

# Squandering treasures

It is said that the rich are recognizable not so much by the amounts they consume as by what they waste. By this standard, the Jews are the richest nation in history, squandering such cultural treasures as other nations have only hoped to amass. The poetry of Jacob Glatstein, who died in New York last month right after celebrating his 75th birthday, is a case in point, writes RUTH WISSE, Lecturer in Yiddish Literature at the Hebrew and Tel Aviv Universities.

Glatstein himself raised this matter several years ago, on the discovery of a long-lost piut by Yehuda Halevi: if the English, for example, had unearthed a comparable find, an unknown sonnet of Spenser or Sidney, can you imagine

the schools of scholars that would have hastened to its perusal and the public self-congratulation? But we hardly notice such things, Glatstein wrote, in a heartfelt lament on the neglect of national treasures.

Now Glatstein — author of 11 volumes of poetry, including "Fun Mein Gantzer Mi," his own edition of selected poems, and several volumes of essays, and long-time columnist for "Der Tog" (now "Tog-Morgn Zhurnal")—is dead and the problem pertains to him. The grief at his passing is inevitably deepened by the knowledge that even his best work remains widely neglected. While he lived, the lament might have been for him, but now it must be for us, for a people fortunate enough to have such masters, but too limited to feel the need of them.

verse. The Introspectivist manifesto, signed by Y. Glatstein, A. Leyeles, and N. Minkoff, is very thoroughgoing and impressive, but even at the time of its writing, and certainly later, none of the signators felt bound by its terms. Ironically, Leyeles was at his best within the strictest, most rigorous of classical poetic forms, and Glatstein became one of the greatest national poets of our time.

Glatstein, who attended the City College of New York and its Law School, was the arch-cosmopolitan of Yiddish poetry, and one of its leading intellectuals. The *Inzikhistn* insisted on the intellectual as well as the emotive content of poetry, and Glatstein especially emerged as a clever poet, a universalist, a highly cultured modern. He was well-read in British and American writing, unlike most of his Yiddish contemporaries who were familiar with only the continental and Slavic literatures. It was the more remarkable that he should have been the one to write, in 1938:

*Good night, wide world/ Big stinking world!/ Not you but I slam shut the door./ With my long gaberdine,/ My fiery, yellow patch,/ With head erect,/ And at my sole command,/ I go back into the ghetto...*

(Translated by Marie Syrkin, from "A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry," edited by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg.)

In the same year, in a very similar tone, Avraham Sutzkever, writing in Vilna, took his leave from the international brotherhood of poets with the realization "az s'iz mein muze a mezuza." ("that my muse is a mezuza"). When the world turned its back on the Jew, the Jewish poet bitterly turned his back on the world. But Glatstein's poem became the tragic symbol of affirmative choice even in the crucible of destruction.

The light-hearted irony that shoots through so much of Glatstein's early poetry is inevitably transformed, during and after the War, into an irony of great bitterness and pain: (etc.)

THE ripeness of Glatstein's poetry derives not only from his own considerable talent, but also, in part, from his chronological place in the development of Yiddish verse. When he arrived in New York in 1914, aged 18, from his native Lublin, the first massive waves of Jewish immigration had already settled into America's shores, and a powerful Yiddish culture had come into its own. In fact, Glatstein's arrival coincided with a decisive literary revolution.

The proletarian or "sweat-shop" poets still dominated the daily press. Their strident calls to Strike! had set the standard of literary taste. Their depictions of immigrant and working poverty, in marching lines of steady rhymes and even rhythms, found an immediate audience among the labour movement's orators and the rank and file. But just at the time of Glatstein's coming to America, some younger writers had begun to publish, whose emphasis on personal rather than public expression took its cue from the European symbolists. Their subtle rhythms were modelled on the forms of music; their subjects were loneliness, love, languor... diction was toned down and exclamation avoided.

## The youngsters

The group was dubbed "The Youngsters," (*Di Yunge*), its name underscoring its rebelliousness. The members called their publishing company Island, and throughout World War I, and even the Russian Revolution, they pointedly ignored political topics except in so far as these influenced private sensibilities. The old school was, predictably, outraged: the new poetry was "art for art's sake" (a terrible denunciation) and irresponsible. But eventually, in the nature of such things, the critical taste was assimilated, and the innovations of *Di Yunge* became commonplace for the next group of breakaways. In about 1920 a third-generation of American Yiddish poets declared itself, younger by no more than a decade, but self-consciously "new." Glatstein was in the forefront of these. He thus inherited a brief but considerable "poetic tradition" which he helped to develop to its fullest, richest potential.



JACOB GLATSTEIN

The grouping with which Glatstein is associated called itself "Inzikhistn" (Introspectivists). By pushing the emphasis from public to private a little farther, the Introspectivists set out to present the world as it "filters through the prism of the writer's own consciousness."

The prism gives only fragmented impressions, which appear in the poem as flashes of metaphor and association. A poem of Glatstein's beginning, "I? What am I?" finds its answer in splintered images of sun, doves, a green double-decker bus, a blond girl in blue tulle, an old man whose skeleton seems visible, the Hudson River, etc. The techniques of expressionism had replaced those of the symbolists.

## Free rhythms

*Di Yunge* had begun to experiment with free rhythms, but the Introspectivists fairly insisted on them: "If a poet writes three poems in the same rhythm, two of them (or better still, all three) must certainly be false..." Regular metre was probably suitable to a former life-style, they argued, but the city's irregular, accelerated tempo requires a matching irregularity in its

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Without Jews there is no Jewish  
God.

If we leave this world  
The light will go out in your  
tent.

Since Abraham knew you in a  
cloud,

You have burned in every Jewish  
face,

You have glowed in every  
Jewish eye,

And we made you in our  
image...

(Translated by Nathan Halpern.)

### New coinages

Many of the later poems are addressed to God, either in anger: "God, wherever you may be / There all of us are also not."; or in supplication, "Let me not remain the only one — Do not pass over me with my thin bones."; or miraculously, in compassion: "I love my sorrowful God/My wander-brother."

With incredible skill Glatstein coins new words for his purposes, transforms idioms, teases with internal rhymes, and generally plays with the language in order to achieve its most poignant level of expression. The post-war poems are a true liturgy, and Glatstein a more tender *paytan* than his Addressee seems to deserve.

During the last years of his life, Glatstein's subject became the language of his writing. Strange, that when Yiddish came to be written widely about 100 years ago, almost every one of its users cursed his pen and the hour of his birth for condemning him to so foul an instrument. In our day, the same vulnerability of the language is betrayed by the excessive fondling and praise of each of its devotees. Glatstein's passionate love for Yiddish is always tinged by the realization that the instrument of his greatness may also be his grave.

He has written his own epitaph countless times, and needs no one to interpret for him the glories and the ironies of his life. He brought to Yiddish poetry a shrewd mind and a satirist's eye for detail, combined, as it rarely is, with a wondrous lyrical gift. He made Yiddish poetry very tough, and asked the same of himself and of us, in his poem "Yiddishkeit" reproduced above right).

# YIDDISHKEIT

By Jacob Glatstein

For those Sabbath lights that flame  
in your memory  
and have already become deathbed candles set  
beside a weeping soul,  
do you yearn perhaps, Jewish poet?  
Forget it, they are no more,  
like raining mercy.

It's agony to see that Jewishness  
has become a cantor's call,  
and dried up is the well  
of the whole glowing ritual.

Shall Jewishness become  
only a folk-song,  
that catches at the heart  
and coats the entrails

with the warm honey of memory?

Better to break up such a celebration.

You, Jewish poet, who have become the bee

and produce the honey margarine

that smears a slice of bread with song —

you are no more than a chorister

who has only enough

for an amen in the chorus of decline...

Nostalgia Jewishness is a lullaby for old men

gumming soaked white bread.

Shall we produce the soft crumbs,

the words lifeless and hollow,

we who had dreamed

of a new assembly of Men of the Great Temple?

(Translated by Sarah Zweig Betsky)