

For English Readers, A Gift of Yiddish Poetry

A TREASURY OF YIDDISH POETRY, edited by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. New York, 1969. 378 pp. \$10.00

Reviewed by ISIDORE HAIBLUM

This book is the first of its kind to succeed, the very first to present Yiddish poetry in English translation in a way that truly makes sense. It shows us what can be done.

To begin with, there is the introduction. Sixty-six pages of polished, erudite prose—it is simply the best introduction to Yiddish poetry we have in English—and by itself, well worth the price. Then, of course, there are the poems—nearly two hundred and fifty—the work of fifty-six major Yiddish poets, and they are a joy to behold.

It is no surprise that Irving Howe—critic, essayist, social historian—and Eliezer Greenberg, the distinguished Yiddish poet and critic, should have brought it all off so splendidly. This is really their second collaboration. In 1953, they compiled *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, a landmark event, and in so doing supplied us with nothing less than the best introduction to

Yiddish prose we possess in the English language.

Difficult Undertaking

A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry, however, was a far more difficult undertaking than its predecessor. The problems involved in poetry translation are immense. Two previous anthologies of Yiddish poetry—the work of others—show quite clearly what can happen despite the very best intentions; one deals with the American scene; the other takes a world view. In both cases the editors were their own translators, and, while the words were all there, the music somehow was gone.

What Howe and Greenberg have done is to go after the craftsmen; they have lined up an enviable ensemble of translators, one that is many-voiced and equal to the task—or as equal as possible when dealing with the capricious white goddess of muse. Not everything has gone smoothly—how could it?—but they have come closer, so far, than anyone else in revealing the hidden wonders of the Yiddish word to the American reader.

Anyone who is at all interested in modern verse, who has rejoiced in

the works of Eliot, Auden, Frost, William Carlos Williams or Robert Lowell will probably want to own this book. It is a volume of sudden discoveries: Mani Leib, Zishe Landau, Moishe Leib Halpern (*Moishe Leib der Takhshit*, Moise Leib the Rascal, as he sometimes referred to himself in those blistering, biting, ironic poems that shook the Yiddish literary world of the twenties), H. Leivick . . . Who were they? Why, the very best of poets. And as Howe and Greenberg tell us:

. . . they were also poverty-stricken immigrants, and some would remain workers for the bulk of their lives. Mani Leib was a shoemaker and for a time a laundryman, Landau began as a house painter, Leivick worked for many years as a paper hanger, and Halpern was a waiter and Jack-of-all-Trades . . .

As late as 1934, when Leivick had

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become a world-recognized poet with work translated into most European languages, he could still be seen in the streets of New York carrying his paint bucket and wall paper.

But how they could sing!

More or less part of a group dating from 1907, called *Die Yunge*, they are the ones who brought modernism into the mainstream of Yiddish American literature. Jacob Glatstein (one of the towering figures), A. Glanz-Leyeles, N. B. Minkoff followed: they were the *In Zich* poets, college men with an eye to what was going on in American and British poetry. Still later we have Itzik Manger, Chaim Grade, Abraham Sutzkever (all grandmasters) and all the others who come before, in between and after. In these pages, there are few minor voices.

Many translators have lent a hand, and it is only natural that their linguistic abilities vary. Some, like Stanley Kunitz and Marie Syrkin, are top-notch. John Hollander is especially outstanding; everything he has touched in this collection—and his work is wide-spread—has come stunningly, remarkably to life. His renderings of Moishe Leib Halpern are superb. A. Lutzky, the e.e. cummings of Yiddish verse, was not quite as fortunate with his translator. Lutzky's simplicity presents enormous difficulties and the few selections before us give scant indication of his greatness.

What we have here, then, is merely the barest tip of the iceberg; there is a wealth of Yiddish poetry still waiting to be discovered by the English reader. But this book makes a very fine start. It is a special and a very lovely gift to all those who treasure the muse. □□