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Rachel Seelig

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Like a Barren Sheet of Paper:

Rokhl Korn from Galician Orchards to Postwar Montreal

RACHEL SEELIG

When Rokhl Korn settled in Montreal in 1948, the period she called her “years of wandering” (na v’nod yorn) finally came to an end. Yet a profound sense of dislocation marks the poetry she produced in this postwar urban setting, where a declining Yiddish culture formed a “third solitude” bounded on either side by Quebec’s hostile Anglo-Protestant and French-Catholic communities. The lush natural description and images of Polish-Jewish harmony of Korn’s prewar poetry were replaced in her postwar poetry by somber symbolism, in which the recurring motif of white paper signifies the futile attempt to recreate a vanished world. Tracing the imagistic shift in Korn’s writing from thriving trees to lifeless paper, this essay explores what Korn regarded as the transformation of Yiddish from an organic, indigenous aspect of interwar Poland to an uprooted, moribund refugee language within a culturally divided urban space. The essay thus sheds light on an underexplored Yiddish woman poet while expanding the dominant narrative of American Yiddish literature to include the unique experience of Holocaust refugees in Montreal.

“I stand in the midst of defoliated time like a naked tree.”—Rokhl Korn

Born Rokhl (Rachel) Häring in 1898 on a farming estate near Podliski, East Galicia, Rokhl Korn grew up in nature, removed from the cities and towns (*shtetlekh*) inhabited by the vast majority of East European Jews. Her youth among peasants is brought to life in her first collection of Yiddish poems, *Dorf* (Village; 1928), which portrays Jews and Catholics living and working alongside one another harmoniously in rural Poland. Two subsequent volumes, a book of short stories titled *Erd* (Land; 1936) and the poetry collection *Royter mon* (Red Poppies; 1937), further established Korn’s reputation for earthy lyricism and lush

natural description that were relatively unusual in Yiddish literature. The 1940s, by contrast, were a period of dislocation for Korn. When World War II broke out, she escaped to the Soviet Union, and then to Sweden, where she made all the necessary arrangements to emigrate. The year 1948, linked in Jewish collective memory with the end of exile, was tied in Korn's personal memory with the end of what she called her "years of wandering" (*na v'nod yorn*). Yet she did not settle in "The Promised Land," the newly established State of Israel, or in "The Golden Land" (*di goldene medine*), as the United States was known among Yiddish speakers. Rather, she laid down roots in Montreal, Canada.

Korn's journey does not adhere to the conventional Jewish American immigrant narrative in which deracinated existence in the East European shtetl is resolved through immigration and assimilation into cosmopolitan centers like New York. The experience of Jewish immigrants to Canada, especially Quebec, differed from that of immigrants who docked at Ellis Island. New arrivals to *la belle province* entered a society bifurcated along linguistic and religious lines. Montreal's Jewish district, which novelist and native son Mordecai Richler described as a "self-contained world made up of five streets," was bounded on either side by linguistic affiliations that were inseparable from both State and Church—Protestant for the politically dominant English-speaking community, Catholic for the French Canadian majority.¹ Excluded from the "two solitudes" of Quebec society, Yiddish-speaking immigrants became a "double minority . . . within the unique linguistic and cultural duality of Quebec."² The experience of twofold exclusion was strangely productive, for it facilitated the formation of a close-knit community based on preserved cultural traditions and bolstered by a network of institutions, some of which operated entirely in Yiddish. Jewish immigrants who arrived in Montreal after World War II benefited from the existing cultural infrastructure and breathed new life into it. At the same time, however, they were forced to contend with the attenuation of Yiddish in this linguistically and religiously divided space.

The contrast between Korn's memory of prewar Poland and her experience of alienation in postwar Montreal left an imprint on her poetry, which took a turn from exuberant lyricism to a somber symbolism that reached stylistic maturity during the 1960s. Yet a powerful link unites Korn's pre- and postwar poetry:

arboreal images, which appear repeatedly in her earlier work as a symbol of vitality and indigenoussness, are reincarnated in her later writing in the form of “barren white paper,” an ambivalent symbol of provisional homecoming in the wake of incalculable loss. In what follows, I explore this dichotomy of living trees and lifeless paper as a reflection of Korn’s attempt to negotiate her physical and cultural transition from the orchards of her youth in Poland to the urban solitude of Jewish Montreal. This shift is emblematic of what she perceived as the transformation of Yiddish from an organic, indigenous aspect of interwar Poland to its uprooted, moribund condition in postwar Canada.

AS I WALKED BETWEEN TREES

Remembering her youth in rural Galicia, Korn remarked, “My friends were the trees . . . whom I simply saw as people.”³ Just as trees take on human proportions in Korn’s memory, the local villagers among whom she grew up appear in her poetry as deeply rooted in the local soil. The poem that opens *Dorf*, “Der letster friling” (The Last Spring), offers an ostensible reconstruction of Korn’s bucolic childhood home as the site of innocence, where she walked “between trees / Wild and happy,” only to be thrust into maturity by the recognition of her father’s impending death. The inevitability of this *memento mori* is made palpable through the frequent juxtaposition of opposing images: the orchard where “apple trees were in bloom / With pinkish-white lips of blossoms” is set against the ailing father’s “cold, tired brow,” while the cascading blossoms of the lavish spring day are quickly transformed into a bitter flood, the “tears of the day in bloom.” This dichotomy of lushness and decay is amplified in the third stanza, where the vitality of trees is set against their neutralized reality as the paper upon which the father’s will is inscribed:

As his eyes filled with tears of the day in bloom
 And his lungs were emptied of coughed-up blood,
 Two witnesses from the village were called,
 His brother-in-law and an old, grey goy,
 Ink and paper prepared for writing,
 Enclosed in a special room,

Allowing no one in, not even mama —
 I knew not then,
 His slender young hand
 Was writing his will.⁴

With this shift of focus from the orchard to the home and from trees to paper, the poem introduces the act of writing as a form of leave-taking, anticipating what would become a defining meta-poetic motif in Korn's post-World War II poetry.

The reference to one of the witnesses as a "grey goy" signals not only a dearth of Jewish neighbors but also the extent to which the speaker's Jewish family is integrated into the surrounding community. With this subtle reference, the poem gestures at another key theme of *Dorf*, namely the ideal of peaceful coexistence between Jews and Poles. This theme continually reemerges through romantic portraits of individual villagers, most of whom are not Jewish. For example, the midwife Hanke is a simple, noble woman who has assisted the birth of countless babies, always offering "soothing words from the deep well of her heart" to assuage the pain of the new mother. Bringing to the fore figures usually relegated to the background of the Jewish world, Korn introduced to Yiddish poetry the benevolent non-Jewish voice, and the possibility of compassionate dialogue between Jews and Poles. Hanke's fate is a testament to the possibility: upon her death, countless candles are lit in her memory, one "for each child's head that she was first to touch." Among these candles are "three Jewish flames lit by my mother [that] mixed with the others."⁵ Within the sacred space of the chapel, Jewish and Christian flames meld into a vision of pure "catholicity."

Such images of mutual understanding cannot simply be taken at face value, however. What appears as an organic description of the natural status quo is in fact a projection of the myth of Polish-Jewish coexistence originating in the medieval legend of Esterke, the Jewish village woman said to have persuaded Polish King Casimir the Great to invite the Jews to Poland and grant them extensive privileges.⁶ This myth undergirded an important cultural movement of interwar Poland, known as *Landkentenish* (literally "knowledge of the land"), which emerged in response to the exclusion of Jews and Jewish landmarks from the Polish Society for Land Study (*Krajoznawstwo* in Polish). The doctrine of the Jewish

Society for Land Study (*Landkentenish*)—knowing the land through hiking, travel, and the study of regional geography, folklore, and history—challenged the oft-repeated belief that the Jews do not belong in nature since they have never held a claim to land. In the words of Emanuel Ringelblum: “The centuries of urban life, the remoteness from nature, the living within narrow, stifling ghetto walls have caused the Jews to feel distance and estranged from the beauty and glory of nature.”⁷ *Landkentenish* responded to this situation by promoting Jewish national identity and integration with the surrounding population based on the concept of *doikayt* (hereness), a sense of rootedness in the Polish lands where Jews had resided for centuries.⁸ According to Samuel Kassow, a significant ideological difference distinguished the Jewish *Landkentenish* movement from its Polish counterpart. Whereas the *Krajoznawstwo* portrayed the landscape as belonging “to one people,” *Landkentenish* did not attempt to ignore the presence (or even dominance) of non-Jews but rather treated the same landscape as “a multi-ethnic tapestry.”⁹ Korn’s interwar writing can be seen as the aesthetic embodiment of this ideal.

The imagined rural idyll presented in *Dorf* signals an alternative reality and a powerful endorsement of Jewish belonging in Polish soil, a vision that stands in contrast to the divisive nationalist politics that overtook Polish cities between the world wars. The tension between the ideal and the reality emerges in certain poems, such as “Der shabes in mayn heym” (Sabbath in My Home), which depicts the Jewish Sabbath, a metonym for the village Jews, as it inconspicuously takes sanctuary amidst the toil of the Christian working week. The poem begins:

Sabbath comes to my village like an uninvited stranger,
Met with the smell of freshly baked rye bread,
And the hissing iron in the peasant woman’s hand
As she prepares a linen shirt for Sunday.
From stones upon pointed peaks of
Steep slopes grey larks sing
The song of the sixth workday.¹⁰

The phrase *nisht gebetn*, meaning both “uninvited” and “not prayed,” subverts the Jewish custom of welcoming the Sabbath with the reverent words of the Friday

evening liturgy, *lekhah dodi*, “come, my beloved.” Korn imagines the Sabbath not as a regal bride but as a fugitive who furtively seeks refuge in the village’s only Jewish home: “The day of rest flees in shame, / And nestles in my mother’s piety” (*Antloyft der rutog a farshemter, / tuliyet zikh in falbn frumkayt fun mayn mamen*). This description reveals the minority status of the speaker’s family while highlighting the placidity of the predominantly Catholic setting. Although the Sabbath must steal away surreptitiously, it also finds itself enshrouded in an air of sacredness, a product of Jewish–Polish harmony within a shared native realm.

The poem’s language accentuates this seemingly organic synthesis by merging Hebraic (Jewish, sacred) and Slavic (non-Jewish, secular) registers. For example, *shabes*, a Yiddish word of Hebrew origin, enters from outside and encounters the hissing sound of the *maglovnitse* (steam iron) and the spirited song of *skoveronkes* (larks), two nouns of Slavic origin that represent the local sounds of the workweek. Perhaps the most striking example of the way in which language performs an organic confluence of cultures appears in the third and final stanza: “He lies like a like partridge in his nest / And waits until the joy of Sunday / Cuts through the long, lazy hours like a scythe” (*Ligt er, vi a kleyne kurepatve in der brizde / un vart biz s’vet zikh durkshnaydn durkh lange, foyle shoen / der serp fun eyrev-zuntikdiker freyd*). The phrase *eyrev-zuntikdiker freyd*, which translates literally as “the joy of the eve before Sunday,” plays on the Jewish tradition of marking the start of a holiday with the sunset of the previous day. With its use of the neologism *zuntikdik*, literally “Sunday-like,” a variation on the Yiddish word *shabesdik*, meaning “festive” (literally “Sabbath-like”), the poem effectively transfers the joy of the Jewish Sabbath to the Christian day of rest. As the Jewish Sabbath draws to a close, the Christian Sabbath descends; the former is not supplanted by the latter, however, but rather merges with it to extend the mood of peace and joy that envelops the entire village. Within this pastoral realm, Friday evening is no more and no less holy than Saturday evening, for the distinction between sacred and profane (*koydesh v’khol*) is blurred, and no value is more hallowed than that of honest labor in nature.

At times Korn’s poems shed a more questionable light on the distinction between the ideal of Polish–Jewish understanding and the tense political reality. In the following verses from the poem “Mayn heym” (My Home), for example, the threat of anti-Jewish violence looms large: “My mother divided her years / between

the fields and her three children. / . . . Her heart bled with every branch in the orchard / that the wild non-Jewish boys broke / just as it bled for the split below my eye / where an axe struck my cheek.”¹¹ No explanation for the axe’s cut is given—was it merely the result of a farming accident? Yet the circumstances surrounding Korn’s decision to write nature poetry in Yiddish suggest a more sinister interpretation. Having fled Galicia during World War I to Vienna, Korn’s family returned to Poland after the war and settled in the town of Przemyśl. A series of pogroms erupted in the region during this chaotic immediate postwar period, the most destructive of which took place when a Polish mob pillaged Lvov (Lemberg) in November 1918, killing approximately 150 Jews. Shocked by fierceness of anti-Jewish violence in the new Polish state, Korn, who initially wrote poems in Polish, vowed henceforth to write exclusively in Yiddish. Ironically, the image of the Polish Jewish idyll that dominates the pages of *Dorf* emerged from a moment of lost innocence and attendant linguistic transfer. Korn’s portrait of rural Poland must therefore be viewed as a Jewish literary utopia rather than as a wistful, nostalgic recreation of Polish–Jewish conviviality.

The very fact that *Dorf* was written in Yiddish rather than in Polish, the language of Korn’s earliest compositions, suggests that she sought to bolster national identity and pride of place among an exclusively Jewish readership. This impulse informed a growing trend in Yiddish poetry of the 1920s and 1930s, which turned to nature and folklore as a means of bolstering “the Jewish claim to normalcy and nationhood, to land and to landscape.”¹² While the fledgling Polish state treated the local landscape as a symbol of national pride, the Jews, marked as alien dwellers, staked their claim to the same landscape by cultivating their own myth of origins. In many cases, this effort translated into an idealized image of the shtetl, as in Itzik Manger’s *Khumesb-lider* (Bible Poems; 1935), which transfers biblical characters from ancient Israel to the roads and marketplaces of Eastern Europe.¹³ Other poets privileged the countryside over the shtetl in their writing, such as Moyshe Kulbak’s poem cycle *Raysn* (White Russia; 1922), or Elkhonen Vogler’s pastoral romance *A bletl in vint* (“A Small Leaf in the Wind” or “A Page in the Wind”; 1935), in which the first-person speaker actually marries a plum orchard.¹⁴ Like Kulbak and Vogler, Korn wrote Yiddish nature poetry as a means of promoting the claim to indigeneness. The mother who sheds as many tears for

her daughter's lacerated cheek as for the broken branches in her orchard is thus revealed to be the custodian of a particular birthright, a rural, earthy Jewishness deeply embedded in the Polish soil.¹⁵

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE POEM

The longing for rootedness remained unfulfilled. When the Germans invaded Przemyśl in 1941, Korn was traveling alone to Lvov to visit her daughter, Irena, unaware that she would never again see her husband.¹⁶ As soon as the bombing of Lvov began, she fled with her daughter and son-in-law to Kiev, and then to Moscow, where they were warmly received by leading figures in the Soviet Writers' Union, including Dovid Bergelson, Perets Markish, and Solomon Mikhoels. Despite her leftist sympathies, Korn felt alienated by the communist state and returned to Poland in 1946, where she was chosen by the Yiddish Writers' Union to serve as a delegate to the PEN conference in Stockholm. She remained in Sweden for nearly two years, until she was able, with the help of Canadian Yiddish writer Ida Maze, to obtain the appropriate visas to immigrate together with her daughter and son-in-law to Montreal.¹⁷

Members of the Montreal Jewish community greeted Korn enthusiastically. In an essay marking the occasion of her arrival, the Yiddish poet J. I. Segal wrote: "This is possibly the first time in the story of Yiddish cultural life in Montreal and perhaps the first in the entire history of Yiddish literature that a Yiddish poet is greeted by so many well-known colleagues with such excitement and wonder."¹⁸ Segal's remarks reveal not only the level of international prominence that Korn had achieved in the Yiddish-speaking world but also the hope that her arrival would put Montreal on the map as a thriving center of postwar Yiddish culture. This hope was bolstered by the sudden influx of Holocaust refugees to the city. When Korn arrived in Montreal 1948, immigration was about to peak; by 1952, the city's Jewish population had grown to 85,000, or approximately 40 percent of all Canadian Jews.¹⁹

To be sure, Montreal had already established itself as a center of Yiddish culture during the 1920s. Extending from St. Lawrence Boulevard ("the Main") to the lower reaches of Outremont, the tightly packed district of Jewish housing, factories, shops, and synagogues was clearly demarcated by the presence of hostile

neighbors on either side. As Gerald Tulchinsky observes, the fact that the Jewish quarter was “the geographical center of the city and divided the French and English sections of Montreal was symbolic of the precarious marginality of the Jewish presence to both.”²⁰ The exclusion of Montreal’s Jewish population from each of the two discrete cultures by which it was flanked translated, paradoxically, into the marginalization of the center. Although Jews were barred from official institutions, their presence at the physical heart of the city could not be ignored.

It was not just the size and geographical location of the Jewish community that encouraged group cohesion, nor its status as Montreal’s largest immigrant population, but also the unique political and social climate of Quebec. As the first non-Christian community seeking integration but unable to gain access to mainstream institutions (most notably the public school system, which was of a Christian confessional nature), Yiddish-speaking Jews were left to form an organizational infrastructure of their own.²¹ As David Roskies has argued, necessity was reinforced by a strong ideological impetus carried over from Eastern Europe.²² Within a few years, Jewish immigrants had organized a vast network of schools, newspapers, libraries, political organizations, synagogues, labor unions, social services, and a hospital; in these venues, all activities were conducted in Quebec’s third-most widely used language: Yiddish.²³

By the 1930s, however, Jewish immigration had declined dramatically due to government policy curtailing the entry of refugees. As the threat against European Jews mounted, Canadian immigration policy for Jewish refugees from Europe was reduced to four infamous words attributed to Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King: “None is too many.” The country’s record for the admission of Jews between 1933 and 1948 was the worst in the Western world, with fewer than 5,000 allowed entry.²⁴ It was only after the war that the doors were reopened: between 1948 and 1952, more than twice as many immigrants were admitted as the total number of Jewish immigrants admitted in the preceding fifteen years. Of the 11,000 Holocaust refugees who arrived after the war, nearly half settled in Montreal. Rebecca Margolis notes that Montreal witnessed “a dynamic Yiddish cultural life that was being revitalized by the arrival of refugees of the Holocaust, who bolstered the local Yiddish milieu and encouraged not only new creativity but an ongoing celebration of cultural continuity on new soil.”²⁵

Immediately upon arrival, Korn was welcomed into the literary salon of Ida Maze and invited to offer public readings at the Jewish Public Library, then under the leadership of Melekh Ravitch, and quickly became a key contributor to Montreal's Yiddish cultural scene. Yet she was aware that her newly adopted community faced linguistic attrition and social fragmentation. After all, Korn arrived in Montreal in 1948, which Mordecai Richler called "the year the drift to the suburbs had begun in earnest."²⁶ Acculturation and upward mobility were accompanied by the attenuation of Yiddish, as more established immigrants and native-born Jews flowed from "the Main" to the affluent neighborhoods of Outremont and Westmount, effectively broadening both the physical and cultural gap between the established and the uninitiated. Whereas in 1931 a remarkable 95.8 percent of the Jewish population declared Yiddish as their native tongue, by 1951 the percentage had dropped to 37.8 percent.²⁷ Korn lamented this situation in a letter to the poet Kadya Molodowsky from 1966: "We are cut off from the younger generations. Children do not understand one Yiddish word. They will speak Hebrew, French, English, just as long as it's not Yiddish."²⁸ In light of these demographic shifts and Korn's resulting disappointment, the poetry she produced in Montreal can be described as the product of a modest postwar Yiddish revival within a broader climate of decline.

If *Dorf* portrays Polish-Jewish coexistence to an exclusively Jewish audience, Korn's postwar volume *Fun yender zayt lid* (On the Other Side of the Poem; 1962) portrays a vanished exclusively Jewish world for a dwindling postwar Yiddish readership. Korn dedicated the volume to the memory of her mother, with whom she longed to be reunited "on the other side":

My mother, the most loyal listener of my first poems, who cried with me over the fate of the poor and wretched . . . lies somewhere in the forest with a German bullet in her heart, in the heart that was full of love for humanity, animals, fields, forests and the smallest blade of grass. . . . My poems are the continuation of her life, which was cut short prematurely.²⁹

With its ambiguous reference to that which lies "on the other side" (*fun yener zayt*)—that is, either in the past or in the "world to come" (*yene velt*)—the title of

the volume introduces a paradox that runs throughout Korn's postwar poetry, namely the notion of writing as both a violent rift and a potentially redemptive act. The cut of the axe under the child's eye described in the poem "My Home" becomes the very function of poetry, "a sharp slash" that brings the past into the present, and is therefore able both to rend and to revive:

I fear that first line of a poem —
Which may become a sharp slash
That decapitates dreams and opens veins
To a flood of blood.³⁰

The terrifying "sharp slash" (*sharfer schnit*) through which the poet may return to her past is both a barrier and a vehicle for return. This image of a "cut" or "slit" that simultaneously severs and connects reappears in the third quatrain of the titular poem, "Fun yener zayt lid":

On the other side of the poem is a path,
Slender and sharp as the thin-thinnest slit,
And there someone ambles adrift in time
Treading ever so softly with barefooted gait.³¹

Writing is likened to the impossibly delicate, narrow path between the memory of a nature-bound childhood in Poland and urban postwar isolation. "Slender and sharp as the thin-thinnest slit," this striking image, placed at the physical center of the poem in the third of five quatrains, serves as a volta that shifts the poem's focus from past to present. While the first two stanzas transport the speaker nostalgically to the orchard and straw-roofed house of her childhood, the final two stanzas return her to the "the wounded hour," in which she remains alone, longing to hear her mother's voice again.

If writing is likened to a slit, a paper-cut of sorts, paper is similarly portrayed as the locus of dread and hope, a sterile, inanimate material that provides a medium for recollection and commemoration. This ambivalent image comes through strongly in the poem "Kh'hob haynt baynakht gefilt a lid oyf mayne lipn" (Last

Night I Felt a Poem on My Lips). Bringing to mind Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," the poem likens composition to an interrupted dream. Yet, in contrast to Coleridge's reconstruction of Xanadu, Korn's nocturnal vision dissolves at dawn like the ephemeral taste of a "luscious fruit," leaving her silent and alone. The final quatrain brings the poem to a mournful conclusion:

The day grows pale at its earliest hour,
A sheet of white paper withers barren in my hand —
Behind the shadows God conceals from me his face,
And like a stranger before my shamed door I stand.³²

Paper is described as "barren" (*akoredik*) a word that brings to mind the biblical term for a barren woman, *akarah*, as well as the Hebrew stem *akar*, or "uproot." Produced from trees that have been cut down and stripped bare, paper provides a clean slate for remembering and recording, yet it is nonetheless a specter of its own source, incapable of bearing fruit. This somber image may be seen as a mirror image of Avraham Sutzkever's optimistic vision of postwar Yiddish poetry: "From trees one makes wonderful paper. But I, the reverse: / I make paper into trees, into the Tree of Life."³³ Sutzkever's mystical, pantheistic relationship to the Polish landscape persisted even in postwar Israel, perhaps because he found himself in a Jewish cultural universe where the spirit of building for the future prevailed over a devastating past.³⁴ By contrast, Korn was unable to engage in such poetic alchemy within the urban environment of Montreal where Yiddish, the tree of her poetic life, was uprooted and attenuating.

DELEGATES OF THE GHETTO KINGDOM

The profound sense of displacement and decline that pervades Korn's postwar writing rendered concrete in "Di verter fun mayn alef-beys" (The Words of My Alphabet), arguably her most powerful Holocaust poem. Ten breathless stanzas are yoked together by the image of a Yiddish alphabet that literally comes to life. In the opening two stanzas, the letters are likened to survivors, the remaining "delegates" of a vanished world:

And so they come to me, the words of my *alef-beyts* —
 No longer redolent of wild poppy and periwinkle,
 Of ripe sheaves of wheat and fresh hay.
 Branded with a number from Treblinka,
 They smell of smoke from Belzec and Majdanek.

Like the mourners' last sigh,
 The lull of an unspoken confession,
 Delegates of the ghetto kingdom
 Escaped from bloodbath and betrayal.³⁵

Stripped of the smells and tastes of rural Poland from which they stem, Yiddish letters now take on the role of the survivor-poet. In the third stanza, poet and language effectively exchange roles. The poet does not transcribe letters; rather, they write her:

They inscribe me in the walls of ruined schools
 With a last prayer of unheard tears,
 Engrave me into the stone of eternity,
 As a monument for my people's bones.

A subversive biblical reference in the third line accentuates the role-reversal of poet and language. The phrase *tsukopns fun der tsayt* (literally “at the head of time”), translated above as “the stone of eternity,” alludes to the story of Jacob’s ladder, in which Jacob slumbers on a stone, dreaming of angels ascending and descending in the presence of God. When Jacob awakes, he “takes the stone that he had placed at his head [*even m’roshotav*]” and anoints it, saying, “And this stone, which I have set up as a monument [*matsevah*], shall be God’s abode [*beyt-el*]” (Genesis 28:22). In the above passage, the poet is herself “engraved” into eternity, placed “at the head” (*tsukopns*) of time to serve as an everlasting “monument” to her people.³⁶ In Yiddish (as in modern Hebrew), the biblical word for monument, *matseve*, also means gravestone. God’s promise to Jacob that his “offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, . . . spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south” (Genesis 28:14)

is realized in its most tragic form, transformed from the promise of progeny into the promise of mortality. Gathered from all four corners of Europe, the “nation’s bones” are unfathomable as the dust of the earth, invoking an altogether different biblical decree: “For dust you are, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19).

The alphabet metaphor takes on different hues in stanzas 4–9, in which the speaker recalls the childhood lessons in which she learned to read from the pages of the prayer book, deciphering the “points and lines” of the sacred alphabet that formed a “new bridge . . . leading to the old shores of the Bible.” In the fifth stanza, these letters are transformed and reanimated as they merge with insects that creep into the book’s margin:

Around me it was quiet, save the humming
Wasp and bee, as my teacher Shmuel
Lifted each letter with his narrow ruler,
Unchaining them from the long line.

Nature imagery proliferates as the childhood memory is elaborated, with the letters becoming an organic part of the scene. The ethereal white buds floating from the cherry tree under which the student is seated are indistinguishable from the “shiny wreath of fluttering white wings,” a flock of white doves circling above her head as they prepare their descent,

As if each dark word
In the yellowing page of the prayer book,
Were a seed planted by God
For their wide, greedy beaks.

Majestic white birds become greedy scavengers, starved for the sustenance that only Yiddish letters provide. The image of edible letters recalls Isaac Bashevis Singer’s story “Mayse tishevits” (translated as “The Last Demon”; 1959), in which the demon narrator “draws sustenance from a Yiddish storybook, a leftover from the days before the great catastrophe,” literally devouring the letters in a desperate struggle for survival.³⁷ In Singer’s story, as in Korn’s poem, images of the past thrive on the fodder

of tradition, which has been reduced to meagre “leftovers.” The notion of consumed letters is strengthened in the poem’s final stanza, which returns to the present moment in a meta-poetic gesture as “the yellowing page of the prayer book” from which the poet received her earliest nourishment is replaced by a blank white page:

. . . Around me now it is quiet with stillness of dusk,
Beneath my hand stirs a white piece of paper
Offering a home for wandering letters,
For half-forgotten dreams—and for me.

The poet’s desire to create a new “home” for the “black seeds” of the old prayer book is in tension with her awareness that the workings of nature are not easily reversed, for that which has been consumed cannot be replanted.³⁸

The elegiac tone that characterizes “The Words of my *Alef-bey*s” hardly seems suitable for the jubilee volume (*yoynl shrift*) in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of Montreal’s Jewish Public Library (Yidisher folks-bibliothek) in which it appeared in 1964. Yet a similar sentiment runs through the entire anthology. Melekh Ravitch, who served briefly as director of the library, contributed a plaintive essay titled “Velt—vort—bukh—bibliothek . . .” (World—Word—Book—Library), which contains a passage that resonates with Korn’s poem:

Without books I am simply a creature.

With books I am human.

But are books also human with actual lives of their own?

Survival is a thorn in the spirit of one who has a fondness for books—a thorn in my spirit. When the late poet Ida Maze became a widow, I paid her a condolence visit. She sat on her bed with her feet folded under her, arms crossed, and spoke to those who came in, to herself and to the book-lined walls—“Until today I believed that books are living people, friends, comforters. Today I look upon them like graveyards of dead paper—paper, dead paper.” But a week later I saw Ida Maze engrossed in a volume of poetry as in an intimate conversation with a loyal friend. And yet I did not forget her bitter words: paper—dead paper.³⁹

Ravitch's memory of the ailing Maze, which reverberated powerfully after her death, reveals the tenacity with which his generation held fast to Yiddish while mourning its demise, a sentiment that grew stronger as survivors became fewer. Similarly, the image of lifeless paper that emerges repeatedly in Korn's postwar writing, which encapsulates the thematic shift from *doikayt*, or rootedness in Poland, to the disappearance of family and the displacement of survivors, became even more poignant as the survivors themselves began to disappear.

A HOME FOR WANDERING LETTERS

Scholars of Jewish American literature have begun to revise the Jewish American immigrant myth in a manner that highlights interlinguistic, cross-cultural exchange over previously dominant notions of rupture, trauma, and assimilation. For example, Anita Norich has challenged the widely held belief that Yiddish immediately went into decline upon arrival in America by showing that Yiddish and Anglo-Jewish cultures "overlapped more frequently and more significantly than is commonly supposed."⁴⁰ In a slightly different vein, the volume *Modern Jewish Literatures: Intersections and Boundaries*, taking a cue from recent scholarly approaches to migration, diaspora and transnational studies, posits the concept of the "wall-less ghetto" as a metaphor for the space where Jewish literatures are produced, a space formed by an inner need for "stability and mutual support" yet "penetrable by external influences."⁴¹ Identifying New York's Lower East Side as a primary example, the volume's editors define the wall-less ghetto as a space where "boundaries still exist, but the intersections forged between those boundaries . . . foster something new"—a corrective to the standard view of the ghetto as "squalid, backward, impervious to outside influence."⁴² Though useful for rethinking Yiddish culture in the context of New York, the term "wall-less ghetto" does not accurately describe Montreal's Jewish community, which, although "wall-less" in the literal sense, possessed cultural borders as solid as the Yiddish culture they forced into existence. In the words of one of Richler's narrators, "The ghetto of Montreal has no real walls and no true dimensions. The walls are the habit of atavism and the dimensions are an illusion. But the ghetto exists all the same."⁴³

Indeed, most recent efforts to reframe the Jewish American immigrant myth are largely confined to the United States, and do not necessarily extend to the North American continent as a whole. In search of an alternative concept to the “wall-less ghetto” that is more relevant for the Canadian context, I turn to Canada’s celebrated literary theorist Northrop Frye. According to Frye, the defining feature of Canadian literature is its “garrison mentality,” a metaphor that he elaborates as follows: “In the earliest maps of the country, the only inhabited centres [were] forts, and that remains true of the cultural maps for a much later time.”⁴⁴ What Canadians proudly refer to as the cultural “mosaic,” a term that denotes contiguous borders among diverse pieces, is in Frye’s view an arbitrary assemblage of “small and isolated communities,” each surrounded by a “psychological frontier” that separates them as much from each other as it separates the entire country from its British and American cultural sources. In contrast to the image of the “wall-less ghetto,” Frye’s image of the “garrison” comes closer to capturing the nature of Jewish Montreal after World War II. Bordered by two enclaves of language and culture and relegated by both to the periphery, Jewish Montreal is perhaps best described as the “third solitude” caught between the two solitudes of Anglo-Protestant and French-Catholic Quebec.

For Montreal’s Yiddish-speaking inhabitants, solitude and separation encouraged a more cohesive brand of creativity, which was shaped less by their new environs than by the memory of a prior home. According to Gerald Tulchinsky, this element of non-integration is precisely what distinguishes Canadian Jewish culture from its American counterpart: “While American Jews yearned for integration into the Great Republic, Canadians strove to express their Jewishness in a country that had no coherent self-definition except perhaps the solitudes of duality, isolation, northernness and borrowed glory.”⁴⁵ This fact was especially pronounced within Quebec, where the Anglo-French stalemate overshadowed and rendered unnecessary any efforts of smaller immigrant minorities to forge a new national self-image. No demands were placed upon Montreal Yiddish writers to express “Canadianness,” since both versions of the concept to which they were exposed remained off limits to them. This double barrier might help explain why little mention is made of Montreal or Canada in the writing Rokhl Korn produced there over more than three decades, a long and remarkably prolific period.⁴⁶ Her

postwar poetry was sustained by the solid yet decaying institutional framework of a culture in decline, a culture that had become an inseparable part of Montreal's urban landscape without ever actually belonging to it.

In addition to the need to expand the purview of American Yiddish literature beyond the borders of the United States, Korn's example points to a distinction that must be emphasized between the prewar immigrant experience and the postwar refugee or survivor experience.⁴⁷ It was within the "third solitude" of postwar Montreal that Korn reconstructed the communal cohesion of the idealized past and grappled with her isolation in the present. The following untitled poem—one of her last—reveals the extent to which she remained imbedded in Yiddish as the language of mourning and memory to the very end.

All that was once true and
 Put forth leaves anew each day,
 With a new answer
 To shield
 My childish joy
 Drifts away,
 So far away —
 And I with all my will
 Clutch the word,
 Like the tail of the imaginary bird
 That lifts me over
 Barren days
 And night's abyss,
 Up there
 Where longing
 And dream
 Draw me
 To the firmament,
 Where a new genesis
 Is dreamt into being
 By the dozing stars.⁴⁸



Rokhl Korn on Mount Royal, Montreal (*Courtesy of the Jewish Public Library, Montreal*)

The contrast between images of rootedness in Korn's prewar writing and the mythical bird invoked in this abstract passage appears as great as the distance between the deepest layer of earth and the pinnacle of heaven. That which "gives forth leaves/pages" (*tsebletert*) is no longer the tree in bloom but rather the attempt to capture metaphysical truth in poetry. The speaker longs to take hold of this notion "like the tail of an imaginary bird," invoking the folk image of the "golden peacock" (*di goldene pave*) adopted by modern Yiddish writers as a symbol of romantic longing. Yet, just like the tail of the ephemeral bird, that which "was once true" proves fleeting and ungraspable. Only within the confines of the poem can the legendary bird carry the speaker from the memory of a former life to the afterlife that awaits her.

APPENDIX: FOUR ROKHL KORN POEMS IN TRANSLATION

דער לעצטער פֿרילינג

The Last Spring

כיגעדענק, ווי היינט:

עס האבן גראָד געבליט אין סאָד די עפֿלביימער,
מיט ראָזאָ-בלאָסע ליפעלאַך פֿון בליטן
געקושט דעם האַניקשווערן טאָג
און ס'זענען קליינע בלעטאלעך געפֿאלן
ווי שניי צעשמעקטער, פֿרילינגדיקער
אויף מיין פֿאָטערס מידן, קאלטן שטערן.

I remember it like today:

In the orchard apple trees were in bloom
With pinkish-white lips of blossoms
That kissed the honey-laden day,
And little leaves that fell
Like snow, succulent, spring-like
On my father's cold, tired brow.

און אז כּיבין דעמאָלט גראָד געלאָפֿן צווישן ביימער,
וויילד און גליקלעך מיט דעם פֿרילינג און מיט מייןע
עלף יאָר
האַט מיין טאָטע אָפֿגעווענדט דאָס פנים אָן אַ זיַט —
נאָר כּיהאַב נאָך דעמאָלט נישט פֿאַרשטאַנען,
אז ער האָט געוויינט.

As I walked between trees,

Wild and happy with spring and my
eleven years,
My papa turned his face aside —
I knew not then that he was crying.

און אז זיַנע אויגן זענען פֿול געוואָרן מיטן וויין פֿון
דעם צעבליטן טאָג
און ליידיק פֿון דעם אויסגעקוּכטן בלוט די לונג,
האַט ער געלאָזט פֿון דאָרף צוויי עדות רופֿן,
זיַין שוואַגער און אַן אלטן, גראָען גוי,
אַנגעגרייט צום שרייבן טינט, פּאַפּיר,
פֿאַרשלאָסן זיך מיט זיי אין אַ באַזונדער צימער
נאָר דעמאָלט האָב איך נישט געוואוסט,
אז ס'האַט זיַין שלאָנקע, יונגע האַנט
געשריבן די צוואה.

As his eyes filled with tears of the day in
bloom

And his lungs were emptied of
coughed-up blood,
Two witnesses from the village were
called,
His brother-in-law and an old, gray goy,
Ink and paper prepared for writing,
Enclosed in a special room,
Allowing no one in, not even mama —
I knew not then,
His slender young hand
Was writing his will.

דער שבת אין מיין היים

ס'קומט דער שבת אין מיין היימדארף פֿרעמד
 און נישט געבעטן,
 עס גייט אים בלויז אַקייגן דער ריח פֿון
 קאַרן ברויט, פֿרישגעבאַקן
 און דאָס טאַרקען פֿון דער מאַגלאָוויצע אין
 דער גויעס הענט,
 ביים צוגרייטן אַ לינאַנע העמד אויף זונטיק.
 ס'זינגען גראַע סקאַווראַנקעס פֿון שטיינער
 איבער שאַרפֿע, אויסגעשפיצטע שנאַבלען פֿון
 די קאָסעס
 דאָס ליד פֿון זעקסטן אַרבעטסטאָג.

אַנטלויפֿט דער רוטאַג אַ פֿאַרשעמטער,
 טוליעט זיך אין פֿאַלבן פֿרומקייט פֿון מיין
 מאַמען —
 צוימט אים אָפּ ביי זיך אַ שטיקל פּלאַץ די מאַמע,
 ווי ווייט עס גרייכט איר דאָווענדיקער ניגון:
 פֿון פֿענצטער ביז צום עק פֿון סטאַדעלע
 און פֿון דער טיר צום אַלטן עפּלבוים אין סאָד.

ליגט ער, ווי אַ קליינע קורעפּאַטווע אין דער
 בריזדע
 און וואַרט ביז ס'וועט זיך דורכשניידן דורך לאַנגע,
 פֿוילע שעהן
 דער סערפּ פֿון ערב-זונטיקדיקער פֿרייד.

Sabbath in My Home

Sabbath comes to my village like an
 uninvited stranger,
 Met with the smell of freshly baked rye
 bread,
 And the hissing iron in the peasant
 woman's hand
 As she prepares a linen shirt for Sunday.
 From stones upon pointed peaks of
 Steep slopes grey larks sing
 The song of the sixth workday.

The day of rest flees in shame,
 And nestles in my mother's piety.

She makes a bit of space for him
 Reaching as far as the prayerful tune,
 From the window to the stable's corner,
 From the door to the old apple tree.

He lies like a partridge in his nest

And waits for the Joy of Sunday

To cut through the long, lazy hours like
 a scythe.

פֿון יענער זײַט ליד

פֿון יענער זײַט ליד איז אַ סאָד פֿאַראַן
און אין סאָד אַ הויז מיט אַ שטרויענעם דאָך —
עס שטייען דרייַ סאָנעס און שווייגן זיך אויס,
דרייַ שומרים אויף שטענדיקער וואַך.

פֿון יענער זײַט ליד איז אַ פֿויגל פֿאַראַן,
אַ פֿויגל ברוין-געל מיט אַ רויטלעכער ברוסט,
ער קומט דאָרט צו פֿליען יעדן ווינטער אויפֿסנויַ
און הענגט, ווי אַ קנאַספּ אויף דעם נאַקעטן קוסט.

פֿון יענער זײַט ליד איז אַ סטעזשקע פֿאַראַן,
אַזוי שמאַל און שאַרף, ווי דער דיין-דינסטער,
שניט
און עמעץ, וואָס האָט זיך פֿאַרבלאַנדזשט אין צײַט,
גייט דאָרט אום מיט שטילע און באַרוועסע טריט.

פֿון יענער זײַט ליד קענען ווונדער געשען
נאָך הײַנט, אין אַ טאָג, וואָס איז כּמאַרנע און גראַ,
ווען ער דופּקט אַרײַן אין דעם גלאַז פֿון דער שויב
די צעפֿיבערטע בענקשאַפֿט פֿון אַ ווונדיקער
שעה

פֿון יענער זײַט ליד קען מײַן מאמע אַרויס,
און שטיין אויף דער שוועל אַ ווײַלע פֿאַרטראַכט
און מיך רופֿן אַהײַם, ווי אַמאָל, ווי אַמאָל:
— עננוג זיך געשפּילט שוין, דו זעסט נישט?
ס'איז נאַכט.

On the Other Side of the Poem

On the other side of the poem is a grove,
In it a house with a straw roof and a yard —
Three pine trees are standing silently
there,
Three sturdy watchmen on permanent
guard.

On the other side of the poem is a bird,
A yellow-brown bird with a ruddy breast,
He arrives to fly off every winter anew,
Like a bud hanging from a bare bush
seeks his rest.

On the other side of the poem is a path,
Slender and sharp as the thin-thinnest
slit,
And there someone ambles adrift in time
Treading ever so softly with barefooted
gait.

On the other side of the poem wonders
can occur
Even now on a day so grayish and dour,
When a knock is felt against the
windowpane,
The feverish longing of a wounded hour.

On the other side of the poem my
mother may appear,
Pensive she stands at the threshold in
thrall,
Then calls me inside as she did long ago:
— You've played enough, don't you see?
It's nightfall.

די ווערטער פֿון מיין אלף-בית

The Words of My *Alef-bey's*

אַט קומען זיי צו מיר, די ווערטער פֿון מיין אלף-
בית --

זיי שמעקן שוין ניט מער מיט ווילד-מאַן
און באַרוינעק,

מיט ווייצן צייטיקע, מיט פֿרישן היי און קלעע,
אויף זיי איז אויסגעברענט אַ נומער פֿון,
טרעבלינקע

עס טראָגט פֿון זיי מיט רויך פֿון בעלזשעץ און.
מאָידאַנעק

זיי זענען ווי די שבעה-זיצער נאָך אַ לעצטן זיפֿץ
און די פֿאַרוויגער פֿון אַ ניט-דערזאָגטער ווידוי;
זיי זענען די שליחים פֿון דעם מלכות געטאָ
אנטרונענע פֿון בלוט-באָד און בגידה.

אין ווענט פֿון שולן חרובע זיי שרייבן מיך אַריין

דורך לעצטער תפילה, דורך ניט דערהערט געוויין,
קריצן מיך אַין ביי דעם צוקאַפֿנס פֿון דער צייט,
ווי אַ מצבֿה פֿאַר מיין פֿאַלקס געביין.

און ווען איז דאָס געווען, מיט וויפֿל יאָר צוריק?
אונטער דעם ברייטן קאַרשנבוים באַדעקט
מיט ווייסן

אַ באַנק, אַ הילצערנע, אַ טיש, אַ סידור
אויפֿגעמאַכט

מיט פינטעלעך און שטראַכעלעך,
ווי ס'וואָלט אַ נייע בריק

געפֿירט מיך צו די אַלטע ברעגעס פֿון תנ"ך.

און ווי ס'וואָלט מיטאַמאַל אַ שלאָג געטאָן דער ריח
פֿון דעם מיט מילך און האַניק פֿליסנדיקן לאַנד,
האַבן זיך דריי שותפֿטעס -- אַן אָסע, פֿליג און בין
צוגעזעצט און איינגעזויגן אין דעם ספֿרס ראַנד.

ס'איז שטיל געווען אַרום מיר, געזשומעט האַבן
בלויז

די אָסע און די בין, ווען מיט זיין שמאַלער ווירע
האַט שמואל, מיין מלמד, אַיעדעס אות באַזונדער

And so they come to me, the words of
my *alef-bey's* --

No longer redolent of wild poppy
and periwinkle,
Ripe sheaves of wheat and fresh hay.
Branded with a number from Treblinka,

They smell of smoke from Belzec
and Majdanek.

Like the mourners' last sigh,
The lull of an unspoken confession,
Delegates of the ghetto kingdom
Escaped from bloodbath and betrayal.

They inscribe me in the walls of ruined
schools

With a last prayer of unheard tears,
Engrave me into the stone of eternity,
As a monument for my people's bones.

When was that, how many years ago?
Under the broad cherry tree shrouded in
white buds

A wooden bench, a table, an open prayer
book

With points and lines like a new bridge

Leading to the old shores of the Bible.

Suddenly, as if struck by the scent
Of a land flowing with milk and honey,
Three partners -- wasp, fly and bee --
Settled into the margin of the holy book.

Around me it was quiet, save the
humming

Wasp and bee, as my teacher Shmuel
Lifted each letter with his narrow ruler,

אָפּגעטיילט און אָפּגעקוקט פֿון דער לאַנגער.
שורה

ס'האַט גלייך מיט מיר אַרײַנגעקוקט אין סידור
בלאָער הימל
דורך דעם קאַרשנבוים ווײַסן, שמעקנדיקן סך,
און אַ ווונק, אַ טאַטישן געגעבן מיט'ן אויג
צו דער מחנה טובים אויף דעם ברוינעם דאָך.

האַבן זיי זיך אויפֿגעהויבן אַלע, איינס בײַ איינס,
איבער מיר געקרייזט, געדרייט זיך אַן עיגול,
פֿלעכטנדיק אין לופֿט אַרום מײַן יונגן קאָפּ
אַ קראַנץ פֿון ווײַסע פֿלאַטערדיקע פֿליגל --

גלייך ס'וואָלט אַ יעדעס טונקלע וואָרט באַזונדער
געווען אַ קערנדל פֿון גאָט אליין פֿאַרזייט
אויף דעם האַלב-פֿאַרגעלטן, אַלטן סידור-בלאַט,
פֿאַר זייערע ברייטע, זשענדע שנאַבלען.
צוגעגרייט

... ס'איז שטיל איצט אַרום מיר, מיט
שטילקייט פֿון פֿאַרנאָכט,
עס שאַרעט בלויז אויף אונטער מײַן האַנט דאָס
ווייסע בלאַט פאַפּיר,
וואָס וויל ווערן אַ היים פֿאַר אותיות נע-ונדע.
פֿאַר האַלב-פֿאַרגעס'נע טרוימען און --
פֿאַר מיר.

Unchaining them from the long line.

As I glanced into the prayer book the
blue sky peering
Through the white, fragrant covering of
the cherry tree
Gave a fatherly wink
To the flock of doves on the roof.

One by one they ascended,
Gathering and circling above me,
Weaving a shiny wreath of fluttering
white wings
In the air above my young head --

As if each dark word
In the yellowing page of the prayer book
Were a seed planted by God
For their wide, greedy beaks.

... Around me now it is quiet with
stillness of dusk,
Beneath my hand stirs a white piece of
paper
Offering a home for wandering letters,
For half-forgotten dreams -- and for me.

Mandel Scholion Interdisciplinary Research Center in the Humanities and Jewish
Studies
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

NOTES

- 1 Mordecai Richler, *The Street* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), 9.
- 2 David Rome, quoted in Gerald Tulchinsky, *Canada's Jews: A People's Journey* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 283. Canadian author Hugh MacLennan coined the term "two solitudes" in 1945 as the title of his allegorical novel about the tensions between English and French Canada.

- 3 Rokhl Korn, quoted in the translator's introduction to Rachel Korn, *Paper Roses*, trans. Seymour Levitan (Toronto: Aya Press, 1985), iii. Originally published in *Zayn* 12, no. 48 (1967): 22.
- 4 Korn, *Dorf* (Vilna: Vilner farlag fun b. kletzkin, 1928), 9. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Yiddish are my own. To read the poem in its entirety, refer to the appendix.
- 5 Ibid., 51–53.
- 6 For a full account of the Esterke myth, its origins and later literary invocations, see Haya Bar-Itzhak, *Jewish Poland: Legends of Origin* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 113–32.
- 7 David G. Roskies, "The Last of the Purim Players: Itzik Manger," *Prooftexts* 13, no. 3 (1993): 211–35, 213.
- 8 Samuel Kassow, "Travel and Local History as a National Mission: Polish Jews and the Landkentenish Movement in the 1920s and 1930s," in *Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place*, ed. Julia Brauch, Anna Lipphart, and Alexandra Nocke (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2008): 241–64, 244. See also David Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 54.
- 9 Kassow, 248.
- 10 Korn, *Dorf*, 34. See the appendix for a complete translation.
- 11 Korn, *Heym un heymlozikayt* (Buenos Aires: Central Press for Polish Jews in Argentina, 1948), 94–95. The poem first appeared in 1937 in the volume *Royter mon*. In Yiddish the passage reads: "Mayn mame hot tseteylt ire yorn/ tsvishn hundert yokh feld un ire dray kinder. / . . . Es hot ir harts geblutikt mit a yedn tsvayg, / vos vilde shkeytsim hobn opgebrokhn inem sod, / azoy vi demolt, ven zi hot derzehn mayn hak-tseshpoltene bak/ untern same oyg."
- 12 Roskies, "Purim Players," 211.
- 13 Itzik Manger, *The World According to Itzik: Selected Poetry and Prose*, trans. Leonard Wolf (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002), 239.
- 14 For a detailed discussion of this and other works by Vogler, see Justin Daniel Cammy, "Yung-Vilne": *A Cultural History of a Yiddish Literary Movement in Interwar Poland* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2003), 195–207. Cammy argues that by personifying the landscape and allowing it to speak in a rich local

Yiddish idiom, Vogler voiced the national claim to a corner of Poland for the Jews.

- 15 Korn's romanticized village portrait therefore appears to confirm Kassow's claim that, despite increasing tensions, Polish Jews "harbored the hope that eventually they would find their place as equal and loyal citizens of the Polish state." Kassow, 249.
- 16 Esther Frank, "Home and Homelessness in the Poetry of Rokhl Korn, 1898–1982," *Canadian Jewish Studies/Études juives canadiennes* 18–19 (2010–2011): 6.
- 17 Levitan, "Rokhl Häring Korn," *Jewish Women's Archive*, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/korn-rokhl-haring>.
- 18 Frank, 3. For the original source, see J. I. Segal, "Tsum hayntikn rokhl korn ovnt," *Keneder adler*, October 15, 1948.
- 19 Tulchinsky, 212.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ira Robinson, Pierre Anctil, and Ervin Butovsky, eds., *An Everyday Miracle: Yiddish Culture in Montreal* (Quebec: Véhicule Press, 1990), 15.
- 22 According to Roskies, this "ideological impetus" stemmed primarily from the Labor Zionist Poalei Tsiyon (Workers of Zion) movement, which espoused a program of Jewish revitalization that included both Yiddish and Modern Hebrew as national languages. See Roskies, "Yiddish in Montreal: The Utopian Experiment," in Robinson, Anctil, and Butovsky, 22–38. Rebecca Margolis points out that "the ideologically motivated emphasis on language coincided with the crystallization of French nationalism" and was bolstered by this "movement centred on the survival of the French language and culture within a dominant English-language society." See Rebecca Margolis, *Jewish Roots, Canadian Soil* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), xv–xvi.
- 23 Robinson, Anctil, and Butovsky, 17. In 1931, a total of 99 percent of Quebec Jews over the age of ten declared Yiddish as their mother-tongue (96 percent in all of Canada). See Margolis, 25.
- 24 Margolis, 19.
- 25 Ibid., xiv.
- 26 Richler, *The Street*, 9.
- 27 Margolis, 38.

- 28 Quoted in Zelda Kahn Newman, "The Correspondence between Kadya Molodowsky and Rokhl Korn," *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 8, no. 1 (2011): 10. The original letter is part of the Rokhl Korn archive, housed at the Jewish Public Library in Montreal.
- 29 Itche Goldberg, "Fun yener zayt lid," *Di goldene keyt* 135 (1993): 136–48, 140.
- 30 Korn, *Di gnod fun vort* (Tel Aviv: Hamenorah, 1968), 12. In Yiddish the stanza reads: *Kh'hob moyre far der ershter shure fun a lid — / zi ken dokh vern, vi a sharfer shnit, / vos kept di troyemen un tse'efnt odern, / biz s'git a pleyts mit frishn, heysn blut.* For an alternate translation, see Seymour Mayne and Rivka Augenfeld's "The First Line of a Poem," *Generations: Selected Poems of Rachel Korn*, ed. Seymour Mayne (Oakville, Ont.: Mosaic Press, 1982), 26.
- 31 Korn, "Fun yener zayt lid," *Fun yener zayt lid* (Tel Aviv: I.L. Peretz Farlag, 1962), 9. See the appendix for my translation in its entirety. For an alternate translation by Seymour Levitan, see *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, ed. Irving Howe, Ruth R. Wisse, and Khone Shmeruk (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987), 524.
- 32 Korn, "Kh'hob haynt baynakht gefilt a lid oyf mayne lipn," *Fun yener zayt lid*, 24. In Yiddish the stanza reads: *Farviyanet iz der tog shoyen in zayn frister sho, / un in mayn hant akoredik velkt s'vayse blat papir — / s'hot mit a khmare got farshwelt far mir zayn ponim, / un vi a fremde shtey ikh itst bay mayn farshemter tir.*
- 33 Abraham Sutzkever, "Trees Are Made into Wonderful Paper," *A. Sutzkever, Selected Poetry and Prose*, trans. Barbara and Benjamin Harshav (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 37.
- 34 I thank Justin Cammy for suggesting this interpretation.
- 35 Korn, "Di verter fun mayn alef-beys," *Yoyol shrift fun der yidisher folks-bibliotek, 1914–1964* (Montreal: Jewish Public Library, 1964), 62–63. The poem appeared in its original form in *Fun yener zayt lid*. See the appendix for a complete translation of the 1964 version.
- 36 In Yehoash's Yiddish translation of the Bible, he translates Genesis 28:18 as follows: "Un yankev . . . hot genumen dem shteyn vos er hot gemakht far zayn tsukopns" (And Jacob . . . took the stone that he had placed at his head). Yehoash, *Tanakh: Khumesb: Breshis, shmoys* (New York: Tanakh, 1926), 74. The word *tsukopns* is also used in the modern sense to refer to a "headboard," i.e., that which rests at or under one's head.
- 37 Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Last Demon," in *The Collected Stories of I. B. Singer* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1982), 179.

- 38 In the original version of the poem published in *Fun yener zayt lid*, this stanza reads slightly differently: “. . . Around me now it is quiet with stillness of dusk, / Beneath my hand stirs the inscribed page, / That wants to be a home for half-forgotten childhood. / And tries to be a home for my own wandering [*eygenem na-venod*].” Evidently, Korn changed the stanza in order to improve upon the rhyme. It is striking, however, that she chose to replace the phrase “inscribed page” [*ongeshribene blat*] with the phrase “white sheet of paper” [*vayse blat papir*], a deliberate erasure that emphasizes the relationship between grief and writer’s block. See *Fun yener zayt lid*, 21–22.
- 39 Melekh Ravitch, “Velt—vort—bukh—bibliotek . . . : Der yidisher folks-bibliotek in montreal tsum yoyvl,” *Yoyvl shrift*, 59–60.
- 40 Anita Norich, *Discovering Exile: Yiddish and Jewish-American Culture during the Holocaust* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007), 4.
- 41 Sheila E. Jelen, Michael P. Kramer, and L. Scott Lerner, “Intersections and Boundaries in Modern Jewish Literary Study,” in *Modern Jewish Literatures: Intersections and Boundaries*, eds. Jelen, Kramer, and Lerner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 2.
- 42 Ibid., 2–3.
- 43 Richler, *Son of a Smaller Hero* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1955), 10.
- 44 Northrop Frye, “Conclusion to *A Literary History of Canada*,” *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Concord, Ont.: House of Anansi Press, 1971), 227.
- 45 Tulchinsky, “The Canadian Jewish Experience: A Distinct Personality Emerges,” <http://www.bnaibrith.ca/institute/millennium/millennium02.html>.
- 46 One of Korn’s only poems that mentions Canada explicitly does so only in its title: “Indiyaner zumer in kanader berg” (Indian Summer in the Canadian Mountains, in *Fun yener zayt lid*, 73–74). Dedicated to the poet Yankev Glatshetyn, the poem was inspired by the eastern Canadian landscape and opens with an image of a local Indian chief, yet it unfolds into an expression of Jewish collective memory and mourning. Most of the poems in this section of the volume, subtitled “Mit beymer un feygl” (With Trees and Birds), though inspired by Montreal’s fall and winter landscapes, are devoid of specific urban markers and invoke only natural images of snow-covered fields and pine trees that could just as easily be attributed to the rural Polish landscape of the poet’s youth. Korn exploits the similarity, deliberately blending descriptions of her current setting with the East European landscape embedded in her memory.

- 47 A similar distinction applies to the shift in tone, style, and imagery perceptible in the postwar writing of poets like Abraham Sutzkever, Jacob Glatshetyn, and Kadya Molodowsky, whose emphasis on the beauty, power, and lamentable decline of the Yiddish language is comparable to the meta-poetic turn in Korn's postwar writing.
- 48 Korn, "All that was once true . . .," trans. Seymour Levitan, *Paper Roses*, 108. The poem originally appeared in 1978 in the Yiddish newspaper *Di tsukunft*.