
Outcasts

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Representations of the Underworld in Modern Yiddish Literature*

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A Lasting Presence

They were a constant presence in modern Yiddish literature, from its humble origins in the second half of the nineteenth century to its final developments over one hundred years later: violent beggars, thieves, smugglers, pimps, and prostitutes. They featured in all the genres, from the *maskilic* anatomy through the realistic novel and novella, to the naturalistic play. These characters could be found both in trashy literature, which was typically published in serial form in newspapers by authors who disguised their identity through a plethora of pseudonyms, as well as in canonical works by well-known writers.

A short list of the main relevant works shows the long term attraction of Yiddish writers over many generations towards this topic: Mendele Moykher-Sforim, the “grandfather” of modern Yiddish literature, had already included a brief description of the Jewish demi-monde in one of his early works, the first version of *Fishke der krumer*

(1869), a feature which was greatly expanded in the second edition of 1888. However, while the Jewish underworld is an important part of the structure of the novel, it cannot be said to take center stage. After all, both editions of the book bear the subtitle: *A mayse fun yidishe ormelayt* (A story of the Jewish poor), which proclaims that the focus will be on the lower strata of the Jewish population, not necessarily its criminal elements. Its protagonist, Fishke, is captured by a gang of wandering beggars living on the margins of respectable society, who were frequently physically and sexually violent and involved in various shady dealings. Nevertheless, Fishke himself did not become part of this band, and he strove with all his might to release himself from their grip. Mendele's novel can thus be viewed as an early instance of the challenge posed by the representation of the Jewish underworld for the first generation of modern Yiddish writers: they were attracted by the opportunity to depict this unique culture, especially its idiolect, but at the same time they blanched at the literary, ideological, and social implications of presenting the underworld as a central topic in Yiddish fiction.

A fine example of these quandaries can be found in another major work in which Mendele portrayed a far more problematic aspect of the Jewish underworld – the trafficking of women. This topic is a key element of *Dos vintshfingerl* (The Wishing Ring), Mendele's most wide-ranging novel, a novel that was published serially, from 1888 onwards, as it gradually developed from the nucleus of an earlier story. The description of trade in women in Glupsk, the novel's archetypical Jewish city, appears only in the later stages of the story, chapters that were published in the late nineties and the beginning of the twentieth century, in Hebrew and Yiddish, and were eventually incorporated into the plot in a rather artificial manner. It can be assumed that Mendele did not want to omit this aspect of contemporary Jewish life in all its evils from his most ambitious work, but struggled to fit it organically into the text. Whether he was successful in his efforts is open to dispute: Hershele, the main character of the novel, witnesses from close up how

innocent Jewish girls, including one dear to his heart, become ensnared in human trafficking. Although he takes on the criminals, he does so from the outside.

The Jewish demi-monde in general, on the edge of criminality and beyond, is described in *Fishke der krumer* through a mixture of terms of attraction and repulsion, an exotic, ethnographic panorama of the margins of Jewish society. In sharp contrast, these mixed feelings have no place when Mendele turns his attention to the trade in women: here he adopts a harsh, moralistic tone, soaked in sentimental empathy for the fate of the women who have fallen victim to these criminal machinations.

Unlike Mendele's stern approach, a certain penchant towards the exotic can be found in other accounts of the same subject matter, such as A. Goldfaden's play *Di kishef-makherin* (The Sorceress, around 1877) or Mordkhe Spektor's novel *Aniyim ve-eyoyanim* (1885). In these works the topic of criminality is integrated into broad and complicated narrative structures, and therefore its treatment cannot be isolated from the more general themes that span broad and diverse geographic arenas, from the Jewish Pale of Settlement in Czarist Russia to the enticing oriental landscapes of voluptuous Turkey.

Sholem Aleichem, the "grandson" among the three Yiddish classic writers, was bolder in this regard than the grandfather, Mendele. Sholem Aleichem dared to accomplish an artistic feat that his forerunner was probably reluctant to perform, by placing a Jewish thief at the very center of his novella *Moshkele ganev* (Moshkele the Thief, 1903). Although this is a half-forgotten piece, which was not included in any edition of Sholem Aleichem's collected works and did not enjoy widespread popularity at the time, it should be seen as a modest forerunner of a literary trend that became highly prominent a few years later. The breakthrough was undoubtedly Sholem Asch's play *Got fun nekome* (God of Vengeance, 1907), which opened the gates of European theater to the young writer.

Less than a decade later, Asch wrote the novel *Motke ganev* (1916) and immediately afterwards transformed it into a play. This creative process underscores the close relationship between prose and drama characteristic of the representation of Jewish lowlifes in Yiddish literature. A work that deals with a similar topic, *A roman fun a ferd-ganev* (A Romance of a Horse Thief, 1912), was Joseph Opatoshu's first novel, written at the very beginning of his literary career. Like *Motke ganev* it was devised from afar, looking back to Jewish Eastern Europe from the perspective of bustling New York. These two works in prose, and others in their wake, betray a clear preference for the "Old Country" when it comes to the imaginative portrayal of the Jewish underworld, a feature that is characteristic even of those artists who spent most of their lives away from their biographical and cultural roots. Jewish Eastern Europe is indeed the major arena for most of the works dealing with the Jewish underworld. Their final occurrences were apparently the stories Abraham Karpinowitz wrote in Israel, which are set in pre-Holocaust Jewish Vilna,¹ and Isaac Bashevis Singer's late novellas, printed in installments in the New York *Forverts* but never collected in book form in their original language.²

So far only names of acknowledged writers have been mentioned. However, a comprehensive overview of the literary works dealing with the Jewish underworld should extend beyond any list of so-called "canonical" literature. At least two other factors should always be kept in mind. First of all, works of world literature dealing with the underworld that were translated into Hebrew and Yiddish had a significant impact on the Jewish publication market, and more often than not these texts were adaptations of one kind or another. The prime example is the enormous success of the Hebrew version of Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris*, produced by Kalman Schulman (first edition: 1857), a book whose popularity among the reading public of the second half of the nineteenth century exceeded by far that of any of Mendele's works. The Yiddish translation enjoyed a more limited reception,

although its circulation both in Eastern Europe and in the United States in editions published as late as 1918 attest to the lasting presence of this work among Jewish readers.³

A second corpus of works is even more important and fascinating, as well as problematic: the endless number of trashy novels, *shundromanen*, which were published in booklets or in installments in the Yiddish press, many of which dealt with the Jewish underworld. It is impossible to read even a small percentage of these works, let alone to grasp the full scope of this amorphous corpus. Yet without an understanding of its variegated nature, a significant facet of the Yiddish literary production will be missing, as these *shundromanen* include original works, translations and adaptations of various forms.⁴

To analyze all aspects of this topic requires a vast knowledge base as well as a discerning critical eye. For instance, it is no simple task to determine which of Shomer's numerous novels deals with the Jewish underworld. How can it be known which of them was translated or adapted from a Russian or German source, and which plot was at least partially the product of his own imagination? Even if one successfully performed an in-depth study of a novel of Shomer's, how can one be certain that the text chosen for a critical understanding of his oeuvre is representative to any degree? Finally, a work of criticism of this kind would have to address the question of whether there is anything distinctive in the way Yiddish literature shaped the subject of the Jewish underworld. At the present moment it is impossible to provide satisfactory answers to these questions. However, there is no cause for despair: while the sheer quantity of the representations of the Jewish underworld in Yiddish literature can engulf the researcher, there is nevertheless some hope that his critical efforts will not be entirely stymied.

One basic tenet when approaching this subject is the requirement to leave aside any sense of amazement or voyeuristic curiosity. Nowadays there is fortunately no need to apologize for the fact that Jews had their fair share of involvement in the criminal underworld, although it must

be remembered that this was a significantly controversial matter in the early twentieth century. Even so, one must avoid a certain penchant to treat this fact as a “secret” that has to be “revealed.” There are numerous books which deal with Jewish criminality of all sorts in America, not to mention the Jewish prostitution network in Argentina in the first decades of the twentieth century.⁵ In any case, there are no major “secrets” regarding the historical background of the phenomenon. If there is something to be discovered, with the aid of historical research, it is the manifold dimensions of the literary treatment of this topic.

The tentative list of literary works presented earlier underlines the fact that the Jewish underworld in literature was almost exclusively the domain of two genres: prose and drama. Occasionally the same work was dressed in two garbs, such as Sholem Asch’s own dramatic reworking of his *Motke ganev*. By contrast, Yiddish poetry addressed the topic of Jewish criminality only rarely. For this amongst other reasons, this paper will refer at the very end to Yankev Glatshrey’s poem “Sheeny Mike” (1928), a text which stands as a prominent exception to the rule.

A Yiddish play, novel, or even a short story on the topic of the Jewish underworld was almost always written for a wide audience, whether the readership of a newspaper (where Sholem Asch’s novel *Motke ganev*, for instance, was printed in installments) or the theater audience. Of course, there are some noteworthy exceptions, such as most parts of Mendele’s novels. Nonetheless, this rule holds true for Sholem Asch, Zalman Shneour, Urke nakhalnik, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and many others. The boundaries between the “canonical” novel printed in a newspaper and the trashy novel printed on adjacent pages in the same newspaper were sometimes blurred and were never absolute. Indeed, the sensationalist motifs introduced in some “canonical” novels can be viewed as an effort to reach the captive audience of the low-class novel. Certain major depictions of the Jewish underworld thus serve a double role. They brought serious literature closer to a broader audience, while suggesting a parallel of sorts between the Yiddish novel

as a popular genre catering to the folk and the milieu described in these works themselves.

The Linguistic Aspect

The presence of the folk is palpable in another essential feature of the literary portrayal of these groups: language. The earliest interest in the language of the Jewish underworld is not of concern here. This was the image, projected in German-speaking territories, of Yiddish as the secret-code language of the Jewish underworld, elements of which were even adopted by their non-Jewish counterparts. Such an idea led to the publication of compilations of underworld argot terms, some of which were purportedly prepared on behalf of law enforcement authorities.⁶

This interest in the specific language of the Jewish underworld was later picked up in very different form by Yiddish linguists and folklorists. Ber Borochov devoted a section of his seminal *Biblyotek fun yidishn filolog* (1913) to a bibliography of terms dealing with the lexicon of the Jewish underworld.⁷ However, the finest of these projects is the impressive volume *Bay unz yuden*, edited by M. Vanvild (Warsaw: P. Graubard, 1923), which presents a wealth of folkloristic material involving the Jewish underworld: its language, songs and proverbs. Only one other topic received such expansive attention in this volume, and that is the world of Jewish children. This unexpected link between two realms underlies the efforts Yiddish folklorists undertook to gather material involving “marginal” segments of the Jewish social structure. Nonetheless, the Jewish underworld received most of the attention in the volume by far. In this light its title has a subtle wrinkle of meaning: thieves, prostitutes and pimps are indeed present “bay undz yidn,” and should be considered an inseparable part of Jewish society.

The above idea was a novel, even revolutionary approach in the development of Yiddish folkloristics. Y.L. Cahan’s classic collection of Yiddish folksongs, published for the first time in 1911, includes only a handful of texts related to the Jewish underworld, probably because

he didn't consider these "genuine" folksongs.⁸ The younger team of folklorists had fewer misgivings about gathering material from the underworld.⁹ One of the more impressive results of their work was Shmuel Lehman's *Yidishe ganovim-lider mit melodies* (Warsaw, 1928), later supplemented by other smaller publications. Unfortunately, most of the material gathered by Lehman was lost in the Warsaw ghetto, where he himself perished.

The language of the Jewish underworld was distinctively rich and intricate, and as such it elicited the interest of the nascent Yiddish intelligentsia. For example, this linguistic complexity clearly leaves its mark on Mordkhe Gebirtig's "Avreml der marvikher," probably the most famous Yiddish text that deals with a Jewish pickpocket or thief, one that deserves to be analyzed from several angles. Its refrain proclaims proudly:

איך בין אברהמל, דער פֿעיקסטער מאַרוויכער,
א גרויסער קינסטלער, כּאַרבעט לייכט און זיכער,
דאָס ערשטע מאָל, כּוועל'ס געדענקען ביזן טויט,
אַריין אין תּפּיסה פֿאַר לקחנען אַ ברויט

I am Avreml, a most able thief,
A great artist, I work surely and lightly,
My first time in jail, I'll remember that till death,
I was put in there for stealing a loaf of bread.¹⁰

These lines reflect the rather problematic notion that the jargon of the Jewish underworld teems with words from the *loshn-koydesh* component in Yiddish (in this text: marvikher, lakkhenen). This is certainly one of the reasons why the Yiddish intelligentsia considered the Jewish underworld one of the genuine segments of the Yiddish speaking folk. However, there are limits to this linguistic phenomenon. Gebirtig's song includes no more than these two words from the underworld lexicon; in Sholem Asch's works, for instance, the underworld argot plays a very small role, and in *Got fun nekome* there are only a handful of terms from

this source. Sometimes it is hard to determine whether a certain term serves as a specific linguistic marker. The widely used term "*hayzl*" for brothel, for instance, cannot be considered a code word, since it was universally accepted and understood, although it is possible that "*feter*" (uncle) is a linguistic marker of this kind. The range and function of the specific underworld lexicon in a Yiddish literary work is one of the main factors that must be taken into consideration when analyzing this topic.¹¹ These terms served as markers which create both a barrier and a juncture between the two realms, the Jewish underworld on the one hand and "respectable" society on the other.

An additional factor underscores the "Jewishness" of the Jewish underworld: some representatives of this group were paradoxically considered better Jews than the deracinated Jewish intellectuals. Not only were they physically stronger, but they also took an active part in defending the Jewish community from anti-Semitic attacks, thus serving as both actual protectors of the Jews and symbolic heroes in salvaging Jewish honor. The fascination many Yiddish writers held for the Jewish underworld – as well as the idealized manner in which they sometimes depicted it – was thus also affected by the status of Jews in Eastern Europe as a persecuted minority.

The situation in America was radically different with respect to both language and the Jewish condition. Jewish criminality of all sorts was a real presence in America (mostly in the immigration and post-immigration period), and it provided material enough for the news at the time, as well as for later research and films. There is firm evidence that Jewish strongmen played a role in physically defending Jews in the first years of Jewish mass immigration, but over the course of time there was less need for this kind of brute force. Accordingly, the Jewish underworld of America could not be considered a source of Jewish pride, as might possibly have been the case in Eastern Europe.

More evident still is the difference in language. The conspicuous American Jewish criminals spoke English, not Yiddish, even if it was

sometimes an inflected English. Consequently, these individuals did not elicit significant interest amongst “canonical” Yiddish writers, although it is possible to detect their presence in Yiddish trashy novels published in American Yiddish newspapers.

While the Jewish underworld did appear in American Yiddish literature, these narratives were generally set in Eastern Europe. As mentioned earlier, Joseph Opatoshu’s *A roman fun a ferd-ganev* was written in New York, as was Sholem Asch’s *Motke ganev*. Notwithstanding the difficulties of dealing with contemporary Jewish life in the New Country in American Yiddish prose, such writers managed to present a vast social and cultural panorama: workers, shopkeepers, farmers (e.g., in Isaac Raboy’s *Her Goldenbarg*), successful businessmen, Yiddish writers, and Jewish teachers. Jewish gangsters, however, seem to have been beyond the imaginative horizons of the Yiddish writer in America.⁴²

The only place in the New World where the Yiddish writer could find a Yiddish-speaking underworld was the Jewish prostitution network in Argentina and elsewhere in South America. However, Yiddish writers where so ashamed of this phenomenon that they rarely dared to touch it. Leyb Malakh was the most noticeable writer who challenged this tacit proscription, and his drama *Ibergus* (1926) was influential in the efforts to ban Jews involved with prostitution from the Yiddish theater in Buenos Aires. He soon returned to this topic in his novel *Don Domingos kreysveg* (1930).

In most cases the Jewish lowlife or gangster speaks a rich and “authentic” language, and he is rooted in the lower strata of Jewish society. “Avreml der marvikher” describes its protagonist’s humble origins at the beginning of the song, in order to strike a note of social protest:

אן אַ היים בין איך יונג געבליבן,
ס'האט די נויט מיך אַרויסגעטריבן,
ווען איך האב נאך קיין דרייצן יאָר געהאַט,
אין דער פֿרעמד, ווייט פֿון מאַמעס אויגן,
האַט אין שמוץ מיך די גאַס דערציגן.

געוואָרן איז פֿון מיר אַ ווילדער יאָט.

While still young I was left homeless,
Driven by desperate need,
When not even thirteen years old.
Away from home, far from mother's eyes,
The street brought me up in filth –
I became a jolly fellow.

Whether he likes it or not, a Jewish underworld character in Yiddish literature will always be tied to his lowly background, even after he grows wealthy. Avreml himself develops into a street thief, a telling example of how criminality is tightly bound to the big city. Some of the works that deal with the Jewish underworld are set in a shtetl (such as Sholem Aleichem’s *Moshkele ganev* or Opatoshu’s *A roman fun a ferd-ganev*), but most of them gravitate towards a metropolitan space, or at least a provincial city, e.g., Glupsk in Mendelev’s *Dos vintshfingerl*, or the anonymous city of Asch’s *Got fun nekome*. Although Motke the thief, the central character of Asch’s novel, is born in a shtetl, he develops into a typical hero of the underworld only after he moves to Warsaw.

Singer places his underworld characters either in a provincial city such as Lublin, or in Warsaw, as in his late novellas. *Der kuntsn-makher fun Lublin* (The Magician of Lublin) opens in a shtetl, but its protagonist, albeit not a characteristic underworld figure, commits his act of burglary in Warsaw. These literary representations typically present serious crime, whether committed by an organized group or an individual, as an urban phenomenon. A lonely thief could indeed thrive in a shtetl, e.g., Sholem Aleichem’s *Moshkele ganev*, but a fully developed underworld is the “privilege” of the urban space. Therefore, Opatoshu’s *A roman fun a ferd-ganev*, which depicts a group of horse thieves in a shtetl, seems to be the exception rather than the rule.

Thus the underworld is often used as a covert or even an overt mark of modernity, sometimes even in the form of a transnational

organization, as in Sholem Aleichem's "A mentsh fun Buenos Aires" (A Man from Buenos Aires), which is part of his series *Ayznban-geshikhtes* (Railroad Stories), written in 1909. Here is the comment of a pimp, an active member of a prostitution ring:

מיין געשעפט אליין איז, אייגנטלעך, ביט אין בוענאס-איירעס. מיין געשעפט איז, אויב איר
וויילט וויסן, אומעטום, אויף דער גאנצער וועלט: אין פאריז, אין לאנדאן, אין בודאפעשט,
אין באסטאן, און די הויפטקווארטאר, דאס ביורא, איז אין בוענאס-איירעס.

Actually, my business is not just in Buenos Aires. I do business, you know,
all over the world: In Paris, in London, in Budapest, in Boston — but my
headquarters, my office is in Buenos Aires.⁴³

Yiddish writers were usually more modest than the boasting narrator of "A mentsh fun Buenos Aires"; they focused on one setting, or two at the most. Singer's pimp in "Shoyrn" does come to Warsaw from Argentina, but the plot of the novella unfolds exclusively in the Polish capital. This city is also the starting point and main location of Singer's "Yarme un Keyle," while towards the completion of the novel New York serves as the refuge for the main female character who is seeking to escape from her fate as a prostitute and a victim of the whims of her pimp.

The "wanderlust" and restlessness of lowlife characters is often a major background theme of these texts, as these individuals maintain no emotional attachment to any single place. The Yiddish writer who prefers to limit his artistic world to a certain arena is, in this sense, more "settled" than the heroes he describes. Whereas they have traveled the world, the writer focuses on one or two stages and locations of their adventures. To put it another way, most of the works in this corpus can be considered distinctive instances of a central motif in Yiddish literature — the confrontation of the genuine Jewish "folk type" with modernity.

A Question of Gender

"Avreml der marvikher" provides an opening to an analysis of a further crucial aspect of the Jewish underworld in Yiddish literature: the issue

of gender. Gebirtig composed another poem about Jewish lowlifes, "Di gefalene" (The Fallen Woman), also shaped as a monologue, and a comparison between the two texts can be instructive on many levels. The first striking feature is their immense difference in reputation. "Avreml der marvikher" became a popular hit, whereas "Di gefalene" is considered a relatively minor work in Gebirtig's oeuvre. It is to be expected that the monologue of a streetwalker would be far more melodramatic than that of a pickpocket, and yet her speech is also much shorter and less elaborate, with fewer instances of self-awareness and less evidence of a developed social consciousness. Avreml der marvikher unfolds his autobiography in a quite orderly way, as he explains how he arrived at his present situation. The anonymous speaker of "Di gefalene" has nothing to say about her turn to prostitution. Furthermore, although both speakers mention their mothers rather than their fathers, both speaking rather impersonally of an anonymous "a mame," the melodramatic weight of the female monologue is far greater than Avreml's:

ערגעץ טראכט אצינד א מאמע:
— וואס איז מיט מיין קינד געשען?
בלוט וואלט גיין פון אירע אויגן
ווען זי וואלט איר קינד דערזען

Somewhere a mother ponders:
— What's happened to my child?
Blood would spurt from her eyes
If she could see her child right now.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, the main difference between both texts is the status of the speaker in the monologue: Avreml is almost proud of himself; he views himself as a kind of social or cultural hero, and there is no doubt that Gebirtig portrays a "soft" criminal, a pickpocket, in order to achieve this effect. By contrast, a fallen woman cannot afford the privilege of pride. In this regard, there is a conspicuous gender difference in the literary representation of the Jewish underworld.

The most important work of Yiddish literature that presents both the possibilities and the limitations of the female participant in the Jewish underworld is Sholem Asch's *Got fun nekome*. One detail in this play, which received virtually no attention from the many critics who dealt with Asch's first sensational work, can help place it in the framework of other Yiddish texts which deal with the underworld. The time and locale of the play are specified: "Tsayt: Kegnvalt; Ort: 'in a gresere [!] provintsyle shtet'" ("Time: the present; Place: in a larger provincial city").¹⁵ However, since the space of the play is essentially confined to the family house, it would be difficult for the theater audience to get a clear sense of the urban character of the larger surroundings. Especially in the case of productions in languages other than Yiddish, the audience could easily have concluded that the play unfolds in a shtetl, the quintessential "Jewish" space. The pointed remark about the "larger provincial city" remains therefore a "textual" comment, notwithstanding the writer's efforts. Yet an urban atmosphere, ranging between intimacy and anonymity, is unmistakable in a short story Asch wrote two years before he composed this play, in 1905, a text that can be considered his first attempt to deal with the same topic. "Di mayse mit di 'sheyne Mary'" (The Story of the "Beautiful Mary"), unfolds in a big city, in Warsaw,¹⁶ that nevertheless functions as a rather intimate space.

The fact that *Got fun nekome* unfolds in a medium-sized urban setting, neither in a small town nor the big city, e.g., Warsaw or Lodz, has significant ramifications for the development of the plot and the place of the traditional Jewish world in it. The central protagonist, Yekl Tshapshovitsh, who owns a brothel, is a well-known person in the community. In the manner of a provincial town, its residents form a distinct social group, anonymous and amorphous perhaps, but with a real presence and influence. The local residents are acquaintances of Yekl, know him well, and are familiar with his past. In the conditions of Jewish Eastern Europe it is hard to imagine a house of prostitution operating freely in a shtetl, certainly not the situation depicted in the

play, in which a close acquaintance of the owner formulates plans to open a rival establishment. Yet the advantage of the plot unfolding in a provincial setting is that the main protagonists of the play are unable to hide behind their anonymity, as they could in the big city. Public opinion is highly important to Yekl. He wants to be perceived, both by himself and the community, as one who has mended his ways.

Got fun nekome chooses a middle path also with regard to the traditions of Yiddish theater. One of its prominent thematic clusters is the motif of the *shidekh*, the prearranged marriage, accompanied by the standard matchmaker character. In his desire to find a suitable husband for his daughter Rivkele, Yekl is prepared to match her with a *yeshive-bokher*, a traditional student who comes from afar, a youth who is not even well-known to his family. He promises this student *kest* (room and board) for the rest of his life. Yet at the same time Yekl's brothel is run from the basement of his house, and his wife herself engaged in prostitution in the past.

Got fun nekome thus provides a mélange of vastly different themes, and there is no doubt that the tensions they spark are responsible for its fascinated reception by audiences, especially amongst non-Jews, who watched the play performed in various languages. These sharp contrasts also resulted in serious criticisms leveled against Sholem Asch at the time for his breach of realism in this play. Undoubtedly the most salient expression of unrealism in the play is Yekl's plan to commission the writing of a Torah Scroll which he will set up in his daughter's room, to serve as a kind of magical amulet to protect her from the dangers of succumbing to prostitution. This scheme is revealing of the superstitious beliefs of the Jewish underworld and the protagonist's ignorance of Jewish law, but even so, it is highly questionable that these motifs justify the theatrical presentation of such an unlikely event as the placement of a Torah Scroll in the bedroom of a young girl.¹⁷

This is perhaps the crudest expression of the thematic complexity of this play. On the one hand it depicts the various aspects of

life in a Jewish house of ill repute: girls who arrive from small towns with ambitions to find a fine match; the pimp who lives off their suffering; obscenities and violence.¹⁸ On the other hand *Got fun nekome* includes aspects of that structure so typical of Yiddish dramaturgy – the family drama. These are developed in a series of paradoxical intergenerational rebellions and reconciliations: Yekl Tshaptshovitsh, the father, wants to prevent his daughter from embarking upon a life of prostitution, and yet he himself runs a brothel. In turn, the daughter “rebels” against her father by starting a lesbian relationship with a girl from that very brothel.

The role of lesbian love in the play is certainly worthy of further analysis, but given the limitations of this paper one observation will have to suffice. Of those Yiddish literary works that deal with the Jewish underworld, *Got fun nekome* is one of the few that includes a scene involving actual erotic yearning. It thereby contrasts the idea of prostitution as trade with the belief that even in such sordid circumstances genuine erotic relationships can blossom. The lesbian nature of these relations, whose presentation on the stage was considered bold at the time, certainly for the naturally conservative Jewish audience, should thus be considered a double-edged sword: the play offers scenes that convey complex emotional depths,¹⁹ and yet these are depicted as somewhat abnormal, befitting prostitutes.

The centrality of the lesbian relationship to the plot of the play can be overlooked, but it is clear. After all, the mutual sexual attraction between Rivkele and Manke encourages Yekl Tshaptshovitsh's daughter to run away from home, in order to join her lover in a different brothel. This is the crucial decision that enrages her father, who realizes that there is no hope for his ambitions: his daughter is not destined for a traditional match but for a very different life. Herein lies the tragic dimension of the play – neither generation of this family can break away from the prostitution business, despite their varied efforts to do so. At the end of the play Yekl treats his daughter violently, forcing her into prostitution in his own brothel, the polar opposite of his original plans

and aspirations. *Got fun nekome* is indeed unique amongst the Yiddish works that deal with the Jewish underworld. Its thematic boldness does not preclude the unmistakable pessimism of its ending: one who lives in the underworld cannot escape it.

A Fate That Was Sealed

It is hard to find an underworld character in Yiddish literature who is happy with his lot. Typically, they dream of a substantial change in their lives, of becoming “respectable Jews,” accepted in their social environment. Such yearnings come to the fore in these texts mostly as erotic energies, which merge and collide with the rather conservative motif of the *shidekh*. Opatoshu's *A roman fun a ferd-ganev* can be considered an extreme example in this regard: Shloyme, the paterfamilias, would like first and foremost to arrange appropriate marriages for his daughters, one of whose weddings is described in detail in the text. As a *balegole*, a wagon-driver, her future husband is indeed from the lower classes of society, but he is still a *kosherer yid*, a decent and normative Jew. When Shloyme devises a plan to steal horses, he does so in order to save money for his daughter's dowry:

שלמה האָט געפֿילט, אז ער איז שולדיק, וואָס שרה איז נאָך אַ מויד. ער האָט שוין געקאָנט זיין אַ זיידע פֿון אַ האַלב טויז אייניקלעך. [...] יא, האָט שלמה געטראַכט, אויב ס'עסן [פֿון גנבענען אַ פֿאַרטיע פֿערד] וועט זיך מיר, אַם-ירצה-השם, אינגעבן, איז ס'ערשטע אַ גון פֿאַר שרה! אַראָפּ אַן עול פֿון קאַפּ! מ'שטייבס געזאָגט, וואָס וועט זי אויסזיצן.

Shloyme blamed himself for Sarah's spinsterhood. He might have had a half-dozen grandchildren by this time. (...) Yes, thought Shloyme, if it please God that this business [of stealing a team of horses] turns out successful, then first of all a dowry for Sarah. It'll be a burden lifted from my mind. And after all, why should she wait any longer?²⁰

In other words, the values of this horse thief are identical to those of a regular Jewish father in a shtetl. His is a typical family, except for

the fact that their source of income is the theft of horses. Of all the Yiddish literary texts dealing the underworld, *A roman fun a ferd-ganev* is probably the most idyllic. However, this is true mostly regarding the father; matters are somewhat different when it comes to the younger generation. The generational gap was one of the recurring structural conventions in Yiddish literature at the beginning of the twentieth century, as in other periods. Therefore, it is no surprise that works about the Jewish underworld make ample use of this cluster of motifs, which also provide an opportunity to introduce an erotic thread into the fabric of the text.

Erotic and romantic fantasies are prominent in the case of Shloyme's son, Zaynvl, the main character of the work. To what extent does a horse thief such as Zaynvl respond to the pull of a normative life, and how far does he accept his place and role in the underworld? Zaynvl is indeed torn between two erotic magnets, his love for Rokhl, the cherished daughter of a conventional Jewish shtetl family, and his lust for Beylke, his fellow thief's new wife, who also lives in the shadows of the underworld. A horse thief is not supposed to marry a "nice Jewish girl" from a respectable family, and Rokhl is wed to someone else through an arranged marriage, despite her lack of feelings for her future husband. Yet Zaynvl still yearns for her. The horse thief cannot detach himself from his dream of reaching the *koshere yidishe tokhter*, the pure Jewish daughter. Although the young man differs from his father, he too wants to be included in the ranks of respectable Jewish society, and to this end he is ready to put aside, or sublimate, his brimming sexual and physical energy. With all its detailed descriptions of the life of horse thieves, the inner narrative logic of Opatoshu's *A roman fun a ferd-ganev* projects a distinctly conservative worldview. This is evident in two major respects. First, the normative values of the Jewish community are universally accepted without any serious objection, even by the lowlife characters who can dare only to utter some minor contemptuous remarks about the lifestyle of the *eydele yidn*, the respectable and gentle Jews. Second,

the plot illustrates the futility of every attempt to close the gap between the Jewish underworld and normative society.

Going back a few years, a similar structure unfolds in Sholem Aleichem's novella *Moshkele ganev*, even though its plot is constructed in a completely different way from Opatoshu's. The two works share a common premise: the underworld hero is attracted to and falls in love with a female character from respectable society. Moshkele ganev, a hero on the fringes of Jewish society, likewise falls in love with a *koshere yidishe tokhter*, but unlike Opatoshu's Zaynvl, Moshkele realizes his dream and eventually marries his beloved, apparently overcoming the aforementioned gaps between the two segments of Jewish society. However, in an interesting tour de force, the final scene of the novella leaves the thief in the realm of his original world, without offering him an opportunity to change the course of his life. Earlier, like any normative shtetl Jew, Sholem Aleichem's Moshkele ganev thinks about a *shidekh*:

נאָר מער פֿון אלץ האָט אים פֿאַרדראָסן, פֿאַר וואָס קיינער וויל זיך מיט אים נישט משהר זיין. קיינער וויל אים נישט נעמען. קיין מיידל וויל פֿאַר אים נישט חתונה האָבן. דאָס לעצטע דינסטמיידל וויל נישט גיין פֿאַר אים; זי וועט, זאָגט זי, בעסער נעמען אַ שניידער אָדער אַ שוסטער. אַבי נישט האָבן מאַשקעלע גנב פֿאַר אַ מאַן.²¹

But more than everything else he was irritated by the fact that nobody wanted to marry him. Nobody wanted to take him. No girl wants to marry him, the last servant girl doesn't want to go with him. She says, she'll better take a tailor or a cobbler, but at least she won't have Moshkele the thief as a husband.

If so, how does Moshkele the thief end up marrying Tsirl, the girl from the respectable family whom he had always desired, a goal that Opatoshu's Zaynvl fails to realize? In order to achieve this end, Sholem Aleichem constructs a complicated plot: Tsirl falls in love with a gentile and is drawn into the shtetl's monastery, where she is urged to convert. Naturally seeking to deter her from doing so, in their desperation her parents turn to Moshkele for advice and help. He finds a way to break

into the monastery and escape with Tsirl, and flees the shtetl with her. However, he has no choice but to marry her in a distant city, without the consent of her parents.

What is the fate of such a couple, a thief and a *koshere yidishe tokhter*? Could they possibly be accepted by conventional Jewish society? There is no doubt that the implied narrator felt strongly that he could not leave this question hanging, but had to provide some sort of answer. The very end of the novella indeed alludes to his opinion on this matter, albeit in an artificial manner. A Jew from the same shtetl encounters on the road a group of prison inmates, among whom he recognizes Moshkele ganev, followed closely by his wife. The marriage with the respectable young woman was consummated, but nevertheless, "*a ganev blaybt a ganev*"; a thief cannot change his nature and escape his fate. He is ultimately an outcast, and there is no chance that he will become a respectable member of the community.

The hidden messages of the endings of the works by Sholem Aleichem and Opatoshu, which were written in very different rhetorical keys, are ample proof that these texts filled a double role in contemporary Yiddish literature: they expanded its thematic horizons to include the margins of Jewish society, but at the same time projected an essentially conservative, even fatalistic worldview. The possibility of change in the lifestyles of their underworld characters is almost entirely precluded.

One of the main artistic realizations of the fatalistic viewpoint that haunts these works is the marked presence of death in the narratives. There is, of course, the danger of real death in the criminal world, but almost invariably the theme of death takes the form of a pervasive presence. In "Avreml der marvikher" a so-called "realistic" motivation for the morbid thoughts of the main hero is provided, as the fate that is awaiting him is presented as an unavoidable outcome of his unhealthy life during lengthy periods spent in prison. Even so, Avreml's obsessive preoccupation with the inscription on his tombstone is striking. His wish to have a tombstone "mit oysyes groyse un fun gold" ("with large

golden letters"), typical of the "moralistic" message so characteristic of Yiddish popular songs of the time, represents his dream to achieve *post mortem* a measure of social acceptance he was unable to enjoy while alive.

Many of the endings of these works are an attempt to strike a balance between power and its limits: death, soul searching, inner repentance (as in Singer's *Der kuntsn-makher fun Lublin*), or betrayal: Asch's Motke ganev is delivered into the hands to the police, and the main character of Singer's "Shoym" suffers a similar fate. It is virtually impossible to imagine a "happy ending" to a canonical work in Yiddish literature about the underworld, although one can surmise that such a conclusion could be possible in a non-canonical novel.

This basic feature of Yiddish literary texts becomes more understandable when one considers that they presented the underworld from the outside. There are not many works about this topic produced from the inside, with the exception of Shmuel Lehman's thief songs and the memoirs of Urke nakhalnik, written originally in prison in Polish (published in 1933), later translated by him into Yiddish (1938). Yiddish literary works about the underworld can thus be viewed as telling examples of the difficulties confronted by writers in their attempts to represent both the lifestyle and the inner world of individuals living on the fringes of normative society.

This external viewpoint is, for instance, very noticeable in Sholem Aleichem's "Moshkele ganev," perhaps because it was one of the earliest texts on the subject. Right from the beginning the main character is viewed from a distance:

נישט-יידן האָבן אים גערופן מאָשקעל. יידן האָבן אים פֿאַרצויגן מאָשקעלע און צוגעזעצט אַ צונעמעניש: גנב.

Non-Jews called him 'Moshke'. Jews used the diminutive 'Moshkele' and added a nickname: thief.

The very first words of the text, which refer to non-Jews, are illuminating

in this regard. The main character is essentially presented by the name and nickname given to him by others – it should be recalled that “Moshke” was a generic name for Jews that had a clearly pejorative connotation in some Slavic languages. Immediately afterwards, the narrator comments that “zayn gvure hot gehat a shem nisht nor in Mazepevke” (“his prowess was famous not only in Mazepevke”). Thus, in the first paragraphs of the text the narrator already introduces the lexicon of the Jewish underworld that serves, as mentioned above, as an external linguistic marker.

How far could a Yiddish writer go in presenting a Jewish underworld character from within? One of the most intriguing texts in this respect is Sholem Aleichem’s “A mentsh fun Buenos Aires.” This story involves a classic use of an “unreliable narrator,” but the recognition of this basic feature does not make things easier for the reader, since the narrator’s discourse on the train with his interlocutor, who remains in the shadows and does not utter a word, is not uniformly unreliable. The reader is still in doubt whether or not he should believe the narrator when he provides the reason for his return to his hometown:

איר מיינט, וואָס, אייגנטלעך, פֿאַר איך קיין סאַשמאַקען? אַ ביסל בענק איך טאַקע נאָך דער שטאָט, און אַ ביסל אויף קבר-אַבֿות. איך האָב דאָך עפעס אויפֿן הייליקן אָרט אַ פֿאַטער און אַ מוטער, און ברידער און שוועסטער – אַ גאַנצע משפּחה. און אַגבֿ ווילט זיך מיר טאַקע חתונה האָבן אויך. ביז וואָנעט איז דער שיעור צו זיצן אַ בחור? און חתונה האָבן וויל איך דווקא פֿון סאַשמאַקען. פֿון מיין שטאָט. פֿון מיין גראַד. פֿון מיין משפּחה.

You must be wondering why I’m bothering to go to Soshmakín at all. Well, it’s partly because I miss the place and partly to visit my parents’ graves. I have a father and a mother who are buried there, and brothers and sisters too – a whole family, in fact. I’d like to get married also. How long can I live the single life? And I want to marry a hometown girl from Soshmakín. From my own town. From my folks. From my family.²³

At first glance, everything falls into place and appears rather simple: Jews engaged in prostitution networks in Argentina would undertake trips to Eastern Europe in order to entice women into the trade under false promises of marriage. “A mentsh fun Buenos Aires” apparently presents

a typical case of such a criminally motivated trip. Still, the reader cannot completely reject the possibility that the pimp does indeed wish to marry and build a family for himself. This issue is problematized by, for instance, his pilgrimage to the cemetery, which creates a strange mixture of eros and thanatos. Near the end of his monologue, he unfolds a vision of his unborn children that is normative to the bone:

די קינדער וועל איך לאָזן שטודירן. דעם אויף דאָקטאָר, דעם אויף אינזשיניר, און דעם אויף יוריסט. די טעכטער וועל איך אָפּשיקן אין אַ ייִדישן געשלאָסענעם פּאַנסיאָן. ווייסט איר, ווידען? – קיין פֿראַנקפּורט...

I’ll send all my sons to study. One will study medicine, another engineering, another law. The girls will go to a special Jewish finishing school. Do you know where it is? In Frankfurt...²³

Is this all pretense, or is the character serious? The reader cannot fully resolve this question. At this point “A mentsh fun Buenos Aires” internalizes the values of the contemporary upper middle class, which were rather the exception than the norm at that time in Jewish life. The speaker wishes to fulfill through his offspring a dream that is very similar to the one which Yekl Tshaptshovitsh fails to realize in *Got fun nekome*. He can in fact be considered a kind of transfiguration of Yekl Tshaptshovitsh, even without taking into consideration the possibility of overt links between the texts. In any case, the “mentsh fun Buenos Aires,” like Yekl Tshaptshovitsh, apparently seeks a double existence. For him, his active involvement in the prostitution business does not preclude the possibility of a respectable family life.²⁴

“A mentsh fun Buenos Aires” is an intriguing text in another respect. The moral depravity of the main character is beyond doubt, given his active participation in a large-scale prostitution business. This phenomenon was considered at the time not only abominable in its very nature but also a real danger to the social fabric of Jewish life, as well as a conspicuous taint on the efforts to present Jews as morally decent. Judged by the nature of his acts, he is possibly the most negative

in a long gallery of underworld characters in our corpus. And yet the reader of this story is granted only a faint hint of the evil a man of this kind would have inflicted in “real” life. The problem of evil as such is hardly present in this story; indeed, the literary representation of the underworld in Yiddish literature sheds light on the difficulties Yiddish writers experienced when trying to represent evil.

The Fate of a Jewish Gangster

Perhaps the most extreme instance of this external viewpoint in the representation of lowlives is found in Yankev Glatshteyn’s poem “Sheeny Mike.”²⁵ As mentioned above, Yiddish poets rarely dealt with the topic of the underworld; it was viewed as a more suitable subject for prose or drama.²⁶ “Sheeny Mike” is an exceptional case in more than one aspect, as it relates the fate of a Jewish gangster living in New York, not Eastern Europe. The title itself, with the word “Sheeny,” provides a completely different lexical marker than those of the aforementioned texts. The peculiar lexicon of the Jewish underworld in Eastern Europe has apparently died out completely in America, somehow replaced by an English derogatory reference to Jews. In other words, the Yiddish writer in this case was unable to include the inner code words that circulated in the Jewish underworld when speaking about outsiders, such as *yold*, *frayer* or others. Instead he inserts a word with a clearly negative connotation used by non-Jews when speaking of Jews – in this case a Jewish gangster whose language is already English.

Since the poem was published for the first time in March 1928, it is quite possible that it depicts a real-life event that occurred a few months earlier: Jacob Orgen, known by his nickname “Little Augie,” one of the most notorious Jewish gangsters in New York, was shot on a street corner in the Lower East Side on October 15, 1927, and died a day later, the victim of a cruel feud between two rival gangs.²⁷ Both the Yiddish and the English press (including *The New York Times*) covered this event, even mentioning that the gangster grew up in an observant

Orthodox home.²⁸ Yankev Glatshteyn was certainly aware of this dramatic episode.²⁹ “Sheeny Mike” should thus be considered an unusual instance in Glatshteyn’s early work of a poem whose composition was directly influenced by a factual event.³⁰

“Sheeny Mike,” the New York Jewish gangster, lives in two worlds. He is presented as the son of immigrants, perhaps his most relevant attribute for the American Yiddish poet. Yet he was also the leader of a criminal gang, the nature of which is somewhat obscured in the poem. In Eastern Europe, a character of this kind would be quintessentially Jewish, even though deeper bonds were forged between Jews and gentiles in the underworld than in other social strata. In America, however, the Jewish identity of the Jewish gangster is blurred, as he is situated “between two worlds.” The “bronze coffin” wherein he lies is, of course, non-Jewish and typically American:

שיני מינק שלאפט אין א בראנדזענעם ארון.
ט׳וייבט נאך אים א מלוכה פון צוועלף בלאק
און דער מאמעס שייטל און דעם טאטעס אלטע באָרד.

Sheeny Mike sleeps in a coffin of bronze.
He is mourned by a kingdom of twelve blocks,
And by his mama’s sheytl and his papa’s old beard.

The reference to the “twelve blocks” as the realm of Sheeny Mike’s power and life achievement, half ironical and half factual, is contrasted at the very beginning of the poem with the remnants of the Jewish tradition, the lot of his parents. Even if the mention of “twelve blocks” is ironic, it forms a sharp contrast to the synecdoche of the small objects, the two palpable symbols of the traditional Jewish way of life, the *sheytl* and the beard. Once again a text that deals with the Jewish underworld merges it with the topic of the generational gap, which Glatshteyn does here in an intriguing fashion: he returns time and again to the tangible object of the mother’s wig, a clear sign of traditional Jewish way of life that at that

time was considered obsolete in America even among observant Jews. In this manner, Glatsheteyn also establishes a clear gender distinction between the mother, who somehow makes peace with her son's lifestyle, and the father, who is far more reluctant to do so:

דער מאמעס שייטל יאָמערט אים נאָך אַ זכות,
 ער האָט אַלטע טאָטע-מאָמע
 ביט געלאָזט פֿאַלן מענטשן צו לאָסט.
 אָבער דעם טאָטנס באָרד איז פֿאַרשעמט אויף די עלטערע יאָרן,
 ווײַל אַלע, אַלע ווייסן פֿון אַרום און אַרום די צוועלף בלאָק,
 אַז שײנ מייק איז געפֿאַלן און שלאָפט איצט
 אין אַ בראָנדזענעם אָרון.

Mama's *sheyt*l wails out his merit:
 He didn't let his old father-and-mother
 Be anybody's burden.
 But papa's beard is ashamed in its old age,
 For everyone, everyone in the twelve whole blocks knows
 That Sheeny Mike fell and is now asleep
 In a coffin of bronze.

Everything is ready for an emotional outpouring of feelings after the son's early and violent death, and yet the poet makes conspicuous efforts to avoid sentimentality, an especially striking decision given the Yiddish literary norms in texts dealing with the underworld. In this case the absence of any outpouring of grief can be explained in a "realistic" manner, since the participants are a crowd of "tough guys." This is perhaps the most peculiar feature of Glatsheteyn's treatment of this topic: the *melukhe*, the kingdom, a clear, ironic reference to organized crime, mourns the death of its "king," but Sheeny Mike's colleagues remain silent. If they were to speak, they would presumably converse in English, and the poet would have to "translate" their words into Yiddish. This unusual linguistic situation provided the poet with additional motivation to avoid any open expression of feelings. Instead, he constructs a kind of theatrical scenery that enables him to "show" rather than "tell":

שטייט אַ יונג ביים ראַג מיט דעם קאָפּעליוועל אָן אַ זינט
 און שפּיט ווינט אַ דינעם שפּיט.
 אויפֿן ברונעם פֿון טרערן ליגט אַ האַרטער, שווערער שטיין,
 אָבער ער ווייסט אַז שײנ מייק שלאָפט איצט
 אין אַ בראָנדזענעם אָרון.

A guy stands on the corner, his hat slanted,
 And spits a thin stream through his teeth.
 A heavy stone covers the well of tears,
 But he knows that Sheeny Mike lies asleep
 In a coffin of bronze.

Glatsheteyn's poem differs from the prevailing Yiddish literary norms for describing the underworld in yet another aspect. These works were typically rich in "explanations" of the circumstances that brought their characters to the fringes of the law. Today, these explanations sound very naïve, a reflection of contemporary efforts to understand the reasons for criminal behavior. In most cases, they pointed to "sociological" factors – poverty, deprivation, and so on. Sholem Asch's *Motke ganev*, for instance, starts by describing the abnormal relationship between his parents and the dire material conditions that precluded his mother from breast-feeding her own child. At times, these explanations reflect a kind of a "fatalistic" outlook, especially when the lowlife hero is already a "second generation" raised in the underworld, as is the case with Sholem Aleichem's *Moshkele ganev*, Rivkele in *Got fun nekome*, and Zaynvl in *A roman fun a ferd-ganev*.³¹ Glatsheteyn, by contrast, refuses to offer any explanation for Sheeny Mike's criminal career, or to provide any broad panorama of the underworld life:

ווי אַזוי האָט ער אויסגעחלומט זײַן מלוכה?
 ווי אַזוי האָט ער געוועלטיקט?
 ווי אַזוי געהערשט?
 ווי אַזוי האָט ער פֿאַראַונטערטעניקט?
 (...) שײנ מייק ווייסט, אָבער מע טאָר ניט דערציילן,
 שײנ מייק שמייכלט אין בראָנדזענעם אָרון.

How did he dream up his kingdom?

How did he govern?
 How did he rule?
 How did he subdue?
 (...) Sheeny Mike knows, but one must not tell.
 Sheeny Mike smiles in a coffin of bronze.

Glatshiteyn starts and finishes his poem with the last stage of the life of his hero, rendering any explanations superfluous. Conversely, the erotic attraction so commonly associated with the lowlife character is found in this text as well. Again it is presented from the perspective of an outsider, that of the female lover who silently divulges some aspects of "Sheeny" Mike's puzzling and conflicted personality.

Written in the twenties, Glatshiteyn's "Sheeny Mike" should by no means be considered the last of an imaginary lineage of texts dealing with the Jewish underworld. Nonetheless, due to its exceptional nature – a poem about a Jewish gangster in America – it illuminates from a distinctive angle the character and norms of a vast literary corpus. These texts aimed to widen the thematic horizons of Yiddish literature, and some of them were considered rather unconventional at the time, and yet a close reading unveils the nature and scope of an underlying fatalistic worldview that both complements and challenges the enticing power of their dazzling thematic richness.

Notes

• This paper presents preliminary findings of a larger project. My thanks to Nathan Cohen, Mikhail Krutikov, Michael Lukin and David Roskies for their comments and suggestions; the Index to *Yiddish Periodicals* served as a primary source of bibliographical information.

1 His first story on this background, "Ganovim," which was set in Jaffa in the first years after the creation of the State of Israel, appears in his book: *Der veg keyn Sdom*. Tel-Aviv: Y.L. Peretz, 1959, pp. 35-48. His later stories about the Jewish underworld are set in Jewish Vilna before the Holocaust: "Nit far Vilne," "Leyke di shvartse," "Elinke der hoykher," in *Baym vilner durkhboyf*. Tel-Aviv: Y.L. Peretz, 1967, pp. 11-21, 49-65, 101-118; "Hashoves-aveyde," in *Oyf vilner gasn*. Tel-Aviv: Di goldene keyt, 1981, pp. 87-99; "Der gast," in *Oyf vilner vegn*. Tel-Aviv: Y.L. Peretz, 1987, pp. 11-21; "Yikhes fun der vilner intervelt," "Tamara di hoykhe," in *Vilne, mayn Vilne*. Tel-Aviv: Y.L.

Peretz, 1993, pp. 53-82; "Zelik der bal-toyve un Orke der hunderter," "Urke nakhalnik," "Der shtrayk fun di vilner gasn-meydlekh," in *Geven, geven amol Vilne*. Tel-Aviv: Y.L. Peretz, 1997, pp. 11-18, 51-67, 103-114; see: Sandra Studer, *Erinnerungen an das jüdische Vilne: Literarische Bilder von Chaim Grade und Abraham Karpinovitch*. Köln: Böhlau, 2014, pp. 310-338.
 2 "Shoym," *Forverts*, June 2-September 16, 1967; English translation by Rosaline Dukalsky Schwartz: *Scum*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1991; "Di gest," *Forverts*, April 7-August 18, 1972; "Yarme un Keyle," *Forverts*, December 9, 1976-October 7, 1977; English translation of one chapter, with an introduction by Joseph Sherman, in Seth Wolitz, ed., *The Hidden Isaac Bashevis Singer*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001, pp. 185-217; Hebrew translation by Bilhah Rubinstein. Tel-Aviv: Yediouth Ahronoth, 2011.

3 This work was also translated into Ladino

(the catalogue of the National Library of Israel includes two editions), a telling example of the influence of French culture on Ladino.

4 On the presence of crime stories in Yiddish popular culture in Eastern Europe see Nathan Cohen, "Sherlock Holmes in the Pale of Settlement: Yiddish Crime Stories 1860-1914", in: Marion Aptroot et al., eds, *Yiddish Studies Today*. Düsseldorf: Düsseldorf University Press, 2012, pp. 253-278. Most of these stories and novels were translations or adaptations from other languages; Nathan Cohen's study should be supplemented with a parallel one dealing with Yiddish immigrant culture in the United States.

5 A selective list would include the following books: Haim Avni, "Tineim": *Sakhar benashim be-Argentina uve-Israel*. Tel-Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth, 2009; Edward J. Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish Fight against White Slavery 1870-1939*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982; Albert Fried, *The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Gangster in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, rev. ed. 1993; Robert A. Rockaway, *But He Was Good to his Mother: The Lives and Crimes of Jewish Gangsters*. Jerusalem: Gefen, 2000 (includes mainly anecdotal material); Jenna Weissman Joselit, *Our Gang: Jewish Crime and the New York Jewish Community, 1900-1940*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983.

6 The basic book on this topic is: Friedrich Avé-Lallemant, *Das deutsche Gaunerthum: in seiner socialpolitischen, literarischen und linguistischen Ausbildung zu seinem heutigen Bestande*. Vol. 4. Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1862.
7 Shmuel Niger, ed., *Der pinkes*. Vilna:

B.A. Kletskin, 1913, pp. 50-51 (special pagination), No. 404-412.

8 *Yidishe folkslider mit melodies*, gezaml't fun Y.L. Cahan, tsunoyfgenumen un fun dos nay aroysgegebn durkh Maks Vaynraykh. New York: Yivo, 1957, No. 551-553, pp. 468-469.

9 Itzik Nakhmen Gottesman, *Defining the Yiddish Nation: The Jewish Folklorists of Poland*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003, pp. 22-27; see also the illuminating recollections of the journalist and poet A. Almi on the difficulties to gather folkloristic material from members of the Jewish underworld in Warsaw: *Momentn fun a lebn*. Buenos Aires: Tsentral-farband fun poylishe yidn, 1948, p. 125. It is important to note that most of this work was conducted in Warsaw, the biggest Jewish community in Europe and a quintessential metropolitan centre.

10 Mordkhe Gebirtig, *Mayne lider*. Cracow, 1936, p. 79; *The Song That Never Died: The Poetry of Mordecai Gebirtig*, translation and introduction Simcha Simchovich. Oakville, ON: Mosaic Press, 2001, p. 80.

11 For instance, Fishl Bimko's play Ganovim (Warsaw, 1919), an unimpressive text, is saturated with words taken from the Jewish underworld argot. An explanatory list of those terms is provided at the end of the published edition of the play.

12 One noteworthy exception to this rule is Khaver-Paver's novel *Clinton Street*. New York: National Jewish Buro, 1937 (English translation by Henry Goodman. New York: YKUF, 1974).

13 Sholem Aleichem, *Ale verk, Ayzenbangeshikhtes*. New York, 1927, pp. 80-81; Sholem Aleichem, *Teveye the Dairyman and*

the Railroad Stories, translated by Hillel Halkin. New York: Schocken Books, 1987, p. 172.

14 Gebirtig, *Mayne lider*, p. 59; English translation, p. 60.

15 The quotations are taken from the later edition: Sholem Asch, *Dramatishe shriften: Sotsyale dramen*, Vol. 3. Vilna/New York, 1922. This volume was part of the inclusive edition of Sholem Asch's collected works, a project that started in New York and was continued in Vilna and Warsaw; all quotations were checked against the first edition, Vilna 1907.

16 First publication: *Der tsayt-gayst* (New York), September 8, 1905, pp. 13-14, with the subtitle: "Fun dem tsikl 'Yungen un meydn'", which points to the explicitly erotic character of the story. It is highly plausible that this was the reason that Asch did not publish it at that time in Eastern Europe. The story was included in the volume *Himel un erd* (= *Gezamlte shriftn* Vol. 3). Warsaw: Kultur-lige, 1925, pp. 183-192.

17 This was Peretz's main complaint in a short article he wrote about Asch in 1907, right after the success of *Got fun nekome*. This success at the time was more modest than supposed, but the very fact that Asch's plays were performed on non-Jewish stages generated a vast array of reactions (and envy) among the Yiddish literati. See: Y.L. Peretz, "Sholem Ash", *Ale verk, 7: Literatur un lebn*. New York: CYCO, 1947, pp. 240-243.

18 For a reading of *Got fun nekome* in the context of other Yiddish plays dealing with the topic of prostitution and brothel life, see: Joel Berkowitz, "The Brothel as Symbolic Space in Yiddish Drama," in Nanette Stahl, ed., *Sholem Asch Reconsidered*. New Haven:

The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, 2004, pp. 35-49.

19 This lesbian relationship between Rivkele and Manke, one of the girls working in the brothel, is at the heart of the second act of the play, the one that Peretz praised in his article as "a poem," without mentioning any of the details of its thematic core.

20 Joseph Opatoshu, *A roman fun a ferd-ganev un andere dertseylungen*. Vilna: B.A. Kletskin, 1928, p. 109; English translation by David G. Roskies in Ruth R. Wisse, ed., *A Shtetl and Other Yiddish Novellas*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986, p. 208.

21 Sholem Aleichem, "Moshkele ganev," *Di goldene keyt* 113 (1984), p. 10.

22 Sholem Aleichem, *Ale verk, Ayzenbangeshikhtes*, p. 86; Sholem Aleichem, *Teveye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories*, p. 175.

23 Yiddish, p. 87; English translation, p. 176.

24 Regarding other aspects of this story see Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000, pp. 283-295.

25 First publication: *In zikh* 3, no. 1 (March 1928), pp. 11-13; included without any textual changes in his book *Kredos*. New York, 1929, and in his volume of collected poems, *Fun mayn gantser mi*. New York, 1956; page numbers refer to this publication; English translation: Benjamin and Barbara Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, pp. 241-245.

26 Another noteworthy exception is Anna Margolin's poem "Der gangster," published for the first time in 1925 and included in

her book *Lider*. New York, 1929. See the critical edition by Avrom Novershtern. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991, p. 111.

27 The title “Sheeny Mike” can be misleading in this case, since this was the nickname of a Jewish gangster of the former generation (born in 1850); for information on him, see Rockaway, *But He Was Good to his Mother*, pp. 97-99. It is clear that Glatshetyn did not want to mention by name the “actual” person who probably served as a model for his poem, and instead used the name of another gangster.

28 Fried, *The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Gangster in America*, pp. 133-144; Rockaway, *But He Was Good to his Mother*, pp. 150-152. A photograph taken at the funeral, showing the mourning mother in a large black scarf bending and weeping over her son’s coffin, is a very pertinent graphic realization of the atmosphere depicted in the poem: cf. Oz Almog, *Kosher Nostra: Tod in Amerika 1890-1980*. Vienna: Jüdisches Museum, 2003, p. 129.

29 See for instance the anonymous article, “Ver hot dermordet dem ist-sayd geng-lider ‘Litl Ogi’”, *Forverts*, October 18, 1927. A day later Tsivven, a well-known journalist and contributor to the newspaper, wrote in his column: “Little Augie was nothing more than a gangster, but not a soldier – a king” (*Forverts*, October 19, 1927). In Glatshetyn’s poem, Sheeny Mike is referred to as a “king” in both Yiddish terms, “meylekh” and “kenig.”

30 Other texts that fall into the same category are “Luther Boddy” (Yankev Glatshetyn, *Fraye ferzn*. New York: Grohar-Stodolski, 1926, p. 46) and “Sako un Vanzetis montik” (*Kredos*, pp. 52-62). The telling fact regarding Glatshetyn’s early work

is that all these poems deal with instances of unnatural death, murder or execution, with some sort of involvement of law authorities, and they were all written soon after the actual events they described. For an introductory analysis to these poems, see Janet Ruth Hadda, “The Early Poetry of Yankev Glatshetyn,” Ph.D. Thesis. Columbia University, New York, 1975, pp. 145-158.

31 Urke nakhalnik’s autobiography, perhaps the only genuine autobiography of a real criminal written in Yiddish, implicitly challenges this opinion: Urke nakhalnik’s family was normative, and the author insists that at his birth he was greeted with satisfaction and joy by his parents. Urke nakhalnik’s upbringing was no more traumatic than that of a typical Jewish child in those years. As such, it cannot serve as an “explanation” for his later life style.

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