

Lamed Shapiro (1878-1948)

ONE OF the most meticulous craftsmen in Yiddish literature, Lamed Shapiro wrote relatively little, but the stories he finally consented to publish after much revising and refining immediately established him as a major force among the younger Yiddish writers. Born in the Ukraine, Shapiro published his first story in Warsaw at the age of twenty-five. Later he went to London, and in 1906 emigrated to the United States. His first book of stories, *Oifn Yam (On the Sea)*, which appeared in 1910, was strongly influenced by the Scandinavian realists. During the early stages of his career Shapiro was known primarily as the author of violent pogrom stories, such as "Der Tselem" ("The Cross") and "Der Kush" ("The Kiss"); but he came to feel that these and similar pieces were too crudely written, and he gradually widened the range of his subject matter and perfected his style.

Shapiro was one of the first "art" writers in Yiddish prose, one of the first, that is, to study and model himself after such masters of European Impressionism as Chekhov and Flaubert. From Chekhov he learned the possibility of employing tone as the unifying principle of a story; from Flaubert he learned the virtues of objectivity and economy. Shapiro's best stories are remarkable for their tightness of structure, their electrical terseness of style, their power of compressed metaphor. While many of them deal with *shtetl* life, they are far removed from the folk manner of early Yiddish literature. Their subject matter is rooted in the past; their mode of organization is entirely modern.

In "The Rebbe and the Rebbetsin," Shapiro evokes—through traditional Yiddish idyll but with a compression quite foreign to it—the aura of an entire way of life. "White Chalah" is a story of a pogrom seen not through the eyes of Jewish victims but as a sternly objective report on a tongueless peasant who comes to seem the personification of primitive violence. "Smoke," in a few sharply elliptical pages, presents the Jewish merchant of half a century ago, one foot in the synagogue and the other in the city. And in the long story "Eating Days" we see the richest and most mature expression of Shapiro's talent: a story that records the breakup of the traditional Yiddish world through the sufferings of a yeshiva student torn between spiritual and worldly appetites.

Pour Out Thy Wrath

— 1 —

True, it was a vicious storm, but when one is nine years old, one forgets the worst of storms. And Meir had just turned nine a few weeks before Passover.

However, it was also true that the fierce, icy, heart-piercing winds that blew through the house always reminded him. But Meir spent more time playing in the wild streets of New York than in the house. Tartilov—and New York. New York had inundated Tartilov and washed it out of his mind. Only a memory and a dream remained. And, moreover, when one is nine, every storm is quickly forgotten.

But even if it were only a dream—what a terrible nightmare it had been.

They were studying in the *kheder*, but really only going through the motions, for at the end of the semester, and with the approach of Rosh Hashana, the rebbi became more lenient. Suddenly, doors slammed, and through the school windows they saw Jews running helter-skelter, spinning and twisting about like leaves in a whirlwind. Suddenly, a witch rose from the earth in a column of dust and spun over the street. It made one's body shudder. Seeing this, the rebbi sank down in his chair, his lower lip trembling, and turned white as a corpse.

Meir never saw him again. Later, he heard that the rebbi had been killed. This news did not please Meir, even though

Pour Out Thy Wrath

145

the rebbi had beaten his pupils severely, but he didn't regret it either. The whole incident was unreasonably preposterous: what did it mean, killed? Thus, in this unresolved fashion, the question receded from his mind along with the rebbi, who was gradually forgotten.

And then came the terror. Separated from his parents, he and other youngsters and several older people lay hidden in the bathhouse for two days without food or drink. He was not permitted to go home. Once, when he began to scream, they almost choked him. He sniffled and trembled for a long while, unable to stop crying. He dozed off a few times, and when he woke everything was the same. In between spells of fear, one word predominated—"peasants"—which gave him a clear comprehension of terror. Everything else was confused, and besides, he had actually seen nothing.

Later, when it was over, still no one came for him, and a stranger brought him home. Neither his father nor his mother said a word to him. It was as though he had just returned from school—as on any other day.

At home, everything had been smashed. Father's arm was twisted and his face beaten. Mother lay in bed, her blonde hair disheveled, her eyes sleepy, her face dirty and pale, and her body crumpled and neglected, like a heavy, wrinkled bedspread. Father silently paced in the house, not looking at anyone, his bandaged hand in a white sling tied around his neck. When Meir suddenly sensed a secret fear and burst out crying, his father merely threw him a gloomy, placid glance and continued his pacing.

Three weeks later, they sailed for America. In mid-ocean the boat rocked and his mother constantly lay in the lower bunk, vomiting piteously. Meir felt fine, and his father maintained his constant pacing on the deck, even during the heaviest rain, until he was chased away.

Meir did not know exactly what had happened, but once

a peasant on the ship quarreled with his father—perhaps he laughed at him. Meir's father just stared at the man—apparently it was no more than a look—but the peasant became frightened, retreated and crossed himself. He spat and muttered under his breath. To be frank, Meir, too, was frightened seeing his father's mouth twisted, his teeth grating and his eyes protruding. Meir had never seen his father that way. Soon his father continued pacing on the deck, his head down in the upturned jacket collar, his hands in his sleeves, and his back hunched.

When they reached New York, Meir became dizzy and Tartilov was lost in a dream.

— 2 —

It was the beginning of winter. Soon the snows came—fresh, white snow—in abundance. Like all other boys, Meir went to school, threw snowballs, rode a sled, started fires in the middle of the street—and no one said a word. At home, all he did was grab a bite and sleep. He lived in the street.

Cold, piercing drafts penetrated the house and made it uncomfortable. Father, a thin, broad-shouldered man, with a dark brown face and black beard, had always been reticent. He rarely said to his wife, "Listen, Tsipe. . . ." But now he maintained an ominous silence. Mother, on the contrary, had been lively, talkative, constantly fussing about. She always turned to father with a constant stream of stories. Suddenly, everything was cut off. Father only paced back and forth in the apartment, and she turned her head like a baby, looking at him, as though always wanting to, but never daring, to say something. A new expression had appeared in her eyes. What, actually? It reminded Meir of the eyes of Mishka, the dog he had played with back home in the dream village. Several times, upon waking up in the middle of the night, he

Mother looked at him with more cowering dejection than ever before. And Meir once again ran out of the house into the tumultuous street.

— 3 —

The snows fell at rarer intervals and then ceased completely, like birds that have abandoned their nests. The air was pregnant with something new—but Meir could not put his finger on it. In any case, it was something good, excellent, which pleased everyone in the street—their faces became brighter and more friendly.

On the morning of the Eve of Passover, the sky cleared partially. Windows were opened for the first time, and street and house joined hands, a proximity that delighted Meir.

His parents had made pathetic preparations for Passover. There was no communal *matza* baking with its festive tumult; instead, a package of baked *matzas* was brought into the house. No barrel of Passover borscht stood in the corner, covered with a coarse tablecloth of starched linen. No dusty, aging dishes were carried down from the attic. Father brought some unmatched pieces of crockery, acquired cheaply from a street vendor. Still, the spirit of the holiday was felt, and it warmed the soul. There had been nights back home in Tartilov when Meir used to lie in bed terror-stricken, listening open-eyed to the dark stillness, thinking that the entire world—that is, the whole house—was dead. It had taken no more than the sudden crowing of a rooster to fill his heart with a hot stream of joy and homey coziness.

His father's face brightened to an extent. During the day when he was wiping the glasses, his eyes looked somewhat distracted, but his lips seemed about to smile. One day, his mother was bustling about almost joyfully in the kitchen, tending to the first *matza* pancakes hissing and sizzling in the

heard his mother weeping, while on the other bed his father puffed away at his cigar furiously. It was frightening to see—tiny fires continually starting in the dark above his father's swarthy face. But Meir's eyes closed of their own accord. Something tangled in his head in confused fashion. His mother, the glowing fire, the room—all of these ebbed somewhere, and Meir slept.

Mother was ill twice during the winter—once for two days, another time, for four—but each time it appeared to be serious. Her face gleamed like an oven, her lower lip became bloody under her sharp, white teeth, and her dreadful groans expressed unbearable pain. And she often vomited, as she had at sea. She vomited as though her intestines were coming up out of her throat.

At those times, she did not look pleadingly at her husband. No, there was something different now. It was . . . it was . . . yes! Once, a sharp thorn entered deep into Mishka's paw. He screeched and moaned with stubborn anger, and chewed his paw as though he wanted to devour it and the thorn.

During those days, Father changed, too. He no longer paced in the house. Now he ran, and the cigar between his teeth smoked and rasped ceaselessly. Instead of the one cloud that hung perpetually over his brow, many clouds now ran through the deep, broad wrinkles, accompanied by an occasional flash of lightning. He did not look at his wife, and neither of them looked at Meir, who felt entirely forlorn and abandoned.

During those days, strangely enough, Meir longed for home. There was nothing unusual about the streets, but his house felt like a *shul* on Rosh Hashana just prior to the blowing of the ram's horn.

Both times after his mother's recovery, a dark shadow again spread over the house. Father became gloomier, and

pan, when a neighbor came in to borrow a pot. Meir stood next to his mother. After the woman had exchanged a few words about the coming holiday, the neighbor said, "So we'll soon have a celebration at your home." With a wink and a smile she pointed to his mother, and Meir suddenly noticed that her figure had rounded out and become full. But he had no time to think about this. From the other room came the sound of glasses smashing. His mother stood crestfallen, and his father appeared in the doorway.

"Get out!"

His voice made the windowpanes rattle as though a heavy wagon were quickly crossing a wooden bridge.

The frightened neighbor turned awkwardly and left the house.

— 4 —

Father and Mother looked odd in their holiday clothes and mournful faces. The entire Seder seemed awkward; it felt more like the last meal before the Tisha B'Av fast. And when Meir, with the colorless voice of a mercenary, chanted the Four Questions, his heart contracted. Everything around him was strangely still, like in *shul* when an orphan recites his first *Kaddish* . . .

Mother's lips moved silently. From time to time she wet her finger and turned page after page. Occasionally, a heavy, shining tear slowly rolled down her lovely but dejected face and fell on the prayer book, the white table cloth, and her clothes. Father did not look at her. Did he notice that she was crying? He was reciting the Hagada so strangely. He sang awhile, drawing out the melody, then suddenly broke off, sometimes with a gurgling sound, as if a hand were strangling him. He looked in to the Hagada, gazed absently around the room, then continued reciting, only to break off again.

They hardly ate. Everyone said grace by himself, silently. "Meir, open the door," his father said suddenly.

Frightened, and with dark thoughts about Elijah the Prophet, Meir pulled the door open.

"Pour out thy wrath on the peoples who do not recognize you!"

A slight shudder suddenly ran down Meir's spine—a strange, absolutely unfamiliar voice rang out from one end of the room to the other, shot up to the ceiling, bounced back and ricocheted among the four walls, like a wild bird in a cage. Meir quickly turned to his father. Horrified, his hair stood up on end. A wild figure in a snow-white cloak, dark beard, and brown, bony face stood straight as a taut string near the table, its eyes glowing with a dark, weird fire. Its teeth grated, and its voice occasionally sounded like the savage lament of a beast roaring for fresh meat and warm blood. His mother jumped up, her entire body trembling. She looked quickly at her husband, and then cast herself at his feet. She seized the hem of his white linen robe with both hands and wailed:

"Shlomo, Shlomo, I'd rather you'd kill me, slay me! Oh the misery, the misery."

Meir felt as though a broad hand with long, naily fingers had dug into his insides and flipped them over. His mouth snapped open, awry, and he emitted a childish scream of fright. Tartilov suddenly swirled wildly before his eyes. Frightened Jews ran in the streets like leaves in a storm. The pale rabbi sat on his chair, his lower lip trembling. Mother lay on the bed all shriveled up like a wrinkled bedspread. Meir clearly sensed that all this had not ended, that it was just beginning, and that the real catastrophe would soon overtake them like a thunderclap. A second scream of helpless terror tore out of his throat . . .

Several Italian neighbors stood in the hall near the door,

regarding the mystifying scene, and exchanging frightened whispers. In the room the wild curse still reigned—one moment in strong, steel-like tones, another with the grim rasping of a dying man:

Great God, all your anger on the peoples who have no God in their hearts.

All your anger on the lands that do not recognize Your name.

He devoured my flesh,

He ravaged my house,

He ravaged me.

Your anger pursue them,

Pursue and catch,

Catch and wipe them from the face of the earth.

(1908)

Translated Curt Leviant