

MAYN TATNS BESDIN-SHTUB (1956)

Preface [Author's Note]

1. A Literary Experiment

joining memoir / fiction

Not in English: deliberately wrote this in an unpolished style: direct address, little use for archaism and linguistic ornamentation: I left the language of Yitskhok Warshavski because it compliments the content (Amita Norich's overdetermined reading)

2. Lifelong Interest in AB/Memoir

Only in English: When still very young, I had actually thought of writing my recollections of the Beth Din

Nati Cohen just discovered these in a Yiddish newspaper from 1935/6:

"Warsaw 1914-1918" = memoirs of German occupation in WW I

3. Genealogy of Morals

traces origins of the besdin back to Moses [=his father]

also a psychoanalytic office

"only that which is individual can be just and true"

ideal of human progress = RETURN TO THE BETH DIN

there can be no justice without godliness

restorative mandate

memorialize an ancient Jewish institution heretofore neglected

neoconservative mandate; anti-revolution of left or right

against temporal power

rehabilitation of the Rov = internal revision of secular humanism

cf. Grade's *Di agunah* (1960)

4. Unspoken: The Destruction of Polish Jewry

intro. to 2nd series (Jan. 1958)

די גאנצע די שטע ליטעראטור פארט א פנקס, א געדענקבוך...

Q: Where is the rebellion?

A: as a memoir, necessarily focuses more on other than the self

parental conflict limited to mother vs. father

no open break of the children

conveniently leaves home w/mother, leaving inept father behind

has his peyes cut off for him at the disinfection station

Q: Where is there a sense of the collective?

A: Sense of the collective invoked solely on a textual level

Q: Where's the ethnography?

Q: Where's the writer?

A: loose chronology from Warsaw to Bilgoray; ends in early adolescence
the "balcony" reserved for deep philosophizing; underlines his isolation

father never went out on the balcony ("The Suicide")

virtually no formal education

A: form = content

Dramatized storytelling in embryo: 2-3 interpretations for each narrative drama

1. A korbn / The sacrifice (9-14)

however much my mother tried to drive me away, I was determined to eavesdrop, so great was my curiosity

I was all for the divorce because...the man in me already had its own reckoning [**budding manhood @ age 5!**]

whenever his mother is agitated, her wig gets disheveled (Y13)

direct address to the reader: Even the fire of the Evil Inclination does not burn forever. (Y14 E10)

Literary Lab: All was mixed up together: life, death, lust, boundless loyalty, and love.

Life was presenting a drama more exciting than those one read about in the papers or saw in a theater

(= adult, journalistic perspective)

2. Far vos di gendz hobn geshrign / Why the Geese Shrieked

in the contest between "cold logic" and unquestioning faith, his mother's rationality is victorious

Father luxuriates over the supernatural:

1. because he believed in it

2. to counteract modern skepticism

Child prays for the geese to shriek

Fictionalized Life: Singer as the Born-Again Storyteller

3. Far vos hobn zey opgelozt dem shidekh / A Broken Engagement

intro. WARSAW UNDERWORLD

Inducted into the secrets of LOVE

(Y22 E20) For the first time I inhaled the poignant aroma of love, of adulthood, and of the mysteries that hover between man and woman

“Oysgeshlosn” [only in Yiddish]

his awareness of lang. vs father’s insularity

(Y34) I was still a little boy, so I was still allowed to look at women...Maybe the bride and groom weren’t really human, but demons?...Maybe the young man is a sorcerer from Madagascar, etc. EVEN THEN I ALREADY FELT THAT THE WORLD IS FULL OF SECRETS

13. Der sod / The Secret (95)

Literature and Life

narrator busy reading a mayse-bikhl

mother knew Tanakh better than father

the secret: she gave birth to a goy

(Y78 E99) In his holy books he had often read about murderers, robbers, thieves, depraved men, seducers...Expressed in the holy tongue, written in the sacred script, even these retained the flavor of Torah. But in ordinary, everyday Yiddish, such things sounded quite different.

Implicit analogy between bookish father/son

all of them living in/through books!

father’s idealism: from Him proceedeth not evil...In reality there is no evil.

16. A tog mit fargenign / A Day of Pleasures (109)

his first carriage ride through the streets of Warsaw

creates fake suspense: maybe the driver is a robber, sorcerer? is it a dream, etc.?

yes, I must be under a spell...

[20 A Wedding] Overheard stories about white slave trade: sounded both seat and terrifying: There are secrets not only in heaven but also on earth (122)

[end of 25 “After the Wedding”](Y 150) I can remember things that children seldom recall. I am embarrassed to reveal how far back my memory reaches

CLAIM OF PERFECT RECALL

27. My Sister / My Sister (151)

my sister was a hasid in a dress; always exaggerated

Freudian analysis of mother-daughter rivalry

used her own language; wrote wonderful, literary letters
 my mother a wonderful raconteur, but she couldn't write
 brother paints landscapes, describes the real world but younger brother lives
 in IMAGINARY VISIONARY REALM (Y 162 E155)

Hinde reveals that she won't wear her wig in Belgium
 narrator begins to write himself...scribbles and sketches

43. A yingl a filozof / A Boy Philosopher (207)

anti-developmental: everything of import he already had in the home
 angry debates between mother/IJ: she insists that hatred of the Jew is
 implacable; even if you wear three stovepipe hats on top of each other
 sexual basis for his penname: how embarrassed to discover the sexual
 exploits of her namesake (255); how she saw through all of western culture;
 accuses Bergelson of plagiarism

her pessimism [=his philosophy]; rabbonim = ra bonim (257)

**I heard the most important debates for/against religious faith in my
 own kitchen**

yes, I was both a boy + philo.

57. Alt yidishkayt / Old Jewishness

though Peretz hailed from these parts, one seldom heard mention of his
 name

the Trisker Hasidim

Bilgoray = preserve of vanished Jewishness, older Yiddish

(287) mention of the brothel on the Sands [Mayses in a vinternackht, 1973]

In this world of of Jewishness I found a spiritual treasure trove. I had a
 chance to see our past as it really was. Time seemed to flow backwards. I lived
 Jewish history. (E290); Y an even greater lie: ikh bin arayn in a shtik alt
 yidishkayt, un ergets vu hob ikh gevust, az dos iz far mir a gaystiker oyster. Alts
 in mir hot gezogt: dos muz men bashraybn...

4. An umheymlekhe shayle / A Gruesome Question

very meagre plot

looked like a pauper out of a storybook...or a hidden lamedvovnik (Y26)

Rabbi, may one sleep with a dead wife?

again, his mother's disheveled wig is supposed to convey the drama (Y 27)

(Y28 E27) evil spirits and sprites...Can a person survive in such an abyss?

5. Di lome kale

(Y31) pious Jews don't shake hands, but my father was already savvy about this newfangled custom

father never looked at a woman

my mother loved to analyze everything rationally

bridegroom stole everything from her and ran off to America

6. Di shvue (36) / The Oath (60)

another weak plot

narrator stands behind father's chair and trembles

interprets father's sigh: How long will the exile last? will the devil reign supreme?

fake tension introduced: loud knocking at the door frightens father because he fears police

swore falsely by the Torah

7. Ven er volt geven a kohen / [IBS Reader 307-13]

narrator sent to call husband to a divorce; gambled away the couple's stove

can remarry her because he's not a kohen; father is elated

8. Dos shalekh-mones (47) / The Purim Gift (67)

very ascetic home: parents frowned upon all luxuries

PURIM brought a reprieve

story of a dead mouse sent as shalekhmones

9. Eyn khosn un tsvey kales

plaintiff is a scribe who betrothed his daughter to someone already betrothed

ends with evocation of his saintliness

10. Kvures khamoyr / The Suicide (73)

first mention of his siblings and what they read

narrator most fascinated by titillating tale from Gemara Maamados about the man/harlot

father, do you know the Kabbalah? What is love?

11. Keyn erets-yisroel / To the Land of Israel (80)

The coming of the Messiah

Moyshe Blekher read Yiddish papers and sometimes we borrowed one from him; returned from there (hyperbolic desc): this is how dead person must look who's returned from hell

(Y67) admits that his story is probably incorrect
 father considered the Zionists apostates
 I thought about him long and hard

12. A heter mimeye rabonim / The Dispensation (87)

monologue of a henpecked husband

young man also quotes her speech: epes take azoy vi in teater (73)

14. A groyse din-toyre / A Major Din Torah (35)

discovers the high style of other local rabbis

15. Di tsavoe / The Will (102)

spent his lifetime rewriting his elaborate will

17. Mit vos er hot gehandelt / The Salesman (116)

scholar wants to sell father his share in the hereafter for 100 rubles; paid him off to get rid of him; ends with a psychological analysis

19. R. Moyshe Bababa / Reb Moishe Ba-Ba-Ba (130)

move from Krochmalna 10 to No. 12

full-bosomed Mirele sits and waits for men to pass through the gate; You pious old oaf, she yells at him, what are you so afraid of? What makes you think I want you? (much funnier in Yiddish 112)

my father full of awe at stories about the zaddikim (113)

(Y 114 E 134) Idealized monologue about hasidim of old, Kuzmir

22. Reb Leyzer Gravitser

portrait of a big time gvir, grandfather of Dovidl

loved 2 things: prestige and danger

narrator's 1st exposure to high style of living (133)

23. Ikh ver a goyve / I Become a Collector

from high society to underclass

fake tension, weak ending
 narrator becomes less shameful; recognizes Krochmalna in its true colors;
 1st-hand exposure to cobblers, tailors, salt of the earth
 God in heaven, how each house is different! (Y137)
 grotesque tableau; phoney supernatural
 moral: never to do something crooked for the sake of \$; never to beg, plead,
 ask for favors (139)
 mother leaves for Bilgoraj
 finds a work of kabbalah in father's library

24. Tsu zeydes un bobes / The Family Tree (43)

father's father was a kabbalist
 At that time it was a woman's accepted lot to bear children, cook, run the household, and earn a living -- while the man studied Torah. Rather than complain, our grandmothers praised God for providing them with husbands who were scholars (Y141 E 44)
 in Tomaszow the Haskalah made some inroads
 father rejected all that: from childhood on wanted to become a zaddik; the other boys resented him as Joseph's brothers did his dreams (Only in Y)
 the legote/draft lottery
 worked on purifying himself in order to become a zaddik
 Jacob Reifman lived in Shebreshin
 grandfather did everything in his power not to admit the Haskalah into Bilgoraj
 there was an officers' club in town
 no sexual intimacy between father/mother
 1st mention of Hinde / IJ; Leontshin, where he, Moyshe are born
 mentions IJ's memoirs
 [skips Leoncin because IJS already described it]

26. Keyn Varshe / To Warsaw (54)

hasidic mini-drama about Bialer rebe's daughter vs. old rebetsin
 who's to blame that the couple is childless?
 both his parents visit the young rebetsin
 his older siblings begin to lose their faith when they observe the rebe's behavior
 narrator's edenic existence
 childish pranks & violence
 1st mention of heder (155)

my sister loved melodrama (156)

28. Reb Yekl Saffir

how my brother masqueraded one Purim to Reb Yekl's delight
 festive meal at their house to which Reb Yekl is invited
 narrator received no regular heder education
 like SA, finds a local orphan who inducts him in secrets of the Kabbalah
 Boruch Dovid knew Warsaw even better than he knew the heavens...teaches
 him about sex, too
 knowledge of sex leads inexorably to doubts about God, thoughts of
 demons (169)
 sense of loss and TOTAL ISOLATION (168-70): parents away in Berlin,
 older brother a free thinker, etc. I'm all alone in the world

29. Der moyfes / The miracle (156)

mini-monologue of a gendzlerin; marvels at the richness of their language
 hype & future flash (E 159): the "miracle" of the birth of his daughter
 hero as child philosopher who goes out onto the BALCONY to think about
 God & the secrets of creation
 "only I myself could reason out such enigmas; no one else could help me"
 meanwhile big brother is reading Copernicus, Darwin, Newton

30. Reb Osher fun milkh-gevelb / Reb Asher the Dairyman

IDEALIZED PORTRAIT: His whole life was one big Yes.
 self-portrait of a hasidic young man in satin gaberdine sitting in a milk
 wagon & contemplating the world
 ends w/1st mention of the Holocaust

31. Der tate vert an "anarkhist"

father's rare visit to the balcony 186)
 I always loved my father. But on that particular evening I loved him all the
 more
 reverie of him becoming a little shoemaker
 reversal: der gedank toyg nisht tsu yidishkayt
 ends w/mother's most caustic words at father's expense

32. Mayn tatns khaver / [IBS Reader 285-290]

father's plans to publish his sefer, aided by "Reb Nakhmen"

police inspection discovers his contraband
 narrator almost expires from fear: his extreme sweat
 awakens absolute hatred of these yevonim (193)
 sees the Jews of Warsaw in all their helplessness vis-a-vis the outside world

33. Men hot nokhgemakht mayn tatn a veksl

eg. of human gullibility & evil

seeks out Noyakh Prylucki

IJ sees corruption everywhere, even in the rebbe's court -- father furious at him (199)

father exonerated; Lula comes running to browbeat his father

34. Di veshin / The Washwerwoman (29)

very positive portrait of Christian hardworking woman

she evinced a love of work, the particular blessing of goyim

nonfunctional use of ethnographic detail

as if the coins had become as pure as she was herself

cannot imagine paradise without this washerwoman

35. Di din-toyre / The Lawsuit (169)

Simkha Pietruska was my father's pupil in the Radzimin yeshiva

a Warsaw watch manufacturer offered a free watch to any yeshiva bokher who learned 50 blat by heart, so father became one of the examiners

narrator still remembers some chapters of Mishnah by heart

my father was also a "literat"

oblivious of the crime around him

Singer censored the dialogue (209): Rebe ^{who} ~~that~~ raped a girl

only now gets to the point: story of a lawsuit where someone pulls a gun

37. Tsu di hefker-ki / To the Wild Cows (175)

nature vs. culture

insects who congregated on the balcony; a rainbow

I had an in-born love of nature [!]

Borukh Dovid tells him about the wild cows, dew on Krochmalna

1st lengthy nature description (221)

* confirmed the truth of the chapbooks: the world is full of wonders

sees rafts floating on the Vistula; knew about large scale merchants from fables of Dubner Maggid

finally ^{spoils} ~~spoils~~ boy/girl making out -- then he feels polluted

38. Der sod / The divorce (183)

[prob. should have been "Der get" as this title used before]

husband, mortally ill, concerned that his widowed wife will have to take halitsah

this occasions long, self-serving passage in which narrator claims to suffer vicariously while the nearest of kin react callously;

broad generalization about human nature: Even when they must look directly into death, they remained preoccupied by the pettiest ambitions (E 185 Y227]

epilogue: wife dies during WW I

39. Volf koyln-hendler / Wolf the Coal Dealer

We were the inheritors of a heroic code not as yet described in Yiddish literature, the essence of which was an ability to endure suffering for the sake of spiritual purity (Y230 E188)

Whenever Mother returned from a shopping tour, she took out the Shvet Mussar or the Meslies Yeshorim; for her, the Destruction of the Temple was a living reality

her anger at the rowdy congregants one Tisha b'Av

lead-in to Wolf: a devil or a lapitut; his futile war against the hoyf on Sabbath afternoons

archetypal quality of the struggle between him/mother: Wolf = "multitudes" who came out of Egypt (Y235)

41. Di atlesene kapote / The satin coat

almost a holiday tale PESACH

tremendous love of Torah amongst the artisan class

awakened in me my first passion for fine clothing

"...from my own experience, I knew that the material world was full of snares. I had become too enamored of its pleasures" (E204) vs. Ikh hob keyn mol nisht gehat keyn iberikn tsutroy tsu di glikn fun der velt (Y244)

farshterter yontef: shtibl closed for lack of gas; no one to marvel at his coat

42. Batlonim /

etiological tale: How our hero became a quasi-kabbalist

his 3 patrons

1) Reb Yekhezl: taught him to play chess

2) Mattes from Leonchin: learned about the demons that try to waylay you; then became a Braslaver Hasid; kivrei zaddikim einan metameim (250)

3) a young man who came to Warsaw to study Kabbalah

44. Der feter Mendl / Uncle Mendel

theme of orphanhood: I had no family

occasional visits: Eli who looks like a saintly pilgrim from the Holy Land

hero greedily takes in all this family gossip

45. Shtarke / The Strong Ones

Heder = microcosm of society; Darwinian struggle for survival

* begins to write imitating Masyse migiml akhim

feels desperately lonely

finally wins over the boys by retelling stories out of "literature"; Crime and Punishment

46. Der shos in Sarajevo / The Shot at Sarajevo (225)

the move to No. 12 Krochmalna

waf breaks out; no contact w/sister in Belgium/ IJ will be drafted; inflation religious order disrupted; messianic expectations

47. Der priziv / The Recruit

what happens to Israel Joshua

hero begins to read NEWSPAPERS; gets used to the strange Yiddish; wierd mixture of neohasidism / pot boilers; father's disparaging comments

48. Di atelye / The Studio

sexual awareness: This was quite a change for me from my father's studio, but it seems to me that this pattern has become inherent to me. Even in my stories it is just one step from the study house to sexuality and back again. Both phases of human existence have continued to interest me (Y288 E240)

(289; only in Y) dos shraybn fun zayne eygene kinder hot mayn foter keyn mol nisht onerkent

49. Hunger / Hunger

German occupation; IJ no longer has to hide

martial problems of Radzmir Rebbe: wants a divorce because they're childless; rebbetsin gives father a diamond ring

50. Umziste hofenungen / Vain hopes

gathering of unofficial rabbis in their home = Sanhedrin
 [Singer careful to get Dr. Carlbach's name right; but confuses those of Soviet-Yiddish writers]

I was there and observed everything
 father loathe to comb his beard before appearing before the Germans
 brother begins publishing sketches; meanwhile hero reading Lehman, Dostoevsky, Bergelson, Sherlock Holmes

51. Dos seyfer / The Book

ironic title: how hero strays from straight and narrow
 IJ now visits wearing short clothes
 appearance of Germanized nephew
 50 marks, half of which father keeps for typesetting his seyfer; hero sees a printing shop for 1st time; father like every unpublished author
 DISINFECTING STATION: hero forced to cut off his peyes (I had wanted to do it for a long time!)
 remained standing, like King David, devoid of mitsves
 1st taste of treyf food; intro. to goyish world
 now world of tradition lost its interest (diff. formulation in Y 307)
 gepruvt oysraysn dos vos dos kheyder, dos shtibl, di besdin-shtub hobn ayngeflantst un gehodevet in meshekh fun yorn...

52. Di vize / The Visa

begins w/Kopl the baker who never lived to marry off his daughter
 1917: mother dreams her father is dead
 standing on line, hero read a on German primer

53. Di nesiye / The Trip

mother, world of women now take over from that of the men
 mother at home in nature, knows the names of living things (ties in with his earlier statement that he "always" felt close to nature)
 must visit a horrible shoemaker's cellar to get new pair of shoes: exemplar of social inequality
 1st train trip; enmity of Jews / gentiles
 This is not a world, but an open Bible (Y 318)

54. Bilgoray / Bilgoray

father never addressed mother by her name; here, everyone did

introduced main players: Mume Yentl, etc.

55. Di mishpokhe / The Family

deep inside, Uncle Joseph was a skeptic & a mocker

Esther, who would later play an imp. role in my life...

Mume Rokhele: her spirit lay in middle ages, like that of my whole family

56. Di Mume Yentl / Aunt Yentel

MONOLOGUE

followed by Cousin Broche's

58. Vinter in Bilgoray / Winter in B.

crazy, dictatorial behavior of Uncle Joseph

hero filled w/sexual fantasies, lusts after his own cousins

59. Naye khaveyrim / New Friends

Anshl Shor and his son Motl intro. to secular books

writes a rhymed poem in Hebrew

arouses wrath of the Hasidim

editorial aside: recapitulated experiences of 100 yrs before in Lithuania

even in English gets Soviet-Yiddish names wrong (298)

Note Shverdsharf

Meyer Hadas

I was more of a skeptic then than I am today

60. Di naye vintn / The New Winds

Yoyne Akerman introduces Zionism to Bilgoray;

hero sitting in the ATTIC reading

reads Hillel Zeitlin's Problem of Good and Evil; 1st intro. to SPINOZA

becomes a Hebrew instructor despite his bashfulness

touched by love

Journalistic style: everything explained, cf. beg. of chap. 12

ergo, besdin-shtub is perfect!

1) hallowed, highly structured, formalized setting

2) life in extremis

3) only the most pathological/saintly specimens are remembered

4) the LAW that is supposed to be bindings vs. the human passions that sever all bonds

5) father, too, is a study in isolation; sits at home all day long; doesn't want anyone to interrupt him; only in "Di soydes fun der kabole" (1966) do we see father praying in the shtibl; otherwise completely otherworldly

6) hence, the narrator/ive controlled by moral center while the imbedded tale is anarchic, antinomian, centrifugal

Writer's Laboratory

Y13 E8 The old woman announced that when his wife would give birth she, the ex-wife, would care for the child because the young woman would have to earn a living = ending of ENEMIES

20. A khasene / [IBS Reader 299-306)

Krochmalna full of whore houses

all their questions concerned yortsayts

artisan comes in as mild as a fast and a funeral: wants to know whether he can marry a whore

mixture of underworld and clerics at the wedding (Y 119) women neighbors tried to form protective ring around mother

reminded narrator (how did he know) of a scene from the Yiddish theater

narrator does not remember the ruling on her being a virgin
from then on began to observe girls more closely

the letters Khayim Gorshkover gets from America perhaps the model for "The Little Shoemakers" (Y109)

(50 E70) From early childhood on, I have noted that for most people there is only one small step between vulgarity and "refinement," between blows and kisses, between spitting at one's neighbor's face and showering him with kindness."

Bobe Temerl spoke an old-fashioned Yiddish

25. Nokh der khasene / After the Wedding (49)

fake ending: sense of mystery

grandfather burned his khidushim (cf. Family Moskat)

mother inherited his nature; taught herself Hebrew [prototype of typical Singer heroine!]

36. Reb Itshele un Shprintse

after describing the store, shifts perspective: a European visitor would have thought these barbaric practices

mentions reb **Meir Tumtum** (only in 1964)

you needed open ears in house of God as well as in a store

how secularism made inroads into their family as well: one son spent his time going to the movies; younger one (narrator's friend) also didn't want to learn
describes MEIR TUMTUM

Ethnographic Memoir

18. R. Khaym Gorshkover / Reb Cahyim [!] Gorshkover

mother wrote letters for him to America since he himself couldn't write
passion for reciting Tehillim and for talking about Gorshkev
MONOLOGUE

21. Treytl / Traitl (138)

mostly a **monologue**; very thin plot

has to marry off his daughters

lengthy ethnographic discourse on Litvak customs: They can call a zaddik Reb Yoyzl, but we consider it an ugly name, etc. (125)

40. Eyniklekh / Descendants (195)

=opp. of his novella of 1920s!!

exemplified an inner peace unknown in ^{its} own day and age

Reb Berele would recite the Zohar without understanding a word

as small as he was, his sons were giants; greedy eyes

plot: Reb Berele wants to remarry; his chosen bride is a schnorrer; created terrible strife between her/stepsons

"that is when I first learned that one bully can't bear another" (E199)

I. 3 Stages

A. *In My Father's Court* (1955)

[can be raided for his later fiction; eg. the plot of *Enemies* #1; Meir Tumtum described in #36; the "real" Aunt Yentl & her monologue #56]

B. נשמה-עקספּעדיציעס / *Shosha* (1974)

semi-AB novel

Aaron Greindinger returns to Warsaw to marry his childhood sweetheart

C. גלויבן און צו פל אָדער די פילאָסאָפיע פון פרעגטעס / *Love & Exile* (1974-78)

picks up on *Father's Court* and continues to early manhood

focus on the kitchen over the court, locus of debate

this is where he should reveal his real artistic awakening

esp. with "the philosophy of protest" in the subtitle!

D. Stories about Childhood (ca. 1975)

originally for adults by Yitskhok Varshavski

Q: Why the ambivalence about writing a straight AB?

A: It runs through all of modern Jewish culture

In My Father's Court: elements of the Ethnographic type

Love & Exile: collapses A / C

reintroduces the **confessional** mode (but only as a form of exhibitionism)

"philosophical protest" will underscore his absolute originality

How I came to Be a Writer...of fantastical stories; or How I came to be the Loyal Chronicler of Polish Jewry

What serves to mitigate the break?

1. essential conflict already in place in the kitchen

2. was passionate by nature: fiery red hair; already "in love"

3. home/street/school = cornucopia of stories

4. somehow combined w/radical isolation