night a blank page. I
will come to write my unwritten
poems.

The invitation to the party at Menke Katz's grave-to-be

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Menke Katz's poetry has been translated into French, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Kannada, and other languages.