

“A Tree in the Ghetto (Yisroel Shtern)”
 by **Rachel Auerbach**¹ (Tel-Aviv)

From the *Yizkor Book of Ostrolenka* (Tel-Aviv 1963), pp. 387-391
 Translated by Jon Levitow (2006)

Most likely it was in the spring or the beginning of the summer of 1941, the height of the season for hunger and typhus, when the streets were crowded with beggars, peddlers, and street musicians. It was after Hershele's death². I couldn't forgive myself for not having tried in time to feed him in our soup kitchen. So, when I accidentally ran into Yisroel Shtern in one of our institutions, I took him aside and invited him to come every day to Leszno 40 to have some soup. His first question was whether or not the kitchen was kosher.

“What could not be kosher?” I asked, “There's nothing dairy, and there's no meat. We grease everything with oil, so it's always parve.”

Shtern didn't even smile at my irony and didn't say if he would come. Nevertheless, a few days later he showed up, and from then on he came almost every day. When our “hostess” saw him, she immediately responded to my wink and served him a plate of soup without a voucher. She and the regular “boss” of the kitchen, a former landowner in the Ripin area, were used to such “infractions.” They reckoned the new customer as one of my “freebies.” It went no farther, though. They wouldn't have allowed me to let him take food home or to invite him to sit at the table in the main room.

¹ (All footnotes by JL, unless otherwise attributed – Ed.)

Rachel Auerbach (1903 - 1976): A philosophy graduate of Lwow University, Auerbach was a Zionist and a literary modernist. She remained in the Warsaw Ghetto and devoted herself to writing for Ringelblum's archive. She also lectured for the ghetto's "popular university" and worked in a soup kitchen on Kovno St. After the ghetto was destroyed, Auerbach continued to write from a hiding place on the Aryan side, and in 1948 in Warsaw she published *Der Yidisher Oyfshtand: Varshe 1943*. She later moved to Israel, helped found Yad Vashem, organizing the Department for Collecting Witness Accounts, and continued to chronicle life in Warsaw before the war (see Roskies, David. *Literature of Destruction*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1992). She was the author of several books in Yiddish and Hebrew about life in the Warsaw Ghetto and in Israel, including *In the Fields of Treblinka* (1947) and *Testimonies from Warsaw* (1974).

² The brother of Yisroel Shtern, an actor who played character parts as a Hassid, “Hershele” was a well-known personality at the Writers' Club, Tlomackie 13. According to Auerbach in *Testimonies*, he was a parodist who recited verse and sang as well.

In truth – why deny it? – even amongst the uprooted and exhausted refugees from the provinces who made up most of the kitchen’s beneficiaries, Shtern stood out for his frightfully run-down appearance. The bottom edge of his coat was frayed all the way around, and the sleeves were coming out at the armpits. He almost never took the black, oilstained hat off his head. His face was only shaved periodically and was usually covered over with hard, black, unruly stubble.

As I recall there was no longer any suitcoat under his overcoat, and his stomach stuck out strangely. I asked Yosef Kirman about that, and he gave me to understand that since the pockets of the coat were torn out, Shtern carried his most-valued objects in his coat lining – the book he was reading, a volume of Rilke or Kasprowicz³, and his own intact vessel so he could wash his hands according to Jewish law.⁴

It was like the old saying about a wise man carrying all his belongings with him. Already before the war we knew that Shtern was a Hasid and for that matter a Breslaver, one of the “Dead Hasidim,”⁵ but we had never imagined that he was so strictly observant.

*

*

Toward the end of December 1941, the kitchen at Leszno 40 underwent a transformation, from merely providing wintertime assistance to being a full-time convalescent kitchen, cooking thick, nourishing soups, particularly for people who had survived typhus. From that time you could only come in if you had a special document, and then only for one month. We had to put up with continual inspections, but of course I still smuggled in an occasional “exception.” Writer, painter, and musician friends now became interested in the kitchen for its calories. For Shtern, though, it was *kashrut* that was of prime importance. I felt it was my duty to tell him that from then on the food would be cooked with pig fat and horse bones – and he disappeared.

I didn’t see him for a couple of months. Toward the beginning of Pesach in 1942, Yosef Kirman came in to Leszno 40 and told me that Shtern was in a very bad way, near death in fact. I dropped everything, and we both went to see him. In a basement apartment on the corner of Pawia and Smocza streets lived a Chassidic family with some money, and Shtern slept in one of

³ Jan Kasprowicz (1860 – 1926), great poet of Lwow, a socialist (see Wikipedia).

⁴ Any damage to the vessel could easily have rendered it unsuitable for use in washing. The “Shulkhan Arukh” Part 1 158:15 specifies the negative consequences that could result from a lack of stringency with regard to washing the hands.

⁵ So-called, with mild disdain, as the only Hasidim who had never taken another leader after the death of their *Tzaddik*.

their corners. From the barred windows just below the ceiling level only a sparse amount of light came into the room. Two made-up beds covered with red plush covers stood by the wall. An old book case full of *sforim*⁶ stood opposite the door.

At a table in the middle of the room sat a horribly changed Yisroel Shtern. His feet and the rest of his body were badly swollen. His equally swollen face was covered with a half-grown beard like that of a mourner. The family in the apartment excused themselves for keeping his bed made. “If he won’t lie down,” they said, “what can we do?” Shtern listened to the conversation. He himself was upset by his situation and allowed us to decide what was best for him. He set one condition only – he wouldn’t travel in a rickshaw, with a man in harness.

I no longer remember how we conjured up a horse and wagon. There were almost no droshkies left in the Ghetto by that time. We took Shtern to the TOZ⁷ office on Gesia Street, where we had strong “family” connections — the chief of administration himself, the writer Yehuda Feld. Shtern was bathed and dressed in new clothes from the TOZ store, and only then did we allow a doctor to examine him, an internist who didn’t even wait for the results of the tests to come back before injecting Shtern with a large dose of glucose. Afterwards we transferred Shtern to the refugee center at Leszno 14.

We alerted the directorate at the Jewish Social Self-Help Organization,⁸ where we had some of our people, like Yitzhak Gitterman and Emmanuel Ringelblum. On the authorization from the “higher ups,” the administrator of the center allowed us to set up a small bed in an office so Shtern could have his own room. The YISA⁹ stores supplied Shtern with special packages of dehydrated products, and we paid a woman to come and cook and serve for him. We also took care of the medicine and other expenses in order to provide him with some additional vitamins. That’s all we could do. Yosef Kirman dispensed the money, as Shtern himself had a small-town peasant’s difficulty in spending anything. Kirman knew Shtern inside out and devoted himself to him like a brother, catering lovingly to his every whim.

Sometimes Kirman would give me money, and I would go to the market at Leszno 42, two buildings down from the kitchen, in order to buy Shtern a

⁶ Religious books, often folio size.

⁷ "Society for the Safeguarding of the Health of the Jewish Population" (Pol.: "Towarzystwo Ochrony Zdrowia Ludności Żydowskiej"), a pre-war Jewish organization active in the Ghetto. It was located at Gesia 43.

⁸ ZSS, (Pol.: "Zykowska Samapomoc Spolczna"), which operated the soup kitchen in which Auerbach worked. It later became the ZTOS or ZHK, apparently because the Germans objected to the "SS" in their name.

⁹ Jewish Social Self-Help ("Yiddishe Sotzyale Alaynhilf").

little cheese and butter or the first vegetables and fruit which had been smuggled from the Aryan side.

That is how we took care of Shtern and nursed him back to health. Our treatment made a big difference. The swelling gradually went down, Shtern could stand up again, and by the end of June, he was able to go out into the street. In fact, saving him from starvation cost several thousand zloty. I mention this because at the time there were tens of thousands of people in the Ghetto swollen with hunger, and normally this meant their fate was sealed. The soup at the People's Kitchen not only didn't help, it actually caused harm, and it was impossible for the Jewish Self-Help Organization to spend thousands on every swollen victim.

* * *

It was in the first days of the summer of 1942, during the period of nightly acts of murder on the part of the Gestapo, evenings of terror that were the prologue to the first deportation "Actions." All the signs were becoming increasingly dire and threatening; the atmosphere was increasingly tense.

Shtern lay alone in his room, read poetry, and thought. We avoided telling him all the bad news of the street. We didn't bring him the newspapers with their reports of German victories. I believe that during this time Shtern enjoyed a quiet, idyllic period on the brink of the annihilation.

I remember one of the times I visited Shtern while he was laid up at the Center and had a conversation with him. I brought him a paper bag with a few strawberries and a jar of compot.¹⁰ The Center was located on the second floor of the lefthand officeblock, bordered by a wing of the Evangelical Church, which had been closed up. Through the open window a section of Christian architecture could be seen -- a grid of spires, towers, and stone facades, and close by, a broad, silent tree. The chestnut tree was covered at the time with white blossoms like a Christmas tree decorated with white candles. On the high ledges of the church were birds' nests in which young chicks had already hatched. The parent birds flew back and forth to them all day long with crumbs of food in their beaks, twittering and fluttering around the nests, unaware that in the Ghetto the Jews had been sentenced to annihilation.

¹⁰ Auerbach specifies that the compot was made of "veprenes," a word which I cannot identify. Maybe related to Pol./Rus. "werbena," a species of laurel, myrtle, or bay leaf?

Everything was still and secluded, as if the street which was about to breathe its last, feverish breath didn't lie a few steps away, as if even we knew nothing.

"In the shadow of the old cathedral...,¹¹" Shtern and I talked about the little known romantic side of Zola, as revealed in his novel, "The Dream," which describes a love affair between a bishop's illegitimate son and the daughter of an organist.¹² "You won't find a great writer who hasn't been a lyric poet at some period in his life," Shtern remarked. He wanted me to read him a poem by Stefan Georg because it was hard for him to read in the evenings.

"Could you recite one of your poems instead," I said. "Write me a poem about just this tree, blooming in the middle of the Ghetto..."

Before I left, Shtern asked me about the news, and though I managed to avoid telling him about the bad things going on in the city or the worse things that people were talking about – I could see he wasn't allowing himself to be fooled.

"The Germans are strong, very strong," he muttered after hearing about the situation on the front. There was no lack of optimists even in the Ghetto, who saw in every report from West or East signs of the approaching military defeat of Germany. Yisroel Shtern didn't listen to the optimists. He didn't want to harbor any illusions about the future of our Ghetto in Warsaw.

He didn't allow himself to be convinced by empty stories, didn't believe in them.

Or, maybe he couldn't help believing a little?

*

*

Once the deportations began, I never saw Shtern again.

People told me that, drawn into the devil's whirlwind of useless struggle against death, Shtern demonstrated a remarkable instinct for self-preservation. Someone from the Ghetto labor office (I think it was the journalist Ptakowski¹³) signed Shtern up for a job with a German workpost

¹¹ I haven't been able to identify the poem or song Auerbach is quoting here.

¹² Perhaps Auerbach's memory fails her here. In Zola's "A Dream," a minor work in the Rougon-Macquart cycle, the girl is illegitimate and is the daughter of a tapestry embroiderer rather than a Church organist.

¹³ (Yizkor Book Editor's 1963 note): Currently known as Marian Podkowinski, a Polish journalist in West Germany and the author of several books about Germany.

on the Aryan side, and for some time Shtern could be seen, early every morning, there in the rows of workers who used to cross over to the Aryan side before the “blockades”¹⁴ began.

Shtern was already over fifty, but like others temporarily filled with “workshop-fever,” he tried to appear young and vigorous. Someone told me that he had even managed to get hold of a new, bright-blue, starched jacket, and with a checkered cap pulled over his head and a canvas bag slung over his shoulder, he marched in step with the other workers.

The masquerade did not last long. In the latter half of August, Shtern fell into one of the “wild” blockades.

These extra blockades would occur if, by nightfall, a transport in the deportation area¹⁵ was still a few hundred “heads” short of quota. The SS men, already tired out from screaming and shooting and anxious to finish work, would send a few Ukrainians to stand by the Ghetto gates, where from five o’clock on the work groups returning from the Aryan side gathered. They would divert some of them back to the deportation area. Sometimes they carried out a last minute selection among the workers, but mostly there wasn’t time for that, and they propelled them all straight to the wagons, with the packages of green onions or bunches of carrots that they were bringing home to the Ghetto still in their hands. Among these “heads” was one crowned with an invisible laurel wreath.

* * * * *

Yisroel Shtern was one of the most significant poets to come along in our literature after World War I. As early as the 1920’s, his series of “hospital poems” placed him in the front rank of Yiddish poets across the entire world. A deeply religious fervor colored his view of the world. Every stanza of his breathed with internal warmth, an original mix of Jewish learning and modern thought, of the “shtetl” and the larger world.

His background, the particular circumstances of being a Jewish poet, as well as the usual incongruities and struggles which a poet has with his or her environment, made him what he was: at one and the same time a spiritual giant and yet a *batlen*¹⁶. His impracticality was so extreme that in his entire life he never managed to put together and publish a collection of poems.

¹⁴ As made clear below, the “blockades” were means by which the Germans rounded people up to be deported during the depopulation “actions” in the Ghetto during the summer of 1942.

¹⁵ The infamous “Umshlagplatz.”

¹⁶ Heb./Yid: “batlen” – lit., an idler, an impractical person; someone resembling a traditional student devoted to learning, but unsuited to life. (Shternberg – Hebraizmen, 1943)

At least, that was how he was, Yisroel Shtern, until the outbreak of the Second World War. What became of him during that time of destruction? To what I've already said about his fate I can add a word about the spiritual transformation that he went through during that period.

Those who observed him in the Ghetto said that after his years of seclusion, the recluse had finally revealed himself.¹⁷ He became approachable, and active in the community. In fact, Shtern felt in his element in the tense atmosphere of Jewish fatality and human suffering, from which he drew powerful inspiration.

*

*

Piles of corpses filled the paths of deportation and torture, from one end to the other of occupied Poland. Through streets crowded with the hungry, and echoing with the cries of beggars and peddlars, Death strolled at midday, dressed in the green uniform and helmet of a German policeman skulking by the Ghetto walls, keeping watch at the gates, and shooting at little children with a rifle. The dead lay on the edges of the sidewalks covered with sheets of paper. Contagion ran riot. The burial man and the town lunatic did their work – would a poet be missed? The thicker the shadows became – Markish's "Days of Blood and Honey" – Jewish days – the heavier became the heart, and the more tightly shut the lips of the Yiddish poet.

At the end of his days, Yisroel Shtern became one of those nameless comforters who could be seen standing at corners and in courtyards after the nights of executions, giving words of comfort, reciting songs of consolation. The tragic and the grotesque, the fantastic and the extraordinary were endlessly disturbing and demanding, digging into the deepest levels of the soul.

All activity in the Ghetto had to be in the guise of philanthropic service. Under the label of social assistance, literature received support as well. It was nothing short of astonishing: we had never seen so much demand for literature as during the Ghetto years.

At Leszno 14, where Shtern later recuperated in the "Center," a kitchen for intellectuals (previously for journalists) was set up a couple of months after the introduction of the Ghetto. It was organized and run by A.M. Apfelboim, a former member of the editorial staff of *Moment*. Apfelboim began a series of

¹⁷ Yid., "madreyga fun hisgalus," from Heb: "madreyga" and "hitgalut," "the level of revelation." The expression was used of *tzadikim* or holy people among the Hasidim in particular who spent their youths inconspicuously among their peers and then "revealed" spiritual greatness later in their lives – the *Ba'al Shem Tov* for example.

Saturday afternoon events at the kitchen which he called “Literary Third Meals.”¹⁸ For a little money, you could get a glass of imitation coffee with real sugar, and a piece of cake made of wheat flour and potatoes. Writers and artists got in free. The main attraction was the literary program.

On the podium was a table covered in a white tablecloth, on it a pair of brass Sabbath candlesticks. The walls were decorated with stylized Hasidic figures cut out of colored paper. That was all – a gesture in the style of Peretz, already conventional by that time. But with Yisroel Shtern seated there, lost for a time in silent thought before he started to speak – it was as if letters of fire were flying about the room. Whatever he discussed we listened rapt to his poetic “Torah,” his lofty philosophical thought which was combined with pure poetry in a single flame.

He had lost his front teeth, and it was difficult to understand him. Although his voice rolled through the hall like a growl or a murmur, his meaning reached the listeners. And the number of his “hasidim” increased from one week to the next.

Sometimes he would read from his own new verses, written about our present circumstances. I can remember only a hint, a fragment from one of these poems. It was one that Shtern read at the “Mendele” celebration which we made the most of in those Ghetto days. It was called *A Letter to America*, and was modeled on a popular song¹⁹. It was a lament and a greeting, from those sentenced to death, to the Jews far away who would one day mourn our annihilation. Perhaps we didn’t understand this at the time – perhaps Shtern himself didn’t either – but the poet in him could feel it and foresaw it with poetic prophecy.

How my heart aches to think that the rumbling, profound wisdom of his voice was silenced before its time.

Shtern died in August 1942, and with him were lost all his poems of those years, poems even richer and more profound than his previous writing, as lovely as the last light of sunset. If one day amongst the Ghetto ruins the buried third part of the Ringelblum archive is discovered as well²⁰, my papers

¹⁸ Heb. “Seuda Shlishit,” a third meal late on the Sabbath day, particularly significant for Hasidim.

¹⁹ (Ed.) Possibly “A Brivele der Mamen.”

²⁰ (Ed.) At the time the essay was written, parts of the Ringelblum archive had already come to light, discovered in 1950 by building workers under the remains of 68 Nowolipie St. These included Auerbach’s own historic testimony of her interview with Abraham Krzepicki, who had provided the first eye-witness account of Treblinka concentration camp in September 1942 (Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust*, Fontana p/back 1987, p.458).

will be there, given into safekeeping after the Action had begun. Amongst them, written on the back of a laundry receipt, will be found the poem Shtern wrote about that tree in the ghetto, the poem I “commissioned” from him a month before the liquidation, which I took to read over but was never able to return.
