

Yisroel Shtern: Poet

by H. Leivick

(Introductory essay to 1955 volume "Lider un Eseyen")

Translated by Jon Levitow (2007)

The present edition of the poems and essays of Yisroel Shtern (of blessed memory) is not a selection but rather a collection of his work. It includes almost everything¹ that the poet published in Yiddish newspapers, weeklies, and yearbooks in Poland during the course of two decades, from around 1919 until the murderous years of the Warsaw Ghetto, when the poet's profoundly tragic life was cut short.

The goal of the L.M. Shteyn Library² is usually to provide a one volume selection from a writer's many publications. In the case of Yisroel Shtern, however, there was no question of choosing among his works. True to his unique essence, Shtern published no book in his lifetime, and as far as we can tell from him and his behavior – the behavior of a person who lived outside normal interests and accepted conventions – he neither desired nor had the inner capacity to occupy himself with conserving and assembling his pieces within a book's covers.

His few poems and his essays are scattered throughout many different periodicals, and collecting them for the present edition has been no easy task. Although the artistic merit of Yisroel Shtern's writing and of his verse in particular called for the greatest pains on our part in locating each and every poem, we remain nevertheless uncertain whether every poem and essay that Shtern published has been uncovered. Thus, we deem it fitting to say that this collection includes *almost* everything of his.

During one phase of his life, Shtern published a number of essays about European writers in Bundist publications for young people under the pseudonym Avigdor Tz. Dunkin.³ We have probably not found all of these

¹ (Ed.) In actual fact, thanks to the cataloguing work of the Yiddish Dept of the Hebrew University (made publicly available at www.jnul.huji.ac.il/iyp/) we now know that the 1955 publication represents less than half of Shtern's writings. This website aims to present all of Shtern's work in one place.

² (Trans.) The L. M. Shteyn People's Library of the World Yiddish Cultural Congress brought out the Shtern collection through CYCO Publishers – see notice on this website "[Buy the Book](#)".

³ (Leivick): The four essays at the end of the present volume in particular, written in a more or less popularizing spirit, were published by Shtern in the Bundist publication *Yugntveker*, Warsaw 1930, under this pseudonym. (Trans.): See "[Ven Di Revolutzye Kumt On](#)," "[Literary Monuments to the Millions Slain](#)," "[A Book Against War](#)," and "[Edgar Alan Poe](#)" on this site.

either⁴. Meanwhile, regarding the work which he never published and intentionally kept hidden – we can say nothing.

Near the end of his essay, “Features of a Biography of Yisroel Shtern,” which we present as the introduction to this volume, Shtern’s townsman Menakhem Flakser passes along the reports of eyewitnesses who testify that Shtern wrote a lot in the Warsaw Ghetto, but these works were destroyed along with him, and regarding these we can also say nothing.⁵ They died a holy death together with their creator.

The present collection consists of around 290 pages, and we approach them with a special awe suitable for the book of a uniquely tragic Jewish poet, whose death in the Ghetto has been wrapped in legend, just like the martyr’s death of another exceptional, Jewish creative spirit, Hillel Zeitlin (of blessed memory). He had warmly supported the young Shtern during the intensely creative years of the 1920’s, and Shtern became an intimate and welcome visitor in Zeitlin’s home. Moreover, in 1920 Zeitlin had published three of Shtern’s first poems in his periodical *The Bush*⁶: “Echo,” “The Moon in the Window,” and “In the Time of the Black Rain.”

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My present remarks should not be considered as criticism or precise evaluation (which could certainly be provided by a professional critic) but rather as the natural outgrowth of a special personal influence and inspiration which I drew from Yisroel Shtern’s fate as a poet: first when I met him during a visit to Warsaw in 1925, and even more so when the legend reached us, in 1945, of how Shtern perished in the Warsaw Ghetto. As I read over his collected poems today, they reawaken in me this same influence and inspiration. I feel that his tormented death is somehow inextricably bound up with the present edition and with the profoundly tragic abyss found in his poems, the same abyss which I see in his catastrophic, personal story.

Yes, I feel the poet Yisroel Shtern lived his life under the ominous sign of catastrophe, and that he foresaw the direction that the world and our people were headed. He discerned the approaching funeral pyres long before they were lit. He suffocated in the anxious darkness before the fateful nights arrived.

⁴ (Ed.) The Hebrew Univ. catalogue so far lists none, however (2006).

⁵ (Trans.) In her reminiscence of Shtern, “[A Tree in the Ghetto](#),” on this site in “[About Shtern](#)”, Rachel Auerbach says that at least one poem by Shtern was deposited in a third part of the Ringelbloom archive, which has never been recovered.

⁶ (Ed.): The title of the periodical referred to the Burning Bush seen by Moses.

Isolation, bitterness, poverty, orphanhood; the hardness of stone, distance, and alienation from people that had to be re-dreamt and remade into closeness; an estrangement from God that must issue forth in a revelation – he lies in a bed in the hospital, gravely ill, his health broken, but in the hospital for the first time he begins to shed the coarse husk of his sorrows. The frozen vice of sadness and doubt melts away. In the hospital for the first time spring arrives for him. He joyfully recognizes God’s smile in the faces of his fellow patients, and he composes his influential poem “Springtime in the Hospital,” published in the Warsaw Yearbook of 1924.

Was Shtern “observant” in a traditional Jewish sense? That much is doubtful, but he was certainly religious. Without question, the breath of mysticism had touched him, and he lived his life in a mystical way. God’s smile did not rest on him at all times, however. His religiosity drove him to seek the isolation of his room (who knew where his place of rest was located?) where in futility he banged his head against the wall.

He published in the *Literarische Bleter*, in the Bundist *Folkstsaytung* and in other Bundist papers. Was he a Bundist⁷? No, but his heart went out to the poor, suffering, common people, to workers who lived like slaves, to insignificant, wonderful, invisible Jews.

It was the ragged, overlooked masses which interested him. He himself dressed poorly and neglectfully, his pockets filled with literature, with writing – his own, that of Jews, and that of non-Jews as well.

He was always welcome at the Literary Union in Warsaw. All his colleagues at the time were aware of his unique power. I myself witnessed this when I visited Warsaw in 1925.

When he came in, he sat by himself, self-absorbed, and then got up suddenly and left. Where did he go? He had no family.⁸ He meandered through the Warsaw streets, the Jewish ones in particular. He could spend the entire day just wandering.

What was he looking for? He alone knew.

⁷ (Ed.): H.Leivick, together with a good part of the intended readership of the 1955 book, was a Bundist – hence this rhetorical question.

⁸ (Trans.): Leivick is not correct about this. We know that Shtern had at least one brother, named Hershel, living in Warsaw before the war with a reputation as an actor. See Auerbach, in “About Shtern” on this site.

He was heavy-set, with broad shoulders. His steps were heavy even when he had not eaten all day.

He would often drop in to the “shtibl” of the Bratzlaver Hasidim, the “Dead Hasidim” as people called them. Something in him responded to them. He would stay there all day, as though he was one of their own, sitting and learning. Why did he do it? Because he was fleeing from people or because he had found God?

Sometimes both: he ran, and he found.

Sometimes neither.

Then he went back to the streets.

The sky above Warsaw rose up over him full of fear, raw with loneliness, and in his loneliness he cried, “God, be with me!”

Then, still crying out to God, he fell into ecstasy, thinking of Peretz.

Peretz represented to Shtern the most glorious example of a Yiddish poet and artist. He counted himself fortunate to live in the same city and the same era as Peretz, and unlucky in that Peretz was no longer living. We can deduce this from his ecstatic words about Peretz in his great essay, “Crowns to Adorn the Head of Yiddish Criticism.”

In his book, “My Lexicon,” published in Montreal in 1945, Melekh Ravich⁹ describes Shtern by saying, among other things, the following: “Yisroel Shtern – people said – had gone through a particular, intimate experience, which left a wound in him that could not be healed, and for this reason he suffered as much as he did.” In his biographical introduction, Menakhem Flakser also mentions Shtern’s tragic experience in his early years, which supposedly left a sad mark on the remaining course of his life and on the nature of his poems.

Should we accept that some hidden, one-time experience on Shtern’s part, the secret of which the poet was never to reveal in his writing, caused the entire – as one might describe it – catastrophic essence of his poetry? It seems to me that it would be a mistake to think so.

⁹ (Leivick): We thank Melekh Ravich for the lifelike photograph of Yisroel Shtern which he provided from his personal collection for the present work.

Without doubt such a hidden, one-time experience would have affected his mood and reinforced his basically tragic poetic orientation; but the general tenor of his poetry must surely have become deeply rooted in his personality in his childhood and youth -- developing a particular, sad edge which was both personal-individual and national-religious.

According to Zalman Reizen's lexicon, Yisroel Shtern made his poetic debut in the weekly, "The People," in 1919. Immediately afterwards he published a series of poems (as I've mentioned) in Hillel Zeitlin's periodical *The Bush*. Later came his poems "Springtime in the Hospital" and "Ostrolenka" (*Literarische Bleter*, 1927).

Already in his first poems, those features of Shtern's poetry appear which came to full expression later – most notably, a way of identifying with inanimate objects, with silent objects in nature and in the city – in the street, in the home – with the sidewalk, a light post, a tree, stones, walls, clouds, a dog – as if he saw his own fate to be worse than theirs, and he envied them.

He says in one poem,

*I envy no one
except the scythe's song
in the evening village.*

Or,

*My sadness
hangs from the trees,
never reaching the ground –*

In one of his first poems, "In the Time of the Black Rain," we see the texture of his sadness when forebodings take hold of "dead brothers who approach and drag (the poet) by the toes toward them..." and he complains,

*--- You know our places,
wild roads through a wild forest,
and You have sworn
by Your holy mercy
not to let our little world
go under:
see how the storm has toppled our old trees,
and we the despairing young
beat our heads on the ground, like grass.*

This was two decades before Maidanek and the Warsaw Ghetto.

He strode through the free Warsaw streets of those days and asked such characteristically Shternish questions as:

*Why is every post and roof
sovereign over its own shape
while I must lower my eyes?
Am I worse than the sidewalk
which lies content and unashamed
and looks directly into Heaven?*
("A Daytime Prayer")

Could anyone at that time have told Shtern that a day would come when he and all the Jews of Warsaw would indeed be worse off than the sidewalk? Yet, twenty years later it happened. The sidewalk was better off, and he, Shtern, sought for a way to fall into it and stay there.

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In his book, "Images from Home" (Tel-Aviv 1953), Moshe Grossman relates how H.D. Nomborg ecstatically greeted the "Hospital Poems" of Yisroel Shtern, "that strange and eccentric man," and Grossman himself followed Shtern in wonderment through the streets:

I followed him (writes Grossman) for more than an hour through the streets of Jewish Warsaw, watching him, observing. He was wearing old, worn-out, faded clothes, his shoes and his face alike tired, worn, wrinkled, and dusty. Only his eyes were bright, childlike, as if at the beginning of Creation, with a fire of faith. He rocked back and forth as he walked, as if in religious devotion, a messenger, a stranger, a visitor from far away...

Grossman's description thoroughly matches the impression that Yisroel Shtern made on me when I met him, as I mentioned earlier, during a visit in 1925. I say "met," but it wasn't really that easy to meet him. He was not a frequent visitor at the Literary Union in Tlomackie 13. Colleagues in Warsaw would tell remarkable tales about him, speaking of him with little smiles; but also with a basic, inner respect.

The one time I met him in the Writer's Union, Shtern appeared exactly as Grossman describes him. He sat alone, off by himself, preoccupied, silent. I went up to him and introduced myself.

“I would like to make your acquaintance, colleague Shtern,” I said.

He got up in haste, his mild eyes taking me in, and said, “I would like that.” He took my hand in his, which was large, thick, and heavy. I can still remember the pressure of his hand.

“In the last few days I’ve been reading your poem, ‘The Wolf,’” said Shtern in a quiet voice, “and I was very moved.”

“Why ‘The Wolf’ in particular? I asked.

He murmured something inaudibly and then said, “That’s just how it is; just the way it is.”

I told him of the powerful impression which the poems of his that I’d read had made on me. He thanked me and sat silently. I finally asked if he thought of going to America.

He answered heavily, “What would I do there?” –

During the Hitler years, when the fate of the Warsaw Ghetto began to reach us, there also came reports of the extraordinary way that Hillel Zeitlin went to his death and how Yisroel Shtern perished. When we heard these reports, we all felt they fit the personalities of both martyrs exactly, that they seemed to proceed directly from the way they lived their lives. Regarding Shtern, it was painfully clear to me why he had told me twenty years before that he was particularly moved by the narrative poem ‘The Wolf’. Yes, it was painfully clear. He actually lived out what the poem relates about a Rabbi in a period of destruction, while I – I only told the story. ---

What is mere legend and what truth? Purified and transformed, reality takes on the dream-form of that which refines it in fire. The legend about Hillel Zeitlin in which he goes to his death wrapped in a *tallis* accords completely with his manner of living.

So too does the legend of Yisroel Shtern’s death agree with the image we all had of him. In his short reminiscence, M. Valdman of Paris relates an anecdote he calls precisely, “A Legend – Yisroel Shtern:”

He (Shtern) disappeared in the first days of the war. No one saw him for some time. He reappeared only after the bombardment had ceased. He met his friends with a quiet whisper, as if he was reciting a blessing over each of them. The last time I saw him was Oct. 15, 1939.

I sought him out so I could say farewell to the poet I esteemed, that everyone esteemed, and also to find out what he planned to do. Warsaw lay in utter ruin. People filled the streets, searching every corner anxiously and fearfully for the shadows following them. Suddenly Yisroel Shtern materialized before me like a miracle. He walked up, his eyes fixed ahead of him, sad, depressed, tired, and more disheveled than ever. His worn-out coat, once black but now grey and yellow, billowed in the wind like a paper sack in spite of its stuffed pockets. Thus did he drag himself around with his only possessions, the poets he most admired, his Rabbis, philosophers... He didn't want to leave Warsaw. Go where? He said that he couldn't go where he wanted. "So many Jews are still here. It's fate; it's my fate to stay..."

Avram Zak reports almost the same thing in his book *In Umru fun Yorn* ("In the Restlessness of Years," Argentina 1954, *Yidbukh* Publications):

Yisroel Shtern (Zak reports) didn't sit in the kitchen for long (the writers' kitchen in Warsaw on Karmelicka St. at the beginning of the war).¹⁰ Something pursued him, drove him away from people. Nobody knew where he stayed or how he lived. He told no one anything.

"What do you think, friend Shtern?" I would ask him. "Will you stay here or try to get away?"

"No one can escape fate," came his terse reply.

Here we see the same answer, *fate*, which Valdman reports, and Valdman adds something else, which brings us from "fate" to "legend." He ends his reminiscence as follows:

People say – maybe it's a legend, and if it is, it could only have been told about

Yisroel Shtern – that he laid himself down on the burning earth, his eyes turned toward Heaven, and quietly prayed for salvation. He spoke to no one directly.

He wanted nothing more from the sinful world...until he passed away like a saint with a protest against God and the world.

We can only imagine what Shtern went through before he died as he lay on the scorched earth. I too have tried to picture it, and wrote a poem in 1943 in honor of Yisroel Shtern, "My Brother Yisroel Shtern," which appeared in my

¹⁰ (Trans.) See Auerbach on this site for a description of this and other Ghetto institutions, as well as for an account of Shtern's death based on reports which are perhaps more reliable than Valdman's "legend" below.

book, "I Wasn't in Treblinka." I believe that it would be in keeping with the present attempt to bring his poems back to life and with my own admiration of him to present as the conclusion to my remarks this poem, which was written with his legendary death in the Warsaw Ghetto in mind.

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The present collection of Yisroel Shtern's work consists of two parts, the first – poems, the second – essays and literary criticism. My introductory words have to do with his poems. It would have taken too much time and space to deal with his essays at any length. I believe other literary critics will do this. Besides, my remarks about his verse are more an attempt to describe his personality than a literary evaluation.

In this connection, however, I might be permitted to answer a question which arose for me as I read through his essays – moving from his great enthusiasm if not idolatry of Y.L. Peretz to his appreciation of Moshe Nadir¹¹, who in his bitter humor was quite the opposite of Peretz. I think that under the black humor Shtern perceived Nadir's tragic yearning – the despairing, lost world that Nadir wanted to cover with laughter. Shtern did not look for and would not look for redemption in this way, however. He looked for and found his salvation increasingly in Peretz.

Although in his poems Shtern plumbs the abyss, often finding no way out, in his essay "Crowns to Adorn the Head of Yiddish Criticism" he shows himself actively modern and optimistic. His mood becomes increasingly elevated the more he relies on Peretz and lives through his work with his entire being.

I will end my remarks with Yisroel Shtern's own words, taken from "Crowns..":

Have you ever dissected a smile and seen how it looks from inside? The clock which sits on our table and shows the hours, is it more alive or more dead than the hours themselves? As it rings and rings so resoundingly, is it more foolish or more clever than our own blood? We want to be just unfortunate enough in order to take pleasure in walking through the world, a secret among secrets.

H. Leivick

NB His poem on next page....

¹¹ (Ed.) see Shtern's essay "Mayne Hent Hobn Fargosn Dos Dozike Blut." ("My Hands Have Spilled This Blood.")

“My Brother, Yisroel Shtern”

by H. Leivick

trans. Jon Levitow (2006).

My brother, Yisroel Shtern,
my brother, whose poems are like Job’s,
we have one father,
one father – the eternal Jew.

My brother, Yisroel Shtern,
our father went willingly to be slaughtered,
in order to hear the Messiah’s *shofar*¹².
This was yesterday, yesterday,

but you have done the same thing
in a different way,
lying amid the destruction-shops
of Warsaw courtyards.

You lie on the stone of sacrifice
just as Isaac lay;
all your bones yearning
to sing, and not to question.

You don’t ask: where’s the ram?
Who will sharpen the knife?
Who will blow on the fire
so it consumes the sacrifice?

You ask nothing but simply sing,
having redeemed yourself.
A wonder – your voice begins to ring
more loudly, loudly, and more boldly:

¹² (Trans.): the ram’s horn, with which the Messiah will sound his return, said to be taken from the ram sacrificed in place of Isaac.

“I lie – as I should lie – in dust,
not moving a limb;
it’s good, it’s good to be eternal,
good being without a cradle or a grave.”

I take your voice and broadcast it,
my brother, Yisroel Shtern,
as if words from the ancient past
have made themselves heard.

Then your voice falls silent,
and from your silence rise up
new songs with newer melodies
from under your still palate:

“Open, Gates of Heaven,
and eternally stand open.
Blood which should cry out and demand
now wants to sleep, to sleep, to sleep.

Another may scourge you, Heaven,
but I will make you whole again.
I will restore you
with my bullet-ridden limbs.

This is my midnight prayer
to go with my father’s *shofar* blast.
Rise up, my limbs, in stoning,
strangulation, burning, and beheading.¹³

*How good and pleasant*¹⁴ – how sweet,
more sweet than holiday feasting,
to undergo all these four deaths;
one martyrdom for God is not enough.”

I take your voice and broadcast it.

cont...

¹³ (Trans.): Four methods of execution discussed in Jewish religious law.

¹⁴ (Trans.): Psalms 131:1.

What happens next -- for now stays hidden;
a wonder from our present days
that as yet cannot be given.

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