

Tears flowing by the stream

After the liberation, we forgot about the song I had written in the Kaisadors work camp. But after the war, the song began an independent life of its own, with no input at all from me. Lila Holzman tells her poem's story

What am I doing here anyway? How did I end up in this place? I'm a 17-year-old girl and I should be at my desk, pondering a problem in the mathematics that I love so much; or maybe having fun at a party with my classmates, surrounded by boys who want to flirt with me; or with my loving family, sitting serenely in my neat, warm house. Right at this moment, I could be with friends and relatives at our summer house in the woods near my home town, picking wildflowers, collecting mushrooms and juicy berries, gathering blueberries and eating them until my teeth and tongue turned blue...

A blow lands on my back, bringing me back to reality. "Arbeiten!" (Work!) yells the Ukrainian guard. My job is to dig up peat with a sharp shovel, while standing in muddy water that reaches almost up to my knees. I have to mold the peat into straight-edged bricks and pile them on top of a broad base until a tall square tower is created. The daily quota is 25 square meters. and

*Hot dos vasserl tsegossen
Oyf mayn shtilen teykhele a shturem iz gevoren-
Un ikh hab dos glik mayns plutslung farloren*

*Nor zogt mir brider
Tsi vet der shturem ven oyfhern
Un dos glik vet vider
Tsurik tsu mir zikh ven umkern
Tsi vet mayn taykhele vi frier flissen
Un mayne trefn umzist nit gissen...?*

I went back to my girlfriends and sang my "Baym Taykhl" (By the Stream) to them. It described the innocent and carefree life that had flowed like the stream, until the waters were suddenly muddied and happiness ended, and how, despite everything, a glimmer of hope remained in the heart. They picked it up immediately, because the words expressed what we were all feeling.

I dedicated it to my friend Nehama, who had lost her entire family a short time before in Ponar, the killing field near Vilna. We sang it in the evenings, when we lay on our hard wood pallets, our stomachs empty. One of our friends, Chaya Segal, was an especially good singer, and the sound of her voice helped us through some of our lowest moments.

After being sent to the Stutthoff concentration camp, which was much worse than the peat mining camp, we were liberated at long last in January 1945. We forgot about "Baym Taykhl" and the other songs I'd written later. But after the war, the song went its own way, without any interference or participation on

It sings me the songs of its fellow rivers
And of the difficult world which goes on endlessly

And each of its songs
Causes me sorrow and pain,
Because it reminds me of the ache of my heart.
Of long years and the desires
For which I lived, to which I aspired.

Because like a small stream,
My life happily flowed.
Until an angry wind
Flooded the banks.
A storm came upon my calm stream
And suddenly I lost my good fortune.

Just tell me, brothers,
If the storm will ever end
And if good fortune
Will come back to me once again,
If my stream will run as it did,
And my tears not flow in vain?

In his introduction to the book, Prof. Rothenberg wrote: "This collection of poems is a tragic document from a tragic period in history. Young people and adults, who were imprisoned behind walls, starved and tortured, felt a need to express their feelings in verse. Apart from a few exceptions, the works present here are of limited poetic value. Their importance is primarily documentary. Anyone who reads them will gain greater insight from observing this 'other plan-

What am I doing here anyway? How did I end up in this place? I'm a 17-year-old girl and I should be at my desk, pondering a problem in the mathematics that I love so much; or maybe having fun at a party with my classmates, surrounded by boys who want to flirt with me; or with my loving family, sitting serenely in my neat, warm house. Right at this moment, I could be with friends and relatives at our summer house in the woods near my home town, picking wildflowers, collecting mushrooms and juicy berries, gathering blueberries and eating them until my teeth and tongue turned blue...

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Nevertheless, even in these conditions, I considered myself a lucky girl. Almost all of my friends and classmates, along with the residents of my town and the nearby towns - approximately 8,000 Jews - had been murdered about two years earlier, in October 1941. Now they all lay in a large mass grave in the forest, about 12 kilometers from Svencian, my home town. I was taken there, too, and miraculously managed to escape from the killing field at the very last moment. By the summer of 1943, I found myself in the Kaisadorys work camp in Lithuania. Hundreds of young Jews from the towns around Vilna were brought to this place, and it was here that we came together, a group of about 20 girls who all shared the same fate - the hardship, the agonies, the typhus and, incredibly, eventual liberation, as well as a powerful friendship that continues to this day.

Our camp and the peat bogs were surrounded by a tall, spiky and well-guarded barbed-wire fence. Beyond the fence lay another world. In the distance, we could see free people hiking at leisure, dressed in their holiday best, laughing and enjoying themselves. We saw mothers pushing baby carriages. How we envied them their normal lives and how we missed the past we'd left behind - a "past" that had not even lasted two decades.

At the edge of the camp, a small nameless stream flowed next to a field. One stormy day, its waters churned and its current grew stronger. Where is it rushing to, I thought. At the sight of it, my heart rumbled, too, till I felt that I could no longer keep silent. I felt a tremendous need to give expression to my profound pain, to my anger at the injustice that had abruptly cut off our youth and enslaved us.

It started to rain. As I looked at the surging water, a melody suddenly began to play in my mind - it was the theme music to the old, sentimental Polish film "Fale Spiewaja" (The Waves Sing). I was overcome with a desire to sing, to shout, to bare my innermost soul, to express my deepest feelings - both the fear and the hope. That long-forgotten tune played in my head, but

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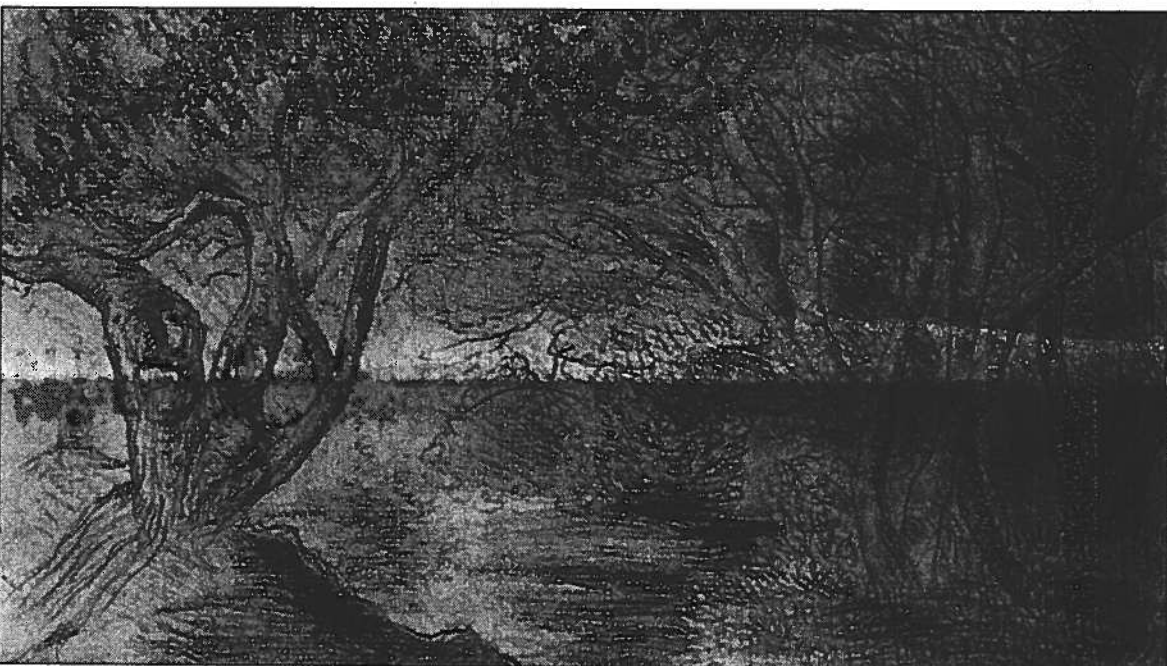
In the 1950s, when I was already in Israel, my uncle in Buenos Aires wrote and told me that he'd bought a book called "Lieder fun die Getos un Lagern" (Songs of the Ghettoes and Camps), which was edited by the famous Yiddish poet Shmerke Kaczerginski. Published in New York in 1948 by the World Congress for Yiddish Culture, it included an introduction by the writer H. Leiwik and contained a collection of Yiddish poems written in the ghettoes and camps. Most of the authors had perished, but my uncle was surprised to find about ten of my poems in the book - including "Baym Taykhl."

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A few days later, a woman student came into the office and said: "I want to show you the paper I've written for Prof. Rothenberg about the poem 'By the Stream,' which is in the 'Young Voices from the Ghetto' book." In her essay, she analyzed the poem and described how it made her feel when she read it. After she let me read it, she remarked: "That poor girl. She suffered so much." I invited her to sit down and then I said: "Rebecca, that girl is me - the person sitting here before you." Neither of us could stop our tears from flowing.



Menachem Shemi, "Trees in a forest"

ביים טייכל

Ich shtei baim tai-chl un kuk far-troi-cat oif dem
va-ser den vint tut fai-fn un dex
ve-ter iz a na-ser a re-gn gist noch
dos tai-chl flist doch vi mai-ne le-bns
teg loift er doch shnel a-vek

Musical setting for "Baym Taykhl."

the Polish words were replaced by something very different.

When the guard stepped away, I took advantage of the moment and slipped into a nearby old barn to get out of the rain. Inside, I quickly scribbled some verses on scraps of paper that I'd collected (to this day, I can't remember where I got a pencil from) and adapted the meter to the melody of the Polish song about the singing waves. I wrote in Yiddish - that was our language. Five verses burst out of me all at once:

Baym Taykhl

Ich shtey baym taykhl
Un kook fartroyert oyfen vasser,
Der vint toot fayfen un der veter iz a nasser,
A regen gist, das taykhl flist
Vi mayne lebenstag loyft er shnel avek.

Vi zargloz shvimt er,
Dos iz zayn tsil shoyne a bashtimter,
Nishto kayn edos dertseylt er mir fun zayne sodos,
Er zingt mir lider fun zayne taykhn brider
Un fun zayn langen veg vas tsit zikh on an ek.

Un yedes lid zayns
Toot mir liden on un shmerzen
Vay es dermont mir on dem vitak fun mayn
Fun yoren lange un die farlangen
Far velkhe ich hab gelebt, tsu vos ich hab
hartsen
geshtrebt

Vayl vi a kleyn taykhele
Mayn leben glieklekh iz geflossen
Biz a vint a beyzer

How did my poems make it into the book? After the war, Kaczerginski, a partisan from Vilna - whose most famous poem is "Shtiler, shtiler, lomir shvaygn, Kvorim Vaksn Do" ("Softly, softly, let's be silent. Dead are growing here," which Avraham Shlonsky translated into Hebrew) had gone around finding survivors in different countries and in the DP camps, and transcribed the songs they'd composed and sung in the ghettoes and camps.

This is how he met my friend Chaya Segal. She sang my songs for him. He wrote down the words, and a musician who was accompanying him wrote the musical notation. I found the impressive volume in a Tel Aviv bookstore. My poems had been published under my childhood name, Lea Svirski, along with some biographical information, some of which was inaccurate. Seeing my poems printed there with hundreds of others, most of whose authors were no longer alive, I was overcome with emotion. Kaczerginski had created a permanent memorial to these people. He himself was killed in 1954 in a plane crash in Argentina, where he lived with his family.

Many years passed. In the 1980s, I worked as the coordinator of the Yiddish program at Bar-Ilan University. One of our faculty members was Prof. Yehoshua Rothenberg, now deceased, who was a Holocaust survivor from Poland. After the war, he emigrated to the United States, and specialized in Yiddish literature at Brandeis University. When he made aliyah, he joined our faculty.

One day, when he was telling me about his work teaching students in the U.S. about the Holocaust, he opened his briefcase and pulled out of it a green volume entitled "Young Voices from the Ghetto." He showed it to me and said: "Look, this is a selection of 20 poems in Yiddish that were written in the ghettoes and camps and translated into English by my students. We chose the best ones from Kaczerginski's book." I leafed through the booklet and saw that five of the 20 poems were mine, including "Baym Taykhl."

The students' English translation of the poem was as follows:

By the stream

I stand at the stream's edge and gaze mournfully
upon the water
The wind keeps whistling and the weather is wet
Rain is pouring down, the stream is flowing on
As my days fly quickly by.

How carefree it swims.
It already has a definite purpose.
It has no weakness, it tells me of its secrets.

At about the same time, the poem also went through another reincarnation. At the end of one Holocaust Remembrance Day, when I returned home late at night from the memorial gathering at Kibbutz Lohamei Ha'getaot, my friend Nehama Bar-On called me. She sounded very agitated. She told me that, that night, she'd seen a program on television about songs from the ghettoes. Nehama, to whom I had dedicated "Baym Taykhl" when I wrote it, had been stunned to hear Miri Aloni performing the song in a Hebrew translation by Rachel Shapira (called "Leyad Hanahal").

Shlomo Arzi, the host of the program, had introduced the show by saying all of the composers of the songs (except for one - Yeshayahu Speigel) had perished in the Holocaust, including Lea Svirski, "who apparently wrote the song at a concentration camp in Poland."

That night, I hardly slept. In the morning, I called the television station (there was only one channel at the time) and asked how I could see the program. I was told that the show, which was called "Sofrim Kol Sha'a Vekol Rega" (Counting Every Hour and Minute), had been produced by Army Radio. I called there right away and introduced myself as Lea Svirski, the composer of the song "Leyad Hanahal."

"But it says here that she died in the Holocaust," a young female voice replied. "But I'm alive and my surname is now Holtzman," I insisted. "Aha, you want to get royalties. Give me your address and speak to the editor, Assi Weinstein." Sure enough, not long afterward I received a modest check from ACUM for the lyrics to the song "Leyad Hanahal" (I kept the check as a souvenir instead of cashing it). But I never did get to see the television program. I also did not obtain a copy of the Hebrew version or hear it sung.

Fifteen more years passed. Then, not long ago, I decided to contact Dalit Ormian, editor of the weekly "Sipurei Shir" program on Israel Radio's Reshet Alef, on which guests tell stories about songs that played a meaningful part in their lives. I proposed presenting my song "Leyad Hanahal." I could describe how it came into being and what had happened to it over the years. Ormian was very enthusiastic and invited me to be a guest on her show, together with two of my friends who had witnessed the song's conception - Sara Epstein and Nehama Bar-On. At the radio studio, the three of us sang the song together, and talked about the circumstances in which it was first sung, in the swamps of the Kaisadorys camp.

A surprise was in store for me at the end of the recording session. Dalit Ormian asked if I'd ever heard the song in its Hebrew translation. "No," I answered. "I'd be happy to have a chance to hear it."

"Well, then I'm going to make you happy," she said. It turned out that the director of their library had done some detective work and located the tape of that program. And so, at long last, I got to hear Rachel Shapira's beautiful rendition of the poem (which was more of an adaptation, than a literal translation) as performed by Miri Aloni.