

INTRODUCTION TO *ANTOLOGIE, DI YIDISHE DIKHTUNG*

Zische Landau*

Poetry, the most refined of the arts, attracts both the sensitive and the crude, the hoary graybeard and the young lover, who, though hardly able to express his feelings in words, nevertheless tries to do so in verse and always, without exception—in rhyme. Screaming epithets, impossible exaggerations, and hyperbole are characteristic of such “poetry,” which is in essence a lie, as is every work of the spirit that is undertaken by those who are not called to it.

It is, therefore, understandable that in the childhood years of the Jewish community in America, which then consisted of the most depressed, the most impoverished, and the most undeveloped, with an admixture of impractical, sentimental followers of the Russian Back-to-the-People movement and of “Be-a-Jew-at-home-and-a-person-in-the-street” adherents of the Haskala, many without talent took to versifying as the most primitive means of expressing their feelings and of helping “to push the wheels of freedom forward” as it was put by the most representative writer of that period, David Edelstadt.

Social hope and suffering were the only concerns of the Jewish world in those days, and it was only afterwards, a quarter of a century later, that national tones were heard. *Until the beginning of our century, it was a disgrace to write any except social poetry.*

As is characteristic of undeveloped people, they found all problems easy to solve; all social miasmas could be made to disappear with little more than a wave of the hand.

Hert zikh tsu vos ikh vel zogn,
Dyb ir vilt keyn keytn trogn,
Kumt in undzer polk.
Vos mir viln, iz nit fil brayen
Un fun shklafn yokh bafrayen
Dos untergedeikte folk

David Edelstadt

*Landau's introduction to his *Antologie, di yidische dikhtung in amerike biz yor 1919* (New York, 1919) is an important statement in the history of Yiddish criticism in America, influential in its own day and not infrequently quoted for its harsh judgment of the proletarian poets. Since that judgment is sometimes misinterpreted as Landau's rejection of the possibility of social poetry, it seems appropriate to present it in this issue. It is also of interest as an insight into the mind of a prominent literary rebel and leader of the Yunge of truculently independent disposition, bold self-assurance, and deep commitment to poetry.
—Ed.

Those on whose beards they learned to barber were not so sensitive, and they listened with affection to these “poets,” who, in years, were far from their childhood but in spirit were still there. In time, the work grew more specialized, although the view of life remained the same. David Edelstadt was the first to sit at the head of the table; he was succeeded by Morris Rosenfeld. The influence of the former far overflowed the boundaries of his anarchist circle and even the frontiers of America. His poems echoed in the hearts of Jewish workers in the old country. And the fame of Morris Rosenfeld far exceeded the confines of his own people. He was translated into most European languages.

Edelstadt died in the early nineties of the last century. With him died the helplessness, the naiveté that characterized the beginnings of Yiddish poetry in America. He wrote his childish verses with his heart's blood. His lines breathe sincerity; but if sincerity is necessary for anyone with talent, it is simply excess baggage for someone who busies himself with literature but has no talent for it.

In those years, Morris Rosenfeld was beginning to make his mark. By the end of the eighties, two slender volumes of his verse had already appeared. He was free of the naiveté that was characteristic of Edelstadt. A talented, able workman, Rosenfeld tries his hand at everything. For him social wrongs and later national sufferings and hopes are not something personal—as they were for Edelstadt—but themes. Essentially anti-social, he becomes a poet of social suffering and aspiration. And in the same breath in which he declaims and celebrates the eternity of the Jewish people and sounds off in that melodramatic pathos which is so characteristic of him, about the beauty of the Yiddish language, calling it his “best part, which he holds dear and holy,” he complains that Jews refrain from becoming Americanized and that they speak Yiddish rather than English.

A slight acquaintance with Morris Rosenfeld's poems suffices to discover his anti-social character in spite of the fact that he wrote so much on these subjects. That all those “strong” words he uses in his social verses are no more than words is clear from the fact that when he writes subjective lyrics, he has only tears, tears, and more tears. And it is impossible to believe that this person who is so thoroughly tear-soaked really possesses that strength. It is, however, not really strength but a pose, and not a personal pose at that, but the pose of the period.

Still more: for a poet with a feeling for social life, social themes are the same as, let us say, love. How does a poet sing of love? He loves, he loved, but never he will love, he is getting ready to love, he is preparing to love. Hundreds of demonstrations took place; strikes were called; these, however, were never noticed, never celebrated by

Morris Rosenfeld. For his part, he merely called upon people to strike, to demonstrate, to revolt. He was the cold bell, not the living participant.

And speaking of Morris Rosenfeld, I have in mind not him alone but all of his contemporaries, of whom he and Bovshover were the most important.

And however ludicrous it may sound, it is nonetheless true: we do not have any national or social poetry (with some minor exceptions, mostly of recent vintage). What we did have was this: *the national and social movements maintained their own rhyme departments*.

Abraham Liessin was an exception. He came here during the mid-nineties. Socialism was for him more than just a subject that a socialist might properly deal with. It was his faith, his ideal. In this respect he resembled David Edelstadt, except that he was more profound, more varied, and above all more talented. Moreover, as the movement outgrew its toddler stage, he used verse more and more sparingly.

The history of Yiddish poetry to the beginning of the present century is essentially the history of an episode in the labor movement. All the poets of the first period, notwithstanding the fact that they also wrote on subjective themes, are a part of the labor movement simply because their entire energy was harnessed to its directives and because the working masses were their sole readers and supporters. The Jewish middle class was busy climbing the economic ladder and was in essence assimilationist.

At the beginning of the present century, this poetry reached its zenith, but at the same time new faces began to appear foreshadowing new times.

Yehoash, who had been silent a long time, began to appear more often. Increasingly, he attracted the attention of the better class of readers that began to develop here and of those new immigrants who had immersed themselves in Yiddish literature while they were still in Russia. More and more, Rosenfeld's vulgarity began to pall. Yiddish poetry began to be an end in itself rather than a means. New notes began to be heard. There was a much more respectful attitude to Yiddish. Signs of new forms began to appear. Joel Slonim brought something new with him, a new tone, though it was still something on the surface rather than organic. Never before had there appeared so many poets, never before so many poems as during the years 1900-1906. What was most characteristic of these poets was that they learned—in comparison with those of the earlier years—to write smoothly. It was perceptibly a period of transition, and the

most representative poet of that transition time was H. Roizenblat, a faceless versifier.

Meanwhile, Yehoash's name continued to grow. If Rosenfeld was the poet of the immigrants of the 1880s and after, Yehoash became the poet of the new nationally oriented Jewish youth that began to immigrate after Kishiniev.¹

Calmer, cooler, more respectable, more responsible than Rosenfeld, although limited in talent, he approached his calling with dignity. He represents the promise of *literature*.

Still, during the very years that Yehoash was growing, he passed by without any significant influence on those among the younger writers, who after a few years of floundering began to group together, to publish anthologies and individual works, and who later became known as the "Yunge."

It was neither a school nor a particular direction that bound together all those who grouped around the anthologies. Their aim was poetry in its own right and for its own sake. And when, by dint of united effort and after several years of struggle and derision they raised the level of Yiddish poetry and, most important, raised their own level to that of poets, then everyone went off in his own direction, and each of them is making his own contribution to Yiddish poetry as are also those who have followed them—each according to his talent and his temperament. They have given Yiddish poetry its own character and they have broadened its scope, because to enlarge Yiddish poetry was the very essence of their emergence.

I have tried—and under the circumstances I have more or less succeeded—to present a portrait in this anthology of Yiddish poetry in America, a portrait of that which a separated part of the Jewish people has created in the course of forty years in its new home.

I did not consider popularity or fame. Circulation is after all no measure of talent. Let the publisher rejoice when a book of his sells well. And the judgment of the critic is also without value if the poet praised passes by leaving no influence on his contemporaries and, most important, on the succeeding generation of poets.

I did not approach my task from a historical point of view, simply because thirty years are no history even if much that was done during that time might by now well be historic. It is at best an episode.

It also seemed to me that to use a historical approach to writers who are in the full bloom of their activity is an offense, and those who laid or helped lay the cornerstones of Yiddish poetry in America are today writers in their fullest bloom. They are writing much better—in any case no worse—than they did before. The fact that

they now pass by unnoticed simply shows how thin was the taste of their readers and critics who very nearly acclaimed as geniuses poets that at best cannot be denied a modest measure of talent.

I sought in Yiddish poetry first the living inevitable word. I opened my anthology to every direction, school, movement—and, incidentally, all of these are not present among us as they are not present in every literature which is beginning to develop. I allocated space to poems written in modern form, and at the same time I looked for those that recalled, even weakly, the old masters of our poetry.

How easy it was to be included in this anthology! During the entire time that Yiddish has been written in America, a little over one hundred persons have concerned themselves with writing verse. A great proportion of these regarded the pursuit as a pastime. Others were forgotten along with the day that saw their verses appear. Nevertheless, I have collected some thirty names. When you consider that in languages where thousands write poems only a few dozen are anthologized, it becomes clear how little it took to be included here.

Those who were not included had no reason to be. It is surely possible that I have been overly generous to many; but unjust—to no one.

There is only one Yiddish poetry. For technical reasons I have concentrated—for the present—on America, since Yiddish poetry is mainly scattered among periodicals and difficult to collect from a distance.

In one respect it was not so easy to determine who should and who should not be included in "the Yiddish poetry of America." Many who had begun their literary activity in other lands came here, but not all can properly be included in the American roster. I have, therefore, included only those whose poetic features developed here, and I have omitted those who arrived here with a finished literary physiognomy.

Translated by Joseph C. Landis

NOTES

¹[i.e., the Kishiniev pogrom of 1903, which convinced untold numbers of Russian Jews that hope for a meaningful future for Jews in Russia was futile.—Ed.]