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Beyond Time and Continents: Irena Klepfisz's Vision of Poland, America and the Space Between

Poza czasem i kontynentami: Irena Klepfisz wizja Polski i Ameryki oraz przestrzeni między nimi

Streszczenie: Dla rodziny Klepfiszów i tysięcy innych Żydów ojczyzną była, bezpowrotnie utracona, kwitnąca kultura żydowska przedwojennej Polski. Artykuł poświęcony jest analizie wizji Ireny Klepfisz, w której poetka poszukuje bezpiecznej (metaforycznej) przestrzeni na styku europejskiej przeszłości i amerykańskiej teraźniejszości.

Słowa kluczowe: poezja Holocaustu, amerykańska poezja żydowska, Irena Klepfisz, poezja jidysz

Между временем и континентами: Ирины Клепфиш взгляд на Польшу, Америку и пространство между ними

Резюме: Для семьи Клепфиш и многих других евреев родиной была, безвозвратно утерянная, процветающая еврейская культура довоенной Польши. Статья посвящена анализу поэзии Ирены Клепфиш, в которой она ищет безопасное (метафорическое) пространство на стыке европейского прошлого и американского настоящего.

Ключевые слова: поэзия Холокоста, американская еврейская поэзия, Ирена Клепфиш, идишская поэзия

Jewish immigrants to America, especially Holocaust survivors struggled with an acute sense of non-belonging. The loss of home, family, and often culture was then compensated by nostalgic memories of pre-war Poland, the true home that was shattered, not so much in the geographical but mainly in the cultural sense, as the Jewish communities and flourishing culture could not be revived. Holocaust survivors thus often had no home or family to return to. As a Jewish American poet and activist Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz (1945–2018) aptly expressed in her poem *Notes of an Immigrant Daughter, Atlanta* (1981): "I can't go back / where I came from / was

burned off the map"¹. This feeling of eternal exile often led to either sentimentalizing or romanticizing of the pre-war times. Irena Klepfisz is one of children survivors whose poetry addresses the gap between the parents' and survivors' narratives and the present life in America in the shadow of the Holocaust.

Klepfisz was born in Poland in 1941 in a secular socialist family. Her father Michal Klepfisz avoided deportation to Treblinka and played an active role in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, during which he was killed in 1943. Irena was hidden in a Catholic nursery and her mother Rose Percykow Klepfisz hid with Polish peasants, passing as a non-Jew due to her fluent Polish and blue eyes. The mother and daughter emigrated first to Sweden and then to the United States when Irena was eight². Klepfisz's sense of spatially located home is therefore significantly complex, as neither of these lands turned out to feel like anything else but an exile.

As the majority of American Jewish writers did not experience the Holocaust directly, their representation of either pre-war or war-time Poland tended to be rather general. The authors either depicted fragments of the European past in the form of dreams and nightmares of their traumatized protagonists (see e.g., the first American Jewish Holocaust novel by Edgar Louis Wallant *The Pawnbroker*, published in 1961) or avoided concrete depiction altogether, providing symbolic motifs, such as cold, hunger, barb wire fence or boots, as in the case of Cynthia Ozick's short story *Shawl* (1980). Klepfisz, as a child survivor growing up surrounded by stories of death and survival, avoids symbolism, which she feels tends to soften the tragic reality. When writing about the war, she uses simple, short lines as in her early, unnamed poem:

germans were known
to pick up infants
[...]
and smash their heads
against plaster walls

somehow
i managed
to escape that fate³

Nevertheless, what Klepfisz shares with other American Holocaust writers is the emphasis on the devastating emotional impact

¹ M. Kaye/Kantrowitz, *Notes of an Immigrant Daughter*, Atlanta, in: Evelyn Torton Beck (ed.), *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, Beacon Press, Boston 1989, p. 125.

² See: A. Rich, *Introduction in: A Few Words in the Mother Tongue: Poems Selected and New (1971–1990)*, The Eighth Mountain Press, Portland 1990, p. 17.

³ I. Klepfisz, *During the war*, in: *ibidem*, p. 43.

of the genocide upon individuals and communities. What is more, Klepfisz presents the Holocaust as an American theme, not only as a tragedy that happened elsewhere and long ago. She turns her sense of geographical and cultural exile into a concept of translating or interconnecting the suffering, emptiness and various forms of oppression of both Holocaust survivors and other minorities. Her poetry reflects her vision of America as an exile that does not support the flourishing of Jewish culture, ascribing this hostility to ongoing economic, racial and gender oppression. America thus becomes a "secondary traumatic stressor"⁴. Despite her critical attitude to America, the language of her poetry is English. She adopted the language of the exile, not only because it had become a global language and her work would, therefore, reach a wider audience, but also due to the fact that her insider's knowledge of Polish or Yiddish was marginal. Exiled from her mother tongue and homeland, she places her cultural and personal center between times and continents in the imagined space of pre-war Poland. Due to her diasporic position, she searches for wholeness, understanding, and affinities, rather than the postmodern difference.

Klepfisz's poetry creates a contact space, where various temporalities and spaces coexist and interact. The present and the past, America and Poland are both painfully present, affecting and shaping each other, coming to the foreground or being put aside, as their topical urgency shifts according to the poem's focus. The time and space are thus, in the vein of the modernist tradition, treated as fluid concepts in a constant process of negotiation. Klepfisz depicts herself as "the water between two land masses that will never touch"⁵, the connecting medium, that is, however, not a stable bridge but a constantly moving mass of water, absorbing and reshaping the past as well as the present. There are passages in her poetry where space turns from geographical to symbolical: a space that is defined by tragedies, emptiness, and silence, the difference between war-time Poland and post-war America dissolve:

I see the rubble of this unbombed landscape, see that the city, like the rest of this alien country, is not simply a geographic place, but a time zone, an era in which I, by my very presence in it, am rooted. No one simply passes through. History keeps unfolding and demanding a response. A life obliterated around me, of those I barely noticed. A life unmarked, unrecorded. A silent mass migration. Relocation. Common rubble in the streets⁶.

⁴ T. Degloma, *Expanding Trauma through Space and Time: Mapping the Rhetorical Strategies of Trauma Carrier Groups*, "Social Psychology Quarterly" 2009, no. 2, p. 111.

⁵ I. Klepfisz, *Bashert*, in: *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue: Poems Selected and New (1971–1990)* . . . , p. 194.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 192–193.

For Klepfisz understands the past as a constantly present series of events that are unavoidable, regardless of time and location: "Are there moments in history which cannot be escaped or transcended, but which act like time warps permanently trapping all those who are touched by them? And that which should have happened in 1944 in Poland and didn't, must it happen now? In 1964? In Chicago?"⁷. She demonstrates the impact of this time trap not only on her own story but also when providing glimpses of family history, especially her mother's, who still follows the same patterns of behavior that were life-saving in war-time Poland but seem out of place in America:

Now she is trapped again.
But no walls or barbed wire around her this time⁸.

When Klepfisz writes about America, she criticizes the country's attitudes towards immigration and unveils the racism, anti-Semitism, sexism or homophobia: "America is not my chosen home, not even the place of my birth. Just a spot where it seemed safe to go to escape certain dangers. But safety, I discover, is only temporary. No place guarantees it to anyone forever"⁹.

Such a claim could, however, equally concern Poland. Though it was her place of birth, eventually it was not her chosen home. When writing about her motherland, Klepfisz, similarly to other American Jewish Holocaust writers, predominantly reconstructs the story of her family, as in her poem *Searching for my Father's Body*. She searches the unfamiliar landscape for any signs of the former life and a stable point of reference she could use to reconstruct at least a glimpse of her father's life, as he was buried in an unmarked grave:

It all depends on who you knew,
Or rather who knew you,
That determines history
[...]
It is more painful
When there is no index¹⁰.

Even though Michal Klepfisz's activities and heroic death were recorded in journals, his being dead still seems incomprehensible for his daughter:

⁷ Ibidem, p. 192.

⁸ I. Klepfisz, *Glimpses of the outside*, in: ibidem, p. 174. Original layout of the poems is respected.

⁹ I. Klepfisz, *Bashert*, in: ibidem, pp. 196–197.

¹⁰ I. Klepfisz, *Searching for My Father's Body*, in: ibidem, pp. 31–32.

Confusing details, difficult to follow,
but the main fact, his death,
stares at me from the faded page,
[...].
Simply a fact, dead / like an object it describes"¹¹

She is frustrated by the lack of details concerning his death and continues rereading the story of his death from various sources and diaries (listed in the footnotes at the end of the poem).

As the fact of his death and its various versions are elusive, the speaker searches for signs of his life instead, creating an imaginary landscape, where she pictures her father hiding. While the poem is to a certain extent autobiographical and personal, nevertheless, in its plain language it captures the essence of the trauma and frustration of many second-generation American Jews and their desire to retrace their family or community roots.

In 1983 Klepfisz and her mother visited Poland on the 40th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, to confront their mental image with reality. Klepfisz documented their trip in the poem *Warsaw 1983: Umschlagplatz* and a diary *Oyfkeyveroves: Poland, 1983*. Only then did she realize how much had "the little Paris of Eastern Europe"¹² changed. As she recalls:

Though I had been raised in almost a *khurn kultur*, a Holocaust culture, I was totally unprepared for the experience. In Poland I saw the *shadows* of Jewish-Polish culture and was able to infer from them the magnitude of what had taken place. It was like stepping into a negative rather than a photograph. I was overcome by the sudden realization of the scale of the loss [...] I knew I would never take Yiddish culture for granted, never abandon it again¹³.

Her childhood memories together with the narratives of her mother and other survivors blended into an imagined space that has a clear geographical structure and feel, and is populated by people from the stories she heard. When she arrives in Warsaw, the scene is unfamiliar, as her mental image was unlocalized, because of its communal rather than personal origin.

When she sees the Warsaw Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, a white brick wall with two plaques in Polish and Yiddish, designating the place of deportations, she feels tense, even though she is aware that there are "no horrors this time"¹⁴. It is only an ordinary street in a modern city. Despite the fact that the street could have

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

¹² I. Klepfisz, *The widow and daughter*, in: *ibidem*, p. 36.

¹³ I. Klepfisz, *Secular Jewish Identity: Yiddishkayt in America*, in: *Idem, Dreams of an Insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches and Diatribes*, The Eighth Mountain Press, Portland 1990, p. 158.

¹⁴ I. Klepfisz, *Warsaw, 1983: Umschlagplatz*, in: *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue: Poems Selected and New...*, p. 235.

been her home or a place from where she would be sent to death, it does not produce any emotions. What, however, makes her feel uncomfortable is the gas station right next to the monument:

A gas station pumping gas
right behind. A building on
one side. Perhaps from that time¹⁵.

She is distressed that the location is only memorialized by a small wall, a plaque, and a candle. As she recalls in her journal:

My mother didn't recognize anything. We saw the Ghetto Fighters' Memorial – on a large plaza surrounded by a complex of apartment buildings. At least it stood out. Then we went to Mila 18 bunker [...] which is on a small grassy hill in the midst of a group of apartment buildings and barely visible. It seemed in disrepair and unintegrated with its surroundings. But the small wall and plaque marking the *umschlagplatz* were the worst. Just stuck there, with a gas station right behind it. There was a candle and I lit it¹⁶.

(Five years later, in 1988, a national monument at the former *Umschlagplatz* was built and the gas station removed. It was the year of 45th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The inscription is in Polish, Yiddish, English, and Hebrew).

In 1983 the general absence of historical memory and any sign of active remembrance struck her already at the airport. Klepfisz relates her landing and experience at the Customs, where she was asked if she carried any gold or silver, the officer pointing to her golden chain with the star of David, and then filling the form: *Złoty łańcuszek z wisiorkiem*¹⁷. Klepfisz admits how anxious and uneasy she felt during the procedure, not knowing whether the official description of the object was the result of ignorance or refusal to identify it. Equal lack of historical memory and awareness struck her also in America, where her colleague who knew where she was going, asked: "Are you going to be staying with your relatives or at a hotel?"¹⁸ She found the question obtuse, as all her family and relatives (except her mother) died in the Holocaust. Still, Klepfisz understands that the imagined space of her homeland cannot be projected into the modern times and she is well aware that a busy street in the capital cannot become an isolated space in time, divided from a common, everyday life:

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 235.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 93.

¹⁷ I. Klepfisz, *Oyfkeyveroves: Poland, 1983*, in: *Dreams of an Insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches and Diatribes*. . . , p. 91. Original italics.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 90.

I live on another continent.
It is 1983. I am now a visitor.
History stops for no one¹⁹.

Klepfisz thus confirmed that Poland was not the homeland she knew it could not be. Instead, she uses her memory, experience, and knowledge to write poetry that would offer America (and potentially Poland) a mirror, giving voice to those who were silenced or underrepresented. Her sense of exile provides her with empathy with minorities, those who lost home or feel lost, oppressed or isolated. As she says: "I have stayed [in America] because there is no other place to go. In my muscles, my flesh, my/bone, I balance the heritages, the histories of two continents"²⁰. Despite the fact her imagined homeland is non-existent and Poland looked different and modern, she still views it as "undzerheyim" (our home), *no matter how filled with disappointment and betrayal. Amerike is goles, America is an exile, a foreign land, where I speak a foreign tongue. But I will never live in Poland, I do not want to, though I never see the end to the mourning*²¹.

Yet her visit to Poland led her to turn to Yiddish culture and a search for undeservedly forgotten women writers. She started to collect, translate and publish poems and stories of Fradel Shtock or Kadya Molodowsky (see *The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology*, 1986, 1989, coedited by Irena Klepfisz). While there were several translations of their poetry, English versions of women fiction writers were almost non-existent. Klepfisz's effort was then continued by other second-wave American Jewish feminists, who put together anthologies *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers* (1994) edited and translated by Frjeda Forman, Sarah Silberstein Swartz and Margie Wolfe (with the introduction by Irena Klepfisz called "Queens of Contradiction: A Feminist Introduction to Yiddish Women Writers"), *Arguing with the Storm: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers* (2007) published and translated by Rhea Tregebov, or *The Exile Book of Yiddish Women Writers: An Anthology of Stories That Looks to the Past So We Might See the Future* (2013) edited by a Canadian feminist Frieda Johles Forman.

Yet Klepfisz did not stop there, as she realized that translation and publication of these poems and stories were not sufficient. As she noted: "If translation is a first step in acquainting non-Yiddish readers with the Yiddish women's writing, the second is gaining

¹⁹ I. Klepfisz, *Warsaw, 1983: Umschlagplatz*, in: *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue: Poems Selected and New...*, p. 236.

²⁰ I. Klepfisz, *Bashert*, in: *ibidem*, pp. 196–197.

²¹ I. Klepfisz, *Oyfkeyveroves: Poland, 1983*, in: *Dreams of an Insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches and Diatribes...*, p. 89. Original italics.

critical understanding, stimulating critical interpretations, and providing perspective so that these rediscovered writers are not left hanging in limbo²². Her work inspired a collection *Women Writers of Yiddish Literature* (2015), where Klepfisz has an essay “Lost and Found: Yiddish Women Writers.” It is a first book dedicated to critical readings of women writers in Yiddish. This recovery and rediscovery of female writers are, according to Klepfisz, the most successful projects of second-wave feminism. As she observed: “What is evident is that women’s prose contributions to modern Yiddish literature are now being recovered only because of feminist efforts. The work is motivated by scholarly interest, but also by Jewish women’s needs to reconstruct and claim an authentic past in which women were included. Without it, most of us feel uprooted and incomplete²³.”

The translations and critical essays of newly discovered Yiddish women writers and their major themes of loss, limitation, and homeland had a significant impact on Klepfisz’s poetry as well, predominantly on her latest collection *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue: New Poems 1983–1990* (1990). As she claims, only then did she begin to realize the importance of Yiddish culture for her writing, missing the natural legacy that for her and thousands of others was lost because of the Holocaust: “I have never thought about the discrepancy between *di yidishe iberleybungen*, the Jewish experiences I was trying to write about, and the language I was using²⁴. Klepfisz realized that the entire generation was robbed of the Yiddish language and culture and gradually introduced Yiddish and Polish expressions and lines into her poetry. She does not use multilingual expressions as pure term-dropping, each word has a specific cultural resonance, as in her poem *Der mames shabosim / My Mother’s Sabbath Days*, where she depicts her childhood and growing up in secular Jewish culture. While she claims, that her “grandmother / Rikla Percykwow knew²⁵ all the commandments, her parents did not observe any religious practices and did not even celebrate the holidays: “So for us, it was different. / *Erevshabes* was plain *fraytik* / Or more precisely: *piontek*”²⁶. She thus uses the Yiddish expression for Sabbath to manifest ethnic and cultural belonging, and the Polish

²² I. Klepfisz, *Lost and Found: Yiddish Women Writers*, in: R. Horowitz (ed.), *Women Writers of Yiddish Literature: Critical Essays*, McFarland, Jefferson 2015, p. 7.

²³ I. Klepfisz, *Queens of Contradiction: A Feminist Introduction to Yiddish Women Writers*, in: F. Forman, E. Raicus, S. Silberstein Schwartz et al. (eds.), *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*, Second Story Press, Toronto 1994, pp. 56–57.

²⁴ I. Klepfisz, *Forging a Woman’s Link in di goldenekeyt: Some Possibilities of American Jewish Poetry*, in: *Dreams of an Insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches and Diatribes* . . . , p. 171.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 230.

²⁶ I. Klepfisz, *Der mames shabosim / My Mother’s Sabbath Days*, in: *Dreams of an Insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches and Diatribes* . . . , p. 230.

term [piątek] for Friday, to emphasize the mother tongue associated and used in everyday life. The Yiddish language and the cultural scene of pre-war Poland feel to be the true home to her. As she claims: "It wasn't even so much that Yiddish was alive. A small part of Poland seemed to be alive. Bolek and Anya. Vladka. Brukha and Monye. . . . All *leben geblibene* ["All those who stayed alive" — translation M.W.]"²⁷. To abandon the language, therefore, meant abandoning the imaginary, geographically dislocated world. According to Benjamin and Barbara Harshav:

It is important to realize that when a Yiddish poet wrote poetry, that poetry was not part of a normal nation-state with a stratified society. The Yiddish poet did not have Yiddish schools, universities, philosophers, sociologists, research institutes, police stations, bus drivers and such around him. Literature was "everything." It was a substitute for religion and for statehood, it was a state in itself, "Yiddishland"; to abandon it was to abandon the whole culture²⁸.

Despite the fact that her mother tongue is Polish, Klepfisz, due to her insufficient knowledge, uses more Yiddish even though she has acquired the language much later in life in America: "And if I wasn't fluent in Yiddish, it seemed that everyone around me was. I heard Yiddish constantly – in our home, in the homes of our *khaverim* and Yiddishists, at the street, in the stores"²⁹. That is also one of the reasons she writes predominantly in English that, paradoxically, is linguistically closest to her (including the wider audience). While she considers bilingual works unsatisfactory, she still seeks ways to promote and incorporate Yiddish culture into American culture. It was during her work on the Yiddish revival, where she eventually found a community and a shared ground she had been searching for. A ground which brings together her major interests: feminism, Yiddish culture, poetry, and history, overcoming the isolation of her earlier, Holocaust-based years. She considers such cooperation that is not limited by nationality or geography to be the potential basis and positive essence of the modern American Jewish identity.

The mixture of languages represents her final step in interconnecting various cultures, times and continents in modern poetry. The Yiddish language and culture thus became her space in-between her homeland and America, the true home.

Funding Acknowledgement: This paper is a result of the project SGS/4/2018, Silesian University in Opava internal grant *Análiza a interpretace textu (Text Analysis and Interpretation)*.

²⁷ I. Klepfisz, *Secular Jewish Identity*, in: *ibidem*, p. 147. Original emphasis.

²⁸ B. Harshav and B. Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry and Its Background*, in: *idem* (eds.), *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1986, p. 22.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 144–145.