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Menke. The Complete Yiddish Poems. Translated by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav. Edited by Dovid Katz and Harry Smith. Maps by Giedrė Beconytė. Published by The Smith, New York 2005.

Comprising the introduction by Dovid Katz

Yiddish Poet Menke Katz

There are no illusions of objectivity when a son writes about his father, and less so of a father who was his best friend too. And so, with the ghost sitting happily on the table, instead of peering down from behind, we turn to three little places (two villages and a biggish town, in the local conception of things), in the Province of Vilna, Lithuania, in the old Russian Empire.



Menke at 3, before the first haircut

became Menke (pronounced *méynke* — MAIN-keh), then a common male name in those parts. According to an ancient Jewish custom, the boy's hair was not cut until he was three years old. The first haircut is known as the *ópsherenish* in Yiddish. According to a rather newer custom, he was photographed right before the first haircut. The photographer supplied the tricycle. The family could not afford such luxuries.

Menke Katz was born on the night of the second Passover feast or *seyder* in 1906, in Svintsyán (svints-YAN), a county seat town some forty-seven miles northeast of Vilna, to parents who had just moved there. Hirshe-Dovid Katz of Svir, and Badonna Gubersky of Michaleshik (mih-CHA-lih-shik) came from families who had lived in those villages for some six centuries. Menke was named for his father's mother Moyne (Yiddish MOI-neh, the local form of Mona).

They couldn't name a boy Moyne, so he

These places, all not far from Vilna (present-day Vilnius), were in the heart of the land known to Jews as *Lita* (pronounced LI-teh in Yiddish). The word means "Lithuania." But Lita is a territory vastly larger than today's republic of Lithuania. It is a Jewish cultural concept by and large

LITA (LÍTE): JEWISH LITHUANIA

Land of the Litvaks

Scale 1: 4,000,000



- **VÍLNE** Yerusholáyim d'Lite ('Jerusalem of Lithuania')
- **VÍTEBSK** provincial capital (in czarist times)
- **BYÁLISTOK** city
- **Svintsyán** county town
- Valózhin shtetl
- Markúin hamlet
- Approximate southern dialect boundary of Northeastern Yiddish (Litvish)
- ▨ Mixed dialect areas

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 Cartography by Giedrė Beconytė
 Dialect boundaries are partly marked on the basis of
 Litvish: An Atlas of Northeastern Yiddish © Dovid Katz.

GEOGRAPHY OF MENKE'S BOYHOOD



● **VÍLNE**

capital of *Vilna guberniya* (Province of Vilna)
[now Vilnius, the capital city of Lithuania]

○ **Svintsyân**

county seat

○ Michalushik

shtetl (town, larger village)

● Markin

hamlet (tiny village)



congruous with the medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania (especially the borders reached in the days of the Grand Duke Gedymin, or Gediminas, who made Vilna the capital back in 1323). The adjacent map approximates the area using traditional Yiddish place names.

Hirshe-Dovid Katz of Svir had little success in his beer brewing business, and so he relocated his young family to the county's principal town, Svintsyan. But during his fifteen or so years there, his business failed to take off. So, like many others, he decided to head out alone, to his relatives who had previously emigrated to *di góldene medíne* ("the Golden Land") — America, with the idea that he would bring over the family as soon as possible. He arrived at Ellis Island in the steerage compartment of the *Imperator* on May 10th 1914.

The rest, as they say, is history. World War I broke out. For five gruesome years, Badonna heard nothing from her husband. The couple's children, Eltshik (born around 1900 in Svir), Berke (1902 in Svir), and the three who were born in Svintsyan, Menke (1906), Blumka (1908), and Yeiske (1912) were known in town as "orphans." The eight year old boy, who was called, as customary in shtetl parlance, *Menke Hirshe-Dovid's* ("Menke the son of Hirshe-Dovid") came to be known as *Menke Badonna's*. Not only had the family lost its father, husband, and keeper. A world war broke out, with a front line that repeatedly ran down the main street in town, Vilna Street, a few steps from the family's home. To make matters worse, one of Svintsyan's richest men, Tarasheisky (ta-ra-SHAY-skee) tried to evict Badonna and the children by suing in the wartime court, claiming that the house was his. The case got stuck on "his word against hers" and she and the children were in danger of eviction. According to a very old custom, a woman who felt she had a grievance could take to the podium in front of the opened sacred ark just before the recitation of the holiest prayer of the Jewish calendar, *Kol nidre* on Yom Kippur eve. Badonna declared in a rich local Yiddish: "If I tell a lie may I become paralyzed, and if he is lying, may he become paralyzed." Tarasheisky was struck by paralysis within the week, and dropped the case.

Lithuanian Jews, poor as they were (potatoes were the daily fare), were steeped in learning and scholarship. It was a society that prized study above all else. Its symbolic capital, Vilna (Yiddish *Vilne*) was known as the Jerusalem of Lithuania (*Yerusholáyim d'Lite*), a name said to be given the city by Napoleon during his sojourn there in 1812. Like other Jewish

children, Menke studied in the traditional *kheyder*. The spoken language was Yiddish. The texts studied, and which were often part of everyday life in various ways were in Hebrew and Aramaic. Typical Jewish children of the area also spoke Russian, Polish, some Lithuanian, and above all, the local Slavic dialect that was the *koiné* of those parts and that is nowadays reckoned to be the westernmost dialect of the Belarusian (Belorussian) language.

Menke's pet was the family cow. When a German officer requisitioned it for the army and had it slaughtered for meat, the boy became a lifelong vegetarian, never touching meat or fish again (but continuing to eat dairy products, because the animal need not be harmed or killed to enjoy its eggs, milk and butter). "When the little calf grew up," he wrote in a memoir many years later, "she was our livelihood. During those lean hunger years of the First World War the little cow fed us with milk, cheese, butter and hope for better times, when we would meet with our father in far away America. I always see before my eyes that sad early morning when the Germans came to take away the cow. The golden specks on its wise forehead suddenly looked like blood and fright. The little cow briefly tore itself away from the slaughterhouse, wanting to say one last goodbye to us. A good death to you, dear cow. . ."

There is however a parallel tradition that vegetarianism has roots in seven generations of the family and was carried on only by some in each generation.



Eldest brother Eltshik died at 17

Menke's closest boyhood friend was his eldest brother Eltshik, a loving diminutive of Eyliohu (ai-lee-O-hoo) or Elijah. It was little brother Menke whom Eltshik entrusted to be the witness at a daring private ritual. Eltshik and his beloved, Dveirka (DVAIR-keh), swore each other eternal love at midnight, facing the opened holy ark of the Old Studyhouse, oblivious to the war around them. It was perhaps the first poetic event in Menke's life. When the Germans announced a call-up of all young men over a certain age for compulsory labor, in 1917, Eltshik was concealed in the eaves of the roof for a time, but was eventually discovered during an inspection. He was taken for forced labor. After some time,

Chaim-Meir of Svir, a wandering beggar and soothsayer in those parts, who was known for wearing one men's and one women's shoe, knocked on the door of the family's little wooden house at 27 Poshmenna Street to bring some not very good tidings. He had seen Eltshik in the German encampment in Buvits (boo-VITZ, now Buividzhiai, Lithuania). Eltshik was quite ill with *krivávke*, a strain of dysentery that was often fatal.

On the spot, Badonna took Menke to find Eltshik. They walked and walked and slept the night in the hut of a kind Lithuanian woman in a hamlet on the way, Shimenishik (shih-meh-NIH-shik, now Simonishke, Lithuania). The woman comforted Badonna, telling her all the night that she would find her son the next day in Buvits. When Badonna and Menke did reach Buvits, they found a scene from Hell. The labor camp had been abandoned. Eltshik's body was one of the dead that had been stacked up on the human sandbag pile to absorb incoming fire. He was still clutching his diary to Dveirka. Badonna's father, Aaron-Velvel Gubersky, a Michaleshik timber merchant, sent a wagon for his grandson's body, so that Eltshik might be gathered unto his ancestors at the Michaleshik cemetery. Dveirka for her part always wore a pendant with a photograph of Eltshik in a heart. She never married, remaining faithful to her Eltshik who had died in early October 1917, until the end of June 1941, when she was among the first group of Jews to be shot on the southern outskirts of Svintsyau, when the Nazis invaded Lithuania.



History books tell us that World War I ended in 1918, but in this region, things only got a lot worse after the departure of the German administration and the final collapse of the Russian Empire. In fact, East European Jewish collective memory now calls those Germans *di gute daytshn* ("the Good Germans") or *yener daytsh* ("that first German"). With the fall of both empires, the void was filled rapidly by the new forces of rising national states in East Central Europe, each with its own brand of (more or less) superiorist, exclusivist ethnic and linguistic based nationalism. The fighting between Poles and the newly Soviet Russians was the most bitter, though at times Lithuanian and Belorussian forces also struggled for what they considered their natural homeland in a region that

was multicultural from the days of old. The borders of the reborn states were to be determined, it seemed, by one question only: who would be the “power on site” when cease-fire time came around. The violence in this area went on until Polish forces (controversially) captured Vilna (Polish Wilno) and its region in 1920. The city had changed hands seven times during the war years! Nearly two decades later, in September 1939, when Poland was dismembered after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, these towns and their environs were taken by the Soviets. Stalin’s U.S.S.R. gave all three — Svintsyan, Michaleshik and Svir — “to itself” (more precisely, to its own Belorussian Republic), and, soon thereafter, the city of Vilna, to Lithuania. In late 1940, the border was adjusted and Svintsyan transferred to Lithuania as a “gift” to the Lithuanians for having “voted” in the rigged election that spring which “ratified” Lithuania’s annexation to the Soviet Union. That border was restored after the defeat of the Nazis by Soviet forces in the region, in 1944, and it became the current border between newly independent Lithuania and Belarus when the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991. And so today Svintsyan is Shvenchionys in Lithuania; Michalishki and Svir are in Belarus.

But all of that is posthistoric for a poet for whom Michaleshik, Svintsyan and Svir are forever in the heartland of Jewish Lithuania — Lita. Menke left “just in time” to take with him a six century old consciousness of Jewish Lithuania that was to disappear from the map forever, in 1920, the year of his arrival in America.



The famine and its consequences were rampant in Svintsyan. Heartbroken over Eltshik’s death, Menke was sent to his mother’s birthtown, Michaleshik, where Eltshik lay buried, and where Menke could in some sense be close to his dearest brother. In traditional shtetl culture, cemeteries and their occupants were very much part of the living psyche of a town and its residents. Before a wedding, one would visit the cemetery to symbolically invite the deceased of the family.

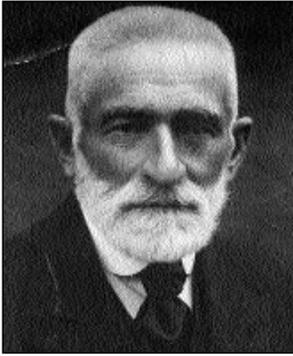
Menke became one of the many children in the spacious home of his well-to-do maternal grandfather. It was right on the town square of Michaleshik. From a twenty-first century western perspective, the difference may be hard to grasp, but Michaleshik was no Svintsyan.

Svintsyān was a fair sized town (about half the population of eight thousand was Jewish) with some grand Russian imperial buildings, nearby trains, telegraph wires, and main thoroughfares in cobblestone. Michaleshik was by contrast a speck of a dreamy village in slanting wood huts, streets of sand and mud, and a population of several hundred. It was situated flush against a sharp bend in the mighty Viliya River, then the “Amazon of Lithuania” (now a shadow of its old self following various Soviet irrigation projects). Access to the world across the river was by a ferry that ran on dragropes. Over ninety percent of its residents were Jewish. In some sense young Menke “moved from a town to a shtetl” (though now, in the post-Holocaust sense of things, Svintsyān too is a shtetl).

Menke Katz was not the first to be inspired to literature in Michaleshik, on the banks of the Viliya, surrounded by deep, mysterious forests. One of the empirical (in other words not romantic) characteristics of many East European Jewish *shtétlakh* (the Yiddish plural of shtetl) is the synthesis of a highly bookish, text-based, ancient near eastern civilization, after many historic relocations, with a village of wooden cabins with orchards for backyards. There is a set of definable characteristics. A shtetl is “big” enough to have a town square serving as the marketplace, and a church on the town square. The homes are mostly wooden cabins with an “entrance room” or unfloored vestibule, a huge stove in the middle of the house which heated the adjacent rooms, or curtained off roomlets, in all four directions, and large yards outside with barns, sheds, fruit trees, and the inevitable potato patch.

The principal founder of modern Hebrew poetry, Abraham Dov-Ber Lebensohn (1794—1878), took his pen name, Odem HaKóyēn (Adám HaKohén in Israeli Hebrew), from the acronym *Avrom Dov-Ber Mikhalishker* (in other words “the Michalishker” or “the one from Michaleshik”), thereby including the place where he settled and spent some years. In rabbinic history, it was home to Shabsai Faingold, a Talmudic author who was the grandfather of the famous Yiddish poet Abraham Sutzkever.

Menke wasn’t particularly comfortable in the home of his somewhat “stiff” grandfather, Aaron-Velvel (Aaron-Wolf) Gubersky. Worse came when the boy, around eleven, developed a high fever and was diagnosed with *shpánke*. That is the Yiddish name for the Spanish Influenza plague



Grandfather Aaron-Velvel
Gubersky

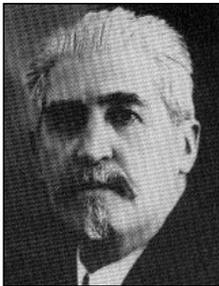
that killed millions (particularly children) during World War I. His grandfather quickly insisted (rightly, as Menke was to observe in later years), that the sick boy must leave so as not to infect the rest of the household. But where, if not back to Svintsyman, hunger and the front line of war?

Menke's aunt Beilka (BALE-keh), his mother's sister, a widow who lived with her two daughters in a small wooden hut at the far end (the poor end) of the main street said: "Menke will live with us. If we die, we all die together." Beilka was the champion storyteller of

Michaleshik. There was no day without a story, and Menke relished the time with her. But his medical situation was deteriorating.

The legendary Vilna physician, Dr. Tzemach Shabad (1864—1935) would make his rounds in those years, in war as in peace, treating poor children of every faith for free. After examining eleven-year-old Menke, he said: "The boy will probably not live, I am sorry." Menke overheard this in the next room. In his feverish delirium, the stricken boy had his first poetic vision. This is how he remembered it decades later:

"At twilight I saw Moses emerging from the Tablets, and he said he would grant me just one wish. I was eleven years old and asked him to give me death. The fifty-nine years due me, to make up the seventy years of King David, to which every person is entitled, are to be given to me as follows: I will rise for one day every hundred years."



Dr. Tzemach Shabad:
"The boy may not live.
I am sorry."



Aunt Beilka:
"If we die, we all
die together."

The two and a half years in Michaleshik were not boring. Menke's cousin Yankele (YAN-ka-leh) was murdered by another Jewish boy in town for the love of a girl. Yankele was the son

of *Khayim der shmid* — cousin Chaim, the village blacksmith. The murderer, Itske (ITS-keh), was the son of *Khonke der feldsher*, Chonke (CHON-keh) the village doctor. The perpetrator knew from his father exactly where the heart was. He sharpened his knife at the smithy of his victim's father. It was wartime and there was no effective police for local crimes. In revenge, Yankele's older brothers smashed the windows of the murderer's house. The killer and all his family swam across the Viliya, making their way eventually to California, where he became a successful heart surgeon.

Michaleshik was steeped in the lore of the Talmud and Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism). Kabbalah is supposed to be studied only by pious males over forty who have already mastered the legalistic Talmudic literature. Moreover, there are some passages even in the Talmud that were off limits for most people. On one occasion, Menke became part of a "break-in team." A skeleton key was used to enter the studyhouse late at night, where by the light of a kindle-rod (a long thin piece of wood lit to provide light), the boys leapt upon a forbidden passage in the Talmudic tract *Chagigo* (kha-GEE-go), with one of the versions of the Seven Heavens. After long deliberations, the ragged, hungry children settled on the third Heaven — the Heaven of Manna, God's food that sustained the Children of Israel during the forty year trek from Egypt to the Promised Land, and which, the Talmud promises, will be ground out by the millstones of the Third Heaven for the souls of the goodhearted.

In Michaleshik, Menke became close with his uncle Avremke (av-REM-keh) the watchmaker, who taught him the art of old-fashioned watchmaking.



In 1919, Badonna was finally able to write a letter to her husband Hirshe-Dovid in New Jersey. She told him that she and the four children are well. He understood that meant that one had died in the war. He wrote back that he dreamt a dream that it was Eltshik who had perished. Badonna sold her lease on her one uncontested possession, a section of a beer cellar in Svintsyan. The deed, still in imperial Russian, is dated 28 November 1919. She and the four surviving children — Berke, Menke, Blumka, Yeiske — set out for America. They passed through Vilna, which Menke had never seen before (or since), then Warsaw (where the children

reveled in hilarity at the exotic sound of Polish Yiddish), and finally Rotterdam. There they saw a black man for the first time. They were sure he was painted, and asked if they could touch him and rub off some paint. Menke always remembered how kind and patient he was with these unworldly children from Eastern Europe. They set sail on the *Rotterdam*, dreaming all the way that a rich American father would be waiting for them. Badonna and the four children arrived in America on July 22nd 1920. Menke was fourteen years old.

During the rituals at Ellis Island, everyone's names and birth dates were more or less mangled. At last, the children saw the father they could barely remember from the time before nation picked up sword against nation. It wasn't long before they found out the truth. Hirshe-Dovid Katz (alias Chait or Hiat, a name adopted during his final years in Svintsyau), was a poor and overworked laborer at a silk factory in Lodi, not far from where he had settled, in Passaic, New Jersey. He had remained religious and spent his early mornings in a little immigrant *shul* (synagogue) in Passaic that was set up by a local society dedicated to daily readings from the Book of Psalms.



Badonna and Hirshe-Dovid at 64 Jefferson Street in Passaic, New Jersey

After a short stay with an uncle at 174 Ward Street in the Legion Avenue (Old Oak Street) section of New Haven, Connecticut, the family was fully reunited in an old wooden house at 64 Jefferson Street in Passaic which Hirshe-Dovid had bought with a stack of mortgages that he spent the rest of his life paying off (Menke would have nothing to do with mortgages after that). In 1921, the first American child was born to Hirshe-Dovid and Badonna. They named him *Eltshik*, but everyone found it too sad to actually call him that, and it was the baby's middle name, *Meishke* (a Lithuanian Yiddish diminutive of *Moysh*) that stuck in Yiddish, though he became Edward in English. Hirshe-Dovid eventually set up his own little businesses in the yard of 64 Jefferson. He later wrote, in a memoir published in a religious newspaper in New York: "I have seven businesses [ice; coal; benzene; kerosene; gasoline; laundry; oil]. I have an ice machine that's one in the whole world! The *Khevre Tehilim shul* [the synagogue named for the

“Society for Reading Psalms”] is near my house. Five o’clock in the morning I’m already there, in the studyhouse, to say Psalms, to pray, to thank God for our living in this world and for our living forever in the world to come.” He was the proud keyholder to this little New Jersey prayerhouse, a veritable recreation of an East European small town synagogue.

In later years, Menke would often recount some of the curiosities from his first weeks in America. He was given a banana, something he had never seen, went ahead and ate it with the peel. He never touched a banana again. A frequent sign on American roads reads “Curve.” Pronounced the Yiddish way (KOOR-veh), that sounds rather like the Yiddish word for “prostitute.” Is America *so* liberal that such things are advertised on signs up and down the countryside? In Hyman Kaplan like English classes, there was a simpleton who could not remember the difference between “be” and “yesterday” for all the teacher’s efforts to use the contrasting length of the words as a kind of first indicator.

The New Jersey scene was not for Menke. When a cousin on the Lower East Side of New York, Avrom-Elle (avro-MEL-eh) invited him to come stay over at his place at 254 East 2nd Street, Menke “didn’t walk, he ran.” In his teens, the long Lower East Side period in his life was set in train; he had become a Friday night visitor to the Passaic family house, rather than a resident. The siblings, typical for such immigrant families, went in different directions. Berke (Ben) was a housepainter who slowly built up his own painting business. Blumka (BLOOM-keh, in English — Blanche) married a chemist and joined him in his business; he died young and she retrained as a legal secretary. Yeiske (Joe) became a revolutionary and worked in one of the most clandestine branches of the American Communist movement. He later renounced Communism, fled to Europe, became a Zionist, and settled in Israel where he helped build a number of kibbutzim (collective Jewish settlements). He was an inventor and entrepreneur, later specializing in lighting and film techniques, and worked on a number of



Menke with his mother Badonna
and youngest brother Meishke
in Coney Island

the James Bond movies as technical advisor in the late 1960s. The Bond movies took him to England, where he remained for several decades. He had been Menke's closest friend for many of those Lower East Side years.

The youngest brother, "the American," Meishke — Edward M. Katz — rose from delivery boy to become president of the Amalgamated Bank of New York, a storybook realization of the American dream. During a 1930s outing to Coney Island, Menke, Badonna and Meishke (left to right) had a photo taken with a (cardboard) "Mayflower" backdrop, a favorite for New York's immigrant communities.



Enrolling at DeWitt Clinton High School in the early 1920s, Menke soon mastered a sophisticated English, though he never lost his strong Lithuanian Yiddish accent. And, he began writing poems in English, to the astonishment of his teachers. One of those poems was called *At a Patched Window*. Working on an English poem one day at Seward Park Library on East Broadway, the main thoroughfare of New York's Lower East Side, Menke was approached by a young man roughly his own age who spoke a deep non-Lithuanian "Galitsyaner" Yiddish. The stranger rebuked him: "Hey there, you're obviously a Jew, why the hell don't you write in Jewish?"



Abba Shtolzenberg



Alexander Pomerantz

Menke had no idea that there was such a thing as serious modern Yiddish poetry. He befriended the stranger, Yiddish poet Abba Shtoltzenberg (1905—1941).

Shtoltzenberg took him to a friend, Alexander Pomerantz (1901—1965), another splendid young poet who was busy setting up the infrastructure of Yiddish poetry in America in the context of the far left (in short — the “literary Yiddish Communists”).

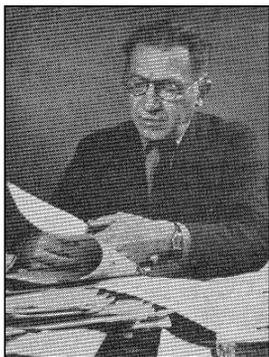


Like many other young writers who underwent cataclysmic transformations from shtetl religiosity and immersion in Talmudic texts to New York radicalism, Pomerantz’s Yiddish verse was suffused with Hebrew and Aramaic expressions and images, often from the Kabbalah. The unique synthesis of the two universes is what gave Yiddish poetry a powerful impetus in those years. Pomerantz was editing his *Yung Kuznye* (literally “Young Blacksmith’s Shop”), when he and Menke met (its official English name was *Young Forge*). He took to Menke and offered to publish his debut poem “Bowery,” in a special trilingual edition called *Spartak* (spar-TAK) that he was coediting with a celebrated visitor, Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893—1930), “the poet of the Russian Revolution.” And so, the nineteen year old immigrant Menke, who was making a sparse living from some watchmaking, and writing English poems, suddenly became a celebrity in the bustling circles of New York Yiddish poetry. This was, incidentally, the trip to America that led to Mayakovsky’s satire, *My Discovery of America* (1926). For his part, Pomerantz, a charismatic



Pomerantz and Mayakovsky’s *Spartak* appeared in New York in October 1925

poet, attracted other young poets in the spirit of an East European literary guru. He was in the process of forging a creative environment in which writers in the leftist circles (many of them personally quite apolitical) would be inspired and, critically, would be able to publish their work. Pomerantz was the driving force behind a number of experimental journals (including *Yung-kúznye* in 1924; *Sparták* in 1925 and *Yugnt* in 1926), and the writers' groups *Yúnger árbeter shráyber faréyn* (Young Workers' Writers' Union, 1924) *Yúnyon Skvér* (Union Square, 1928), and the *Fráyhayt shráyber-faréyn* (*Frayhayt* Writers' Union, 1929). Veterans of the period often recollect that the "real center of gravity" for writers and literary types was the *Downtowner yidisher arbeter klub* (The Downtown Yiddish Workers' Club) which became a favorite hangout for debating new works of literature. The club actually published Yiddish books in the 1920s. In 1929, all these fed right into the newly founded *Proletpén*. The name Proletpen is a typical "Russian style" Yiddish coinage, an abbreviated compound noun deriving from *proletárishe pen* ("proletarian pen," in other words, writing in the spirit of the labor movement, a concept that was to have profound repercussions for its members).



Frayhayt editor Moyse Olgin
(1878-1939)

Reactions to Menke's first Yiddish poem, *Bowery* (p. 1 in this volume), immediately signaled trouble for the poet's relationship with his new environment. The towering figure of the literary Yiddish left was M. Olgin (1878—1939), the powerful editor of its daily newspaper, the *Frayhayt* ("Freedom"; often spelled *Freiheit*). Olgin naturally wrote a review of *Sparták*. It wasn't every day that Mayakovsky came to New York to co-edit a Yiddish-Russian collection of new poetry. Olgin found the work of the nineteen year old beginner worth a comment:

"Not even the camouflage tactic of invoking the Citizens of the Bowery and its prostitutes can help the writer of this poem. It just so happens that these types are the carriers of anti-proletarian perceptions of the world. A tramp is not a proletarian. And a bum is not a freedom fighter. The hobo's look on life is not a constructive one."



Some words of explanation are necessary on the use of the words *left* and *right*. The corresponding Yiddish terms, *di Linke* (LINK-eh) and *di Rékhte* (REKH-teh) refer specifically to the two rival camps, particularly in New York Yiddish literature. Both were socialist and radical and frankly far to the left of the American political center. The *Linke* were gathered around M. Olgin's pro-Soviet *Frayhayt* (renamed the *Morgn Frayhayt*, or *Morning Freiheit* after a court case); the *Rékhte* around Abe Cahan's anti-Soviet *Forverts* (Jewish Daily Forward).

In the 1920s both camps were anti-Zionist, and the one major issue of contention was the Soviet Union: utopia or cunning evil? Historians continue to debate what might have happened had Stalin not succeeded Lenin, had Trotsky or someone else come to power, and so forth. The *Linke* believed that Lenin's new experiment would bring peace and equality to the peoples of the world. In the 1920s, Yiddish writers from various countries settled in the new Soviet Union, where authors were paid by the government to write in Yiddish (and other minority languages), and where, in areas with many Yiddish speakers, Yiddish was one of the official languages, as in the famous sign at the central railway station in Minsk that welcomed visitors in Belarusian, Russian, Polish and Yiddish. It seemed that paradise for Yiddish was at hand. But the *Linke* continued to defend the USSR passionately, even after things were going "very wrong" during the 1930s, everything from famines to clampdowns on literary freedom to the first multiple murders of Yiddish (and not only Yiddish) writers.

A turning point had come at the end of the 1920s. After the Hebron riots of 1929, in which sixty-seven Jewish residents were killed and sixty more wounded in this ancient Jewish city in Palestine, the *Forverts* warmed considerably to the idea of a Jewish homeland in Israel, and there was a spate of defections from the *Linke* to the *Rékhte*.

In the 1930s, events were beginning to show the failure of the Soviet solution for European Jewry (in the form of cultural repression; harsher campaigns against religion and Hebrew culture, and the failure of the so-called homeland in Birobidjan in the Soviet Far East). The first major purge of Soviet Yiddish writers came in 1937. By stark contrast, the daring experiment to resettle the ancient Land of Israel was showing increasing, if

painful and controversial, viability. During this period, the change of attitude by the *Forverts* toward the Jewish settlers in Israel was bringing it gradually closer to the Jewish mainstream, while the *Frayhayt's* stance took it ever further from that mainstream.

It is often neglected, however, that the *Linke* took the lead in the daily battle against Fascism and Hitler on the pages of their press. They warned of the mass horrors ahead with uncanny accuracy (but this, as is the fate of political losers, is often forgotten). Throughout the 1930s, the pages of the *Frayhayt* were full of disclosures of what the Germans were doing, step by step, to their Jewish population.

The Yiddish newspapers in New York battled it out every day with colorful polemics complicated by the expected evolution of a host of interpersonal rivalries and intra-movement intrigues and disputes. New York between the wars was a most creative time-and-place in the history of Yiddish literature, and it has *still* not been studied properly, in large part because of lingering political correctness.

The New York *Linke* of the twenties and thirties included a number of the leading Jewish writers and intellectuals of the day. It was a thoroughly *American* milieu, from its all-night automats and cafeterias down to the *Frayhayt's* advertisements for kosher food, religious resorts and sundry other bourgeois pleasures.

Many of its young writers (like those on the other side, the “right wing socialists” — strange as that formulation sounds in the twenty-first century) had absolutely no interest in world politics. They wrote about life, love, death and a diversity of other subjects. They happened to have found their environment there just as those who joined di *Rékhte* found sustenance *there*. To think that teenagers right off the boat from this or that *shetl* back in the Old Country were immersed in political science and the chances of the new Soviet Union (in the part of the globe they had just escaped, to pursue hopes for a better life in America!) is sheer anachronistic nonsense.

Still, there *was* one sense in which the *Linke* were becoming just a trifle Soviet-like, and this was to be the crux of the controversial “Menke phenomenon” over a period of years: the notion of the movement’s editors and literary leaders that literature must serve the interests of the workers. The most common literary feature came to be known among the *Linke*

(and equally among their enemies) as *royte ekn* (“red endings” or “red tails”), which brought some socialist moral or image to the end of a poem or story. While the movement could not invoke any of the governmental power its Soviet comrades had at their disposal, control over who would be published is itself a mighty weapon in a self-contained literary environment.

Still, the *Linke* of New York produced a grand (if short) period of remarkable creativity in the first thousand years of Yiddish. Its heyday spanned the interwar years. The Stock Market crash of 1929, and the years of the Depression, set the scene for these proletarian writers, and particularly the poets, to become heroes to the masses of poor immigrant Jewish workers.



In 1925, an amiable crowd of young radicals approached Menke, who was reading Rousseau’s *Confessions* on a bench in Passaic’s Monroe Street Park. They invited him to join a bus outing the next day, and explained that the purpose of their new movement was to create a better world, a world with justice and equality, like the one

Isaiah the Prophet spoke about. “Well, if it’s like Isaiah, then, sure!” He fell in love with and married one of the girls he met on the outing.



Chaske Blacker
(1905-1944)
Menke’s first wife

She was Chaske Blacker (Yiddish KHASH-keh BLYA-kher), a native of Avarevitsh (a-VA-re-vitch, now Uvaravichi in southeastern Belarus). She too had immigrated to Passaic, New Jersey (in 1923). Menke’s family, from the Vilna area, had been religious and *misnagdic*, followers of the more rationalist, Talmudic Lithuanian Jewish milieu of the Gaon of Vilna. Chaske’s family, from the Gomel (Yiddish *Homle*) region, had been religious and *hasidic*, followers of the more mystical brand of Lithuanian hasidism known today as

Lubavitch after the village that became its headquarters in the early nineteenth century (now Lubavitchy, in Russia, not far from the Belorussian border near Vitebsk).

Both Chaske and Menke had experienced the horrors of World War I in childhood and early adolescence. Both sets of parents remained religious all their lives. And, both became part of the Lower East Side's radical Yiddishist literary milieu. They inspired each other to write (Menke — poems, Chaske — short stories). The couple moved out west, married in 1926, and settled in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles. Menke worked on his writing, earning his living from watch-



Poet, watchmaker and married man (in L.A. around 1927)

making, and also took some premedical courses at the University of Southern California. To his insistence that a doctor helps people, she retorted: "So does a street cleaner!" He never forgot the role she played in his growth as a poet who could never imagine any other vocation, except as needed for the minimum income to live on.



Moyshe Weisman and Menke saying goodbye in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles

One of their close friends in Los Angeles was Yiddish writer Moyshe Weisman (1885—1971), who later recalled the young couple in his memoir, *A halber yorbundert in Amerike* (*Half a Century in America*, Tel Aviv 1960). Both writers, who never met again, treasured their farewell photo. Menke is on the right, wearing sneakers (his vegetarianism in those years extended to banning leather shoes and belts). Weisman reminisced:

In those years, I befriended a young Yiddish poet called Menke Katz. He lived in Boyle Heights at the time, in a poor hut, with his young wife and child. I became a frequent visitor to this little hut, which had so much happiness between its four low-ceilinged walls. Menke was a carefree kind of fellow. He

lived and breathed with Yiddish poems. Writing and declaiming them was his life. But he missed New York, the center of Yiddish literature. One fine day he came around and told me he is going to leave beautiful California. It pained me to hear this. I came to love the young man who was so full of love of life, and I didn't want to lose him. I spent the last hours with him and his beautiful, clever little daughter and his dear wife Chaske.

(Moyshe Vaysman, *A halber yorbundert in Amerike*
[Half a Century in America], Tel Aviv 1960, p. 132)



Noah and Troim,
growing up in Passaic

The “clever little daughter” is Troim. The name Menke and Chaske gave their daughter means “beautiful dream” or “grand aspiration” in Yiddish, and it was in the spirit of those times. Although in later years he regretted not naming her for a departed soul in the family, according to Jewish tradition, it was for him a mark of her strength of character that she never changed her name in an America where just about everyone else did. An ancient rabbinic adage, that Menke often quoted, has it that the Children of Israel survived and retained their distinct identity during the four hundred years of enslavement in ancient Egypt because they didn't change their names. The second child was a boy called Noah. The marriage was not to last, and Menke began a long period of the bachelor lifestyle in New York. Troim and Noah were brought up by their mother and her parents, Stessia and Morris Blacker. Menke visited them during his periodic visits to his own parents and siblings in Passaic, New Jersey.

Chaske Blacker (1905—1944) is one of many undiscovered fine women Yiddish writers of the period, whose literary output came on top of hard manual labor. She worked in radio and tobacco factories, and later as a finisher on dresses. Her published fiction includes the short stories *Der roy* (*The Roy*, 1932); *Marta* (which won an award in 1933); *In a radyo-fabrik* (*In a Radio Factory*, 1933), the novella *Katsóvim* (*Butchers*, 1936); *Farbitene* (*The Exchanged*, 1938); *A lébediker shtul* (*A Living Chair*, 1939); *Mundirn in shap* (*Uniforms in the Shop*, 1941); *Kinder shpilh zekh*

(*Children at Play*, 1942). These were all set in America. In her later work she returned to European roots. The best known of the European stories is *A máyse funem Dnyéper* (*A Tale of the River Dnieper*, 1942, reprinted in the Oxford magazine *Yiddish Pen* in 1995).

The children received a secular Jewish education. Troim and Noah both attended the *Ordn* (International Workers' Order or IWO) Yiddish afternoon school in Passaic, run by the *Linke*, but after it closed down they transferred to the town's *Arbeter ring* (Workmen's Circle) school on Howe Avenue, which belonged to the *Rékhte*. Troim became active in the leftist Yiddish culture movement, and eventually became the assistant to Itche Goldberg who ran the movement's Yiddish school system and edited a number of outstanding Yiddish publications for young people, working out of offices at 80 Fifth Avenue. She also mastered Yiddish stenography and touch-typing, completed her teaching degree and became a teacher of English literature in public high schools, and of Yiddish in afternoon schools. Noah's life was tragic. After serving in the American army, he developed schizophrenia in his early twenties, and died in his early forties.



Menke published his poems in various literary magazines, but ran into trouble with the ones he sent to the *Frayhayt*. Olgin even found it necessary to devote an essay to the question of why he would not publish the poems Menke was sending.

The approach to the world is mystical. Everyone is surrounded by unknown and unknowable forces. Humans are helpless vis-à-vis their mysterious hegemony. He is himself thoroughly alone among so many people. Nobody is connected to anybody else. Nobody can help anyone else. Life is senseless. Life is swarming with gray and secretive figures. Everything is going under. Even physical love is a form of death. The only sure thing is death. It rules in all sorts of forms. It gazes with closed eyes. It wipes away any trace of happiness. It is possible to sing about a chaotic hopelessness only with a gray poem of nothingness:

*Evening walks
 Like a fiery rider over roofs
 And every windowpane is a gold-green worm.
 They are graying in their holes
 Like dust on old graves.*

It's good poetry of degeneracy and decadence. Such poetry is born in the smoke of the café and calls out for hashish if not for suicide. What does it have to do with proletarian poetry?

The writer of these poems is a member of Proletpen and he doesn't understand why the *Morgn Frayhayt* did not publish his cycle of poems! [...]

But what can we do? People write in the style of Leivick and they say it's proletarian!

(M. Olgin, "Fun der laboratorye. Bamerkungen vegn proletarisher literatur" [From the Laboratory: Comments on Proletarian Literature] in *Morgn Frayhayt*, March 10th 1930)



Working on *Three Sisters*

From the verses cited, we know that these poems were to be part of Menke's first book, *Three Sisters* (the cited stanza appears on p. 44 in this edition). It is supreme irony that the name invoked as the antithesis of good proletarian poetry, H. Leivick (1886—1962), is considered one of the leading Yiddish poets of the twentieth century. Menke immersed himself in *Three Sisters*, and was known to walk the streets of New York City absentmindedly, with the manuscript in his hand, forever afraid of losing it. Over a half century later, he reminisced about the time he was working on the book.

I wrote the first poem of the book in 1929. It appeared in 1932, during the Depression years, when I lived in the depths of the Lower

East Side, at 251 East 2nd Street, New York, in a second inner courtyard. The poems of this first book, *Three Sisters*, were written by the light of a candle. Drops from the leaking faucet made a metallic sound, accompanying the song of a beggar outside who kept on singing the same tune: “Let’s have a little gift, a little gift, and God will help you as he has helped me.”

(Menke Katz, from an unpublished letter, 1983)

Three Sisters is an inner city poetic drama in four acts. It begins with the love between a poet and three very different sisters, and ends in the world of spirits, long after the death of all four players. On the way there are poems on erotic love; spiders and mice of Lower East Side tenements whom the vegetarian poet befriends; poems protesting poverty and racism (politically okay); graphic verse against abortion and against killing animals (politically not okay); poems exploring and poeticizing suicide; a prediction that Lenin would one day be demarinated from his state of preservation (politically unthinkable). There are mystical, kabbalistic undertones throughout the work (for example the communication between the poet and the sisters in three metaphysical states: all in this world; after the poet’s death when he is there and they are here; after the death of the four). From the peaks of erotic love to the souls of the lowliest insects and creatures, to the way in which aborted babies will return to haunt their mothers *and* fathers, this was a decidedly non-conformist work.

But it did not occur to the young poet that he would get into trouble for expressing his views in his poetry. In 1931, an excited young Menke brought the manuscript of *Three Sisters* to Proletpen. Not only was the book “not accepted for publication.” The leftist Yiddish writers’ union ordered the poet to *not* publish it.

At that time, at the peak of the Great Depression, Menke landed a job as delivery boy for a Manhattan dry cleaners. One fine day he happened to deliver a suit to the American writer and artist Guy Murchie (c. 1907—1997). Murchie asked the delivery boy why he looked so sad. The writers sniffed each other out. Menke told him the whole sad story of his first book that couldn’t be published. Murchie gave Menke a hundred dollar tip, and told him: “Go and publish your book!”



Guy Murchie
(1907-1997)

Afraid to approach any union Yiddish printers in New York, and unwilling to go to a non-union shop, Menke took the hundred dollar bill to Milwaukee and published *Dray shvester* there in 1932. His friendship with Murchie was to be a lasting one. After the book appeared, they would meet in a New York cafeteria. Menke would recite from the Yiddish and translate at the table. Murchie drew *The Hunger Dance* to one of the poems in the book (see pp. cxxxii, 36-38).

The one politically correct passage in *Three Sisters* taking up all of four lines, contained the then obligatory reference to the Sacco and Vanzetti executions of August 1927 (p. 17). But it could not compensate for all the political incorrectness of the book.

Menke was expelled from Proletpen for publishing the “decadent work” and cast into the literary wilderness of the old East Side. This was the New York *secular* equivalent of the religious Jewish *kheyrem* (*herem*) or Ban of Excommunication. It meant that *no* publication in the leftist movement would publish his work any more. It seemed he was finished at twenty-six. The *Frayhayt* noted the book’s appearance in its “Notices about New Books” column with the description:

An example of rottenness and degeneracy. A characteristic passage:

*Over me
Rotten limbs swarm
And crumble me up as a maggoty flowerbed.*

[p. 11]

That’s all.

(“Notitsn vegn naye bikher” in *Frayhayt*,
April 25th 1932, p. 5)

Olgin reviewed *Three Sisters* together with another work of the period: *Erev-tsayt* (*On the Eve of Time*, New York 1931), a book of verse jointly published by two of Menke's poet friends: Leyb Sobrin (affectionately known in Yiddish literature as Léybele Sobrin, 1907—1946), and Yosl Grinshpan (or Greenspan, 1902—1934). Grinshpan's "half" is *Tsvishn vent* (*Among Walls*), Sobrin's is *Tsvishn mentshn* (*Among People*). Grinshpan, one of the most talented Yiddish poets of the twentieth century, was to die in his early thirties of an illness deriving from the hunger of the Depression.

Olgin's review of the two books — Menke's and the Sobrin-Grinshpan volume, was titled *Di poézye fun krétsike kep* ("The Poetry of Scabby Heads"), a little over the top even for the feisty Yiddish literary criticism of the day. Whether it was really a typo, or Olgin didn't like the look of it in print we may never know, but the *Frayhayt* did carry a correction the following morning:

CORRECTION: The title of Chaver ["Friend" or "Comrade"] Olgin's article in yesterday's edition of the *Morgn Frayhayt* read: "The Poetry of Scabby Heads." This was an error on the part of the typesetter and the proofreader. The correct title is: "The Poetry of Scabby Cats."

(*Frayhayt*, June 14th 1932)

The corrected version is conceivably more toxic, featuring a polemic play on words. For one thing, *kets* is the Yiddish plural of *kats* ("cat"), itself an obvious homonym for *kats* ("Katz"). Menke and the other two poets (or their works) are referred to as cats, or their work as fit for scabby cats.

For another, the image comes right from Menke's lines in the book, with a slight (and polemically typical) transposition of "scabby" from the *nights* to the *cats* just a bit further down the same line.

*I am the lord of backyards
Of scabby nights and stray cats —
How can I, such a lord, flee
And abandon
My estates — my stray cats?*

[p. 34]

In Yiddish writers' circles of early 1930s New York, the review and the correction became the stuff of fun-filled chatter. In the idiom-spinning spirit of the language, *Olgin's a tikn-tóes* ("A correction of Olgin's") came to mean: "a correction that makes an insult worse than the original". . . (There is, to be sure, a humorously vulgar variant which substitutes *tókhes* "backside" for *tóes* "error").

In the review Olgin says:

[...] But here Menke takes on quite another theme: erotica. And here he's in his citadel. True, the other [two] poets are no *melámdim* [pious elementary school teachers] either. Grinshpan too knows how to connect sadness, nightmare and the skin of a young woman [...] Come to think of it, Sobrin is no premature babe either. In his poems too, young widows throw themselves at night onto beds, scratching the hotter parts of their skin with their nails, and do other weird things.

Sobrin too likes to inform us of every instance of arousal of his sexual instinct. Nevertheless, Menke is the greater connoisseur in this department. When he gives it his attention, he has, first of all, three sisters; second, a mania for exhibitionism; and thirdly, a candor that borders on psychosis. [...]

The Bourgeoisie can make good use of all this, together with its fascist terror, its wild orgies, its licentiousness, lack of solutions, and suffocating excess. But what does it have to do with the working class? [...]

In any case, the three are not equal. The worst of them is Katz. Here there is almost no hope. Rotten through and through. And what's more: the man takes pleasure in his decadence. It would be a miracle if he returned to the working class. [...]

The three *could* be among our own. They possess the requisite technical apparatus. They have the form. True, Menke Katz sometimes reminds us of Mani Leib [1883—1953], Grinshpan of M[oyshe-]L[eyb] Halperin [1886—1932] and Sobrin of Dovid Einhorn [1886—1973], but they would have to be able to develop a healthy and fresh form of expression [...]

Let their example [expulsion from Proletpen] serve as a warning

for our other poets. Let it be clear for them, once and for all, that all the psychological twists and turns, the riveting personal feelings, the sickly and tortured “visions” and other such “generally accepted” pathologies are material borrowed right from the bourgeois camp. To the extent that it is brought into the proletarian camp, it serves one purpose only: to demoralize the workers, disorientate their consciousness, and weaken their capacity for struggle.

(M. Olgin, “Di poezye fun kretsike kep” [The Poetry of Scabby Heads] in *Morgn Frayhayt*, June 13th 1932)

Olgin’s ambivalence in the midst of the fray is nevertheless manifest in his paternalistic hope that these young poets, whose talent he respected after all, could yet be molded into the Left’s answer to the higher levels of Yiddish poetry. It is noteworthy that Olgin’s Yiddish, and that of nearly all his staff, is full of the rich Hebrew and Aramaic derived Yiddish vocabulary that is put to new use in a collective act of linguistic virtuosity. And for all the intolerance (by American standards), nobody was imprisoned or sent to Siberia. Feuds were fought out on the pages of the lively Yiddish periodic press in New York City. And anyone who wanted to could just walk away.

To a retrospective observer, two things stand out about Menke. His heart and soul were just plain incompatible with the literary environment where he “landed off the boat.” Moreover, there was not a little naiveté in a poet who “just didn’t get it” and thought he could write what he wanted in the spirited environment of freewheeling buddies he had found in New York, friendships which he cherished. It was a happy time, which more than compensated for the poverty and hardship of Depression era New York City. He had found a vivacious environment of bohemian literary café life, the hub of which were a number of twenty-four hour New York City cafeterias and automats.

Outside the *Frayhayt* circles, the conflict around *Three Sisters* caused something of a sensation. Short story writer Herman Gold (1888—1953) put it this way, tongue in cheek:

The poet Menke Katz is a former *proletpénik*. [...] This organization, that dictates the proletarian line, excluded him “officially,” and refers to this book [*Three Sisters*] as “the decadence

that must be cleaned up, and the quicker the better” [...] Of course he has no ideological role to play in a political program! Nevertheless the fact of the matter is that he is:

*With marrow on mad fingers
Of blind wounds the singer.*

[cf. p. 22]

(Herman Gold, [review of *Three Sisters*] in
Nyu-yorker Vokhmlat, May 6th 1932)

It was left to another outside critic, Yitskhok Libman (1899—1959), to reply to Olgin and the leadership of Proletpen, in words that would remain immortal in the history of American Yiddish poetry:

In a four columned headline, three “scabby heads” are tied to the Proletarian Pillory: Menke Katz, Y. Grinshpan and Leib Sobrin. M. Olgin dispensed this obviously deserved hangman’s work before all our eyes on Monday the 13th of June, in the columns of the *Frayhaye*. And one has to concede that it’s all their own fault: THEY WERE CAUGHT WRITING POETRY!

(Y. Libman in *Nyu-yorker vokhmlat*, June 25th 1932)

Three Sisters (and the sensation it caused) caught the attention of some of the major Yiddish literary figures of the time, though not necessarily for compliments.

One of the kindest, as ever, was B. Z. Goldberg (1895—1972), the veteran writer for New York’s *Tog* (*Day*), and incidentally, a son-in-law of Yiddish classic Sholem Aleichem (1859—1916).

And here there lies before me a little black book, *Three Sisters*, by Menke Katz. This little book is however a spark in the darkness, a flower risen from the mire, truly different and raw and barbed and defiant.

(B. Z. Goldberg, “In gang fun tog” [In the Course
of the Day] in *Der Tog*, April 29th 1932)

Poet Alef Katz (no relation, 1898—1969), writing in Montreal, devoted one of his columns to the controversy. Among his comments:

Three Sisters by Menke Katz is a book of love poems. But it is a *Song of Songs* of a dazed imagination, the bad dream of a rattled mind. [...]

Reading the book I imagined a flaming human torch that runs from a great fire while the winds round about fan and flare up the fire. [...]

The book is a game of spiders and flies, and the poet is through and through both spider and fly.

But somewhere among the lines there hovers great promise. The three sisters become virtual symbols of three dimensions of the poet: the beloved, the street woman and the spirit of idealism. Even though the promise remains hazy, or goes astray altogether, it is a book that intrigues.

A first book of a young poet, whose turbulence should become not quieter, but purified; not less wild in spirit, but riper, and less wanton in the use of language.

(Alef Katz, "Literarische naves" [Literary News] in
Keneder Odler [Canadian Eagle], June 7th 1932)

Aaron Feldman (1880—1952), one of the editors of a journal called *Tsuzámen*, which sought to bring together (with some marginal success) writers from the warring camps of *Linke* and *Rékhte* had this to say about *Three Sisters*:

He possesses a unique creative power, whose train of thought shows no combining of hues and colors. When I read Menke Katz's poems, it seems to me that life all around is rainy — a sort of slush, that requires you to put on boots and galoshes, snuggle up in a warm winter coat with a big bashlyk, and wrap up your neck with a scarf, to guard against the bad weather... His entire horizon is black as pitch, as in the gray days of autumn: the rain knocks and knocks and seeps into all the folds of your clothing, until you begin to shiver...

The pessimism of Menke Katz's poems strikes such deep roots in

you that you want to cry out: “To the Devil with all of everyday life!
To the devil such a society that caused such a primeval abyss.” [...]

Menke Katz is so melancholy, such a seer of darkness, that he looks at life with condescension, with overgrown gravestone leaves. Seems to me, that he is after all a young man with a fiery temperament, with unbounded desires, and yet so despondent.

(Aaron Feldman, “Bibliografye” [Bibliography] in *Tsuzamen*, January-March 1933, no. 4, pp. 34-35)

Literary critic A. Tabachnik (1901—1970), himself among the *Rékhte*, was one of the few voices for a Yiddish literature that would cross party lines. He published an extensive review of *Three Sisters* in the Chicago journal *Brikn* (“Bridges”), a Yiddish journal that carried a second masthead in English: “a quarterly for Yiddish literature and constructive criticism,” something sorely lacking in the politically charged atmosphere of the interwar American Yiddish milieu. After a methodical enumeration of the book’s weaknesses and strengths he came to his conclusion.

To the extent that Menke Katz is a rung in the chain of Yiddish poetry in America, he is a continuation of the *Yunge* [“The Young Ones,” a group launched in New York in 1908], but a continuation that lived through the war [World War I], [Peretz] Markish’s *Kupé*, [Meylekh] Ravitsh’s *Nákete líder* [“Naked Poems”], Uri Tsvi Grinberg’s choking hysteria in *Mephisto* and the whole commotion over free verse.

In a certain sense, Menke Katz is like that hero of Mark Twain who is his own grandfather. He is to a certain degree that with which the *Yunge* began. Something of their supersensitivity and receptiveness to pathology. [...]

He will have to bring more order into his senses, restoring to each of the senses its natural function. Yiddish literature in America is much more in need of clear differentiations and sharp descriptions of things that can lead to clarity of expression, than a process of dissolving, intermixing and cloaking over. [...]

(A. Tabachnik, “Dray shvester — Menke Katz” [*Three Sisters* — Menke Katz] in *Brikn*, Chicago, Sept. 1934, no. 4)

One of the more memorable reviews of *Three Sisters* appeared a few years after its publication in the noted *Minyaturn* (“Miniatures”) series, in the Anarchist (and staunchly anti-Communist) journal *Fráye árbeter shtime* (“Free Worker’s Voice”) by the paralyzed poet Chaim Krul (1892—1946), who wrote with his pen in his mouth.

[...] True, he is a bit shocking when you see phrases like *táyre* [“ritual cleansing of the corpse before burial”] in the book, and blood and death and dozens of similar expressions.

But this is secondary. The main point is that the poem is good, showing that we are dealing with a talent, not just a potential talent, because something more tragic than what is in this book cannot be created.

The poet has had his say. These poems by Menke Katz are as strong as [Hebrew national poet Chaim Nachman] Bialik’s “sorrow and anger” poems. But there is this difference between Bialik [1873—1934] and Menke Katz. Bialik stirs the national beat, Menke Katz stirs the human beat.

But they actually converge in their poems. Bialik punishes one and all for the sin which the Kishinev pogrom [of 1903] left in its wake. At the same time, they diverge in another point. Bialik’s punishing words are conceived in the genre of the Prophets (though not in their style), with anger and belief in better things to come. Menke Katz’s are conceived in the Baudelairian genre (though again, not in its style) — bitter and daring.

But they come close to converging. Bialik the rebuker, Menke Katz the lamenter.

(Chaim Krul, “Minyaturn. Menke Katz” [Miniatures. Menke Katz] in *Fráye arbeter shtime*, September 4th 1936)

European critics were by and large less “shocked.” Itsik Shvarts (better known as Y. Karo), the Rumanian Yiddish writer, attributed the visions in *Three Sisters* to the poet’s dislocation and migration.

In his first book he still feels oppressed by life in America. A heavy veil of pessimism envelops the poetry. The refinement of form

and the imagery strengthen the impression that the poet wishes to remain on the sidelines of *this* life. [...]

He wants to save himself, from sadness and from people, by wandering, and by becoming the friend of abandoned cats, mice and stifling cellars. [...]

(Itzik Shvarts, “Menke Katz’s lider” [Menke Katz’s poems] in *Tshernovitser bleter*, July 12th 1935)

Incidentally, Menke’s spiritual closeness to mice, insects and other detested creatures was part of his vegetarianism, and from his youth to his last days, he was known by his intimates for his “rescue operations” to remove to safe territory (out of the reach of violent humans) such creatures. It is curious that this motif was overlooked by Yiddish criticism of the day, at a time when a good number of Yiddish writers were ethical vegetarians.

Yiddish poet (and vegetarian) Melech Ravitch (1893—1976) was then living in Warsaw and in the midst of his own expressionist period. Along with Uri Tsvi Greenberg and Peretz Markish he was a key figure in the *Khalyástre* (“The Gang”) movement which rejected realism and other demands being made by the politically oriented leadership of the Yiddishist movement. Ravitch had this reaction to *Three Sisters*:

The reviewer in me was genuinely cheered up by *Three Sisters*. [...] The name Menke Katz was previously unknown to us, but the book will certainly be remembered as a lyrical work with beautiful poems [...]. Maybe these can be considered love poems to three sisters at once. There are such cases in world literature. And maybe it will be considered a poetic tragedy, inspired by the famous English poem about the three sisters. [...]

It is virtually impossible to understand it all. Really and truly impossible. From time to time there is a spark of something reminiscent of listening to people speak in their dream. One moment you catch what the dreamer is saying, the next you are lost, words and halves of words come around. [...]

After such three sisters, a young poet might do well to shut up for three years.

(Melech Ravitch, “A poeme vegn dray shvester” [A Poem about Three Sisters] in *Vokhmsbrift far literatur*, Warsaw, March 31st 1933)

Back in America, the *Inzikhistn* or introspectivists, sworn enemies of political control over poetry, had a good laugh.

[...] His group of pals [= Proletpen], where he had been a member, washed their hands of him. His book shocks everybody. And all of our crowd, who are so strictly amoral, and never stood next to morality, now turn their noses up at him. [...]

Menke Katz calls out with his clanging antipathies. Both of them [Leyvi Goldberg and Menke Katz] are however entitled, taken as poets of the street, of *our* street, to a closer acquaintanceship rather than to either sympathies or antipathies.

(A. Introspectivist [= ?], *Tsvishn shrayber un bikher* [review of *Close Ones* and *Three Sisters*] in *In zikh* [*In the Self*], April 29th 1932)



Leyvi Goldberg, New York
(1893-1974)

Menke, for his part, teamed up with the second named poet in that review, who had also just published a controversial book of poetry, Leyvi Goldberg (1893—1974). Goldberg’s book *Nóente* (*Close Ones*, New York 1932) appeared the same month as *Three Sisters*. The two (somewhat quixotically, it turned out), decided to set up the *Náyer yídisher shráyber faréyn* (“New Yiddish Writers’ Union”) under the auspices of the publication *Undzer folk* (“Our Nation”). A banquet was held on June 24th 1932 at Beethoven Hall at 210 East 5th Street, to celebrate the publication of *Three Sisters* and *Close Ones*. The hall was packed and the evening inspirational, but it did not lead to a new apolitical writers’ union. Instead, the *Linke* reached out to bring the dissidents back into the fold (a very far cry from the fate of their so-called “brethren” in the Soviet Union).

Incidentally, a comparative study of the four condemned New York Yiddish poets of 1932 — Menke Katz (*Three Sisters*), Yosl Grinshpan (*Among Walls*), Leybele Sobrin (*Among People*) and Levi Goldberg (*Close Ones*) — remains a desideratum for Yiddish literary studies of the period. It is a pity that so many dissertations and studies continue to rehash the

same tiny canon that has become popular in North American universities.

In a memoir, Yiddish leftist cultural activist Zussa Shapiro recalled (some sixty years after the events):

I went to Olgin and I told him: “You condemn the fanatics of Amsterdam for their ban of excommunication against Spinoza and you go ahead and do the same thing to a young poet! You’re not happy with his book? You have a press to criticize, even attack, but don’t excommunicate!”

(“Er hot geholfn aropnemen dem kheyrem fun dikhter Menke Katz” [He helped to rescind the ban of excommunication on the poet Menke Katz] in *Forverts*, December 27th 1991)

The *Three Sisters* saga and its aftermath is encyclopedically summarized in the 1935 work on Proletpen by Alexander Pomerantz, based on a dissertation he wrote in Kiev during a sojourn of several years in the Soviet Union. The work concludes with an alphabetic listing of notable members. This is the entry for

Katz, Menke. Born in 1905 [sic] in Svintsyan, former Province of Vilna, to worker parents. Came to America at the end of 1920. Studied in American schools for several years. Now a watchmaker by trade. Published his first poem in *Spartak*. Published almost exclusively in the press of the Communist movement. Joined Proletpen at its inception. Then became one of its right wing, challenging the leadership of Proletpen and the line it took in matters of proletarian literature. Subsequently he automatically fell out of Proletpen [euphemism for being kicked out — DK] when, against the decision of the organization, he published a book of decadent anti-proletarian poems [= *Three Sisters*], which he later disowned. Katz then recognized his mistakes, and was readmitted into Proletpen. He re-debuted in recent times with a number of poems in the *Frayhayt* and in the [magazine] *Hamer*.

[There follows a long quote from Olgin which ends with:] “His talent is truly a healthy talent, earthy and belonging to the here-and-now — not a symbolic talent from the other side of the fence, as it were. Therefore Menke Katz’s talent is now battling Menke Katz’s literary tradition and its impact on him — and the talent is winning

out. Menke Katz is making a great effort to free himself from the bony chains of his skeletons. He is marching forward in a big way.” — M. Olgin.

(Alexander Pomerantz, *Proletpen*, Alukrayinishe visnshaftlakhe akademye, Kiev 1935, pp. 234-235)

The ripples of *Three Sisters* were felt for years to come. One of the best known later echoes is Zelig Dorfman’s poem by that name, which appeared in his *Zing Zinger* (“Sing Singer,” New York 1938). It is a friendly satire on Menke’s first book and its fate in the stormy Yiddish literary world of the 1930s.

During the thirties, Menke had taken many part time jobs to make ends meet. Some, via Roosevelt’s WPA (Work[s] Progress Administration), became the stuff of humor among Yiddish writers. He gamely raced up a scaffold on a construction site. At the top, he looked down, froze up in fear, and had to be rescued by the New York City Fire Department. A safer job, rewriting old report cards in a public school, was so soul-destroying that he quit. “Better to starve,” he said, “than to re-write old report cards.” In spite of his lack of a sense of direction, he was appointed a guide at the 1939 World’s Fair. He meticulously taught himself how to get to the Ford Pavilion. Whenever anybody asked for directions to another exhibit, the “guide” told them that the Ford Pavilion was the only thing worth seeing. It lasted a few days until someone complained about the guide who only knew the way to one exhibit.

There were other retrospectively comic episodes, including Menke’s arrest by New Jersey police on the night of the Lindberg baby kidnapping in 1932. He was thinking about a poem at a train station one night, and nabbed as a potential suspect in the case. Absentmindedly thinking about a poem during the Furriers’ union strike of 1934, he blundered into an alleyway concealing the back entrance to a Lower East Side fur factory. Union leaders mistook him in the dark for a scab and beat him up, laughing at his protests about ethical vegetarians having nothing to do with the fur business in principle.



For several years in the mid 1930s, Menke tried hard to conform, producing what was wanted from a poet in these circles, for example a poem on begging children and the Salvation Army (*Frayhayt* of March 16th 1933). Having been a watchmaker, it was natural that he turned to poems about watchmaking that would fit the proletarian bill (pp. 63, 93). As a vegetarian, he enjoyed having a go at one Professor Grau, a big shot professor who dissects animals (pp. 78—83). And he became an instant hit. Some of his poems even made it into the *Revolutsyonéerer Deklamátor* (“The Revolutionary Declaimer”), a sort of left-wing fireside songbook published in New York in 1933. He collected this new “proletarian verse” into his second book, *Der mentsh in togn* (*Dawning Man*, as translated on the inside title page, New York 1935). It even contains a poem making fun of that previous Menke Katz with his three sisters (pp. 114—117). The playfully ambiguous use of quotation marks in the poem created an ongoing mystique. It is an intriguing case of the real writer somehow sneaking through his views, if not between the lines, then at least — in the quotation marks.

Menke’s stature in the Yiddish literary circles of the *Linke* took an instant leap after the 1935 appearance of *Dawning Man*. He became, albeit briefly, a hero of the leftist writers. He was not yet thirty when he was chosen to carry the Proletpen banner in the Manhattan funeral march for the artist and writer Yosl Kotler. The heading in the *Frayhayt* read: “Out in front with the Proletpen flag!” The caption below added: “Chaver Menke Katz carries the flag of Proletpen. Immediately following [the leaders of the writers’ union] are the orchestra. and then the editors of the *Morgn Frayhayt*” (June 19th 1935).

Olgin even hailed the “new Menke Katz.”

In this book [*Dawning Man*], the poet left far behind that other Menke Katz, who had written the poems of a previous collection, *Three Sisters*. In that first book, Menke Katz grappled with a web of personal experiences, unhealthy visions, semi-mystical fears, and a frequently degenerated psychologism. He grappled, tried to free himself, but often remained defeated. The healthy side of the poet, himself a son of Jewish poverty who always kept his ties with the revolutionary workers’ movement here, finally helped him tear himself away from

those dark spiderwebs. Menke Katz goes forward on the road of light, where the sun is to be found. It is a fist of fire!

(M. Olgin, "Khaver Menke Katz's poeme" [Chaver Menke Katz's Poem] in *Frayhayt*, July 6th 1935)

Well, Olgin's evaluation of Menke had made a progression from "scabby brains" (or "scabby cats/Katz") to "a fist of fire." By 1937, he characterized the young poet as

one of the most important and original revolutionary poets. [...]

He is one of the richest in imagery among the poets of the Left — and for that matter, not only of the Left. Menke Katz is the bard of images par excellence. He cannot see other than through imagery. His unique perception of the universe is imagery. [...]

Menke Katz is in this sense a lyricist even in his epic works. A rich life of emotions accompanies and permeates his lines. A warmth of flowing blood, an engagement that is not formal but personal, deep, honest and individual. Menke Katz is one of the most forthright Yiddish poets. Himself an explicit poetic individualist, Menke Katz knows how to individualize his characters. In his longer poems he creates living people.

(M. Olgin, "Der itstiker tsushtand fun der yidisher literatur in Amerike" [The Current Situation of Yiddish Literature in America] in *Frayhayt*, August 8th, 1937)

Frayhayt co-editor William Abrams (1894—1969) wrote a long essay about the development of the young poet, and published it in *Signal* in 1935. A personal friend of Menke's, he wanted to do him the favor of showing that that old Menke Katz of *Three Sisters* was over and done for, replaced by the new.

The master of empires of cats and kingdoms of mice [pp. 42—44] has died. Before us stands the poet who has begun to learn to forge his poems: "Let my poem be strong" and "Let my poem be simple" [p. 112]. In his striving toward this goal, all of proletarian literature wishes his hands to be strengthened."

(final paragraph of William Abrams, "A dikhter in veg" [A Poet on the Way] in *Signal*, May 1935)

Poet and literary critic Eliezer Greenberg (1896—1977) followed with a review in *Hámer*.

“[...] From Menke’s first child, *Three Sisters*, to his second book of poems, *Dawning Man*, the transformation of his nocturnal hopeless poem into a confident, upbeat poem is evident, along with the soul of social vision. [...]

“[...] Of the younger poets who came and educated themselves in the environment of the *Frayhayt*, Menke Katz is one of the most talented. [...]

(Eliezer Greenberg, “Menke Katz — bam rand fun togn” [Menke Katz — at the Break of Dawn] in *Hámer*, October 1936 [continued in issue for December 1936])

Dawning Man made some impressions outside the *Frayhayt* circles too. The critic of the traditionalist orthodox *Morgn-zhurnal*, A. Mukdoyni (pen name of Alexander Kappel, 1878—1958) praised the book for *not* being overloaded with the socialism of the other books he was reviewing at the time (particularly Aaron Kurtz’s *The Golden City* that also appeared in 1935).

Communism does not hang from his nose like some part of the anatomy. It doesn’t shut out the world for him. [...] Menke Katz shuns all those proletarian poetic stunts. He is the most blameless of all the proletarian poets.”

(Dr. A. Mudkoyni, *Bikher un shrayber* [Books and Writers] in *Morgn Zhurnal*, November 20th 1935)

B. Z. Hariton commented:

In this second book it is evident that the poet has liberated himself from the past, from the motifs of decline and decay, of *lumpenproletariat* that almost bordered with degeneracy. And instead of sighing and weeping over loneliness, and constantly looking death in the face, he now takes the loneliness into the fiery blacksmith’s shop of the worker’s poet, and reforges it from top to bottom [...]

You feel in his poems not only a proletarian lyrical tone, not only loathing, but humanity, gentleness, and love. As a vegetarian, he

demonstrates not only the brutality of human to human but also the brutality of humans to a little fish, describing how his little girl, Troim, to whom the poem is dedicated, argues it all out with the little fish [p. 147]. It is evident that the poet can exchange his anguish not only for loathing and struggle, but also for love. [...]

Of the group of young proletarian poets, he is the most capable as well as the most talented. The new proletarian poetry in America has been enriched by this book.

(B. Z. Hariton, "Funem bikher-tish: *Der mentsh in togn*"
[From Books on the Table: *Dawning Man*] in *Shpigil*; a version also
appeared in *Nyu-yorker vokhnblat*)

Dawning Man attracted a response from the great Yiddish writer Avrom Reyzen (Abraham Reisin, 1876—1953).

He has an awful lot to say and sing about, but he doesn't say or sing it clearly enough. Whether because that's the way he wants it, a sort of capriciousness, or he has not fully developed his form (there is no shortage of content) is difficult to surmise. Nevertheless he is a unique poet, and moreover one with profound sensations. He is a far-sighted poet. [...]

The concluding poem in the book is particularly wonderful. It is beautiful in form, in mood and in content. The poet calls it *Tomorrow* [p. 150]. It is genuine vision.

(Avrom Reyzen in *Feder zamlbukh*, 1936)

There was also a lot of reaction abroad to *Dawning Man*, which seemed to catch a certain mid 1930s mood.

Yankev Pilowsky (1898—1969) in Santiago, Chile, wondered

how it is possible to write about hunger, want, anguish, suffering and injustice in such a refined tone, mastering words and phrases, verses and stanzas the way Menke Katz pulls it off.

(Yankev Pilowsky, "Menke Katz: Fun *Dray shvester biz Der mentsh in togn* [From *Three Sisters to Dawning Man*] in *Yidishe prese*, Santiago, Chile, June 28th 1935)

Argentina's Yiddish critic L. Zhitnitsky (1894—1967) took note of the optimistic moods.

But the poet cannot couch things in pessimistic veils. He knows the reasons why reality is for the time being as it is, and not otherwise, and he perceives it with a clear and sober gaze. He is therefore not overcome, either by sadness or by moods of hopelessness. He does not allow himself to become a singer of lamentations over human fates. Just the opposite: The given social reality forges the poet's will even more, fills him with hope and courage. [...]

(L. Zhitnitsky, "Der dikhter Menke Katz —
Der mentsh in togn" [The Poet Menke Katz —
Dawning Man] in *Di prese*, May 15th 1935)

A young critic in Poland, Y. R. Brinman (who was to fall victim to the Holocaust), sent a review to a paper in Chicago likewise hailing the poet's perceived transition.

Not only would he no longer want to be "a king of mice" but there has awakened in him a proletarian conscience, which had previously been hiding out down in the mouse hole.

(Y. R. Brinman, "Afn veg tsum oysgehamertn proletarishn lid"
[On the Way to the Hammered-out Proletarian Poem] in
Yidisher kuryer [Jewish Courier], Chicago, November 24th 1935)

But there was one critic, Sheftl (Shabse) Karakushansky (1905—1972) in Rio de Janeiro, who came to the opposite conclusion. As a poet, he felt, Menke Katz had gone *downhill* in the transition from *Three Sisters* of 1932 to *Dawning Man* of 1935.

But it so happens that it is Menke Katz II [of *Dawning Man*], the guy who talks about "dawning," who is all faded out, heaven help us. It seems that it isn't so easy to jump from the mouse hole and go out right away to look up at the sun. You have to prepare yourself well, you have to be refreshed by the deep morning dew to be able to face that sun. [...]

And although Menke Katz in his second book speaks not about mice but about watches and watch-hands (he must be a watchmaker),

he is so much paler here than in the first volume. The verses and words are semi dried-out, they are akin to journalistic undertakings and don't even succeed on that score. He is better at bemoaning the rags on the whore whose time has come [cf. p. 26] than rebelling against "injustice and brutality at high noon" [cf. p. 70].

Do you really believe that valiant happiness, about which the same Menke Katz speaks to you, the same fellow who just yesterday sang about the mouse hole?

No. You believe the first Menke Katz! Because *that* poetic descent borders on obsession. Obsession has power! His ascent, however, which is neither obsession nor a bona fide ascent, is no more than an attempt to fit in as an "honorable" member of the shoemakers' and bricklayers' club. It has no gusto.

Where, O where, Mr. Katz, do you find those waterfalls in the "raging marches"? [see p. 121] [...] You were in the mouse hole and you've just now linked up to the marches of the Bolsheviks. And where, by the way? In New York! Well, maybe there it's still literary merchandise, but in Moscow you'd already be Mr. Rip Van Winkle!

Where does a poet get such incredible *chutzpah* in 1935 to extinguish God, like a Sabbath candle? This takes almighty courage, but you must forgive me a thousand times, Mr. Katz, when I tell you that after all that, — it just doesn't *dawn*!

(Sh. Karakushansky, "Es togt nit" [It Doesn't Dawn]
in *Yidische folks-tsaytung*, Rio de Janeiro, May 31st 1935)

The later Menke Katz agreed entirely with Karakushansky! He regretted not *Three Sisters* (1932) but *Dawning Man* (1935). Nearly a half century later Menke gave me an "extra" copy of *Dawning Man* with the following inscription:

After many attacks on my first book of poems, *Three Sisters*, there are here, to my regret, many poems influenced by the leftist environment and by the years of the Great Depression in America. I would very much want to rework this book, according to my present

ideas and feelings. I would wish to raise this book to the level of my present poems. Maybe I'll still manage to do it, if I will have, if I am destined to have the added years that are a gift [after the seventy traditionally allotted years of a lifetime — DK].

Menke, August 12th 1981

Through much of the 1930s, Menke earned his living from watchmaking (all thanks to Avremke the watchmaker back in Michaleshik — Menke had “two wooden hands” for just about everything else in the way of mechanics). He practiced this craft in an exceedingly narrow shop at 218 Avenue A (the place is still there, as it happens, almost unchanged). But he decided to study to become a Yiddish teacher, and completed his degree at the Yiddish Workers' University under the Yiddishist intellectual Kalmen Marmor (1879—1956). He took courses in English literature at Columbia University and studied rabbinics and Kabbalah at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. This was a natural extension of his lifelong study of kabbalistic and other classical Jewish texts, in the original Aramaic and Hebrew, incongruous as this might seem for a “leftist” writer; this at the same time as writers caught with religious books were being arrested and killed in the Soviet Union. Another of the constant reminders of how very *American* the left wing Yiddishist movement was in New York.

As a personality among the poets of the Lower East Side, Menke became known for boundless exuberance, and an ebullient love of life and fun. He cherished spending time with friends at a table over cups of coffee or *l'chaims* (drinks). The twin mainstays, poetry and Yiddish, always seemed sufficient to make him feel high, and he always projected enjoyment of making those around him feel high too. To this end, he would pick up his mandolin and break into Yiddish folksong (despite having no great voice, and having learned to play by ear during his Lithuanian childhood). Besides his antipathy toward bananas and his strict vegetarianism, he would never wear an overcoat in the cold New York winters (they were not that cold compared to the winters back in Svintsyman and Michaleshik). He became a familiar figure in the late-night cafeteria life of the Yiddish writers of New York.



The first use Menke made of his new status in the mid 1930s was to challenge the most basic ideas of Marxist thinking on literature: socialist realism. In an essay in the journal *Signal*, couched in the language of a true believer who wants to reform from within, he begins with an analysis of a popular work of the day by poet Alef Katz (1898—1969), to illustrate how writers try to be “proletarian” even when their talent is unsuited to that pursuit.

Notwithstanding its attempt to achieve proletarian truth, Alef Katz’s poem *Dos telerl fun himl* [*The Little Plate from Heaven*] approaches Maeterlinck’s symbolism. Alef Katz wanted the main motif of this beautiful, fantastic children’s tale to be class conflict. The poet takes as his theme hunger, want and even struggle. But he seeks that truth through so many veils, that he becomes, it seems, a magician in the process. [...]

Alef Katz is a very gifted poet with a creative imagination. His symbols are very colorful but indeterminate and therefore by definition not proletarian. Alef Katz has used symbolism as a method. Symbolism as an element is an effective means for precise wording and compactness, a means toward realistic introspectivism that should in fact be admitted into socialist realism. Ditching the symbolist element is in effect a narrowing of the compass of proletarian literature in general and of poetry especially; it means taking away the possibility of being adequate; it means approaching socialist realism with a photo lens.

Whether by simplicity or by metaphors — that depends on the poet’s style — he deepens his senses by including the symbolist element. To see an object through the realism of photography is to flatten our senses. [...]

I was religious myself some ten years ago. The wheels of a watch used to inspire in me religious conceptualizations. I saw God in the spinning of the wheels, even though I the watchmaker put them together. Now I see the wheels racing to a new tomorrow, in other words, using the symbolism as an element. But a poet can never see a wheel as a photograph. A poet sees things introspectively, not photographically. [...]

Reducing socialist realism to one method or one genre means not only to put proletarian literature in a narrow straightjacket. It is quite simply impossible, just as it is impossible for different faces to have one and the same expression. I don't by any means claim that symbolism is the most important element with which the proletarian artist should operate. But it is without a doubt *one* of the important elements. Each of the disparate tendencies among artists works to make proletarian literature rich in shades and in colors. To remove the symbolist element from our literature means to make it gray and shriveled. On the basis of socialist realism we have to *include* all the elements of every bourgeois method [...]

Symbolism as an element inspires and builds. [...]

(Menke Katz, "Simbolizm — element un metod (diskusye artikl)" [Symbolism — Element and Method (Article for Discussion)] in *Signál* (May 1935))

The second use Menke made of his new found success was — and this is the rub — that with the odd exception of what poets call "occasional verse" in the daily press to satisfy the proletarian-poetry throng, he stopped writing the stuff altogether. He took to working on an epic based upon his childhood during World War I. In that epic, the full mystical shtetl splendor of his Lithuanian villages is uninhibitedly paraded. His stocks were so high at the time that he had no problem in getting Proletpen's own publishing house, *Signál*, to publish the work, *Bréndidik shtetl* (*Burning Village or Burning Town*) in two handsome volumes (pp. 151—338 in this volume), and according to the poet's own exacting standards of page layout and "massive negative space." The twin volumes appeared in 1938. For some years, the offices of Proletpen's publishing house, at 133 Second Avenue, gave it the cachet of one of New York's leading Yiddish literary presses.

Critics outside the circles of the *Linke* received the two-volume work with the usual range of reactions. B. Z. Goldberg called it "a stream that emerges from under cliffs out to the sunlight" (in the *Tog*, January 23rd 1938). Y. L. (Judd) Teller (1912—1972) was among those who anticipated, with an appropriate dose of partisan glee, that this work would not wash with the *Linke*.

In his third work, *Bréndidik shtetl*, which will soon appear, he

finally frees himself from the cardinal sin, from his native sin, and he begins to tell about *himself*, about the feeling of homelessness. That is because he thinks — while the rest of us sincerely doubt! — that the leftist camp has given him a readership to whom he can pour out his soul.

(Y. L. Teller in *Yidisher kénfer*, Sept. 17th 1937)

Ruvn Ayzland (Reuben Eisland, 1884—1955), a major poet (and, incidentally, a top translator of Heine and other works of world literature into Yiddish), wrote a most curious essay on *Bréndik shtetl*. He had not seen the book, but read an attack on it by Y. A. Weisman (Vaysman) in *Inzikh*, the journal of the introspectivists. Ayzland more or less fell in love with the lines which Weisman had quoted to show how bad the book was.

I feel that I owe thanks to the poet Y. A. Weisman for revealing to me in the May [1938] issue of *Inzikh* Menke Katz as a fine poet. I knew from way back that genuine poetic veins run through Katz's being. But I hadn't read a poem of his for a long time and I could not imagine, that this disheveled, informal young man would ever get himself together to the point of achieving true poetic fineness. And now, along comes Y. A. Weisman and teaches me yet again how you must not let an opinion of yours become ossified, especially when it concerns a living person. The less so when it concerns a creative person.

True, that was not Weisman's intention. And who knows, maybe I'm making a mistake, and Menke Katz is not as fine a poet as I think he is today. But if that's the case, I have Weisman to thank for this "mistake." I have not read Menke Katz's *Burning Village*. Still, I feel certain that Weisman's quotes are accurate. And, from the lines which he cites from the book, a completely different Menke Katz emerges from the one he describes! And it certainly isn't my fault if his intention was just the opposite. [...]

Even with his [Weisman's] "strong nerves" he "fervently needed to restrain himself not to hurl them [the two volumes of *Burning Village*] onto the floor" and, as far as I remember the young poet from a long time ago, I'd be prepared to believe that his *Burning Village* is just like his first book, probably overflowing with

discomfiture. But when I read Weisman saying, that he is “prepared to pay any price” to hear someone who can give a logical justification for such children’s verse as

*Unter Yeiskes vigale,
Iz nito kin tsigale —
Dikh farvign
Dershosene — mit khorkhlendik gezang.*

*Under Yeiske’s cradle
There is no white goat —
Riddled bodies swing you high
With their snorting song.*

[p. 256; the “white goat” is a reference to a well-known song which comfortingly juxtaposes a “pure white little goat” with a child’s cradle — DKJ]

— Well, I’d like to come and claim the prize! I don’t know what comes before these lines, and I don’t know what comes after them. But these four lines alone! What a darned fine poet you have to be to be able to convey with such bitter irony the lamentation and the tension in the atmosphere of being at home in a place where there has just been a slaughter!

I am also prepared to come and claim the prize for the following five lines (which Weisman brings along with the other four as reason for tying the poet to the pillory):

*Er shpirt
vi di erd zupt lebedikn blut
un em vert paynlakh gut,
vos amol vet oykh er tsien
a shverd fun sbeyd.*

*He senses
The earth sips living blood
And he feels painfully good
That someday he too
Will pull a sword from its sheath.*

[p. 224]

Only a person who is altogether without nerves would fail to feel what a wonderfully sensitive structure of nerves a poet has to have, if he is one who “feels the earth sipping living blood.”

When Weisman cites the lines

*In ash fun Seyfer-Toyres
in Yehove — a holeveshke gezesn*

*In ash of Torah Scrolls,
Jehovah — a sitting ember.*

[see p. 157]

as “a senseless attack on the Jewish past, on the old Jewish culture and the Jewish God” I can only surmise that it must be because he was indignant at whatever it is that comes before the two lines and after them. But as he brings us only these two lines, all I can say is that if Bialik had written them everybody would (rightly) dote on them with delight for many years to come.

(Ruvn Ayzland, “Poetn, kritiker” [Poets, Critics] in *Tog*, June 26th 1938; a reply to Y. A. Vaysman, “Poezye in a dulhoysz” [Poetry in a Madhouse] in *Inzikh*, no. 46, May 1938)

Among the *Linke* themselves, it took a little time for the big guns to notice that “something might be wrong” with *Burning Village*. When the two books appeared they were met with acclaim. Olgin chaired a festive evening in honor of the book’s appearance on April 24th 1938 in the Eugene V. Debs Auditorium of New York’s Rand School at 7 East 15th Street (a favorite for leftist literary celebrations). Such evenings played the role of holidays for the Yiddishist communities. They were among the many “cultural replacements” whereby the celebratory spirit of traditional religious festivals had been “sublimated” to evenings in honor of new literary works in Yiddish. On the day of the event Olgin published an appeal for people to come.

On the occasion of the appearance of the two volumes of *Bréndidik shtetl*, the friends of proletarian Yiddish literature will assemble [...] to honor the poet Menke Katz and to applaud his work.

Chaver Menke Katz is one of the most important poets of our leftist front. With these two volumes he assumes his place in our literature as the author of four books. [...] I personally considered it my pleasure and responsibility to write a special article about *Bréndendik shtetl*. I planned for it to appear the same day as the *yóntef* ["celebration," previously "traditional Jewish holiday"] in honor of his two new books. [...]

I apologize to Menke Katz and his many friends and admirers. But tonight, at his *yóntef*, I will have the possibility to express verbally part of what I want to say about his creativity. [...] I am certain that tonight's event in honor of Chaver Menke Katz will be packed, and will be held in the elevated spirit which his poetry inspires.

(M. Olgin, "Der hayntiker yontef far Khaver Menke Katz" [Today's *Yontef* for Chaver Menke Katz" in *Frayhayt*, April 24th 1938)

Olgin wrote a single weekly column in English in the *Frayhayt* (which was otherwise in Yiddish). Following the evening for *Bréndendik shtetl*, he summed it up in English, in his "Heroes of Poetry in the Flesh."

We had a unique experience last Sunday evening. We were present at one of those gatherings to greet a poet on the occasion of his publishing a new book, gatherings that have become quite frequent. The poet was Menke Katz. The book was a two-volume war poem *Burning Town* (*Bréndendik shtetl*).

On the surface this evening resembled many other evenings of the same kind. There was some singing, some recitation, some play-acting and quite a lot of speaking. The crowd, as is usual on such occasions, was quite young. There were also a few of a more advanced age — those stalwarts who would always visit an evening devoted to proletarian literature because they are friends of Jewish culture and friends of its proletarian brand.

Everything was as is customary at such evenings, including that spirit of holiday, of festivity, where people would rather talk to friends, exchange opinions, than listen to speeches from the platform. There was something unusual also, however, and this is what I wish to relate.

* * *

Menke Katz has had a remarkable career as a poet. He started with an almost mystic fear of life. His extraordinary talent was directed toward depicting horrors, cruelty, degeneracy, abysmal sufferings of the darkest kind. There was something unwholesome in the performance. Because the man was obviously endowed with a tremendous gift, and because he counted himself among the left he was severely criticized for leading his readers into a dark corner with hopelessness and despair as the only logical emotions. Criticism, the example of other writers, and his own adherence to the ideology of the class struggle helped him reorient himself. His second volume of poetry, *Dawning Man* (1935) differed radically from the first volume, *Three Sisters*. After this volume he began to work on a war poem which, to a degree, explains the origin of his brooding attitude towards life in the early years of his literary activities. It is the description of a small Lithuanian town, Michaleshik, during the World War — a town that suffered both from war and pogroms and changes of government and was repeatedly looted and ravaged both by Russian and German armies. It was a record of his own childhood in the war zone, a poetic reproduction of what a sensitive boy experienced during those fateful years. While this poem is a valuable contribution to Jewish literature, many of its chapters being among the best productions of Jewish proletarian poetry, it is, to the poet, a means of freeing himself from his past by giving it pictorial expression.

* * *

The unique thing about the evening was that most of the personages mentioned in the poem were present in the Debs Auditorium of the Rand School where the celebration took place.

Here was his mother. He is a young man in his early thirties, tall and handsome, with a very sensitive face. What he described was centered around his own family. When I read his *Burning Town* I was transferred into an imaginary land with people suffering tortures that could hardly be believed. The name Badonna to me was a name of a fantastic figure woven out of the tortured imagination of the poet. The child, Yeiske, born in the midst of the war, with his mother dying in childbirth and himself raised by Badonna, his mother's sister,

seemed equally fantastic. So were the other brothers. What he told about them could spring only from the mind of an Edgar Allan Poe; perhaps it could even put Poe in the shade. The constant horror, the continuous hunger, the state of mind almost inevitably bordering on insanity. The shapes of actual insanity crowding upon the family.

Yet here they were, almost all those whom Katz describes in his book. His mother sat on the stage, Badonna in the flesh. His brothers and sister sat in the hall, and it was so strange to hear the chairman call Yeiske to come up to the platform — that Yeiske that was a purely poetic creation to me. Also present were many former citizens of Michaleshik and Svintsyan, another town depicted in the poem. They are all simple people now, working people. They are far from the left. Yet they are proud of their native son who “made good.” They came to celebrate the appearance of his books. They came to tell him that they appreciate what he has done for their town. He is an outstanding member of their *landsmanshaft* — the society of immigrants from Michaleshik.

Strange, isn't it? To me the whole thing looked somewhat unreal. I still can't believe it.

(M. Olgin, “Heroes of Poetry in the Flesh” [in English] in *Frayhayt*, April 27th 1938)

The Yiddish press reported a turnout of over five hundred, and the speakers included talks by the Yiddish poet Kadye Molodovsky (1894—1975), and Menke's close friend, the poet and essayist Ber Grin (1901—1989). Those who remembered the festive evening never failed to mention Menke's poems sung by Reyzl Spektor and Luba Rimer to music composed for the occasion by Spektor (now presumed lost).

When the festivities died down, Olgin got around to reviewing the book. And something changed between April flowers and May showers:

[...] So Katz threw himself into the burning village like a thirsty man in the desert leaping upon a stream of running water. And it doesn't matter that the stream is of sandy or muddy waters. Here he is free. Here it is his world. Here he can let loose his sickly passion for blow-me-away visions of degeneracy and destruction. Here he can dig

his fingers into mould and cool his heart with a whale-like howling. Here he can return to his arsenal of images from *Three Sisters*, for which Marxist criticism rightly let him have it.

Menke is a prolific creator in the first volume of *Burning Village* — and it affects you. Many pictures, characteristics, scenes and images engrave themselves on your memory with fire-rods: all of Badonna's family, from the half grown up Dveirka to Yeiske; the Song of Blumka; the portrayal of the czarist army; Svintsyman; the young love in April. [...]

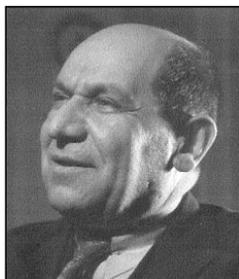
But why is everything made to be so maddening, just as if some blind, crazy "fate" was in control here, rather than the determinate power of certain well known social forces? Why is there no class distinction in the war poems, among those who suffer in the war, when we *know* that the Jewish rich people in Michaleshik and Svintsyman suffered much less than the Badonnas? [...] Why is there virtually nothing about October? Why does the Red Army get barely a page [pp. 305—306], far less than the mad cow [pp. 165, 168, 181—184, 192, 208, 221—222, 229—230], and twenty times less, than Hirshe-Leyb Tarshish, the assistant beadle of the hasidic prayer-house? [pp. 231, 234—240, 261—277]

Why are the Bolsheviks so unreal, and so bombastically described, to the point of being unrecognizable? Why is Menke Katz so wary of a realistic picture that a simple worker-reader could read, understand, digest and from which he could become spiritually richer? Why does Menke Katz torture us so much and so superfluously? [...]

(M. Olgin, "Menke Katz in zayn nayster tkufe" [Menke Katz in his Newest Period] *Frayhayt*, 8 May 1938; reprinted as "Menke Katz" in his posthumous *Kultur un folk. Ophandlungen un eseyen vegn kultur un vegn shrayber* [Culture and Nation. Studies and Essays about Culture and Writers], YKUF, New York 1949, pp. 281-285)

An earlier review by poet Moyshe Katz (1885—1960, no relation) was called "A velt brent andersh" (roughly: "This isn't how a world burns").

Menke Katz made his *début* in our literature with his *Three Sisters*, which appeared in 1932. [...] A poet who draws his



Moyshe Katz (1885-1960)

inspiration not from superficial impressions, not from beautiful things, that have been latched onto by others hundreds of times, but somewhere from a deep inner springwell. From this springwell there spurts forth in his work, however, not clear playful water but bile and poison. [...] It didn't seem credible to think that the bitterness has a direct relationship to reality. It was rather taken as a kind of symbol, a Jobian outpouring against the ugly times and badly set-up world. [...]

In his second book, *Dawning Man*, which appeared in 1935, Menke Katz began to tear himself away from the vicious cycle of despair, with which he had surrounded himself in *Three Sisters*. [...] He expresses in the book the readiness to struggle with his fellow people in such beautiful lines as:

*Nem ikh dem elnt fun tsefrozenem Zushe
in ongeheytester kuznye fun arbeter-poet,
shmid ikh fun frost tsetsundenem has:
shmeltsn zikh ferzn unter brazg fun hamer,
finklen verter af briendiker kovadle,
iz heys der shtol fun ongeglite lider,
beygn zikh shures — ongebrente shtabes,
un verter shteln zikh in rey, vi royte frontovikes;
nem ikh dem elnt fun tsefrozenem Zushe
in ongeheytester kuznye fun arbeter-poet,
shmid ikh fun frost tsetsundenem has:
iz yedes vort mit shroyt gelodn
un yeder os shteyt hoyl in fayer —
az men darf, iz men shmids.
un az men darf, iz men pikes.*

*I take the loneliness of freezing Zushe
Into the hot smithy of the worker poet
And forge the frost into fiery hatred:
Verses fuse under the band of my hammer,
Words sparkle on the searing anvil,
Hot is the steel of glowing poems,*

*Lines bend — white-hot stabs,
And words stand up like red frontline soldiers.
I take the loneliness of freezing Zushe
Into the heated smithy of the worker poet,
I forge the frost into flaming hatred,
And every word is loaded with shot,
Every letter stands naked in the fire —
When we need, we are blacksmiths.
When we need, we are spears.*

[p. 113]

This was Menke Katz's promise, an oath of a frontline red soldier in our proletarian literature. And now, at the end of 1937 [when the pre-publication text of *Bréndik shtetl* began to circulate among the critics], Menke Katz's new work, *Burning Village* comes off the press. [...]

Did Menke Katz keep his promise to detach himself from the "previous Menke"? After all, he wrote about *him* in his previous book [*Dawning Man*, 1935].

*O, nekhtiker Menke Katz, —
oyb fun umet bistu geshtorbn,
fas ikh dir ayn in a toytnram,
un layter zikh
in fayern fun mayn ufgevakhtn shtam.*

*O Menke Katz of yesterday
if you died of sadness
I fit you into a death frame
and purify myself
in fires of my awakened race.*

[p. 117]

More likely it is just the opposite! He has buried himself even more in the mood and experiences of the onetime Menke and has

dunked himself in a still deeper and blacker spring of despair. Just one thing though. At least we finally know where the black Menke moods, his bitterness and fear of life, come from. They derive from all those years, from the immense human pain and poverty and hunger and fear and despair and sense of being totally lost which he, together with those closest to him, lived through during his youth, in the time of the World War. [...]

Russians, Germans. Everyone is busy fighting, everyone is killing people, torturing others and suffering themselves. Why? Because of what? Nobody knows. The poet doesn't know either. Some kind of punishment from God and — finished!

But you don't even see the Bolsheviks themselves! Neither within the village nor among those who arrive in the village. You know nothing about their achievement! [...] And the only mention of them is a... curse of the "Queen of the Prussian King" over a women's prayer book covered with tears [p. 310].

(Moyshe Katz, "A velt brent andersh" [This isn't how a world burns] in *Frayhayt*, December 26th 1937)

Sometime in 1938, a meeting of Proletpen turned into a concerted attack on *Burning Village*. The poet was apparently taken aback and did not respond effectively at the time. But afterwards, he began to work on a manifesto of independence of poetry from politics. It was published in the *Frayhayt* on August 14th 1938, along with four poems. Technically speaking perhaps, the title *Der braver pakhdn* ("The Brave Coward"), applies more to the manifesto, with each of the poems named individually. But the four poems plus the manifesto came to be known collectively as *Der braver pakhdn*. Each of the four is Menke's reply to one of the accusations against *Burning Village*. Each of Menke's replies doubles as a general debunking of the political correctness of the day. The first, *Vegn freyd un umet* (*On Happiness and Sadness*) is a response to the notion that happiness can be "demanded" of poets. The second, *Vegn nekhtn, haynt un morgn* (*On Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*) is a defense of the right to be passionately consumed with the past (which happens to coincide markedly with traditionalist Jewish culture). The third poem, *Un du bist umetik vi toyznt Kuni-Aylend zunen* (*And You are as Sad as a Thousand*

Coney Island Suns), returns to the theme of happiness and sadness, but this time in the form of a broadside against the faked happiness of poets who are out to deliver it as a commodity. It ends on a particularly controversial poetic note: his right to undress his word naked even in the mouse hole. This is the “mouse hole” that came, in Yiddish literary circles, to refer to all the poems about mice, cats, spiders and flies, back in *Three Sisters*, for which he had been unrelentingly attacked throughout the thirties; see the poems on pp. 10, 41—44, 55, and 83 in *Three Sisters*). The final poem is *Di tfile fun baraban* (*The Prayer of the Drum*), an ode to the beauty of sadness in poetry. The four poems appear in their original 1938 version on pp. 393—397 (and in their later *Grandmother Mona* version of 1939, on pp. 435—442).

The accompanying manifesto appeared under the title “A letter to the editor of the *Morning Frayhayt*.”

Dear Chaver M. Olgin:

I have written the poem *The Brave Coward* for the *Morning Frayhayt*, as a reply to two members of Proletpen who gave speeches attacking me at a Proletpen meeting. Nevertheless, it is not my intention that the poem should serve simply as a reply to these two writers. I want to demonstrate once and for all *in general* the importance of plucking out of proletarian poetry the countless, unnecessary “tails” [endings] which do not permit the growth of proletarian literature in America. For years, poets in our circles, more as a pose than out of honesty, have been sticking on proletarian, happy endings to moods that have absolutely nothing to do with the movement for freedom. How ridiculous! Poets with red, happy tails, as if they had come out with the slogan: Back to the epoch of the monkeys!

I shall attempt to demonstrate, in the poem concerning happiness and sadness, that when there is a dearth of honesty, it is only a superficial, boring happiness that can be churned out; that even darkness can shine in true poetry; that happiness forced upon yourself is madness. And certainly, the homogeneity that rules the day, unfortunately so powerfully in our proletarian literature, is madness. Because when poets all have one face to the extent that they cannot be differentiated, to the extent that they cannot be recognized, it is just as if a person would suddenly see in the street on all people — one

face, his own face. That is madness.

It is high time, Chaver Olgin, that we should learn to tolerate each other — differentiated styles, tendencies and genres — so that our proletarian literature might become a rich, deeply moving symphony. But for that to happen, it becomes necessary to open up the purest of all streams: honesty. When a proletarian writer is honest, it will be impossible for the injustice of the brutal world not to manifest itself in his works, and then the struggle for a new world, for a more beautiful human being, will emanate not mechanically, but organically.

A work, no matter how red the author may try to paint it over, if it is not convincing, it is, ironically, anti-proletarian. A proletarian poet above any other must write honestly, about whatever it is within that evokes in him the deepest happiness or the most shattering anguish. The notion that only the most recent and the present interest him and, more generally, that they alone can inspire great proletarian writing is an out-and-out falsehood. (I don't mean to say that great works cannot be written about the most recent times.) And, the notion that red-rhymed flag waving can uplift the worker and show the "true light" is similarly an out-and-out falsehood.

A proletarian poet, who is false with his pen, cannot commit any greater crime against the movement.

Hoping that you will not ignore this poem, *The Brave Coward*, I remain

with friendly greetings, your
Menke

(*Frayhayt*, August 14th 1938)

The Brave Coward — the four poems and the manifesto, taken together — resulted in a much bigger scandal than either *Three Sisters* or *Burning Village*, though many of the attacks went on to revive the vitriol against both earlier works. In later years, Menke would often credit Olgin for daring to publish the *Brave Coward* and the ensuing discussion in the spirit of free debate. As ever, it is essential to grasp the quintessential Americanness of the entire environment; no debate of the sort could have been imagined in the literary circles in the contemporary Soviet Union,

where many of the greatest authors had already fallen victim to the purges launched with murderous venom in 1937. Over in New York, the venom was all in the ink, and it could be hurled back and forth on the literary pages of the *Frayhayt* in fine Yankee spirit.



Martin Birnbaum (1904-1986)

The first reaction, which appeared a week after the *Coward*, came from poet Martin Birnbaum (1904—1986). In many ways it was the most devastating, dredging up the *Three Sisters* imbroglio (which, to speak polemically, Menke had royally asked for by defiantly concluding the third of the four *Brave Coward* poems with a reference to himself in the *moyzn-lokh*, the mouse hole). Here are excerpts from Birnbaum's piece, called *A pashkvil af der proletarisher literatur* ("A Malicious Libel-Sheet Against Proletarian Literature").

Menke Katz's poem and letter amount to a malicious libel-sheet, an attack on proletarian literature. Judging by the contents and quality of both "works," even A. Glantz of *Inzikh* [the Introspectivist group of Yiddish writers] would have done it just as talentlessly, not less poisonously, not less red-baitingly: "Mugs the dream in a dark alley" of "true poets" and "brays Hey, poet, over here — happiness; happiness for sad slaves!" [pp. 393, 437].

"The beautiful dream" of "true poets"! Well, what a fine old workshop we have here! You'll find the whole shebang strung out all over those mouldy walls — from the purest poetic sadness to the weirdest spider [p. 419], from Aunt Tilly's shrouds [p. 416] to the wailing of hungry cats [p. 420] down to the mouse hole that gets treated to bedding made of mould [cf. p. 437], where so many "genuine" poetic souls make themselves at home.

Nevertheless, you do find a smidgen of happiness somewhere through a crack in a rusty hinge or the veil of a spiderweb [p. 421]. And, you even find the murky *mikves* [traditional Jewish ritual baths] from which they, the "genuine poets" draw their purest "honesty" [...] for their conjured-up world-class pain. Oh my, it's the dear old

workshop again! So many poets still cling to the rusty nails of those dark chambers of self-torment, and when a single ray of bright sun falls on them, they begin to flutter their poetic wings, like nervous bats that just can't handle the light. [...]

It would appear that Menke, the big hero, the champion of honesty, was once upon a time afraid to come out with this kind of a libel-sheet. Then, way back in that distant past, proletarian literature, young and red, stood on the barricades and fought the enemy. It was a time of sharp political struggles throughout the country, and in the framework of our Jewish life in New York and its region. Proletarian literature was, then as now, completely at the disposal of the interests of the working class, as formulated by its ideological guide, the Communist Party. [...] A soldier on the front lines cannot busy himself with measuring the depths of his own wellsprings of pain. Even a poet becomes pale with anger when he sees a comrade's head split open in front of his eyes, and even a poet is ignited with joy when he feels the might of his class at a hunger march, a May Day parade, or even a weekday picket line. Naturally, in the list of "genuine poetic elements," this joy does not get mentioned by the poets of "self torment" who draw their honesty from murky *mikves*. For them, this is an artificial happiness, and they, just like Menke Katz, become "sad-sad from so much happiness" [p. 395].

But now it's okay! It wasn't allowed way back when, in the days when Menke Katz would make an appearance on the Square [= Union Square] in a heroic red shirt, catch a quick glimpse at the "happy, red tails" — and rush right back to the "beloved shudders" of his *Three Sisters*.

Could it be that Menke Katz doesn't get it? And that's why he started to sputter out these echoes of the so-called *Inzikh*? "How funny! Poets with happy, red tails" as if they had come out with the slogan, in Menke Katz's words: "Back to the epoch of the monkeys." Wow, what honest dedication, what "constructive criticism" for proletarian literature! What a deep belief in the joy of struggle, in the heroism of the Spanish people, in the building up of the Soviet Union! Could it be that Menke doesn't know about all that? And that's why he writes in his letter: "Even darkness can shine in a true poem" (We should go and tell this one to all the dark forces on earth!). Then he

goes on to write that “happiness forced upon yourself [among those princes of sadness, proletarian happiness was always artificial — MB] is — madness. And certainly, homogeneity (...) is — madness. Because when poets all have one face to the extent that they cannot be differentiated, to the extent that they cannot be recognized, it is just as if a person would suddenly see in the street on all people — one face, his own face. That is madness.”

When Menke Katz throws around the word “madness” it reminds me of the fellow with bad nerves, who gets examined by a psychiatrist, and then winks bashfully to his daughter who accompanied him, asking her: “Has the *meshúgener* left yet?”

[...] Menke writes: “It is high time, Chaver Olgin, that we should learn to tolerate each other — differentiated styles, tendencies and genres, so that our proletarian literature might become a rich, deeply moving symphony.” What a fine chop suey of ideas that is!

Different *tendencies*? And just what tendencies, for instance, should we incorporate into our proletarian literature? Religious? Reactionary? Fascist? “As long as darkness shines through in a true poem” [p. 395].

(Martin Birnboym, “A pashkvil af der proletarisher literatur”
[A Malicious Libel-sheet against Proletarian Literature] in *Frayhayt*,
August 21st 1938)

Moyshe Katz’s piece, “Something is rotten in Denmark” came the following week. He hinted at some anti-proletarian plot that might somehow be “using Menke Katz.”

What were the influences that had to be pushing him all this time, to the point where they provoked him to publish this libel-sheet in both “poetry” and prose? What does Menke, or those who speak through him, want? In his letter to the editor he explains that he wants “once and for all to pluck out of proletarian poetry the countless, unnecessary ‘tails’ which do not permit the growth of proletarian literature.” What kind of “tails” are these? Menke Katz believes that they are “red happy tails as if they (the proletarian poets) would come out with the slogan: Back to the monkeys!” In other words: The “red happy endings” drag proletarian poets to the level of *monkeys*. We sure

won't forget that one. [...]

But let's leave aside the insulting image of the clumsy analogy. What is the object of the analogy with the "red happy tails"? Red means revolutionary; happy means optimistic. It is not to Menke Katz's taste that many proletarian poets construct their works to lead to a revolutionary conclusion that is steeped in courage and optimism. In his *Brave Coward*, he explains that "the coward" (in other words some member of Proletpen he dislikes for criticizing him and demanding of him a revolutionary, optimistic view of the world), that these "cowards" —

Dreyen zikh heylik un ritshen gerekht
'Hey poet. Aber gib shtraln,
likht — far doynes nekht;
Hey poet, aber gib freyd,
Freyd far umetike knekht.'

Twist 'I am holy' and bray 'I am right':
'Hey, poet, over here — rays
of light enough for generations of nights.
Hey, poet, over here — happiness,
Happiness for sad slaves.'

[pp. 393, 437]

The truth is, of course, that this is a lie. We do not conceive of the working class as "poor servants." That's how *fascists* look at workers, honored Menke Katz! We don't "order up" "rays" of "happiness" from a poet. We believe that in the daily heroic struggle of the working class, and in the uprising of the honest laborer against a world of enemies and troubles there is a sea of happiness and a sea of rays of light. The proletarian artist doesn't have to make them up.

[Menke writes:]

Vayl freydiker fun ale freydn ken dem dikhters umet zayn

Because the poet's sadness can be more joyful than all joy

[p. 441]

because
Un holt hob ikh azoy —
Zayn aleyn dos likht vos helt dem khoyshekh arum mir.

And I so love
To be myself the light that dispels the gloom around me.

[p. 396]

There we have it! He “himself” is the light and everything all around is darkness, so how can you go and discuss the light of a class, the happiness of struggle?

Oh, Menke is a hero all right; true, a hero down in the mouse hole. But that’s why he’s all by himself in the mouse hole. No competition. And he’s used to the mice, and doesn’t get scared of them, and therefore ensures us in his “poem” that

Ikh vel vi der pakhdn zikh nit shrekn,
Mayn vort oyston naket afile in moyzn-lokh.

And I will not be afraid like the coward
To strip my word naked even in a mouse hole.

[p. 396]

[...] Then again, now, is it appropriate [...] to take for yourself all nine measures of honesty, leaving nothing for the remaining members of Proletpen? And is it “forthright and honest” for a writer, who has been hanging around Proletpen for so long, to make such vacuous insinuations in his letter; not citing a single name or fact, just insinuating that proletarian writers busy themselves with “red-rhymed flag waving,” that they “falsify with their pen?”

He was quiet for a while. During his silence, he saw the growth of the unified cultural front, when in the face of the horrific enemy, Fascism, which stands at our threshold, we became closer to the progressive cultural groupings with which we have disagreements (that do not interfere with our cooperation). Still, we Communists are

now attacked very often and we swallow an awful lot.

So Menke Katz apparently decided, that “now it’s okay for sure” and he has perpetrated a gas attack not against proletarian writers, but against all proletarian literature, against the proletarian revolutionary view of the world, against the revolutionary leadership of proletarian literature. [...]

We must take this as a serious signal that something is not in order on our proletarian-literary front, that something is “rotten in the state of Denmark.”

(Moyshe Katz, “Epes iz foyl in Denmark” [Something is Rotten in Denmark], *Frayhayt*, August 28th 1938)

It is noteworthy for the history of American Yiddish literature that Moyshe Katz saw Menke’s readiness to criticize as a result, in part, of the “unity talks” then underway among the Yiddishists to suspend *Linke-Rékht* warfare in the fight against Fascism, which was reaching a crescendo in 1938. After all, the *Linke* and *Rékht* were two camps of Yiddish creativity based on New York’s Lower East Side, both politically far left of the American center, both comprised virtually wholly of immigrants from the former Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires who had been brought up traditionally and then shifted to secular Yiddishism of one brand or another. Now they were two of so many branches of a people facing a war of racially motivated extermination back in their homeland.



Aaron Kurtz (1891-1964)

Another major poet of the Left, Aaron Kurtz (1891—1964) called his piece “A shot that hits the shooter.”

Who is he talking about? Most of our poets are fighters, revolutionaries, Communists! If they are lying in their poetry they are of necessity also liars in their struggle. This is slander of the worst kind. Is this not an illustration of Menke’s brand of “honesty”?

The writers of Proletpen “attack the beautiful dream [Yiddish *troyim*].” And guess what? Menke comes to the rescue! [...]

Here is what he puts into the mouth of the “literary coward.”

*Dem nekhtn hot shoy'n di tsayt dervorgn
dem morgn — far krenklakhe batlonim.*

*Time has choked the yesterdays
And tomorrows are for sickly idlers.*

[p. 393]

The first line is a libel that comes straight out of the worst reactionaries. The Whites [who fought the Soviet Reds during the Civil War that followed the Russian Revolution] and the bourgeoisie all over the world screeched that *we* will destroy everything, which the genius of “yesterday” created. The fascist [Filippo Tommaso] Marinetti [1876—1944] ranted in the name of the futurists that the entire old culture should be burnt. [...]

Do we have something against *burning village as theme*? No. The question remains the timeless one: what have you done, poet of your time, with that theme, from *any* analytical viewpoint? [...]

Every revolutionary — of *all* periods — struggled, lived and gave his life *for the future*! This is as elementary as ABC! And the poet of the revolution never stopped singing of tomorrow. And now, along comes Menke Katz and hits us back with:

*Ohó, braver pakhdn, dayn poykndiker ruf
Vet gevis fun driml, a tsiterik hezele vekn,
Nor ikh vel tsum shlakht nit firn —
Mayn lid, mit shtroyenem guf,
Oyb afile toyznt mol roy't tsetsundn.*

*Oho, brave coward, your drumming call
Would surely wake a trembling rabbit from its nap
But I will not lead my poem into battle
My poem with its straw body
Even if ignited a thousand times red.*

[p. 393]

The true lyricist, who is among those who go up onto the

barricades, is not afraid of the sound of the drum. It's the real coward who is afraid of it! Heine wasn't afraid of the drum. Neither was Pushkin. Nor Goethe. Certainly not Gorky. [The Yiddish poets Morris] Winchevsky [1856—1932], [Morris] Rosenfeld [1862—1923], [Joseph] Bovshover [1873—1915], [Dovid] Eydlshat [1866—1892], and M[oyshe] L[eyb] Halperin [1886—1932] did not fear the drum. [...]

*Dayn vort — a milb mit fantastishn foyst,
Mont freyd — a flokn di groys...*

*Your word — a gnatmite with a fantastic fist,
Demands joy — big as a stick...*

[p. 393]

What can you say about such an evaluation of revolutionary poetry? I ask you: If such lines would have arrived in our editorial office without the name of our colleague, who would you think they came from? These are the words of an obscurantist, a reactionary who “sings” while frothing at the mouth. [...]

Just one thing. Let Menke be aware, that in the eyes of the readers whom we meet, he has hit only himself. I hope that it will be a cure for him.

(Aaron Kurtz, “A shos vos treft dem shiser” [A Shot that Hits the Shooter] in *Frayhayt*, September 4th 1938)

Menke had his defenders too.

Leo Yurman was an accomplished writer in German who switched to Yiddish after his migration to America in 1923. He had noticed the same “red tails” that Menke was targeting. He objected moreover to the personal tones the debate was taking. His contribution to the debate was titled “An attack, not a discussion!”

[...] Notwithstanding his great talent, almost as if to spite the fact that he is a great poet, when he has to express himself about some practical issue in simple language, he is as helpless as a child!

Okay, and now about the “red tails.” Isn’t it a fact that our proletarian literature has suffered from deluded endings? Shall I count you out some dozens of poems and stories that end inorganically?

There was a time when people in our crowd would write something like: “And he heard (from a block away, of course), the “International” and the next day the worker (who never heard about us!) joined in the marches” . . .

And what about the poems that end with a strike, when such an event, according to the content of the poem or story is quite impossible? [...]

So what’s this great outcry about Counter-Revolution!? [...] *For God’s sake, it’s Menke!*

I am reminded of a poem by one of our best poets. He laments the suffering he must endure in the shop. The boss persecutes him and the machine, to make matters worse, is no good and the thread keeps tearing. So how does he finish off his poem? A strike! I argued with him, and explained to him that strikes aren’t called over such things.

And you in your great rush, jump up on a horse called *tendencies* and Giddy-up! Let him have it over the head! Menke would have to be a menace, some kind of real counter-revolutionary, to mean what you ascribe to him.

What did he mean by it? The end of the same sentence, “a deeply moving symphony” makes clear that the reference is not to *political* tendencies, but to those streams which individualize every writer! [...] You don’t mean — or do you? — that Menke should be excommunicated for *that*?

It is correct to say that [the question of] our proletarian literature in America has been neglected, and the time has come to take stock. But it is not Menke who neglected proletarian literature! We won’t do our literature any favors by excommunicating him, or inscribing in the attic that this one or that one expressed himself inappropriately! In the first instance, the tone of personal attack must be excised from our deliberations. We can explain things to one another in a friendly tone and learn from each other.

And let us for that matter not forget: With all his faults Menke is

without a doubt one of us, and moreover — one of the *very best* poets we have, who are with us, and who developed among us.”

(L. Yurman, “An onfal, nisht kin diskusye! Tsu der diskusye vegn proletarisher literatur. A brivl tsu Martin Birnboym” [An Attack, not a Discussion! On the Discussion about Proletarian Literature. A letter to Martin Birnbaum] in *Frayhayt*, September 11th 1938)

Menke’s principal defender, who was to become a close friend too, was associate *Frayhayt* editor William Abrams (1894—1969).

The comrade-poets have written that Menke Katz is a red-baiter, an obscurantist, a reactionary, just about a Fascist. This is the Menke Katz who just published his two-volume epic, *Burning Village*, the best poetic work of the last ten years in our proletarian literature. Let us look at a few lines from the book.

*Mayn oreme litvishe erd —
Mit lider fun betler, tsigayner un feygl,
Iz nit mit korn, nit mit bulbes farzeyt.*

*Mayn oreme litvishe erd —
Iz geminet mit pekh un mit shvebl.*

*My poor Lithuanian earth —
With songs of beggars, Gypsies and birds.
Sown not with rye, not potatoes.
My poor Lithuanian earth —
Shimmering with pitch and sulfur.*

[compounded from pp. 245 and 249]

Is *this* a relapse into the mouse hole? That was the claim made by the “friendly criticism” against Menke Katz, both at the Proletpen meeting, and in these katzenjammer articles. [...]

The simple truth of the matter is that Menke Katz is no Apostle of Sadness and Darkness, as they are trying to make out that he is. He

loves people! Menke Katz loves people and the life of people. What he is trying to say in his poem and his letter to the editor is that it saddens him when some of our poets — not *all* poets as they are trying to have it, and not all proletarian literature — do not see people's lives; that their reaction to people's struggle is superficial; that this superficial and often trivial rhyme-making is often raised by our superficial criticism to the art of a Heine. Hand on your heart, Chaver Kurtz: Is Menke Katz so completely wrong about this? [...]

And why all the hollering about the expression “happy red tails”? Are these endings not really there in our poems? I am prepared to take Chaver Birnboym and Chaver Kurtz and to show them in one half hour that the number of “happy red tails” comes to a consequential sum in our poetry (and often in prose, too). The “happy red tails” are only half a problem when they just drag along. It's a lot worse when these tails become the *anchor* from which the whole darned literature is dangled.

And since when is it a crime to demand genuine art? Since when is it bad to demand honesty? [...] May we not truly say that red tails of artificially concocted and bogus poetry are *false* red tails?

What nonsense! It's a case of hiding behind a phrase. And there are certain reasons why some want to hide behind such a phrase. It's leftist *kvitsh* [...].

Let's see. One of the main points in the attacks on Menke Katz's *Burning Village* at the Proletpen meeting went along the lines of: “Why, O Menke Katz, didn't you tell us about the revolution in your shtetl?” This is the theory, I beg your pardon, of creating Communists and revolutions in your literature one-two-three! [...] If there *was no* revolution in the shtetl, if he did not see it, and did not set it as his goal, if it hadn't yet happened, then what, ah? Then along comes the leftist *kvitsh* and screams: “Revolution in any and all circumstances!”

Let me try to make this clear with an example. Out in Jersey City, for example, they have a Fascist mayor. Every revolutionary wants to get rid of him. But what would you think if I proposed that the Communist party should organize an army and send it down to Jersey City to unseat Mayor Hague? You would say, without a doubt, either that I lost my marbles, or that I am a leftist *kvitsher*. Or, that I am a

Trotskyist and that one A. Glantz [A. Glantz-Leyeles, 1889—1966] of *Inzikh* [the Introspectivists] is some kind of relation of mine. [...]

(William Abrams, “Menke Katz un di polemik vegn proletarisher literatur” [Menke Katz and the Polemic Concerning Proletarian Literature] in *Frayhayt*, September 18th 1938)

One of the more personal points made by Abrams has been emphasized by others who remember the era. Menke was known back then, just as in his later years, for nearly always being ebullient, something near euphoric with the joy of writing poetry, and with a love for good times with friends over coffee and *l'chaims* (drinks and toasts). Throughout his life he sought to divide each day between working hours in isolation, and socializing hours with friends and family. His hobby, as noted previously, was to sing Yiddish folk songs and accompany them on the mandolin. For Menke, sadness or even horrors in his poetry were not the slightest contradiction to a happy and fulfilled daily life.

On another note, these remarks by *Frayhayt* associate editor William Abrams remind us yet again that all these writers were “revolutionaries” in some ethereal abstract sense, not in practice. Their lives were as far as could be from armed insurrection or overthrow of a government! Nothing could be further from the happy go lucky leftist Yiddish café life of the writers on the Lower East Side. Again, one has only to compare the pages of the *Frayhayt* with any contemporary Soviet Yiddish newspaper to see the glaring difference. Nobody would believe that these two societies were long-distance blood brothers at some level of political theory. The *Frayhayt* had big, attractive ads for everything from banks to insurance companies to Yiddish books steeped in the old religious traditions. It ran articles about new movies with big pictures of the attractive actresses. No one was sent to a gulag or put in the position of betraying other writers to any secret police. They were a fringe group in the midst of free America, and at the end of the day, they were as loyal as any other citizens. Moreover, those who lived long enough came without exception to rue being deceived by misinformation about events in the Soviet Union; but that is another story.



Olgin assumed the mantle of moderator in a substantive debate (notwithstanding the personalized polemic it assumed in form). In his last years he himself perceived the degree to which the need to “serve the cause” was wrecking Yiddish literature in the circles in his sphere of influence, and this in a period when *Linke* stars were “in the habit” of defecting to the *Rékhte*. Olgin was concerned that the left’s literary status would plummet if non-party-line literature could not flourish in the leftist environment. He was frankly happy that Menke started this debate.

We printed the poems and the “letter” because we believe that the time has come to air in public the question of proletarian literature in our times, in contrast to proletarian literature in the initial period of proletarian creativity in America. We hope the issue will be looked at from all sides.

[M. Olgin], “Fun der redaktsye” [From the editors] in
Frayhayt, August 21st 1938)

In a piece called “A discussion that should bring more light” Olgin again entered the fray.

In the last few weeks, a discussion about proletarian literature has flared up on the pages of the *Frayhayt*. It was started by Chaver Menke Katz, one of the most prominent and talented poets on the leftist front. Chaver Katz tried to answer the critics who spoke out against him. [...] Chaver Katz came out with a serious indictment, that proletarian poets are not forthright when they write the way they write. He didn’t even try to set out a demarcation line between the proletarian poets in America and the proletarian poets in the Soviet Union.

The proletarian writers of America reacted with replies. We have published some [...] and we have received [others]. We are waiting for more! [...]

(M. Olgin, “A diskusye, vos darf arayntrogn mer likht”
[A discussion that should bring more light] in *Frayhayt*,
September 3rd 1938)

A curious side show was added when one F. Teper, describing himself as a “simple reader” wrote in with a four-column mini-dissertation on the necessary “red tails” of each period of world literature, asking whether Menke thinks that the red-tailed writers would suddenly become masters if they dropped their ruby appendages? After many ins-and-outs, he concluded:

I believe, however, that the *Morgn Frayhayt* is giving too much space to this question at a time when daily events are so critical. I am convinced that only a small number of colleagues take the time and trouble to read the polemics that have developed.

The question needs to be dealt with in the literary publications or at literary evenings, but not in the *Morgn Frayhayt* which must give an answer regarding the burning questions of the day.

With friendship,
F. Teper

(“A leyener hot dos vort. Tsu der diskusye vegn Menke Katz’s onfal af di proletarishe dikhter” [A Reader Takes the Floor. On the discussion about Menke Katz’s attack on the proletarian poets] in *Frayhayt*, October 2nd 1938)

The editor’s retort (printed at the end of Teper’s long piece) was “classic Olgin.”

After he assumes for himself the privilege of saying everything he wants, it is not ethical on his part to declare that it’s a waste of time or space to speak further about the question, and to propose calling a halt to the discussion. The fact that you, Chaver Teper, took the trouble to react to the discussion (though on other questions you very rarely react in the *Morgn Frayhayt*), goes to show that the question has to be thrashed out publicly, not only among a “select elite.”

(M. Olgin, “Fun der redaktsye” [From the Editor] in *Frayhayt*, October 2nd 1938)

When he was through playing umpire, Olgin weighed in with an essay of his own. Here are some excerpts.

A discussion concerning a question that inspires differences of opinion is a good thing. A discussion about a question, which is still so unclear for so many activists, notwithstanding the experience of some fifteen years — as is the case with the proletarian literature in our circles — is a necessary thing.

Chaver Menke Katz came out with a grand *J'accuse!* and he was wrong from A to Z.

But Katz cannot be accused of any bad intentions. None of the participants in the discussion can be accused of going over the edge. The matter has to be taken objectively and one must try to pry out of it the necessary conclusions.

Menke Katz expressed many things in a “poetic,” and therefore not a “precise” form, things that continue to be irksome to our proletarian poets and short story writers, and which would sooner or later burst out into the open in our press in order that more light should be brought to bear on the question.

Some fifteen years ago, work began in our circles of creating a proletarian literature, in other words, works in Yiddish with an ideology of class orientation. The idea was so new and the forces so few that almost everyone was accepted as an honored guest. Whoever helped with his pen to condemn capitalism and praise and support the revolutionary proletariat, social revolution, the Communist party and the Soviet system was crowned as a major writer! Nobody was very bothered about whether the person has any talent for writing. It was the right way to go in that time.

But a hefty chunk of time has elapsed. The cultural level of the “proletarians” and their supporters has matured and with that comes the critical demand for quality. Not everyone who was a significant player in winning our first battles was capable of satisfying the needs of the new period. The readership began to demand better literature, literature with a wider scope. The demand for literature of a higher caliber means that a certain number from the earlier period will have to fall by the wayside. This doesn't mean that they will fall out of cultural work, it means that their career as creators of artistic literature is over.

And then, along came a second crisis. Circumstances arose causing proletarian literature a need to compete with its non-proletarian counterpart in a *broad arena*, to assert itself and maintain its position, and even acquire new ones, on the basis of artistic strength alone.

Not only that. In our own auditoriums, we began to see both kinds of writers [proletarian and non-proletarian]. Our own publishing houses began to publish the works of the great non-proletarian writers. It was now demanded of proletarian literature that it should be able to compete successfully with non-proletarian writers — and win the upper hand not only among the leftist workers and toilers, but among others as well.

This was a healthy development and a step forward. But it took away from the proletarian writers the protection of isolationism. It robbed them of “exclusive rights” to a certain audience.

Menke Katz is a writer with colossal talent, but one who has accepted proletarian ideology without real diligence and without being internally convinced. The weaknesses of *Burning Village* which the critics pointed out are a result of the simple fact that Menke Katz’s proletarian ideology is not strong enough. So Menke Katz got angry and came out with a protest against all of proletarian literature.

It is therefore necessary to ponder the question. Where do we stand regarding Menke Katz and all the painful issues that have been raised in the discussion, in order that we may find a key to the entire situation?

We come to that next week.

(M. Olgin, “A por verter vegn undzer proletarisher literatur”
[A few words about our proletarian literature] in
Frayhayt, October 23rd 1938)

It certainly speaks well of the *Frayhayt* that it *did* succeed in interesting tens of thousands of uneducated immigrant readers in serious literature and serious literary questions and debates. This was a New York culture where a promise that the *redáktor* (editor) would give his opinion on such matters in a week’s time left multitudes with a feeling of suspense.

But if, in this instance, their suspense was geared to the “question on the street” (“Whose side will Olgin take next Sunday?”) they were disappointed. His sequel, duly published one week later was titled “Di proletárishe literatúr un der fólks-front” (“Proletarian Literature and the People’s Front”). It was in fact one of Olgin’s more important pieces, and it went to the heart of the burning issue and stayed away from the personalities. Olgin naturally argues for the absolute necessity of proletarian literature, literature defined as being absolutely free in form and content with the one caveat of belief in the class struggle model of all human society and sympathy with the downtrodden and oppressed. Beyond that, Olgin admits that on its own this literature is useless; it must be one component of the “progressive” literature of the day, even if this is painful for second and third rate talents who used to revel in being hotshots in their own cut-off *Linke* corner and now find themselves diminished within the wider spectrum of Yiddish literature (which had developed so prolifically in interbellum New York). Proletarian literature, Olgin now contended, was important only as one component of that wider progressive literature and it was a healthy change that it was coming to be tested by means other than the party-line test. Olgin ended his mostly sober essay in near “secularist messianic” tones:

So why is proletarian literature necessary at all? In order for the entire cultural movement to become stronger! In order for the entire cultural movement to move all the more rapidly in the direction of redemption and liberation.

One of the grand personal curiosities of the essay is that the only name mentioned is not of Menke, nor of his adversaries, but of his wife, short story writer Chaske Blacker (their divorce was at the time in progress).

Among the letters that arrived in our editorial offices in connection with the present discussion, I found precious lines in an essay by Chaverte Chaske Blacher. “Proletarian literature strives to be free,” writes Chaverte Blacher. “It must,” she continues, “last for generations. (...) Art means — getting to the bottom of truth. Art doesn’t have time for bunglers. Art binds in perpetuity the past with the present and the present with the future. A poet’s individual word should be identifiable even in the dark. Third and fifth raters have no place in our literature. (...) Proletarian literature must not become isolated from all uplifting elements, leaving it emaciated to struggle

with its own anemia. The workers are ready to grasp, with all their senses, all the sounds of the earth. (...) The workers want to hear about sadness as well as happiness.”

(Chaske Blacker cited by M. Olgin in his “Di proletarishe literatur un der folks-front” [Proletarian Literature and the People’s Front] in *Frayhayt*, October 30th 1938)

And so, with quotations by Olgin from a now-lost essay by Chaske Blacker — in effect “deciphering” Menke’s *Brave Coward* into its harsh real-life consequence in an environment that was brimming with political hacks — the literary debate Menke had ignited on August 14th 1938 came to an end, on October 30th of the same year. Menke’s *Brave Coward* defended the poet’s right to deal in sadness and in the past; condemned the pressure on poets to pursue make-believe happiness, political correctness, and “red tails” and it included a manifesto for the freedom of poetry from politics, even the most important and correct political stands.

If one line was to become immortal in the *Brave Coward*, it is:

I will not lead my poem into battle

[pp. 393, 438]

In between the lines of the debate (and ultimately within the lines) there lay a more delicate question, one which Olgin used his authority to tackle head on. The *Brave Coward* signaled the death knell of the *notion* (certainly not the reality), that anyone “with the right politics” can be a writer just because he or she can cough up the usual “red stuff,” a proposition Menke blew up precisely when its proponents were rounding on him for not “writing in red.” A follow-up came a month after Olgin’s “closing statement” when the famous Yiddish writer (and humorist) Moyshe Nadir (1885—1943, like many other giants of Yiddish literature, then a *Frayhayt* writer), published his “Yeder, vos halt a pen in hant...” (“Whosoever holds a pen in his hand,” *Frayhayt*, November 27th 1938). This started the next phase of the debate.

The interwar golden era of Proletpen (and the New York *Linke*) was coming to an end. Those final debates launched by Menke Katz and



In the eye of a storm: Menke in 1939, when his grandmother Mona came to his dreams to answer the Communists



Yiddish author and editor William Abrams (1894-1969) lost his job for writing the preface to Menke's *Grandmother Mona* in 1939

Moyshe Nadir went right to the heart of the founding principles. The dynamic that had worked so brilliantly in turning young immigrants into original writers of the left, who then helped build a splendid Yiddish literature in America, was suddenly in disarray. Yiddish literature had developed in America to the point where a “proletarian,” just like any other kind of writer, had to be *good*, and had to compete in the open marketplace of a freely available literature. The defections to the *Rékhte* of some major writers, the united front against Fascism, and a few years down the road, the writers’ knowledge that the traditional world of the old Judaism (of their childhood), that they had so rebelled against, seemed forever wiped out by the Holocaust — all these factors combined to precipitate a precipitous fall from the interwar heyday of Proletpen. But that is not to say that the Yiddish literature of the *Linke* went under. The *Frayhayt* appeared until September 1988, and *Yidishe kultúr*, the traditional journal of the *Linke*, edited by the redoubtable Itche Goldberg, outlived all its rivals in America as a magazine capable of producing original and serious writing in Yiddish. It has, incidentally, been pro-Israel and anti-Soviet for many decades.

Looking back to the early 1930s, it must also be acknowledged that more than any other Yiddish newspaper, the *Frayhayt* gave front page coverage to individual Nazi atrocities, warning of the *real* danger of the Holocaust that was to come upon the Jews, Communist or non-Communist. It dared to print the worst about Germany long before it became fashionable to do so anywhere else, and it continued throughout the decade. This American brand of leftist Yiddishism was never complicit in any human-rights violations (which cannot be said of those paid Soviet Yiddish hacks who collaborated with the regime to arrest, purge, deport and murder writers who came for whatever reason to be regarded as “enemies of the state” and who went on to deny the truth to the non-Soviet world for the sake of the USSR’s reputation). And, it is important to add, the *Frayhayt*’s storming against fascism did not distinguish proletarian from non-proletarian victims (that level of discourse was kept for debates on literature and theory). The issue with Nadir’s attack on talentless hacks, on its literary pages, carried the front page headline “Nazis expropriate small Jewish businessmen in Germany” (November 27th 1938). These were the same bourgeois merchants who would have been condemned in a theoretical exposition of orthodox Marxism.

One of the many ironies for the current student of Yiddish literature derives from the latter-day status of the poets Menke is compared with in the course of polemic warfare. One likens him to Leivick, another to Aaron Glants-Leyeles, comparisons that would flatter any Yiddish poet. That kind of twist is described in Jewish folklore by reference to the curse-that-came-out-a-blessing of Balaam (Numbers 22-24).



The rebellion against political meddling in literature — even politics which the writer may happen to believe in for bringing about a better world — had been played out earlier in other circles of twentieth century Yiddish literature that decried Yiddish verse that was in fact “the rhyme department of the labor movement.” The groups best known for such literary rebelling were the *Yunge* (“Youngsters”) in 1908, and the *Inzikhístn* (“Introspectivists”) in 1920, both in New York. They rejected the idea of a Yiddish poetry that would serve the political causes of the day, and they played a major role in building serious Yiddish poetry in America. Menke, by contrast, took his individual “one poet’s protest” to the “holy of holies of the leftist Yiddish movement,” the literary pages of the daily *Frayhayt*.

Menke might have emerged a stronger figure from the debate, with a status enhanced from launching a provocative literary discourse that went to the core of literary creativity among the left. But this time around, Menke never came back into line, as he had done after *Three Sisters*. Instead he took his protest a stage further, in a quintessentially poetic way.

Some thirty years later, when Menke told me about all this, sitting at our favorite table (the *vínkele*, or corner, as he liked to call it) at Bernie’s candy store (luncheonette) on New Utrecht Avenue in the Boro Park section of Brooklyn where I grew up, I asked him, “Well, did you answer back?” He laughed and said “Of course not! But when one of those Communist poets attacked my poems to my grandmother, called her “*di bóbe Toltse*” [“Grandmother Toltsa,” a derogatory term for an old woman analogous to “Aunt Tilly”], my wonderful Grandmother Moyné started coming to me in my dreams each night. She dictated *her* reply. I wrote

down her poems before dawn, and they became my fifth book of poetry, *S'hot dos vort mayn bóbe Moyne* [*Grandmother Mona takes the Floor*; pp. 399—433 in this collection]. Of course I never knew my grandmother. I was named for her. But she was famous in the shtetl Svir for helping poor people. She was particularly well-known for being able to cure a common and deadly chicken ailment called *pipets* which she used to do all the time for poor people.”

Grandmother Mona takes the Floor is written in the voice of the long-gone beloved grandmother, and the book is liberally sprinkled with precisely that kind of homespun oldtime religious Yiddish that was by then a laughing stock for the left. Defiantly, Moyne-speaking-through-Menke embraces that bona fide shtetl Yiddish to lash out at the new-world critics of New York.

*In nobeln tsilinder, in netn frak,
Iz er der shekhter fun veltisher boyne.
Mayne takhrikhim, shoyn azoyfl doyres rayst er
Un mit di risn fun dem heylikn gevant,
Di zun fun mayn folk alts blinder farheyngt er.
A likhtikayt fun dem blyask fun gilotines breyngt er —
Oy, Homon's likhtikayt!
Un s'loykht di hak,
Nit nor iber di martirer-eyniklakh mayne, —
S'loykht oykh di hak,
Iber di shoyn letste glider fun dayn toyter bobé Moyne.*

*In his noble top hat, in his snappy tuxedo,
He is the slaughterer of the secular slaughterhouse.
For so many generations, he tears my shrouds,
And with the tatters of the holy cloth
Like blindness, he closes the sun from my people.
The gleam that he brings is the gleam of guillotines —
O Haman's light!
And the axe shines
Over my martyred grandchildren,
And the axe shines
Over the last limbs of your dead Grandmother Mona.*

[p. 413]

The middle section of the volume contains a polemic reply to the specific *Frayhayt* barbs of Birnbaum, Kurtz, Moyshe Katz and the others. The voice is still Grandmother Mona's but she, all the while from her grave in Svir, laughs back and apes the New Yorkers who so decry her shtetl heritage and her grandson's poems. This section comprises a partially reworked version of the *Brave Coward*. The changes are telling, and merit study (cf. pp. 393—397 with 435—442).

And then comes the farewell, which warns against worship of the electric God of New York.

*A gutn tog, mayn noenter eynikl — mayn vayte freyd:
in dayn tsimerl,
ze ikh fun mayne elter-elter zeydes dos dakhkes lebn,
ze ikh dem elektrishn got fun Nu-york farshemt.*

*Goodbye, my close grandchild — my distant joy:
In your little room,
I see the poor life of my great-grandfathers,
I see the electric God of New York put to shame.*

[p. 450]

And it turns to the plea — this was on the eve of the Holocaust — to cherish the shtetl's heritage.

*A gutn tog, mayn noenter eynikl — mayn vayte freyd:
Nokh mir un mayn shtoltsn yikhes bistu a nomen —
A yikhes fun milner, vald-heker un Viliye-plitn,
A yikhes fun zeydes — giboyrim,
Vos hobn af ferd, vi af blitsn, tsu di basherte geritn —
A yikhes, bam Yizker — mit Shimshenen tsu dermonen.*

*Goodbye now, my close grandchild — my distant joy:
You're named after me and my proud pedigree —
The pedigree of millers, woodcutters, and Viliya raftsmen,
A pedigree of grandfathers, giants,*

*Who rode horses like lightning to their chosen ones —
A pedigree, to be invoked together with Samson on days of memory.*

[p. 450]

The preface to the book, by Menke's stalwart defender William Abrams, is a longish essay. Here are excerpts.

MENKE KATZ FIGHTS FOR HIS POETIC POSITIONS
(preface)

*Mayn shtibl iz orem, mayn shtibl iz groy,
A fingerl zun — a redele umet.
Vi a tsetrotene royz, di groys —
Dreyt arum mir zikh arum.*

*My hut is poor, my hut is gray.
A finger ring of sun — a ringcircle of sadness,
The size of a crushed rose —
Circles around me.*

[p. 406]

Smack in the middle of the vast city of New York, Menke Katz began to yearn for back there, for that tiny hut of his grandmother. He has carried the whole lovingness of his soul to that hut of his Grandmother Mona, whom a comrade, a poet, insulted so unbecomingly, accusing Menke Katz of singing in his poetry about “Grandmother Toltza’s shrouds,” while comparing her to the “weirdest spider.”

Menke Katz’s heart shuddered. His grandmother Mona was an honest, poor, hard working woman who lived in a gray hut with “a finger ring of sun — a ringcircle of sadness.” She used to “thank and praise the Almighty” that “her heart is not poor, her heart is not gray” [p. 406]. She was a good human being, that Grandmother Mona. She would “heal the belly of every sick chicken” among the poor [p. 415].

She took a lot of time to help people in anguish and poverty. And her name was *Moyne*, though his comrade the poet assigned to her the name *Toltse*.

And so Menke Katz, profoundly insulted by a comrade-poet, proclaimed: Now it is Grandmother Mona who takes the floor! Listen: I will, through the mouth of my grandmother dare yet again to show you my sullied, poor little shtetl: I will again unwind for you the scroll of that truth of my poetry, for which I have been attacked for the pedigree of my grandfathers and grandmothers. If you want to talk about pedigree, says Menke Katz, then let's go and measure. Let's see how upright are those who scream on the city street corners that they are the "Red Apostles" of Yiddish poetry, and what differentiates them and the truth as I, Menke Katz, see it.

You have to admit it. It's as if Menke Katz just ran ahead and seized the opportunity to return to his shtetl, to the gnawing past of his last two volumes of poetry [*Burning Village I and II*]. He threw himself into the theme with the same thirst as before, as if he felt faint from that big New York desert. And it happens frequently, when you read Menke Katz, that New York appears for you as some weird desert. He wants to drink heartily from the wellsprings of his forefathers. He returns to his forefathers because he believes, not without justification, that those who have accepted the metropolis, the great world of America in our revolutionary poetry, who dedicate their poetry to the poor and impoverished, and stand on the ground of the great truths of class struggle, cannot be revolutionary poets if "Grandmother Toltza" is an object of ridicule and mockery. He goes even further: According to him, somebody who smears his grandmother and grandfather with tar and sticks them over with feathers, who sees in them only evil, ridiculousness, cannot have a warm heart for the present and forfeits the future even during his life. Without a warm, human heart, there can be no poetry. Without a warm, human heart you cannot be a fighter for justice, and of course you cannot, Menke Katz concludes, be a poet.

By way of the voice of his Grandmother Mona, he binds together his present life with that poverty against which his Grandmother Mona struggled. Through Menke's pen she says:

*In dayn tsimerl,
Ze ikh fun mayne elter-elter zeydes dos dakhkes-lebn.
Ba dayne khurve-vent, hob ikh derkent,
Fun dem vint — di zelibike noyt-gezangen.*

*In your little room
I see the poor life of my great great grandfathers.
At your ruin walls, I recognized
In the wind the same songs of need.*

[compounded from lines on p. 450]

They [the *Frayhayt* critics], because of certain habits, missed the entirety of Menke Katz. They missed the deep sorrow of a whole generation in the little village during the great World War. It seemed as if they were just “waiting for the chance,” not as writers with dignity and insight, but more often like jealous little boys, to gang up on him. Hiding behind dubious proletarianism and revolutionarism, they ripped whole stripes out of his wholeness, his descriptions, his new power, his broader and deeper scope.

A person without ulterior motives, who reads literature either for its beauty or to learn something about the world and its people, sees in Menke Katz’s *Burning Village* a poet whose unique talent has poetically surpassed by far the boundaries to which proletarian literature had become accustomed. Although traditionally Jewish, his song is of universal scope. His portrayals are unique, his images realistically fantastic (if such a synthesis is possible), the verse crisp and vexing, his word wistful for distant goals still unreached. Such a poet must be respected. The works of such a poet must be analyzed.

But it would appear that certain parties in our proletarian literature have become so rusty wallowing in their own ego, that they want to measure everyone with their own sunken bonnets. Remaining stuck at the point at which they began to write, around the same time as Menke Katz, they were unable, and perhaps didn’t want to see, that Menke Katz got way ahead of them, that his talent developed and strengthened. For them, he was the same Menke Katz who over a decade ago began to publish poems just as they did, in proletarian literary journals. This sort of things happens quite often to people

who can't get used to it, when someone from their grade back at school, who seemed to be a bit of a *shlimazl*, suddenly towers above them. They resent this kind of thing, and not finding it sufficient to consider him their equal, with a friendly slap on the shoulder, they seek to demean him with scorn and ridicule.

There are poets among us who can write a poem of sorts, but when you read such die-cast lines as

*The horrific, dark word pogrom
that bores through the Jewish ear*

you begin to get the feeling that instead of attacking Menke Katz, they would be better off boring through the blister of artificiality and tortured forcedness in *proletarian* literature. Because it is just that helplessness, that empty shouting and banality, that throws itself so mercilessly on a true poet when he dares to mention, as Menke Katz did, the danger of false, tacked-on “red tails.”

This new book by Menke Katz, *Grandmother Mona takes the Floor*, tries to provide an answer to a number of questions in our poetry, principally on the issue of “red tails.” It is a polemic book. But Menke Katz doesn't come out with some dry and pompous polemic, but rather, a lively, human description of forms and occurrences, such



Title page of *Grandmother Mona Takes the Floor* (New York, 1939)

as lived in his mind, like his grandmother Mona, and such as he conjured up for polemic reasons, like “the little giant Mabir-Kurmoik” [p. 428]. Through these forms, he brings to the forefront his philosophies and thoughts about life and people. And if you will push into the background the polemics in the book, which were Menke Katz's main objective, the underlying wonder-tale remains and the wonderful pictures and images will stand, and there is the warmth of hot-flowing blood, in the course of settling scores with his attackers, which is a very human characteristic. But after all that, there remains a poetic work in and of itself, apart from all the polemics. And therein lies the touchstone of a true poet, something that

only unprincipled cynics can dismiss lightly, throwing about words which they picked up over in the petty-bourgeois marketplaces.

With his phenomenal vision, Menke Katz sees that his grandmother's extinguished suns can no longer be found by the trampled yesterday [cf. p. 451]. Still,

*In mayn beyn, in mayn blut — — —
iz dayn farloshener tog
ersht ufgegangen.*

*But in my bones, in my blood,
Your long set day
Now arises.*

[p. 451]

The bygone day has just arisen anew. He has just begun to see the great, wonderful light of human life, as wonderful as Menke Katz is himself. The day gone down, of his Grandmother Mona back there in Michaleshik and Svintsyman, and all our villages in the Old Country, left him with a legacy until this very day. The legacy?

*Verter: iber turems, krume geselakh shtern.
Verter vos hilkh fun shrayendikn shtol,
Mit basheydenem roysh fun amol.
Verter — tsorndike skvern,
Farlibt vi Mikhaleshik, hungerik vi Svintsyman.
Verter — dervorgene af tliet, verter — toytn-blumen,
Dertseyln vifl klang in der shtumkayt iz faran,
Mit vifl zun, di shvarts kayt iz durkhgenumen.*

*Words — stars over city towers and crooked alleys,
Words echoing off screaming steel
With the modest sound of the past,
Words — raging squares
In love like Michaleshik and as hungry as Svintsyman,
Words choked on gallows, words — death flowers,
Tell how much sound there is in silence,
Tell how much blackness is drenched in sun.*

[p. 448]

Only a poet whose heart sings the love of the world and of people can sing this song; a poet who feels that no attack will divert him from his poetic path.

Menke Katz should remember that the attacks will not hurt him. Let those who doubt their own talent go on hurling their envy and their bile to preserve their egos. Someone like Menke Katz doesn't have to resort to such methods. The best sign of his greatness and importance for his class and his people will be to ignore the attacks, when he will learn to laugh high and resoundingly at those "great thinkers" and he will go with his path, which must lead him to become the great revolutionary poet of our times.

WILLIAM ABRAMS

In the age old tradition of putting out a book by assembling *prenumerántn* (pre-publication orders), William Abrams in effect became the publisher of the book, by printing numbered purchase slips, offering the soon-to-appear book at 75¢. The mechanics were managed by his wife Sylvia Abrams, a high-flying business executive.

Menke's *Grandmother Mona Takes the Floor*, preface by William Abrams (New York 1939) had a major effect on both writers. When Moyshe Olgin died on November 22nd 1939, his replacement as *Frayhayt* editor, P. Novick, proceeded as one of his first orders of business to fire Abrams for the preface. Abrams, who died in 1969, never got another job in the world of Yiddish. His major novel remains in manuscript to this day. To the end of his days, Menke felt guilty about the sacrifice his loyal friend had made for him by writing the preface to *Grandmother Mona*.

As for Menke, his time as a major poet among the *Linke* was over for good after *Grandmother Mona*, though he continued writing, and his livelihood had shifted from watchmaking to working as a Yiddish teacher in the schools of the leftist movement.

Among the *Rékhte*, the literary fracas gave rise to a certain puzzlement, and sometimes, merriment. Isaac Bashevis Singer (then known as Isaac

Bashevis), reviewed the book, which he didn't particularly like, in the major literary journal of the *Rékhte*, the *Tsukunfi* ("Future").

It is clear from the introduction that Menke Katz broke away from his erstwhile colleagues, or should I say comrades, who begrudged him rising above them poetically, and therefore penned their "friendly criticism" and let him have it. Menke Katz went into wrath, and wrote a poem, *The Brave Coward*, where he poked fun at his opponents. He added a letter that was printed in the *Morgn Frayhayt*. The end of the story was that Menke Katz was attacked even more. He was accused of being "nearly a Fascist" and his book *Burning Village* referred to as "Mouse Hole Relapse." The present book, *Grandmother Mona takes the Floor*, is a polemic, a spirited reply to the attacks.

After reading the introduction, and reading Menke Katz's poems carefully, word by word, you slowly begin to comprehend that Menke Katz got tired of the "Proletpenny" critics, of those monitors of the Revolution, and that he does not want under any circumstances to break with his past, with his grandmother Mona, to whom he gives the floor in this book. All this is fine and well, but why dress up a "spider in shrouds?" Why resort to a "nightmarish spider," "blood of a jackal," "an inkwell full of wretches," "a Denmark spider," "carcass of the summer," and other such expressions that mean nothing? [...]

(Y. Bashevis, "Menke Katz, *S'hot dos vort mayn bóbe Moyne*" in *Tsukunfi*, vol. 45, no. 3, March 1940, p. 178)

Bashevis Singer enumerated the phrases which Grandmother Mona up in Heaven hurled back at their progenitors. Naturally, those specific epithets from the *Frayhayt* attacks strike the reader as a bit weird, if he or she is not familiar with the individual attacks (and people in the *Rékhte* environment were not).

L. Zhitnitsky (1894—1967) in Buenos Aires reacted differently.

This is how poet Menke Katz sings in reply to the criticism and accusations of yearning for old times, for carrying himself away in image and imagination to his Michaleshik, transforming it verily to a wonder tale, full of provocative imagery, poetically unique in form

and remarkably original in style. Furthermore, it is permeated with deep humanity and hot-blooded revolt. It is a definite achievement, a poetic ascent. The poet may truly be proud of his book which carries the phenomenal name *Grandmother Mona Takes the Floor*.

(Dr. L. Zhitnitsky, "Der dikhter Menke Katz, zayn bóbe Moyne un dos shtetale Michaleshik" [The Poet Menke Katz, his Grandmother Mona and the Little Village of Michaleshik] in *Di prese*, Buenos Aires, January 17th 1940)

As *Grandmother Mona Takes the Floor* went through the press in 1939, Menke understood that war in Europe was imminent. Far from becoming one of many topics that would soon seem insignificant, the question of Michaleshik, and *all* the Michaleshiks, would be taking on an ominous new dimension, far beyond the debate about poetry. He arranged for a frontispiece, drawn by his brother Yeiske's future wife Eva Getzoff, that would carry the ominous message of war in Europe (see page xcvi). It was a drawing of Michaleshik shaped as a tombstone engulfed in flames, in the clutches of the monster Fascism, with these lines from Grandmother Mona's vision, which suddenly became tragically portentous.

*Oy Mikhaleshik,
Ikh hob dikh gezen
In shturem —
A voyendikn dorn.*

*Hark, Michaleshik,
I saw you
In the storm —
A howling thorn.*

[cf. p. 449]

In *Grandmother Mona* (or via her voice in his dreams), Menke's poetry began to muse about some of the ideas about life that crystallized over the decades to become hallmarks of the later Menke. His often expressed disdain for people who claim to be perfect, and avoid even the smallest misdemeanor, made its appearance here, along with the notion

that certain “goody-goodies” are viewed far more severely in Heaven than certain “sinners.” This is a poet who takes Heaven and Hell (rather than socialist realism of the day) darned seriously, and the notion that defying the political dictates of the day is “the New Sin” is somehow an ultimate irony for him.

*Her, der shturem dertseylt:
 faranen mitsves vos zindikn afile in ganeydn,
 durkh zey di sheynkayt, vi afkulyes geyt;
 faran aveyres vos zindikn nit afile in gehenem,
 durkh zey, der gehenem — iz di veynendikste fleyt.*

*Hear what the storm tells:
 There are good deeds that sin even in Heaven.
 Because of them, beauty hobbles on crutches.
 There are transgressions that do not sin even in Hell —
 Because of them, Hell is the flute that wails the most.*

[p. 408]



Why didn't Menke just pick himself up and take the proverbial walk from 35 East 12th Street (the old *Frayhayt* address) to 175 East Broadway (the *Forverts*), and have it over and done with? This was a painful question for him in later years, but his answer was, I believe, straightforward, precisely because it was not couched in any kind of heroics. The *Linke* had provided him with a magnificent environment of writers, friends and literary inspiration; they had published his poems and his books, they had given him a Yiddish teacher's education and made him into a teacher in their Yiddish schools. They had given him a life in America. “You don't want to spit in the well you drank from all those years,” he would say, underlining the feelings of deep betrayal which virtually all his personal friends would feel about someone who “crossed over” to the *Forverts*. To move in either direction (and nearly all the moving to be sure, was from the *Linke* to the *Rékhte*) was considered to be abject treachery.

Menke continued writing and started devoting ever more of his energies to teaching children Yiddish in the Yiddish school system (where

he was enthusiastically welcomed despite the virtual embargo on his poetry in the upper echelons of the *Linke*). What he managed to complete of *Burning Village III* went into *To Tell it in Happiness* (published in 1941). In this English collection, *Burning Village III* is appended to the first two volumes (which appeared in 1938). One regret he expressed in later years was that the final poem, about him and Chaske, is recast as being about his brother and a girlfriend (pp. 387—392).

The rest of *To Tell it in Happiness*, largely comprising press poems expressing relief at the occupation of (then) Eastern Poland by the Soviets (rather than by the Nazis who occupied the western sector) do not appear in this volume. Many would require special historical introductions explaining the daily events being reacted to.

In 1944, Menke, together with William Abrams and Yankev Stodolsky (1890—1962) founded their own literary journal, called *Mir* (Yiddish for “We”; for this generation there was also a lingering allusion to the Russian *mir* which means “peace” as well as “world”). Although it lasted for just three issues (February, April, and June 1944), the journal, which appeared in large two-column format, succeeded in producing a compendium of literature on traditionalist motifs, as if to say: “To hell with the damned revolution.” To start with, the founding editorial is full of praise for America, to which the term “revolution” is applied (rather, than as usual in those days, the Russian revolution and its tentacles).

Therefore the blessing of every Jew goes out to the sons of America, who do battle in the skies, on the seas and on land against the same enemy [...]; every Jew knows that here in this land which was born in one of the greatest revolutions of human history, Jews have found for themselves a tranquil home and have built up a great and diverse Jewish life. Every Jew knows that the grand traditions of freedom of our country go with the warriors on the battlefields and that these sons of America will not allow the rule of Nazism to reach our shores.

The Jewish population in the United States has created a rich and diverse Yiddish literature which can favorably compare with the most beautiful literary periods in the Jewish life of any country. There were times when the lines in Yiddish literature were drawn with stark

sharpness — now the sharpness is dulled down. But a new danger has emerged. It seems that our literature in America is becoming sedated and settled. It rests on once-upon-a-time laurels, it boasts of earlier works and is neglectful of its own current creativity. A stimulus seems to be missing, that word of provocation for the creator of artistic values. [...]

We appear with our word and our promise. We hope that through our work, we will be able to do away with at least some of the bitterness that continues to be rife in our Yiddish life. At the same time, we hope that the Yiddish world will recognize in us one of their own, a colleague in the struggle for our oppressed people, and will receive us as such.

(“*Mir kumt af der velt*” [“*Mir comes into the world*”],
opening editorial in no. 1, February 1944, p. 4)

In the midst of days when firm news of the full (but still inconceivable) extent of the catastrophe in Europe was sinking in, *Mir* succeeded in making a number of major secular writers feel “comfortable again” with an instantaneous return of poetry and prose to the age-old thematics of traditional Judaism and classical texts. The first issue included Menke’s poems on the holiday Chanukah and Yankev Stodolsky’s essay on mysticism. The second published (sensationally for any branch of the secular Yiddish environment, *Linke* or *Rékhte*) Menke’s translation into Yiddish of the Hebrew commentary on the biblical Song of Songs by Rashi (who lived from 1040 to 1105). The third issue featured a front cover poem, *A Chapter of Psalms* left by a doomed girl of the Warsaw Ghetto. It also had poems called *Der Vilner goen* (“The Gaon of Vilna”), and *Kaddish*. There were of course typical secular pieces too; during its brief lifespan, *Mir* demonstrated that the juxtaposition could produce a rich tapestry of variegated writing. Incidentally, during this period Menke, mourning the death of his mother Badonna (at a New Year’s Day party, on January 1st 1943), used the (transparent) pen name *Menke Badanes* (Menke Badonna’s, a traditional matronymic = Menke son of Badonna).



Menke (at far right) with fellow teachers of the Philadelphia Yiddish (supplementary) High School

During the 1940s, Menke's fame was spreading as one of the few Yiddish teachers in New York whose pupils actually learned to *speak* Yiddish, in spite of these schools being supplementary afternoon and Sunday schools. There were no Yiddish day schools in the United States. For a time he taught in Philadelphia too. During this decade and beyond, Menke's Yiddish books were published thanks to the time-honored Yiddishist tradition of *bukh komitét*n ("book committees") which raised the funds to cover the publishing costs. Many of them were chaired by his friend Hersh Steinhart, a furrier and author of a populist Yiddishist tract. Thus he was able to continue publishing his books in the absence of support of any of the movements. His next volume was *Der posheter kholem* (The Simple Dream, New York 1947, pp. 453—542 in this volume).

For the first time, Menke added a preface. In it he addressed not only his own literary "problem," but also the numbness that befell Yiddish literature when the scope of the Holocaust became evident.

This is the first time I write a few words to preface one of my books. I believe it's neither humble nor necessary to add something to a book of poetry. The poems must hold their own without any introductions. Nevertheless, it occurred to me, at the last minute, to allow myself an exception, because during the five years that have elapsed from my previous book until now — my fortieth birthday — such huge catastrophes have come upon the world, such unimaginable slaughters of our people, and such upheavals in my personal life, that I don't know if I will ever write another book.

Therefore I include in this collection things that have perhaps strayed over here as if by chance. Rashi's commentary on *Song of Songs*,

with my annotations from the Talmud and the Bible, which have never been translated into any language except Latin, should have appeared separately, not as a stray limb. The chapter *Zayt gezunt* ["Farewell"] by Leyzer Chait and his letters would certainly not have found their place here [these were written by Menke; the pseudonym was taken from his deceased brother Eltshik; he was to invoke it again in the 1950s — DK]. Nobody is in need of this death. Nor would *Der letster yid* ["The Last Jew"] have been included here, because I believe that prose and poetry should not be mixed in one book, it becomes a sort of *shatnez* [image taken from the religious prohibition against combining wool and linen].

Ever since the appearance of *Tsu dertseyln in freydn* (*To Tell it in Happiness*, N.Y. 1941), I have lived in literary loneliness (unless I count my friendship with the light-giving Jewish children in the classrooms of our Yiddish schools as a literary milieu), without any literary environment, without the stimulus which even a literary quarrel provides, as in the days when the proletarian Yiddish writers' organization Proletpen lived its stormy life. After the death of my dear friend and colleague M. Olgin, I published almost no poems anywhere, and the gnawing loneliness began to sink in. To be able to create in this writer's abyss, in years of tragedy, I had to try to be "stronger than iron," and none of us are, and I really wrote very little. This suffering, how deeply this creative rust eats into the heart and spirit is well known for any writer, but now I have begun to write so extensively, with such energy that I can barely contain the stream of moods that have, I would say, "attacked" my days and nights. The greatest part of this book was written in the last few months.

I hope that the feeling that this is my last book will somehow pass. Certainly I don't want to avoid the happiness of creating — the joy of life. O the joy of writing — striving for all that is true and beautiful, and in between, talks, "traveling" with close friends at a cup of coffee.

With all my heart I thank the committee of teachers and activists, especially my friend Hersh Steinhart, for his untiring labor: my thanks

to everyone who helped enable this book to see the light of day.

“Truly the light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to behold the sun” (Ecclesiastes 11: 7).

The “upheavals in personal life” refer to the suicide of the poet’s beloved Ethel in July 1947. He dedicated poems to her in *The Simple Dream* (e.g. pp. 517— 522), and continued to do so throughout his life. His final English book, *Nearby Eden* (1990) has a chapter “From Ethel’s Diary.”

In *The Simple Dream*, Menke experimented with some forms of brief prose, included an expanded version of his translation of Rashi’s commentary to *Song of Songs*, and a section of children’s poems (in the voice of the Yiddish schoolchildren of New York), some of which had appeared in the children’s journal *Yungvarg*, edited by Itche Goldberg. The English translation in this volume (pp. 453—542) is limited to its “straight poetry” component. The children’s poems and other materials remain for a future project.



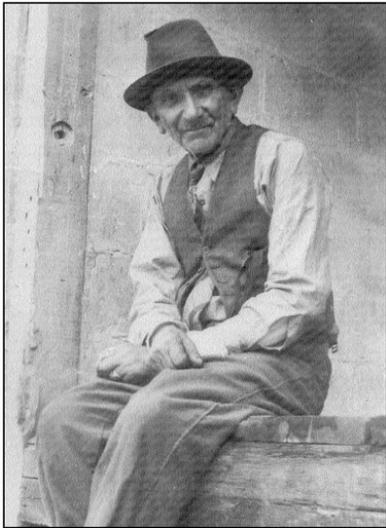
Newlyweds Menke and Rivke

In the early 1950s two personal events, one happy and one sad, along with a major international tragedy in the world of Yiddish culture, were to shape Menke’s future.

At a combined art exhibition, film and dance evening, held in an old brownstone on 8th Street in Greenwich Village on April 30th 1950, Menke met his second wife and partner for the remaining forty-one years of his life. She was artist and art teacher Rivke (in English, Ruth) Feldman. Both came there quite by accident. Rivke had spent the afternoon at Manhattan’s

Museum of Modern Art with a friend who didn't want to return home to a nagging parent, and they found an ad for the Village event in a newspaper. Menke had been spending the day with two old friends, the gregarious Yiddish writer and *Frayhayt* stalwart Printz (by then known as Ber Green), and the unassuming, nearly always-silent Yiddishist savant Aaron Aeroff. These two friends didn't particularly get along with each other, and Menke decided that their "literary evening" in the usual cafeteria would not work. The fellas decided to go out and maybe meet some company. They ventured into the 8th Street dance. Menke and Rivke met, and were married several months later.

Rivke Feldman Katz was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1921, and grew up in its Boro Park section, in a gracious wooden Victorian house with a wraparound porch. She was interested in art from an early age and won a scholarship to Pratt Institute upon graduation from high school. After working as a fashion illustrator she went on to earn her BA in Art Education at Brooklyn College. She taught high school art and then completed a teaching degree. For many years she taught English, and Art, at Public School 160 in Brooklyn. She has exhibited her paintings at dozens of exhibitions, and has won a number of awards.



Hirshe-Dovid Katz
(1871-1951)

On January 20, 1951, Menke's father, Hirshe-Dovid of Svir, died in Passaic, New Jersey. Until the end of his days, he rose before dawn to open that little *Chevra Tehilim* (Psalms Society) synagogue, to give his prayers and thanks to God, with joy and exuberance, before starting the long day. In a recent memoir, Menke's brother Meishke (Edward M. Katz) reminisces about his father's later years.

He woke up every morning at 4 AM to go open the shul [synagogue]. He was the keyholder. At night he would fall asleep in his chair. It was a tough life except for those happy Friday evenings when Menke would come in from the city to be with us for making Shabbos (the festive Friday-night eve-of-Sabbath meal and candle lighting).

Nothing in awesome America had shaken Hirshe-Dovid's faith, and his death came to clinch Menke's complete return, if not to orthodoxy, then to a traditionality and love of tradition and the ancient Jewish heritage. Menke continued to put much of his energy into his teaching, which was, after the European catastrophe, inseparable from the question of the future of Yiddish. In his unpublished 1951 – 1952 diary to his brother Yeiske, he writes:

I have taught these children for three or four years. I have tried to influence the life of every child. Every one of them speaks only Yiddish to me. Maybe half of this small number will fight for Yiddish, wherever life may take them. They will all probably continue on to the *mitsbul* (high school). The best will continue to the highest classes. With such children around me, I am shielded from the wails of "Yiddish is going under." Let us rather take action, let us work with all our spiritual and physical strength, so that Yiddish may live. Let us bring to every child the magic of the old tale, our love, our enthusiasm, let us capture the imagination of the child with the beauty and power of Yiddish. And then Yiddish will live.

(Menke Katz, Yiddish manuscript, diary to his brother Yeiske,
from the entry for June 29th 1951)

At the same time, he was heartbroken at the decline of Yiddish literature in America. This is one of his confessions from the period:

I have to write. Who can be as unhappy as a poet who doesn't write poems? Through such unfruitful days and nights you feel like you are rotting alive. You even miss the sadness of stuffing poems into full drawers of your desk.

For many years I have had no poetic environment. I read my poems to myself.

The Yiddish world is becoming a desert for the Yiddish poem, and, O my God, maybe even for Yiddish words. As ever, I loathe such pessimism, because I always believe that if we will act instead of mourn, then Yiddish will live. But I am frightened by the fact that the enemies of Yiddish in Israel choke our mother tongue, while Yiddish literature in the Soviet Union has been silenced. And here in America, the *Morgn-zhurnal* has folded, and the *Frayhayt* has shrunk, it has become a little midget. Proletarian literature here has become the same as Birobidjan there — nonsense. My God, there is nobody to fight with even! What is left for us to do, except to love even more strongly, fight even more stubbornly for the heartiest language on earth, that has earned itself the most stirring name among languages: *máme-loshn* [“mother tongue”].

(Menke Katz, Yiddish manuscript, diary to his brother Yeiske,
from the entry for June 29th 1951)

On August 12th 1952, twenty-four Jewish intellectuals, including leading Soviet Yiddish writers Dovid Bergelson (born 1884), Itzik Feffer (1900), Dovid Hofshiteyn (1889) and Peretz Markish (1895) were murdered by Stalin’s regime in the cellars of the infamous Lubianka prison in Moscow. When news of the executions reached New York, the *Frayhayt* and the leaders of the Jewish left denied the news vehemently. These rebuffs were accompanied by accusations that the rumors were the stuff of malicious slander by anti-Soviet propagandists. The *Frayhayt* circles revised their view only after Nikita Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin’s excesses at the Twentieth Party Congress in Moscow in February of 1956.

But Menke had been more and more uneasy even as a teacher in the *Ordn* schools of the *Linke*. He had written nothing to make the *Linke* happy in the years following the war. His 1951-1952 diary, written to his brother Yeiske, then in Europe, has a number of references to the absolute spiritual misery of having to take God out of the Jewish holidays to

conform to the *Linke* Yiddish school requirements, and his constant ruses to circumvent and outwit these ideological guidelines.

In 1953, Menke made his first known attempt to publish something in an anti-Soviet Yiddish publication. But instead of defecting to the *Forverts* circles, he published a deeply religious, pro-Israel poem in the traditionalist, pro-Orthodox and pro-Zionist *Tog – Morgn-zhurnal* (*The Day — Jewish Journal*) on November 26th 1953. The poem is steeped in the Bible, love of the Land of Israel, and the eternal spiritual beliefs of the Jewish people. It is called *A nayer Oz-yóshir* (*A New Oz-yóshir*, *Oz-yóshir* being the first two words, and the popular name, of the Song of Moses in Exodus 15). The poem was later included in *Midday* in 1954, and appears in this volume on p. 654.

Menke's *New Song of Moses* is an obviously pro-Israel compact encapsulation of all those cherished beliefs of the Jewish people that were the stuff of Communist ridicule. It starts with the Psalmist oath that his right hand would wither before he forgets Jerusalem (after Psalm 137: 4), and proceeds to cover the age old Jewish wandering, and burnings at the stake of the Inquisition. Jewish history is likened to a "millennium old tree with a saw through its heart" redeemed by a new "spring that eternity cannot bend."

The pseudonym was again Eltshik Chait (Chayet), the name of Menke's eldest brother who had died at the age of seventeen and a half during World War I (Menke liked throughout his life to keep Eltshik's name alive; the surname Chait had been used alongside Katz during the family's final years in Lithuania). The *Tog – Morgn-zhurnal* carried an editor's note: "Eltshik Chait is the name of a young Yiddish poet who perished."

Around the same time, Menke became the main protester against the removal of Yiddish language instruction from the curriculum of some of the left-wing *Ordn* schools. This had been a party decision. It was motivated in part by the sacking of suspected Communist-sympathizing teachers in the public school system during the McCarthy purges, and the need to give them work, whether or not they knew any Yiddish. There had

also been a formality of “disassociating” the schools from the Communist movement and declaring them “independent” in order to protect them from government harassment and closure. For Menke the only issue was Yiddish, and those who insisted on retaining Yiddish became known as the *Meynkistn* (“Menkists”).

The two causes célèbres were intertwined in a long polemic piece in the *Forverts* by Simon Weber (1911—1987), who had himself defected from the *Frayhayt* in 1939, and eventually rose to become the editor of the *Forverts*. He was for many years the chief “red-baiter” at the *Forverts*, publishing almost daily polemic broadsides against the *Linke*. Here are excerpts:

For those readers who may not remember, I would briefly note that the present uproar among the Communists [the disputes over the school system] started with their decision to get rid of the Yiddish language in their schools. A number of teachers who protested were stamped as “Yiddishists and Chauvinists.”

Only one of the teachers, Menke Katz, dared to write a sharp article against the Bull of the *Frayhayt* and the other assimilationists, whom he accused of pushing Yiddish culture downhill. [...] Such an atmosphere of terror was then inflicted upon the other teachers that they are afraid to open their mouths. Individual teachers are called before the petty commissars [...] and they have to undergo inquisitions about any suspicion that they are sending me information. In the meantime, the question of Yiddish has been forgotten, because the teachers are happy at present just to be left alone. Others even wrote articles against the *Forverts* and against me.

The only one who did not surrender is Menke Katz. And, instead of punishing him, they flatter him endlessly. There are notices about him in the *Frayhayt* almost every day. The editor of the *Frayhayt* “himself” went to him to try to get him to write an article or at least a letter to the editor against me. But it didn’t help.

Menke Katz may not know it, but all this flattery does not come

from any suddenly awakened love for him. It results from a decision of the Communist party that he must be kept with every means and at all costs. The reason is quite simple. He is the spokesman for the opponents of the assimilationist line and the disgruntled teachers, who are called “Menkists.” They have grouped themselves around him; he must now be separated from them so that the opposition can be broken. If they succeed they will pay him later for his “sins.” Such things are not forgotten by the Communists.

But they have not succeeded to win over Katz with their flattery. If it isn't enough that he has refused to come out against the *Forverts* and against me, I would like to reveal here for the first time in public more evidence of his national Jewish sentiments.

On Thursday, the 26th of November, a poem called *A náyer Oz-yóshir* appeared in the *Tog* — *Morgn-zhurnal* written by Eltshik Chait. An editor's note says that “Eltshik Chait is the name of a young Yiddish poet who perished tragically.” The first verse reads:

*Un s'iz mayn rekhte hant nit geleymt gevorn,
vayl ikh hob Yerusholayim dikh nit fargesn,
zint ba di taykhn fun Boul zaynen mir gezesn;
nit tsugeklept tsum gumen iz mayn tsung gevorn,
nor glyiyiker di beynkshaf, dor nokh dor.
shobn di oves farbridert undz mit nes,
iz mayn rekhte hant nit geleymt gevorn,
hob ikh, Yerusholayim, dikh nit fargesn.*

*And my right hand did not forget her cunning,
Because I did not forget you, Jerusalem
Since we sat down by the rivers of Babylon.
My tongue did not cleave to the roof of my mouth
But my longing glowed, generation after generation.
Our forefathers made us brother to miracles,
And my right hand did not forget its cunning,
And I did not forget you, Jerusalem.*

[p. 654]

So I went and asked Mr. S. Dingol [1887—1961], editor of the *Tog — Morgn-zhurnal* how he got this poem and what he knows about the poet “Eltshik Chait” because this name has not been heard of in Yiddish literature. The poem is too mature from a literary point of view to be the creation of a beginner. [...]

Mr. Dingol was so kind as to inform me that he received the poem from a “friend of the poet.” My assurance that there is no poet “Eltshik Chait” and that the author of this poem did not “perish tragically” but is alive and publishes his poems was a shock for Mr. Dingol.

The name of the author of the poem *A náyer Oz-yóshir*, dear Mr. Dingol, is Menke Katz.

(Simon Webber [Shimen Veber], “Komunistisher firer git tsu, az di kinder-shuln balangen tsum Ordn” [Communist Leader Admits that the Children’s Schools are part of the I.W.O.] in *Forverts*, Dec. 9th 1953)



Finally, when the *Linke* could produce no evidence that the Soviet Yiddish writers were still alive, Menke barged in to the office of the *Frayhayt*’s editor, P. Novick and banged his fist on the desk (he was later to remark: “It was the only time in my life that I did that”). He demanded an answer. “If it’s not true that the writers were murdered, then where are they?” Novick threw him out.

(Some thirty-five years later, accompanied by one of my graduate students from Oxford, I gently knocked on Novick’s door on my only visit to the *Frayhayt* offices in New York. We had a long talk. He greeted me warmly and I shall never forget his opening line: “Tell me, now, son of Menke Katz, when did you last see a ninety-six year old editor of a newspaper working at his desk every day?” When the more painful question inevitably came up, he confirmed Menke’s account with a wry

smile, gently grabbed my jacket lapel, and said through a corner of his mouth: “Turned out Menke was right after all, ah?”)

The same Alexander Pomerantz who had brought Menke into Yiddish poetry of the *Linke* in the mid 1920s would now, some thirty years later, take him, and many others, away. Together with author and union leader Max Perlow (1902—1993), Pomerantz led a group of writers, teachers and cultural leaders out of the *Frayhayt* circles and into the Workmen’s Circle and *Forverts* circles, which were by then very close to the policies of the Democratic and Liberal parties in New York City. After long and discreet negotiations, the “Dovid Bergelson Branch of the Workmen’s Circle,” named for the slain giant of Soviet Yiddish prose, was formed to accommodate the new *Frayhayt*-to-*Forverts* “converts.”

But for Menke there would be little solace in all this. For one thing, all his intimate friends stayed with the *Frayhayt* circle, and were too afraid to have any more to do with him. Most heartbreaking of all was the immediate estrangement of Printz (Ber Green), after some three decades of close friendship. For another, the McCarthyist period was in full swing, and Menke felt sickened by the persecution by the government of so many of his erstwhile colleagues and friends. As if to rub salt into these wounds, the Yiddish writers who “moved over” were *not* accepted with genuinely open arms by the *Rékhte*. They were all stamped with a Mark of Cain: the specially minted Yiddish curse word *gevézener* (“a former one” = “a former Communist”).

In 1954, Menke and his wife, Rivke, spent two years in Safad, Israel, where Menke’s brother Yeiske had settled with his second wife, Eva. Menke and Rivke returned to New York in 1956 (where and when I was born).

Menke’s eighth book of Yiddish poetry, the first to appear after the “complete break” with the *Linke*, was *Inmitn tog* (*Midday*, New York 1954; pp. 543—628 in this volume). Illustrated by Rivke, it contains poems to his departed father, his new wife, and many more on universalist themes. One of the most famous is his *Fraynt bam tish* (*Friends at the Table*, p. 671), extolling the splendor of friends around a table over travels and cosmos. The Holocaust, New York and the future of Yiddish are prominent topics.

There is one poem that makes oblique reference to his split with the leftist environment. It laments the loss of the friendship of one Ber Green, who is referred to pseudo-cryptically as the “B.G.” to whom the poem is dedicated (p. 622).

Isaac Bashevis Singer, a stalwart of the *Rékhte*, reviewed the book in the *Forverts* under his usual pen name for literary criticism (Isaac Warshavski).

[...] We begin with a poem by Menke Katz, the leftist poet and pedagogue, who has abandoned the Reds. His book *Midday* appeared in 1954 and is adorned with illustrations by Rivke Katz. The poem we print here is called *A tfile* [“A Prayer,” p. 628] and is original in its content.

We can understand these moods when we take into account that Menke Katz had seen all there is to see about the Communists and went through the difficult process of tearing oneself away from one’s environment and colleagues and perhaps also a job. Nevertheless, the book as a whole is highly optimistic. But this one poem reveals the poet’s true mood. It is a feeling and tendency that is as old as life itself: to run away, not to have to look at the falseness, the brutality. The cited poem has that genuine feel of forthrightness.

(Yitskhok Varshavski [= Isaac Bashevis Singer], “Lider fun dray yidishe dikhter” [“Poems of Three Yiddish Poets”] in *Forverts*, 9 December 1956)

When I was growing up in Brooklyn in the 1960s, I often heard with sadness Menke’s tales of his magic circle of eccentric Yiddish poet friends, most of whom shunned him after his final break with the *Linke* in the early 1950s. My little boy’s heart warmed especially to the mystique of a poet called Prince who rode through Lower East Side cafés like a prince from the stories that Menke would tell me every night. Menke explained to me that this original literary name, “A. Printz” had to be changed officially, because the Communists found it too, well, uncommunist, and so he,

whose original name was Itsik Greenberg, became the latter day Ber Green (1901—1989), a major American Yiddish poet, essayist and anthologist.

On the day of my bar-mitzvah, after the speeches about becoming an adult and taking responsibility, I decided that I was going to meet The Prince (as I called him). I began to talk to Menke about it. At first he explained that it isn't possible. But I persisted, and even snuck to another neighborhood in Brooklyn to buy a *Frayhayt* (so as not to cause embarrassment at Bernie's candy store, where everyone knew who the "Communists" were by their purchase of the paper). I opened it up in secret, with trepidation at looking at something forbidden, remembering Menke's story about the boys in Michaleshik sneaking into the studyhouse at night to look at the Kabbalah. And right smack in the middle was the name Ber Green. He was alive and well, and writing substantial essays on literature. Why couldn't we meet him? I finally persuaded Menke to write to him. Menke wrote that his son Hirshe-Dovid wanted to meet the famous Prince from all those stories. By the time the three of us met, in an upper West Side Broadway cafeteria, almost a year had passed.

Menke and I turned up early. A heavyset man stomped in, at first tentatively, then with ever more rapid steps. His teeth were every hue of yellow. He broke the ice with a huge smile and an explanation that it's stupid to brush your teeth, because the toothpaste takes off the enamel and then your teeth fall out. Prince couldn't hide his shock that Menke's New York born son spoke only Yiddish to his father, something very rare even among Yiddish writers (a statement in itself). He turned to kidding about his fabled romantic life and his reputation for having lovers who were "up to the age of twenty-five."

Prince questioned me closely about the yeshiva Hebrew day school I was attending, and we discovered over the next few minutes a mutual love for Ashkenazic (traditional East European) Hebrew. To my amazement, he started speaking it fluently (it sounds very different than the modern Israeli variety, popularly called "Sephardic"). His discourse was embroidered with quotations from the Bible and Talmud as if he were a rabbinic scholar of years gone by, not a Communist. He quickly returned to nowadays

naughtiness with lines like: “Yefeyfyoys nekhmodoys nikhnosoysh lamisodo hazoys, shemo tishalno eyzu sofo doyvrim atem, uveynosayim niftakh sikhoseynu iton.” In a pronunciation and vocabulary that no typical Israeli could understand, it means: “Pretty girls are coming into this restaurant. Perhaps they will ask what language we are speaking and meanwhile we’ll strike up a conversation with them.” So this is what a “Yiddish Communist” looks like! I walked away from the meeting with a realization I’ve carried with me the rest of my own days: the typical leftist Yiddish writer of the generation of major literary figures grew up steeped in the ancient Jewish texts and tradition, with deep knowledge of the Hebrew and Aramaic sources.

There was, however, a grim sadness toward the end. It was clear without being said that this was a one time only event, not a renewal of friendship. He prepared for me a gift, a small black book and went on, as we were making our farewells, to inscribe it in *Hebrew*: “To Hirshe-Dovid son of Menke and Rivke. In friendship, Ber Green. April 1970.” The book was not about Marx or Lenin. It is a Hebrew Bible that I always keep by the desk, as a sort of charm. I never saw “the Prince” again.



From 1959 to 1960, Menke and Rivke spent another year in Safad, Israel (with me, their three year old son). The intention had been to go for much longer, but the massive state and intelligentsia supported campaign to obliterate Yiddish was still in full swing in the new Jewish state. Menke tired of constant arguments over Yiddish, and more specifically, over his “crime” of speaking Yiddish to his son despite his fluency in modern Hebrew. The full scope of the hatred of Yiddish in Israel, and the campaign to destroy the language and its status, literature and culture, has yet to be documented with full openness. The fear of being branded anti-Israel or anti-Zionist continues, even today, in the contemporary Jewish Political Correctness, to hamper full research into the firebombings, beatings, and constant legal harassments that were used to bring down the language of East European Jewry in the new Middle Eastern Jewish state.

My own first memory is of us being stopped by a policeman who claimed it was illegal for someone employed in a government school (where Menke worked as a teacher) to speak Yiddish in public. We were “invited” to the police station. There, to be fair, a stunned chief of police of Safad, a good family acquaintance, opened a bottle of wine and apologized profusely. Still, given the daily rebukes from strangers for the cardinal sin of speaking Yiddish to his son, this incident became a last straw, and that evening my father announced to me: “Hirshe-Dovid, mir forn in Amerike!” (“Hirshe-Dovid, we’re going to America!”).

For Menke, love of Yiddish and love of Israel were no contradiction, even if they made for a major contradiction in daily life then and there. Menke wrote a book of poems to the Land of Israel during his sojourns in Safad (1954—1956 and 1959—1960) which appeared, with revisions, only two decades later, in Tel Aviv. It is called *Tsfas* (*Safad*, Tel Aviv 1979), and appears in this collection on pp. 695—763.

Within the modest Yiddish literary establishment in Israel, Menke received an enthusiastic welcome, and began to publish in Abraham Sutzkever’s *Goldene keyt* and in Yankev-Tsvi Shargel’s *Yisroel-shitime*, both in Tel Aviv, among other publications.

Upon return to New York in the summer of 1960 with his wife and four year old son, he sought, without fanfare, to resume publishing his poetry in New York’s “non-*Linke*” mainstream literary periodicals. But something untoward happened. His poems were consistently ignored or rejected. By that time, the *gevézene* were done for in the environment of New York’s *Rékhte*. The Yiddish Department of the Cold War had stiffened up during his final absence. For him as a writer, it was a new and devastating shock.

Determined to prove the truth, Menke decided on a trick. It didn’t come easily, and it caused him pain for decades to come. His poems had been rejected repeatedly by the great Yiddish poet Yankev Glatshiteyn (Jacob Gladstone, 1896—1971), editor of the *Tsukunft*, then America’s leading literary periodical of the mainstream (in other words, the *Rékhte*). So he went ahead in 1961 and sent Glatshiteyn poems under the name of his mother-in-law, Clara Feldman. He used an address in Plattekill, upstate New York, where he and Rivke had spent a summer. They were old poems taken from previous books.

Watching this circus of the *Rékhte* rushing to publish his own old *Linke* poems, thinking they had discovered the first major American born Yiddish woman poet, did not however give Menke much pleasure. Whatever satisfaction there was at “proving his point” was overwhelmed by a profound sense of sadness at what was becoming of Yiddish literature in America: a club of political victors, who were to unilaterally decide what was worthy of publication based on the unstated criterion of *when* this or that writer left the *Linke*. As noted above, the same criteria were used in establishing the “canon” of American Yiddish literature in English translation. One of the results in the twenty-first century is that *hundreds* of outstanding twentieth century writers of America (many of them women) await discovery by scholars and researchers who will not care which “group” they joined after coming off those boats of immigration.

Without losing sight of that bigger picture, it is nevertheless instructive to note some of the curious detail of the Menke Katz — Yankev Glatshiteyn literary entanglement, one of the most sensational in American Yiddish literature. The first poem by “Clara Feldman” was a telescoped version of the poem *Professor Grau* that had appeared in *Dawning Man* back in 1935 (see pp. 78—83). It was submitted as three separate short, interlocked poems called *Bobolnik* (“Bobolink”), *In a laboratorye fun fligalakh* (“In a Laboratory of Flies”) and *A mentsh bam yam* (“A person by the Sea”). Glatshiteyn wrote back immediately to the unknown Clara Feldman.

September 21st 1961

My dear Clara Feldman:

I like very much the three original poems which you have sent to the *Tsukunft*, but before we publish them, I would ask you to give me a little more information about yourself.

Your poems are very mature and it seems impossible that you have just begun your poetic career. In short: who are you? What do you do? Did you ever publish poems? Answer as soon as possible, because I'd like to publish your poems even in the October issue of the *Tsukunft*.

Yours,
Yankev Glatshiteyn

(Yiddish original in the Menke Katz Collection, Vilnius)

“Clara Feldman” duly replied, and the three poems appeared on a full page of the October 1961 issue, with the following editor’s note:

When we read the poems sent by Clara Feldman to the *Tsukunfi*, they interested us immediately. One senses a cautious tremulousness in her use of Yiddish words, though we did not know whether this is the result of her being American born. So we decided to write to her with some questions, to which we immediately received a reply which we now publish here. When we discovered that she is a product of Jewish America, we had no further doubts that the poems should be published.

This is her reply:

“My dear Yankev Glatshiteyn:

I thank you for your good words with all my heart. No, I never published any poems anywhere, though I have been writing Yiddish poetry from childhood. I was born in America. I am 29 years old. As to my work, I am a housewife with three children. I hope that my poems may still be able to appear in the October issue of the *Tsukunfi*.

With gratitude,
Clara Feldman”

(Editor’s note to Clara Feldman, *Dray lider* [Three Poems],
Tsukunfi, October 1961, p. 373)

Well, Menke’s mother-in-law Clara Feldman was indeed a housewife with three children (though she was sure no twenty-nine).

After the initial success of the hoax, Menke was emboldened. Perhaps most brazenly, “Clara Feldman” published *Two Poems* in the May-June 1962 issue of the *Tsukunfi*. The first, called “Her Three Unborn Boys” consisted of the first eight lines of the longer 1932 poem of that name from *Three Sisters* (see p. 8), but without the verses that make clear that it is an anti-abortion poem. The second, “In my Dream” was taken from the then relatively recent *Midday* of 1954 (see p. 577), where the abortion theme is likewise ambiguous.

Many in the *Linke* camp immediately recognized Menke’s poems. They were quietly following, with glee, the Clara Feldman saga, enjoying the sight of the *Tsukunfi* making a fool of itself and, at the same time, the need of the “deserter” Menke Katz to publish under his mother-in-law’s

name in his “chosen new environment” (it didn’t take long for gossip about the “real Clara Feldman” to hit the New York Yiddish literary scene).

The Clara Feldman episode lasted about a year and a half. By early 1963, the poet and literary critic Eliezer Greenberg (1896—1977) had told his *Tsukunft* colleague Glatshsteyn, “I think I’ve seen these poems somewhere before” and went on to find their provenance.

The rumpus was spreading to other Yiddish journals, and Glatshsteyn finally wrote a two-page piece, “A Sensation from Sensation Land” which skirted the entire political boycott issue and made light of the episode in delightful Glatshsteyn style, making wistful reference to the relative agedness of Yiddish writers (in the early 1960s).

It’s been high time that a sensation should liven things up among us. I mean a literary sensation. Literary sensations are always a sign that the creative factory is in full swing and its workers still full of youthful energy, capable of playing tricks when they want to have some fun. Or, when they get angry at a stubborn editor, whom they want to teach a lesson for not printing a poem or story. The tried and tested technique was usually to hide behind the alter ego of a pseudonym. It was even better when a male writer disguised himself as a woman to make a fool of the editor.

Those are whims of the young, and they are to be found in the literatures of all the world. They used to occur quite frequently among us too, and there are many examples, but lately you don’t hear anymore of such happy tricks and pranks in our circles, for the simple reason that all those who write are already in fact recognized and well settled in the “literary vineyard.” And if there are a few who believe they were treated poorly, because they get less gingerbread than others, they can always find a place in another magazine; and even the smallest magazines are properly recognized so it doesn’t even occur to anyone to hide behind a pseudonym, because people’s real names are recognized and writers can enjoy that little bit of living immortality which our Yiddish literature ekes out to its faithful servants.

Nevertheless, it came to the point where a Yiddish poet found it necessary to play a youthful trick on an entire editorial board. Indeed, it is our editorial board of the *Tsukunft*, and he triumphs now with a great sense of triumph. The poet is Menke Katz, who has published

nine books of Yiddish poetry. [...] His poems are read from *Di goldene keyt* [Tel Aviv] to the *Fraye arbeter shtime* [New York] and anywhere else you look. [...] But for poet Menke Katz the magazine *Tsukunfi* became a fortress that he had to conquer with all his poetic might. The whole world was open for him, but the fact that the *Tsukunfi* rejected his poems did not suit him. What is the Christian and Jewish world worth if the *Tsukunfi* doesn't rejoice with his poems? [...]

When the poetess sent us a [third] group of poems, Eliezer Greenberg decided to do some active detective work and he found some of Clara Feldman's published and unpublished poems in Menke Katz's book *Three Sisters* which appeared *over thirty years ago!* [...]

Menke Katz was twenty-two years old when he wrote these poems that we have printed under a woman's name. These poems were made to fit for a young woman, and were perfect for Clara Feldman. [...] And now, the editorial board of the *Tsukunfi* hopes that Menke Katz will personally and poetically again become his actual fifty-two years.

(Y. Glatshteyn, "A sensatsye fun sensatsye-land" [A Sensation from Sensation Land] in *Tsukunfi*, February 1963, pp. 93-94)

Glatshteyn's comment about Menke publishing widely at the time reveals an understandable annoyance, whose underlying idea is: "What's the big deal about the *Tsukunfi* when he publishes in *Di goldene keyt*, the world's most prestigious Yiddish literary journal?" For Menke, it was perhaps more a question of literary acceptability in his own city of New York and of someone who had, on literary matters, fiercely fought the *Linke's* orthodoxies from within, from the days of *Three Sisters* onward. In other words, for him it was "not good enough" to be able to publish in the best of Tel Aviv but not the best of New York. And for both poets, there was another "temporal" subtext. While Menke was playing games with the *Tsukunfi*, the recycling of old poems, and the name "Clara Feldman," he published his epoch making *Kegn mos un gram* (*Against Lock and Rhyme*), a notable document in modern Yiddish poetry, in *Di Goldene keyt* (1961, no. 41, pp. 170-171; it was included in *Safad*, 1979; see pp. 747—748). It led to the degree of discussion and debate of which Yiddish poetry was capable at the time.

This new concentration on poetic form, and the rebellion against rhyme, mark the start of an era of experimentation for Menke, a period that would continue in — English.

Glatshsteyn graciously apologized to Menke in a personal letter. And many years later, on his deathbed, Greenberg would ask Menke's forgiveness for having "arranged for him to be excluded" from an anthology of Yiddish poetry because of Menke's having been among the *Linke* (as had Greenberg himself, of course, but they "left the Left" in different years).

Incidentally, the effects of the Yiddish Political Correctness problem continue in the twenty-first century to limit severely the canon of Yiddish writers seriously studied today at universities and research centers. The problem dates back to the McCarthyist spirit which struck America in the 1950s, just when Yiddish in general was coming out of the closet in America. Yiddish literature in translation was beginning to come into vogue. The unstated criterion in the pioneering anthologies was: what year did so and so leave the *Linke* and join the *Rékhte*? Those who left right after the Hebron riots of 1929 were completely kosher. Those who left after the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939 were relatively kosher. But those who waited until the early 1950s when Stalin's August 1952 murder of the leading Jewish writers and intellectuals was confirmed, were — *treyf* (the traditional word for unclean or unkosher). And those who *never* left, and happened to survive into the 1990s, were only "koshered" when the Soviet Union fell apart. I recall how Itche Goldberg, the widely acclaimed, and beloved, editor of *Yidische kultúr*, for decades America's best Yiddish literary journal, was banned from the international conference for Yiddish in Jerusalem in 1976, at the demand of the *Rékhte* in New York (though he had publicly condemned the Soviet system many years before). The Israeli Yiddish writers, who had no such hang-ups (and many were rationally "further" from *Linke* politics than the New York *Rékhte*) honored him with a separate reception. Old battles die hard, and slowly.



Back in New York, from 1960 onward, Menke didn't want anyone to be "forced" to publish him, and the 1963 rapprochement with Glatshsteyn

was more personal than poetic. Menke's sense of literary loneliness increased. During the mid 1950s, while in Israel, he had tried his hand at English for the first time with any seriousness, since that youthful poem he had been working on when young Abba Shtoltzenberg had "discovered him" in Seward Park Library on East Broadway back in 1925. That poem was *At a Patched Window*. Menke reworked it in Safad in 1955, and sent it to *Commentary*, where it appeared in February 1956. He wrote other poems, and began to publish in the prestigious *Atlantic* in June 1961, with the poem *Manikin*, inspired by a Fifth Avenue window display of Bergdorf Goodman. In the 1960s he became a regular contributor there and in the poetry column of the *New York Times*. He published widely in poetry magazines, including *Poet Lore*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Poetry*, *The Smith* and others. In 1961, he launched his own poetry quarterly, *Bitterroot* magazine, whose hundred issues he edited over the coming three decades. The magazine was dedicated to discovering new talent, and its editor became famous for never sending a printed rejection slip. He answered each submission personally. In English poetry circles, he became known, as he had been in Yiddish, simply as Menke (with a distinct, Americanized pronunciation: MEN-kee, rather than the Yiddish MAIN-keh).

The poetic and spiritual anchor of his new life in English was Harry Smith, the poet who was to become his closest friend for his last three, "English" decades. The friendship was couched in a poetic dialogue that was to be Menke's inspiration, and his new microenvironment. The Smith Press enabled Menke to devote more and more time to his poetry and eventually to give up teaching altogether.

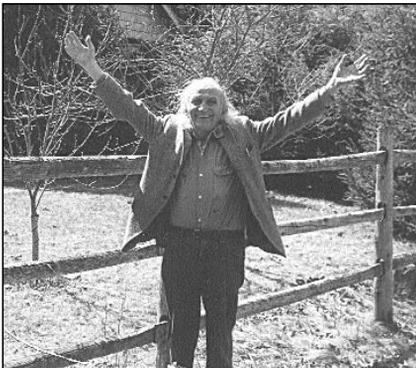
Menke's first work in English, and some say his most universal, is *Land of Manna* (Chicago 1965), named for the Heaven which the Kabbalah-hungry boys of Michaleshik had chosen during the famine of World War I. All of his subsequent books were published by The Smith. They include *Rockrose* (1970), and *Burning Village* (1972), which is, as Harry Smith explains in his preface to the current collection, a new work rather than a translation of the 1938 *Bréneindik shtetl*. To experience some little something of the cold and loneliness that Eltshik must have felt in his final days in 1917, Menke spent some months isolated in a desolate bungalow in the forests around Accord, upstate New York, in the fall of 1968, to immerse himself in the epic. Subsequent books include two volumes of poets' dialogue *Two Friends* (1981) and *Two Friends II* (1988). They comprise poems by Menke and Harry on facing pages, often

confronting a single topic from opposite perspectives. Menke's final two books in English are *A Chair for Elijah* (1985) and *Nearby Eden* (1990). Earlier, The Smith also published a book of Michaleshik children's tales, *Forever and Ever and a Wednesday* (1980).

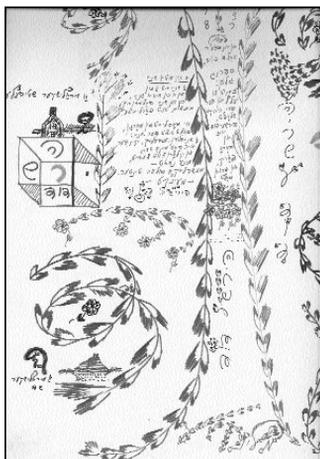
Menke's English poetry won the Stephen Vincent Benet Award twice, and an assortment of other awards. His English poems were translated into several dozen languages. Translations of his work appeared as separate books in French (1972), Greek (1968), Hebrew (1973), Italian (1974), Japanese (1967) and (South Indian) Kannada (1968).

Thematically, Menke Katz became known as a poet of two worlds, Michaleshik and New York. In poetics, he became known for his anti-rhyme stance and his experimentation in poetic form. His essay "A Word or Two Against Rhyme" (in *Poet Lore*, 1966), launched a debate which led to *Aspects of Modern Poetry: a Symposium with Twenty-seven Communicants* (1967). He perfected a number of new forms. The best known was the Menke Sonnet (wherein each line increases or decreases by a syllable, giving the visual "Menke triangles"), which he developed in both Yiddish and English. In his English poetry, he went on to experiment with the unrhymed, unrefrained double chant royal (The Menke Chant Royal), and the unrhymed, unrefrained double ballade, rondeau redouble, villanelle, and twin sonnet.

Menke and Rivke, who had been spending ever more time in their forest house in upstate New York in the 1970s, relocated there fully in 1978. Rivke continued (and continues) to work on her painting and exhibitions, Menke worked on his poetry, and went on lecture tours to offer poetry workshops in a number of North American



universities. They also enjoyed frequent visits to and from his daughter, Troim and her family, and his brother Meishke and his family. The exuberant welcomes and farewells outside the forest house, in all seasons, hands raised into the air in classic Lithuanian shtetl exuberance, became an icon for friends, family and visiting poets.



Menke's "crowns on letters," and trademark doodles

Menke's letters, in Yiddish or English, were often accompanied by the adorning of letters with "crowns" and by homey Michaleshik illustrations, including the *shetl* (little house), *késtale* (little cube), a *Mikhálshker shed* (the friendly Michaleshik ghost) and a *shifale vos vet eybik zukhn Mikháleshik* (a little boat that will forever sail, looking for Michaleshik).

Menke remained deeply involved in Yiddish throughout his life, speaking it as the *only* language of communication with his siblings and children, singing Yiddish folksongs which he accompanied on the mandolin, and inspiring ever more students to dedicate themselves seriously to Yiddish. In 1976, he contributed a piece on Michaleshik folklore to the Yivo journal *Yidishe shprakh*. In 1985, he produced a 261 page collection of his favorite Yiddish songs (many of them otherwise unknown folksong variants) which has yet to appear in print. It was penned by Menke, with the letters adorned with traditional "crowns" and decorations as was his style, and reproduced for that year's Oxford Yiddish summer program. And, although his main poetic output was in English, he continued to publish Yiddish poems, mostly in Abraham Sutzkever's *Góldene keyt* (Tel Aviv), Yankev-Tsvi Shargel's *Yisróel-shitme* (Tel Aviv) and Itche Goldberg's *Yidishe kultur* (New York).

But for all his success in building a happy new life away from those "Yiddish wars of New York," the wound never healed completely. Even the pride in being the only Yiddish poet ever to become a serious poet in English as well as always



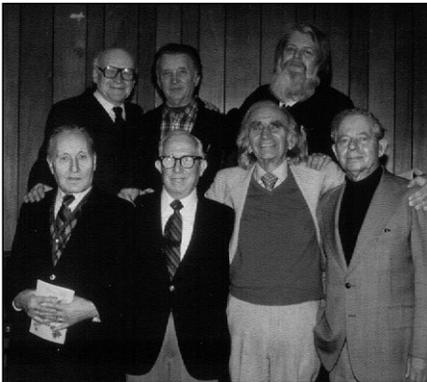
Title page of Menke's Yiddish song book produced in his own hand (Oxford 1985)

tempered by fear for the fate of a bilingual poet. In a diary written to me in 1976 (in Yiddish), he wrote:

A few words to you, Hirshe-Dovid. I see my writing English poems just from around the time when you were born as a punishment in my destiny. True, my very first poems were not in Yiddish; I started writing at the age of around fifteen, in English. But that was only because I didn't know then about the wonderful Yiddish poets. After eight books of poetry in Yiddish, it's difficult for me to see how I have become so immersed with heart and spirit in my English poetry, but I have spoken to you a lot about this. After leaving the environment of the *Linke*, I felt so frighteningly alone that I was afraid I wouldn't be able to write any more poetry at all. And no true poet can live without writing poems. So I tried to write in English.

I hope I will be seen exclusively as a Yiddish poet. That is how even readers in English see my poetry. They call me the Yiddish poet.

But no poet should suddenly switch from his mother tongue to a second language. For this reason, there is a danger that I will be forgotten in both languages. But I am sure that you will not forget me, and maybe a few other people will remember too.



At the 1981 evening for *Safad*:

First row left to right: Yiddish writers Mordechai Bauman, Max Perlow, Menke Katz and Saul Maltz.
Second row: Chaim Plotkin, Martin Birnbaum and English poet and publisher Harry Smith.

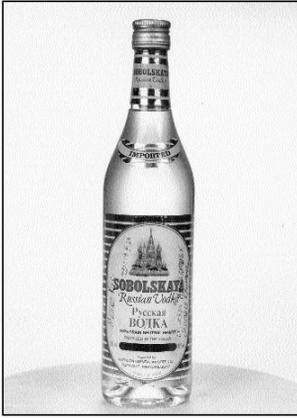
In 1981, Max Perlow (1902—1993) who devoted the last decades of his life to achieving rapprochement between the Yiddish factions of New York, organized an evening in honor of Menke's *Safad* (Tel Aviv 1979), at which one of the key speakers was Martin Birnbaum. It was Birnbaum's attack on "Grandmother Toltza's shrouds" back in 1938 that had such a profound impact on Menke's future. For both Menke and Martin Birnbaum, it was a welcome chance to heal old wounds.



In the mid and later 1980s, when travel to the Soviet Union was becoming easier, Menke and I began to speculate on the possibilities of my visiting Lithuania to see Michaleshik, Svir and Svintsyan. On the one hand it all seemed too painful. Close to one hundred percent of the Jews living in all three places at the end of June 1941 were butchered by Nazi henchmen during the Holocaust, and for Menke (and I guess for me too) it seemed more important to devote all energies to preservation of what could be rescued of the culture of, in short, the Michaleshik of Menke's poems, and not spoil that by looking at those Judenrein places today. But a contrary view was gaining ground in both of us. It was "nevertheless" important to see and feel. During our final "debate" on the subject, in the summer of 1990, we agreed that if one gentile can be found who remembers those people from Menke's books, it would all be worthwhile. And he wanted me to see what a house in Michaleshik, the Viliya River and the Hill of Svir all look like.

I finally made the journey in December 1990. In Svintsyan, I found a handful of Jews. One of them, Blumka Katz (no relation) is a veritable expert on the Jewish history of the town (she was spared from the Holocaust because of Stalin's "favor" of having sent her to Siberia for twelve years in the 1930s). A barber from a nearby town, Ziske Shapiro became my translator and guide. (The internal border between Svintsyan, in the Lithuanian S.S.R., and Michaleshik and Svir, in the Belorussian S.S.R., was then marked by a small sign. Today it is the heavily guarded border between pro-western Lithuania and neo-Soviet style Belarus, in other words, the current border between east and west in the New Europe.)

There were no Jews left in Michaleshik, but the town's young Belarusian mayor, Mikhail Krupitsa, closed down the town hall and made a banquet for our little party when he heard that an American, whose father is a Michaleshik Yiddish poet in America, had turned up in the village. He gave me a bottle of vodka, signed "to Menke Katz from the mayor of Michaleshik." After the month in Lithuania, I rushed back to New York in January 1991 with a video, pictures and tales of the last shtetl Jews, and the dozens I had met in Vilnius. At the time, I think I was most focused on having to bring Menke the bottle signed by the mayor of Michaleshik (and afraid it might break). I had the privilege of meeting



A signed bottle of vodka:
 “To Menke Katz from the Mayor of
 Michaleshik, Michail Krupitsa”

“Now write in Yiddish, only in Yiddish, so I can understand your poems too, here in Heaven!”

And so, Menke returned to writing Yiddish. Many of his poems of this final period are in his *Menke Sonnet* form, with the number of syllables per line increasing from two to fifteen, or decreasing correspondingly (see pp. 758—770).

At the end of March 1991, I began my long postponed sabbatical from Oxford, intending to spend it with Menke and Rivke. During our month together, he was hard at work on Yiddish poems, and I on my own work, Rivke on her painting, at the “forest house” in Spring Glen, New York. At eighty-five, Menke was in apparently radiant health, writing, singing Yiddish folksongs, and reveling in contacts with the discovered old Jews of Lithuania, whom he told me never to forget. On the afternoon of April 24th, 1991, he took a nap and never woke up. He had never had a headache, never been sick, never spent a day of his life in a hospital.





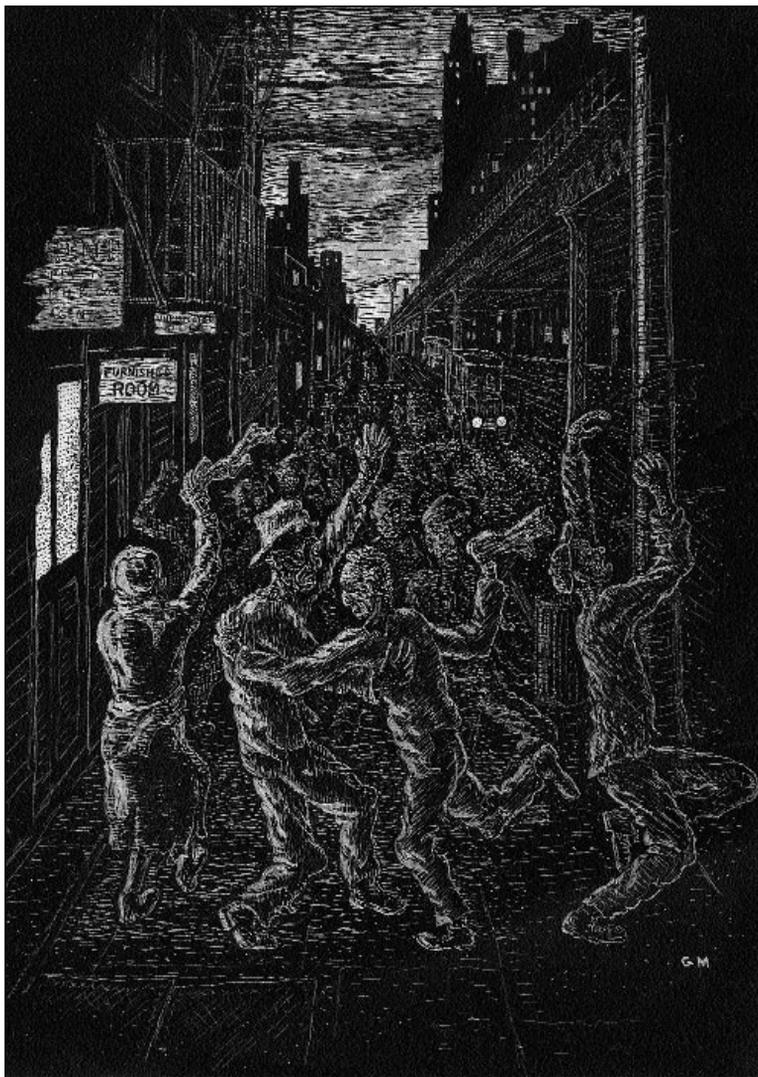
Menke Sonnets
(New York, 1993)

Two Yiddish books by Menke appeared after his death. One, *Menke Sonnets* (The Smith, New York 1993), contains the corpus of his Yiddish work in Menke Sonnet form. Some had appeared in *Safad*, and the rest are from his last Yiddish-writing period (January to April 1991; they are translated in this collection on pp. 765–773). The cover image is a facsimile of Menke’s last letter to the doyen of New York Yiddish editors, Itche Goldberg, which Menke sent out along with some new poems on his last night.

The second, published the same year, is a new folio edition of *Three Sisters* with drawings by Lithuanian artist Rimantas Dichavicius. Guy Murchie, who had given Menke the hundred dollar tip to publish the book sixty years earlier, launching Menke’s controversial career as a Yiddish poet, was found alive and well in California at around ninety. He had kept his drawing to one of the book’s poems, *The Hunger Dance*, over those sixty years, and contributed it for the cover of the new edition (it appeared in Rowen, North Wales, in 1993).

Menke’s daughter Troim Katz Handler, a Yiddish culture activist all her life, began to write Yiddish poetry shortly after his death. Since then, she has published widely in Yiddish periodicals. Her first book, *Simkhe* (“Celebration”) was published by the International Association of Yiddish Clubs in 2002. She is at work on the second. In 1996, she contributed the Yiddish and English components of the Japanese-Yiddish handbook edited by Kazuo Ueda, and teamed up with him again in 2000 on texts for students of Yiddish in Japan. She and her husband Frank Handler continue to offer programs in Yiddish and Jewish history at various levels.

Their elder daughter, Claudia is a psychological counselor and poet in Los Angeles; her daughter Cleo (born 1990), Menke’s great-granddaughter, became a vegetarian at six. Troim’s younger daughter Shelley, now a secondary school French instructor, released a Yiddish album, *Songs of my Grandfather* in 1988, based on Menke’s favorite Yiddish folksongs. Her son Alex, born in 1984, is a student at the State University



Guy Murchie's *Hunger Dance*
Cover of the second edition of *Three Sisters*
(Rowen, Wales, 1993)

of New York at Stony Brook. Shelley's twins Lily and Miles Moysh, Menke's most recent great-grandchildren, were born in Stony Brook, New York in October 2003.

Rivke and I spent Menke's first *yortsayt*, the traditional anniversary of a death, in his birthtown Svintsyman, along with the small number of elderly Jewish survivors.

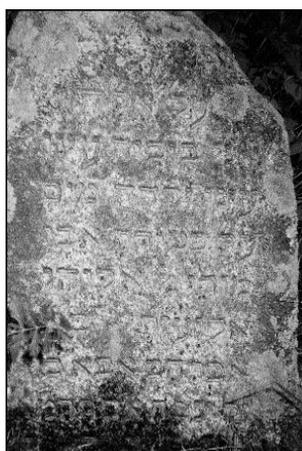
Menke's brother Yeiske (Joseph) published a selection of his old letters to Menke, which he translated into English, under the title *Letters to My Brother* (Birch Book Press, Delhi, New York 1998). In 2002, he spent his ninetieth birthday in his native Lithuania. He died in 2004.

Brother Meishke and his wife Phyllis visited Lithuania and Belarus in 2001, to see Michaleshik, Svir and Svintsyman.

In the years since Menke's death, various traces of the people and contents of these books have turned up in Lithuania. At what remains of the old Jewish cemetery in Svir, Grandmother Mona's grave was found intact. And, the stone of Menke's great grandfather Elle-Leyzer (Eylióhu-Eliézer) son of Avrom-Abba who died in 1880, has been standing for a hundred and twenty-five years. He made a cameo appearance in the original *Burning Village* of 1938 (p. 191); Eltshik had been named for him.



Grandmother Mona's
tombstone in Svir



and Menke's great grandfather
Elle-Leizer



Ruins of the watermill in Stratsha
(now in Belarus)

The last Jew of Svintsyánke (now Shvenchioneliai), to the west of Svintsyan, is Tsipka Bikson-Guterman, niece of the Dveirka Ozhinsky who swore eternal love to Eltshik during the First World War. In her eighties, Tsipka remembers that her aunt Dveirka in Svintsyan (who perished in the Holocaust in 1941), had never married because of an oath to “a certain young man” who died during that war.

And in the forest by a riverside at Stratsha, near Svir, the haunting remains of the old watermill evoke Grandmother Mona’s lines:

*Der Stratsher mil gedeynkt nokh di erlekhe korn-zomen,
Fun mayne elterzeydes, di melike milner —
Vemens pratse hot feldish geshmekt azh in Vilne.*

*The watermill of Stratsha still remembers
The honest seeds of rye
Of my grandfathers, the millers whitened by flour
Whose toil brought the scent of fields all the way to Vilna.*

[p. 416]

Back in the late 1980s, Menke studied Benjamin and Barbara Harshav’s *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology* (Berkeley 1986). He said: “They are the finest translators of Yiddish poetry. What a dream it would be if they would someday, when I am long gone, translate my Yiddish books into English, and if Harry Smith would publish them.”

Dovid Katz
Vilnius University, Lithuania
2004

Menke

The Complete Yiddish Poems of Menke Katz

Translated by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav

Edited by Dovid Katz and Harry Smith

The Smith



Brooklyn, NY

Illustrations by Rivke Katz
from the original edition of *Midday* (1954)

Maps by Giedre Beconyte
Center for Cartography at Vilnius University (2005)

Cover design by
Harry Smith

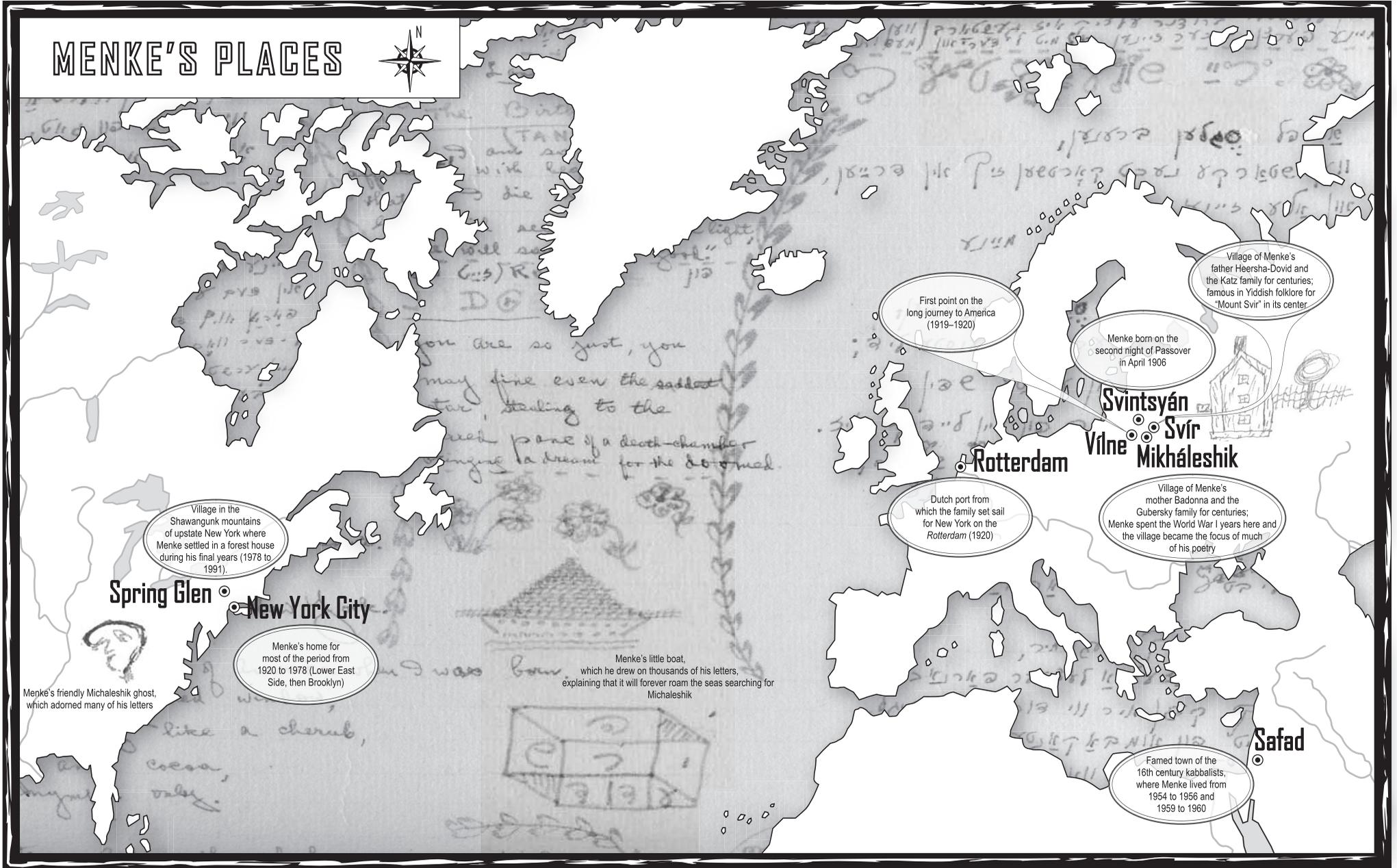
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Published by The Smith,
under the aegis of The Generalist Association, Inc.
69 Joralemon Street
Brooklyn, NY 12201

ISBN: 1-882986-21-0

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MENKE'S PLACES



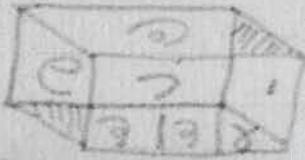
Village in the Shawangunk mountains of upstate New York where Menke settled in a forest house during his final years (1978 to 1991).

Spring Glen ● **New York City**

Menke's home for most of the period from 1920 to 1978 (Lower East Side, then Brooklyn)

Menke's friendly Michaleshik ghost, which adorned many of his letters

You are so just, you may find even the saddest tree, standing to the dead pane of a death-chamber, trying to dream for the doomed.



Menke's little boat, which he drew on thousands of his letters, explaining that it will forever roam the seas searching for Michaleshik

First point on the long journey to America (1919-1920)

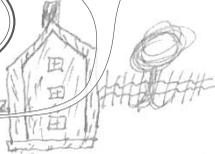
Rotterdam

Dutch port from which the family set sail for New York on the Rotterdam (1920)

Village of Menke's father Heersha-David and the Katz family for centuries; famous in Yiddish folklore for "Mount Svir" in its center

Menke born on the second night of Passover in April 1906

Svintsyán
● **Vılne**
● **Svir**
● **Mikhálesnik**



Village of Menke's mother Badonna and the Gubersky family for centuries; Menke spent the World War I years here and the village became the focus of much of his poetry

Famed town of the 16th century kabbalists, where Menke lived from 1954 to 1956 and 1959 to 1960

Safad