

“The Svive of Blume Lempel”

Ellen Cassedy and Yermiyahu Ahron Taub

Description: Yiddish literature is being widely translated into English today. For example, the new Norton anthology *Have I Got a Story for You: More Than a Century of Fiction from The Forward* showcases a wide range of Yiddish literary offerings translated by some of today's leading Yiddish translators. A plethora of translated full-length volumes by Yiddish writers have also appeared recently. This session will provide case studies of three distinguished Yiddish writers - Blume Lempel, Yenta Mash, and Joseph Opatoshu - and the efforts to render their writing into English. Focus will be given to the author's lives, their oeuvre as a whole, and narrative strategies as well as the translators' overall selection and translation process.

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In this talk, I will be sharing with you the life and work of Blume Lempel, an extraordinary writer who deserves to be much better known by English language readers. Ellen Cassedy and I have spent more than ten years working on the translation of Blume Lempel's writings, and we were delighted when our translated collection of Lempel's stories entitled *Oedipus in Brooklyn and Other Stories* was published in November 2016. I am giving this talk solo since Ellen gave a presentation about Yenta Mash. But this talk is a product of both of our work, and Ellen will add her perspective in the Q and A.

In Yiddish, the word “*svive*” means “environment” or “atmosphere,” but can also connote fellowship and connection. It's a place where one belongs, a home. The *svive* that Blume Lempel constructed for herself was highly idiosyncratic – part privacy and solitude, part support and community. As writers ourselves, Ellen and I were fascinated by Blume's *svive* and how richly rewarding it clearly was for her.

Lempel's approach to building a literary home for herself was uniquely her own. Her work itself is unique, as we will discuss. But it was also part of a larger picture – the larger context of what it was to be a writer in Yiddish in the second half the 20th century, in the United States, and as a woman. As the work of women writing in Yiddish is increasingly translated, studied, and analyzed, we are glad to help her work take its place among these found treasures.

Blume Feffer was born in 1907 in Khorostkov, in what was then Galicia, subsequently Poland, and now Ukraine, in what she described as “a white-washed room by the banks of a river that had no name.” For a few years she attended a religious school for girls and a Hebrew folk school, and at times a tutor came to the house, but as she later recalled in an interview with the Yiddish scholar Itzik Gottesman, “my father believed that all a girl needed to know was how to cook a pot of food, sew a patch, and milk a cow.” “In Poland,” she remembered, “I didn't write at all. I only dreamed of writing.” As she dreamed, she stored up observations that would later appear in her work. All her life, her childhood self remained accessible to her, as “the girl who was, the girl whose tides ebb and flow on my sandy shores to this day.”

(slide – Pfeffer family) When Blume was 12, order of her familial life began to crumble. Her mother died, and when her father remarried, Blume was pressed into service as a housekeeper and nursemaid for the new couple and their young child. Her brother Yisroel, eight years older, had become involved in communist activity. He was caught and imprisoned, then escaped and went into hiding. Lempel remembered the police arriving at the house in the middle of the night to search for him, ordering everyone out of bed and stabbing into the mattresses while cursing the “filthy Jews.”

Yisroel fled to France, and in 1929, at age 22, Blume, too, left Khorostkov. **(slide, pioneer cousins)** She was intending to become a pioneer in Palestine, but on the way, she stopped off in Paris to visit her brother, who'd settled in the Jewish immigrant neighborhood of Belleville.

Captivated by the City of Light, Blume abandoned her pioneer plans. She found a job in a factory, where she met her husband, Lemel Lempel (**slide, Blume and Lemel**). They started a family. And her dream of becoming a writer began to take shape. She began writing poems and meeting other Yiddish writers.

During the ten years Blume lived in Paris, she fell in love with the city. It became the setting for some of her most important work, including a novel set in the years before and during World War II, and many short stories. Just before World War II, the family was extremely fortunate to be able to flee to New York. Here they are a few years after the war. (**slide 1947 Lempels**)

In America, Blume reached out to the New York Yiddish literary scene, especially the newspaper *Morgn Zhurnal*, and began to publish – a serialized novel and short stories. Then the horrendous news from Europe began to trickle in. She learned that back in her home town, her father’s wife and their young son had been seized and killed by the Nazis, that her father had then set fire to the family home and hanged himself, and that on the day before the liberation of France, her beloved brother, who had joined the Resistance, had been arrested and shot, leaving a wife and two sons.

As she later said, Blume “was catapulted into a deep despair. The past was a graveyard; the future without meaning. I sat paralyzed within a self-imposed prison,” she said. “The years went by, many desolate, fruitless years.”

She began to burn her work.

But then came a turning point. She had two friends, Chaim Plotkin and Reyzl Glass Fenster, who were Yiddish writers, and maybe it’s thanks to them that we can read this work today. They suggested that she dedicate herself to writing about the terrible destruction that was consuming her. The idea, she said, “opened a psychological door.” She wrote:

I felt I must speak for those who could no longer speak, feel for those who could no longer feel, immerse myself in their un-lived lives, their sorrows, their joys, their struggle and their death.

She had found her calling.

Her subject, as she developed it, was not the annihilation itself, but its aftermath. Not the annihilated themselves, and mostly not people who experienced the ghettos and the camps, but “the survivors, the broken people who attempt after the war to establish a new link to life, and who through it all remain broken.” She took upon herself the task of expressing the experience of people like herself, an experience of displacement, flight, and adaptation, and a special burden of remembrance and retribution, grief and guilt.

And, in an approach that was uniquely hers, she often approached the subject not head-on, but through a variety of subtle literary strategies, in which the great cataclysm of the 20th century is never far from the surface, but often hovering just out of sight.

Lempel always said that she didn’t feel part of a literary “school” or trend in any language. When an interviewer asked her which books or writers had helped to shape her, she could not cite any. “I feel I don’t borrow from anyone,” she said.

(Slide BL 1954) Yet as she embarked on this new chapter in her writing career, her *svive* came to her aid.

(slide of Sutz) Perhaps the most important factor in her career was that by 1970, she had won the support of Abraham Sutzkever, who was renowned throughout the world of Yiddish letters as a poet, as a cultural hero who had rescued treasured Jewish texts in the Vilna Ghetto, and as the editor of the leading Yiddish literary journal, *Di Goldene keyt*, (which was published in Tel Aviv. Here’s what *Di Goldene keyt* looked like **(slide of GK)**).

(slide of Sutz letter), Sutzkever and Lempel corresponded for twenty years. Here we see an early letter from him, complete with a rather charming drawing, signed, “All the best, with love, Sutzkever.”

While another editor might have tried to rein Lempel in, to smooth out her rough edges or tame her bold choices, what was critically important about Sutzkever was that he never did. Instead, he deeply affirmed her individuality:

You have your own words, your own observations, your own madness, which you scoop out from within yourself like shovelfuls of hot coals...Your talent is not an ordinary one – of that I am sure.

As you'll see, her stories were jagged, disjointed. They didn't move smoothly from Point A to Point B. Instead, often within a single sentence, you'll find Lempel's imagination moving back and forth between dream and reality, present and past, Old World and New.

We think this jaggedness is a carefully considered literary choice, one that is not really found in other Yiddish writers. It's a reflection, we believe, of the disruptions in Lempel's life and the lives of her characters – an ingenious way to convey the restless and unsettled existence she knew so well.

Here's an example. In the story called "The Little Red Umbrella," a middle-aged woman named Janet, in New York City, gets a phone call from a poet she met at a Hanukkah party. He invites her out on a date. He's one of a series of dates she's had over the years, including, as she tells us, "a wash-up actor, a sock manufacturer, a card player, a man who had left his wife and child to travel around the world in disguise." So it doesn't look good. But this is a woman who doesn't give up hope.

Listen to how, within a single paragraph, Lempel catapults us out of Janet's New York apartment into the cosmos:

"The rendezvous with the poet came like a jolt from the very heart of life, awakening the butterflies from their lethargic dozing. White silk wings hovered in the air. The studio apartment, which a moment before had been cold and dark, brightened with an ethereal light. The walls began to sing again. 'There's still life at close to fifty,' she said to the fly that was spending the winter in her house....

“Fantastic patterns streamed through the cracks in the Venetian blinds. Lost ships swam to her mountain, bringing regards from distant lands, magic keys to locked doors....Janet followed a voice through the dark corridors.” Behind one of the doors, “a purple light filled the room . On a bed of sky-blue silk, the Greek was lounging with a high-born lady.”

Janet “swims without moving over still water, not forward but backward in time from today to yesterday... The ship takes her to the Middle Ages, to another world, on another continent.... She continues on to the land of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, then to the promised land of milk and honey...Under an outspread fig tree, Adam dozes... She approaches him...”

Then the telephone rings. And Janet goes to the closet, gets dressed, puts on her make-up, and steps out onto the streets of Manhattan, on her way to the date with the poet, and the story goes on from there.

The erotic imaginings of a middle-aged woman are not standard fare in any literature, and Lempel’s approach to spooling out this character’s fantasies so freely is quite unusual.

Another important sustaining force was the poet Malka Heifetz-Tussman. **(slide of MHT)** Here’s a photo of Heifetz Tussman with her husband – in her bathing suit, **(slide, MHT letter)** And here’s a letter from her, in which she talks about the complex and very personal literary home that Lempel had built.

Blume, Blume, [she says] why do you think your poems would shock me? Not so. Good poems, Blume.

You dive into the self, and behold -- a *svive*.

Here... is Blume!

In other words, Blume *is* her own *svive*. And that is an important part of the truth, but only part.

Lempel's work became well-known in the Yiddish world. It was published in a great variety of Yiddish journals, and she won several literary prizes.

(slide of Heller) In 1979, she began preparing her first short story collection for publication. For editorial help, she turned to the Tel Aviv poet Binem Heller.
(slide of Heller letter).

He urges Lempel to include even her most daring stories, ones that had been rejected by literary magazines – including “Oedipus in Brooklyn,” which Sutzkever himself had turned down.

(slide of Rege) The result was *A rege fun emes*, a book that garnered wide praise in the Yiddish literary world.

As translators, we found her prose so poetic and so rich that we had to work very hard to capture her unique melody – one that we found to be denser, more idiosyncratic, more, well, unhinged, than that of other women – or men -- writing in Yiddish.

(slide of Balade) EC: Her second collection came out in 1986: *Balade fun a Kholem*, Ballad of a Dream. Like her first book, it contains an extraordinary range of subject matter. We meet women and girls of all ages.

A lonely little girl who's too poor to own a doll, so she draws one with her finger on the misty windowpane.

A mad woman dancing in the marketplace.

A mother and son living in the forest with the squirrels to hide from the Nazis.

A woman lying on her back on a table in an abortion clinic.

A woman who occupies herself with extravagant daydreams as she and her husband drive to Florida for the winter.

An anti-Nazi spy in Paris, disguised behind a mask of glamorous makeup.

A deeply religious African-American woman living in Brooklyn, who's obsessed with the lie she told to save her son's life.

And now a word about the title story, "Oedipus in Brooklyn," a story that Avrom Sutzkever considered too shocking to publish.

Maybe he was right. You can be the judge when you read the story. We find that in Lempel's hands, the account of a contemporary woman involved in a transgressive relationship with her son is not sensational, not tawdry, and not played for laughs.

Step by step, Lempel leads us into the heart of darkness. She tells of the car accident that kills the father and blinds the son, of the growing closeness between mother and son, of their increasing isolation.

By the end of the story, we've come to understand the plight of mother and son, and perhaps even to sympathize.

(slide of BL in 1985) YAT: Finally, why did Blume Lempel write in Yiddish, and keep writing in Yiddish, even as the Yiddish readership grew smaller and smaller year by year? She wrote:

"Yiddish is in my bones. When I hear my mother's "Oy!" in my head, I lift my eyes to the heavens and hear God answering me in Yiddish. The birds, real and imagined, speak Yiddish, and the wind at my window speaks Yiddish — because I speak Yiddish, think in Yiddish."

So Yiddish was a portable homeland. A way of remaining true to a world that was no more, while she made her way to new places, confronting new circumstances in new languages.

Yiddish was also a way to honor the six million who perished in the Holocaust, including the members of her own family. She wrote:

“My older brother...tells me what to write in Yiddish, directing my stories from beyond the grave... This is how it was. This is what happened. So must it be recorded.... You did not survive simply to eat blintzes with sour cream. You survived to bring back those who were annihilated. You must speak in their tongue, point with their fingers....”

And, for Lempel, Yiddish was also a way to hide. Writing in Yiddish could feel isolating. But we think that maybe that very isolation freed Lempel to pursue her own idiosyncratic vision.

Even as she was being published in Yiddish periodicals, receiving literary prizes, and corresponding in Yiddish with readers and writers all over the world – living in her *svive* – at the same time, her children couldn’t read what she wrote, and her neighbors in Long Beach, New York, had no idea she was a world-published writer.

She told an interviewer this: “I hide my literary existence under my apron. If you asked my neighbors about my writing, they’d think you were crazy.”

So perhaps writing in Yiddish in an English-speaking world helped to liberate Lempel to be the taboo-defying writer she was meant to be.

When Blume died in 1999 at her home in Long Beach, on Long Island, an article in the *Forverts* stated:

“With the passing of Blume Lempel, Yiddish literature has lost one of its most remarkable writers,An empty spot has opened in the galaxy of talented women Yiddish writers.”

(final slide, cover of our book) During her lifetime, Lempel’s dream of an English-language readership for the most part eluded her. It’s a joy for us now to help her unrealized dream come true.

With our collection, we hope we're helping this extraordinary writer to be known as she wanted to be known, as a bold explorer of new terrain, as a dazzling stylist, and as a profound teller of truths about the human condition.

As new generations of readers encounter Lempel's work, whether in the original Yiddish or in translation, they will have the opportunity to step into her *svive*. As they do, they will be richly rewarded.