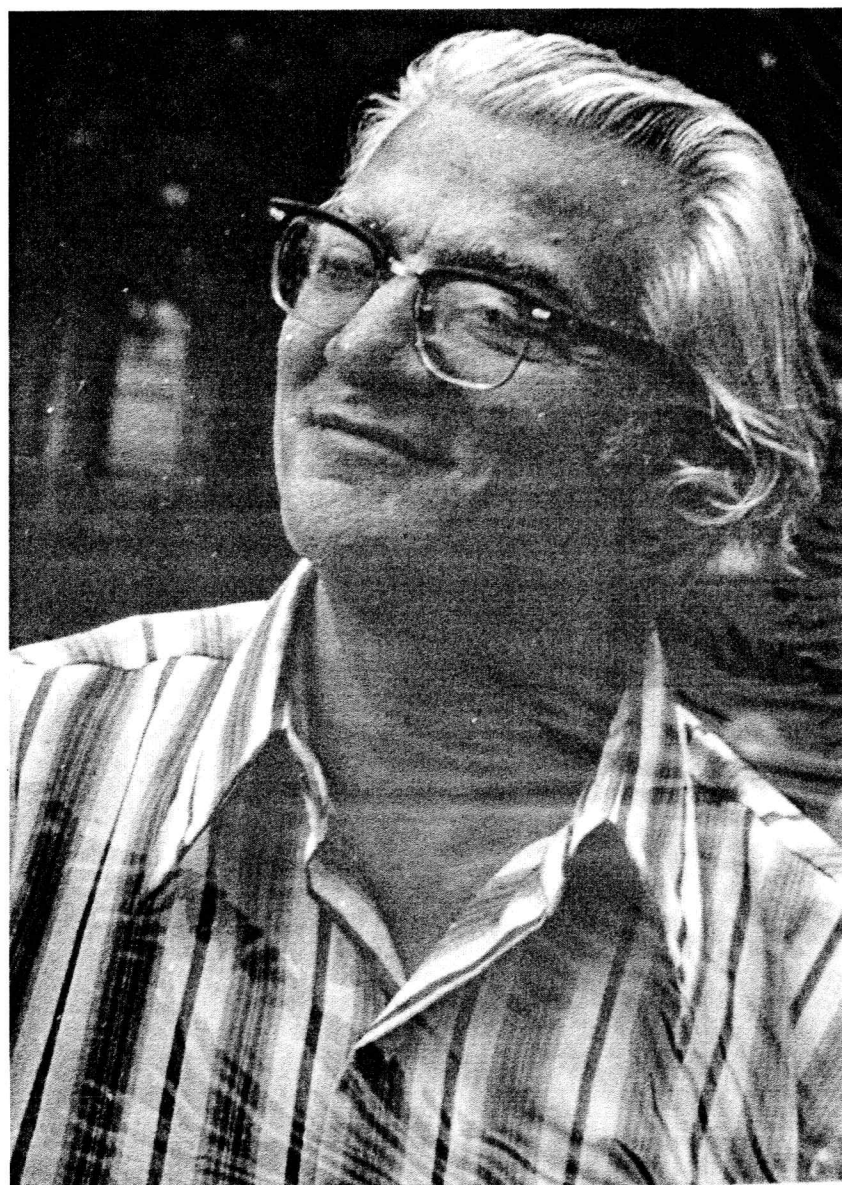


*Personal Remembrances of Yosl
On the Fifth Anniversary of His Passing
By
Moish Mlotek*



Joseph "Yosl" Mlotek, zikhroynu livrokhe

Born in Prozevice, Poland on July 25, 1918. Died in New York on July 2, 2000.

Many words have been used to describe Yosl's life and career. "Der adres far yidish" -- The address for Yiddish; "Vegvayzer" -- Spiritual leader; "Lerer" - Teacher; "poet"; "Khaver" - Friend. All of these descriptions are accurate, but no one word can truly describe the man or the pain and suffering and the trials and tribulations he endured or his own passion and energy to overcome all obstacles leading to his tremendous achievements.

A Life of Struggle and Hardship

Life in pre-war Poland was difficult. A child of a poor, blind melamed (teacher), the family had to move at an early age to Warsaw because there was no work to be had in Prozevice. In Warsaw, the family of 8 children (brothers Moishe, Nosen, Chone, Avram, Mendel, and sisters Sore and Esther), together with their parents, Zalmen and Feygl, lived in a one-room apartment. Pre-war Warsaw was rife with anti-semitism and disease.

Yosl was blessed to be among the few selected to go once and sometimes twice a year to the famous Medem Sanatorium, a health and cultural facility located about an hour outside of Warsaw, designed to treat children stricken with tuberculosis. Yosl became a leader of the children there, the chairman of their children's republic and from a young age, organized the daily activities, including radio programs, theater programs and newspapers. His journalistic career continued when as a young teen-ager he published poems and articles in the Warsaw weekly children's newspaper called "Di Kleyne Folksztaytung" -- the young people's newspaper. One of his early poems at age 15 was addressed to his mother who, out of love and fear, made him stay home and not attend a mass rally.

Ven s'hilckhn di rufn

*Vi ken men, vi ken men in shitub haynt farblaybn
Ven s'rufn un tsien dikh lider ful freyd,
Vi ken men, vi ken men aleyh mit zikh blaybn,
Ven s'hilckhn di lider, vi rufn fun vayt...*

*Ven tif-bloye himlen vi loytere fener
Zikh vign in luft! un shmeykhen mit zun
Un s'hilckhn di rufn fun bronz-harte mener
Un s'entfert in khor zey say alt un say yung!*

*Vi ken ikh, o mame, vi ken ikh do blaybn
Ven s'rayst zikh mayn harts, vi fun boygn a fayl,
Ven s'vilt zikh farbindn mit masn vos laydn
Un filn, az kh'bin fun der mase - a teyl.*

*O, kfi'her shoyn, ikfi her shoyn di trit fun milyonen,
'Vi s'flekfitn zikfi lider mit ritmishn trot,
Kfi'her fonen-geflater un lider, vos monen,
Ikfi her shoyn dem broyzndn gang fun der shtot.*

*Ken ikfi nisht, ken ikfi in shtub haynt nisht blaybn,
Ven s'rufn mikfi, s'tsien mikfi lider fun freyd,
Ken ikfi nisht, mame, aleyt mit zikfi blaybn,
Ven s'shaln di lider un rufn mikfi vayt*

*How can I? How can I stay home today?
When the joyful songs call to me, pull at me;
How can I stay here alone by myself
When the songs resound like commands from afar.*

*When the deep blue skies, like fluttering banners
Move on the winds and smile with the sun;
And the voices of golden youth reach out
And are answered in one voice - by old and by young.*

*How can I? Oh Mama, how can I stay on here?
When my heart flies from me, like an arrow from the bow;
When I yearn to join up with the masses that suffer
And feel that I'm one of them - one of them all.*

*I hear, oh I hear the footfall of millions,
Who weave those songs in the rhythm of their steps;
I hear the flags' flutter and the songs that command,
I hear the glorious voice of my town.*

*I can't! Oh I can't stay at home any longer;
They call to me, pull me - those songs full of joy;
O Mama, I can't stay at home any longer,
When the songs take hold of me, calling me out.*

Translation: Adrienne Cooper

While at the Medem Sanatorium, Yosl wrote a letter to one of the then icons of the Yiddish cultural movement in the United States, Nokhem Chanin, urging him to help raise funds to help the sickly children of Warsaw. Later, when Yosl came to the United States, and visited a Workmen's Circle school, he happened to come across his letter in one of the school's records. Chanin distributed that letter to the schools so that the schools could adopt the Medem Sanatorium as one of their important causes.

Notwithstanding his mother's urging, Yosl became a leader of SKIF, the Jewish socialist children's network, and was often seen leading rallies and marches against injustices.

When Yosl was 21, the second world war broke out and on September 6, 1939, six days after the invasion of Poland, the newspaper where he was employed, the "Folkstsaytung" decided to evacuate the newspaper to an eastern city, Lublin and he left with the editors and writers.

On the way they heard that Lublin was bombarded and the paths were blocked, so he went to Vilna, where he remained a year, working on eyewitness testimonies of the refugees for an eminent scholar Noakh Prylucki and as a research fellow of the YIVO.

One day it was announced that the editor of the newspaper and other leading writers were arrested by the Soviet government and Yosl went underground into hiding. While in Vilna, Yosl heard from a friend that one of his brothers also escaped Warsaw and was in town and this friend arranged a meeting. Yosl did not know which brother it was until he opened the door and saw Avram. This was the only family member that Yosl would see again until after the war. Except for his sister Sore, the rest of the family perished in the Holocaust.

One day while still in Vilna, Yosl received word that a Japanese diplomat was granting exit visas out of Lithuania. Yosl waited in line in Kovno for days for visas for him and Avram and was one of the last persons to meet the hero Chiune Sugihara, one of the Yad Vashem noted "righteous gentiles" before Sugihara was recalled to Japan for his "traitorous" act of issuing transit visas and rescuing a few thousand Jews. But for this fortuitous happenstance of being at the right place at the right time, Yosl would not have been able to leave Europe.

Traveling by foot, wagon, train and boat, Yosl, together with Avram, started the long trek around the world from Vilna to Vladivostok to Kobe, Japan. After a year's sojourn in Japan, the Jews learned that Japan would not host them and they were deported to Shanghai, China where a ghetto was established for them. While in Shanghai, he received news of the devastation that had befallen his family and his people in the Holocaust. As previously mentioned, the only other family member to survive was Sore, who spent the war years in Siberia, and who later emigrated to Canada.

While in Shanghai, Yosl worked for the Jewish community, at the Russian library and on the Yiddish newspaper and magazines. The Jews recreated for themselves a cultural life in the Shanghai ghetto with weekly lectures, concerts, and newspapers and Yosl was one of the active participants in that activity.

In 1947, after the war and after numerous attempts, he finally received a visa to come to North America, and settled in Calgary Canada for two years before receiving a visa into the United States. While in Calgary, he received a scholarship to UCLA to study Jewish folklore and linguistics with Max Weinreich as part of a YIVO-sponsored program. There he again met his "lebens partnerin", his life-partner, Chana Gordon, affectionately called by his friends, "dos varshever meydle fun der Bronx" - the Warsaw girl from the Bronx. Yosl and Chana corresponded when classes ended and he returned to Calgary and she to the Bronx, until Yosl received his visa. They soon became engaged and on August 7, 1949 were married.

Two years later, on June 15, 1951, Chana gave birth to their first son, Zalmen Nosn, and four years later on August 8, 1955, she gave birth to their second son, Moishe - Mark Elchonen.

Upon arriving in New York, Yosl took a job as a teacher in the Workmen's Circle school system. In his spare time, he wrote curriculum, including the well received "Yidishe Kinder" text books for the shule system, and was quickly promoted to director of the schools in New York City. In 1966, the then Educational Director of the Workmen's Circle, Zalmen Yefroiken, suddenly passed away and Yosl ascended to his position. His accomplishments in this position are described in the next section.

Yosl was always very close to the remaining family that he had, and he was a devoted son-in-law to Bessie and Leo Gordon, Chana's parents, adopting them as his own, visiting them every day when they were old and infirm. He was a loving brother-in-law to Malke and Bing Gottlieb, Chana's sister, and a prideful uncle to Joey and Judy Gottlieb and to their families.

He took care of his brother Avram during his illnesses and was a loving brother-in-law to Dina and a wonderful uncle to Ruth and her family. He had a special kinship to Sore, his sister, who was doing similar work as Yosl in Canada, as leader of the Canadian Yiddish community. He was especially proud of Sore who won Canada's highest honor, the Order of Canada, for her work, and was a loving brother-in-law to Hershl, and a devoted uncle to Moishe, Zalmen and Fay and their families. Yosl was particularly close as a mentor to my cousin Moishe, guiding him in his chosen career of being a Jewish cultural impresario and producer.

Most of all, Yosl was especially proud of his wife Chana - who has an incomparable font of knowledge of Yiddish folklore and songs and who helped him on a daily basis in his work - and of his children and their families.

He was so proud of Zalmen, who has contributed so much to the field of Yiddish music, and who has taken the helm of and is responsible for the revival of the Folksbiene Theater. Zalmen also gave Yosl so much joy and happiness with his marriage to Debbie and their subsequent "production" of three wonderful grandchildren, Avram, Elisha and Sarah - all of whom are fluent tri-lingualists (including Yiddish.)

He was also so proud that I grew up and became a president of the Workmen's Circle, continuing his tradition of helping that organization, which he loved, to perpetuate the Eastern European heritage as a living and vibrant culture. He loved Audrey as if she were his own daughter, and he had a special place in his heart for his other two loving and adoring grandchildren, Marissa and Lee.

Yosl had many illnesses throughout his life and his last few years were not easy. While he was able to work writing columns until his very last day, his physical health deteriorated rapidly. It was only his strong will, his passion to survive, his love for his work and for his family, that enabled him to overcome for as long as he did, until finally he succumbed at the age of 81.

Yosl's Legacy

When one thinks of Yosl and his many accomplishments, one must marvel as to how one person could have done so much. Yosl was what they called a "tuer" - he was a doer. But he was much more than that - because not only did he roll up his sleeves and work tirelessly and endlessly to get things accomplished, he was also the idea man.

Yosl was known as "the" address for Yiddish because he was involved and, for the most part, he organized everything that happened in the world in Yiddish. He sent our actors and actresses on theater tours throughout the world, not only helping with the material as to what they would perform, but arranging the logistics of determining what cities to perform in and on what days.

He was the force behind the Folksbiene Yiddish Theatre helping to pick plays, helping with fundraising and with their sales and marketing. He was an impresario who would arrange for concerts or lectures for anyone visiting the United States, whether they were writers from Israel or singers from the Soviet Union. Who of us could forget the concert series at the 92nd street Y when Soviet artists Mischa Reitzin, Misha Alexandrovitch, and Emil Gorewitz appeared in three successive weeks to sold out audiences.

He wrote educational books to learn Yiddish; he compiled poetry and song books (together with Chana) so that the next generation would have access to the poems and songs that he and his peers recited or sang from memory (today those books are the reference guide and anthology of Yiddish songs). He edited numerous newspapers and magazines on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. He was the preeminent orator of his generation, speaking wherever and whenever invited, all over the world - Israel, Russia, London, France, Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, Canada and all over the United States. He organized shuln and met with the parents on a constant basis. He had a weekly radio show. How many of us can close our eyes and still remember hearing his melodic voice opening the show, "A gutn ovnt libe tsuherer...." He later also became the voice of the weekly "Forward Hour" radio show.

He produced records so that the mass audience could hear Yiddish songs. He produced video tapes of children's Yiddish songs in the 1960s - before Sesame Street was even dreamt of. He organized the first ethnic concert in the city parks in 1968 - where over 25,000 people came to Central Park to hear Sholom Secunda and see Molly Picon for free. He of course continued and expanded this tradition of free concerts in the parks every year thereafter.

He organized Yiddish cultural immersion weekends, an event that subsequently started the elder hostel phenomenon, and which tradition has been continued to this very day with the summer activities that the Workmen's Circle conducts at Circle Lodge.

Yosl wrote a column in the Yiddish Forward about the World of Yiddish, and, together with Chana, wrote a weekly, later bi-weekly, column in the Yiddish Forward about Yiddish poetry, asking the readers for snippets of songs they remembered and giving them, from that snippet, not only the full version of the song, but also information about its author. Yosl and Chana continued that weekly column for 30 years and Chana is continuing it today in his memory.

Yosl assisted in the opening of the Leivick House in Israel and was also a founding member of the "Veltrat far Yiddish," the World Council for Yiddish. Yosl received the coveted Manger Prize for literature as well as other awards from numerous organizations. He was also awarded an honorary doctorate from the Jewish Teachers' Seminary/Herzliah University.

Yosl was an amazing man who, through all of these activities in a relatively short period of time, always had time to meet with whomever would happen to stop by the office that day. He would find the time to converse by letter with Yiddish activists and writers throughout the world. to be in tune with what was going on and helping out wherever he could.

Yosl also continued his childhood legacy of activism and organized the shuln to march for better working conditions in May Day parades, to march for the State of Israel in Israel Day parades, and to march for the rights of Jews in the former Soviet Union. Yosl was part of the American Jewish leadership involved in the struggle for Soviet Jewry, with the Workmen's Circle's position being slightly different from others.

Yosl advocated that not only should Soviet Jews have the right to emigrate, but they should also have the right to practice their religion and culture wherever they chose, even in the former Soviet Union. I remember hearing my parents talk about a trip they took to Russia in the 1970s for the first international book fair representing the Workmen's Circle. Yosl and Chana's greatest joy was to turn aside while hundreds of Jews were able to appropriate the books that they had brought with them for that very purpose, and watch as the Soviet Jews kissed the Yiddish books and treated them as if they were a holy seyfer Torah.

Yosl's further legacy to the American Jewish Community was his vision that although many Jews were secular, they were nevertheless still connected as a people with common traditions and culture. He organized grandiose holiday celebrations of Passover and other holidays, with secular and cultural traditions, so that secular Jews would have their own traditions and not easily assimilate. We continue these holiday celebrations today and many of the things he brought us have become traditions in thousands of homes - with people not knowing their origin.

Yosl was a man of passion, energy, vision and strength. A man who never rested or stopped. A man with a drive. Yosl was one of a generation of Holocaust survivors that had a mission to make sure that their religion and culture survived. This generation took this mission as their personal obligation and would not succumb until they contributed enough of a mark to make sure that their mission would succeed. Yosl was unique among his peers in what he was able to accomplish because of his natural talents of leadership, passion, writing and oration.

Yosl was my father. From an early age, I called him Yosl - as everyone called him Yosl. He was an inspiration to me in everything I do. He was a practical man with sage advice on important life decisions. He was a very calm man who never lost his temper or raised his voice. I loved my father very much and think of him every day and miss him terribly.

The Yiddish world suffered a great loss the day my father died and while we all try to continue a portion of what he did, none of us can match his intensity or drive or expertise. So our entire world, and not just I, lost a lot with the loss of Yosl.

I want to thank the organizations that have agreed to appear in today's program as affiliated organizations. My father had a kindred connection and worked closely with these organizations as they each, in their own way, have helped and are continuing to support our Yiddish Culture. Again, thank you in my family's name for the work you do and for agreeing to be a part of tonight's program.

As you can see in the program, the family has established a prize in Yosl's memory for the individual or individuals that best capture the spirit of who Yosl was and what he did - living their lives for Yiddish and Yiddish culture. Hopefully, through this prize, the family can inspire others to help continue and further his legacy. There were many qualified nominees, hopefully, many of whom can receive this award in the future, but the recipients of the first award are individuals that unquestionably carry Yosl's spirit. I want to congratulate and thank the winners for their work and urge them to continue. We all need Yiddish to continue to flourish.

I also want to thank the people who have agreed to participate in tonight's program. They each have been gracious in giving their time to honor the memory of my father.

Our symposium speakers Dr. Eugene Orenstein and Dr. David Roskies are world renowned scholars and Yiddishists and we are honored that they have agreed to be here. The artists, Theodore Bikel, Re'ut Ben-Ze'ev, Phyllis Berk and Robert Abelson took this on as a labor of love and we thank them.

I am especially grateful to my cousin Moishe Rosenfeld, who helped make everything happen. This was a family event. The children and family all participated in the planning. Audrey and Debbie took care of the refreshments. My Executive Assistant, Jackie Kostalos, did a wonderful job with the program and invitation. This was a labor of love for all. Thank you everyone.

When Zalmen, Moishe, my mother and I first started to think of tonight's program, we had many ideas on how to remind ourselves and help recapture what Yosl meant to the Yiddish world. Yosl brought Yiddish to the people. That was his greatest gift. One way he did this was by writing musical vignettes that were interesting to listen to - he called it - "tsu zingen un tsu zogn", so that the audience would both enjoy and learn. He also brought Yiddish to the people through the use of the media.

Accordingly, we felt it would be fitting to bring to you tonight the concert premiere of a musical vignette that he wrote and produced as a record and cassette while Executive Director of the Workmen's Circle, entitled "Amol Iz Geven A Mayse" / "There once was a story". With this concert, we hope to remind us all of the wonderful work that Yosl produced and the great loss we have all suffered.

Koved zayn likhtikn ondenk.