

How “*Unter Fremde Himlen*” was received

Andrew Firestone (2007)

As a young man Yossel was not yet a performer. He published his poetry in journals and newspapers but seldom read it. While wellknown through his communal work, and well liked in Melbourne’s Yiddish community, his book was not reprinted.

The two Melbourne reviewers were Australia’s Yiddish novelist Herz Bergner, and the distinguished literary critic of pre-War Warsaw Yehoshua Rapoport. Both chose to celebrate that young Birstein had *become* a Yiddish writer in Australia – the first ever to do so. (The reviews discussed here can be found on the site in “Archive”.)

Reviewing in OYN, Rapoport writes that Birstein’s poetry first intrigued him while a refugee in Shanghai, when the Melbourne “Tsushtayer” anthology of 1942 arrived. He notes that the title “Under alien skies” is neither a conceit nor a flag of convenience related to his impending departure for Israel; rather, the entire collection of poems “gives the impression that Birstein never once raised his head to regard Australia’s sunny skies; choosing instead to hold firm to his origins - which, remarkably, flourished in their uprooted state”. A homely atmosphere, a single mood, pervade the book. And his attitude is a deeply Jewish one.

Rapoport is acutely conscious of his audience here: it is evident that he is writing in the first place to the young poet himself:

It is good to see the changes Birstein has made, in editing the poems previously published. With this capacity for self-criticism his technical skills will steadily improve. Rapoport singles out for praise “[The Plea](#)” and “[A visitor at my doorstep](#)” and the sonnet “[Di loytere verter](#)” – which he quotes in full. It is true, he writes, that the uniform tone of the collection is monotonous – and yet, because Birstein’s approach is deeply and authentically of the Old Country, that uniformity is its greatest strength. “The poems are often poorly expressed; they are a lot stronger inwardly, than outwardly”. He fully expects steady development in the poet’s work.

Soon after, Rapoport was one of the speakers at the Kadimah function held for Birstein’s book, and he later published his remarks. He began by characterizing poetry (after a disclaimer that critics can’t define poetry, any more than Rabbis can define God) as follows:

1. It’s poetry if, each time you read it over, it grabs your heart anew; and you can’t sum it up, can’t detach it from its context.
2. poetry never comes at the behest of a political programme, but from deep within the poet.
3. poetry works through symbol, by seeing the general in the particular.

And Birstein meets all three criteria. Even a poem like “[At the factory](#)”, with its passionate social programme, isn’t propagandistic; and his national poems too, succeed because they come from deep within. He carries on the

spirit of his grandfather in all his best poems. (This may have been prompted by the latter's recent death).

But now for criticism. The fine poem "[At your fiery wedding](#)" is spoiled by Birstein's striving for rhyme – he shouldn't have used the word "kale-moyd" when just "kale" would have been more apt.

Rapoport ends by acknowledging his envy of Birstein, who has been able to choose Israel and a new beginning; and his own sadness that he himself will remain in Australia.

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A few months later Yankev Glatstein, the great American Yiddish poet and man of letters, reviews the book as well. By now Birstein is in Israel, and Glatstein ponders his situation: *will Birstein go over to Hebrew? That would be a loss, for he is very talented, and attached to our tradition.... Sutzkever is sticking with Yiddish; he translates his work into Hebrew, but the Yiddish remains primary. His skills were already fully developed upon arrival, though... it's not certain, that a beginning poet like Birstein won't go over to Hebrew...*

Glatstein quotes admiringly from [I say farewell](#). *While the influences of other poets (unnamed) are still clearly seen, there are signs aplenty of independent poetic talent. He has found his way to his own voice and his own style. Birstein even bears within him a poet's intimate stillness. He has a musical ear, and although the music often eats up his words or makes them banal – he is such a musician that before we begin to analyse the words, we have already enjoyed the reading of them.*

Like Rapoport (whose review may have been sent to him with the book) Glatstein quotes with approval "**A Visitor at my Doorstep**" and "**The Plea**", and gives both in full (first line of latter omitted – a typo, probably). He admires Birstein's use of refrain in "[Don't Brighten Me](#)". Writing as a practising poet, he says that Birstein's greatest fault may be his sanity, "he is too sane for a young poet", and for the present he is too charmed by the warmth of Yiddish.

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Clearly both of these experienced critics were perceptive, and Glatstein gave sound technical advice. They might have celebrated the book more, but who felt then like celebrating? Both were patronising, and had the right; but one wonders how Yossel, a serious reader, was affected by the bucketings.

Perhaps it was not only the urge to begin anew in Israel that led Yossel to abandon poetry. For to this writer it is both bizarre and instructive, that two such acute readers as Rapoport and Glatstein make no mention of the book's most obvious and striking feature – its **memorial** to the martyrs of his family and town.

The book's dedication names his dead. Bergner's fine drawings show the wasteland. And the first 15 poems form a memorial series. None of this rates a mention from either reviewer!

As it happens, Glatstein's column goes straight on to review another poetry book, and one that, unlike Birstein's, is entirely devoted to the *Khurbn*. Glatstein dubs its author "not a poet but a screamer" – and he ends by asking wearily: how much longer will this kind of poetry retain the immunity (from criticism), that these times are granting it?" ... So that another aspect of these critics' ignoring of Birstein's memorializing may have been – a special kind of reviewer fatigue, a traumatization akin to the "battle fatigue" that war journalists can suffer. Then too, maybe the reviewers' personal losses made them turn away from this pain; and/or they were carefully sparing their readers.

But it may have been simpler, more fundamental than that. It is a poet's job to be ahead of the game. And it was too early, then, for most Jews of the Yiddishland to contemplate all that had been lost.¹

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¹At the time, only young writers who had themselves suffered what they described, like Celan and Wiesel, were getting a hearing. It would be another 10 years before fine writing by non-survivors was noticed.

Item: in 1950, John Hersey's outstanding novel of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, "The Wall" (1950) passed almost unnoticed... the admittedly more popular treatment of the same subject by Leon Uris, "Mila 18" was most successful – but only in 1961. In the same year the fine novel by Andre Schwarzbart "The Last of the Just" became a bestseller as well, in its English translation.