Yudica

Poet of Spadina's Sweatshops

by Adam Fuerstenberg

Cet article parle de Yudica, une poète dont l'oeuvre révolutionnaire est inspirée de sa propre expérience dans la classe ouvrière immigrante du Canada.

It wasn't the simple pietism of the shtetl that they remembered; it was the unrelenting poverty and the violent revolutionary struggle that they recalled in their poetry. They sang of the new social order and the industrial paradise they believed was forming.

Yiddish literature in Canada, now more than a hundred years old, has a history that parallels the development of modern Yiddish literature in the rest of the world, especially that of the United States with which the Canadian Jewish community shared a similar immigrant experience. However, the unique milieu in which the early Canadian Jewish community developed produced significant differences from other Yiddish literatures. Proportionally, considering the great variance in Yiddish populations in Canada and the United States, one of the most striking aspects of Canadian Yiddish writing—particularly in the 1930s and 40s—was the abundance of what came to be known as "proletarian" literature, especially poetry. It is amazing how long and vigorously the proletarian influence, and the dream of a secular working-class political entity, retained its hold on Canadian Yiddish writers. In all three centres of Canadian Yiddish activity—Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg—the socialists, ranging from the Labour Zionist to the Bundists, communists, Trotskyites, or anarchists, created and maintained a vigorous presence well into the 1960s that was reflected in Yiddish literature.

The early years of Canada's present Jewish community were a time of great hardship, with the main effort being expended by individuals on economic survival or saving money to bring the rest of the family. There was little time or energy for cultural pursuits. Nevertheless, some of the most important cultural and social institutions were founded during this time, and in the forefront of their development were the socialists. Along with other political movements, they founded unions, relief agencies, Jewish afternoon and day schools, newspapers and periodicals, theatre groups, and libraries, all vibrantly communicating in Yiddish. The enormity of their task, and their achievement, becomes clear if we look at the rapid increase in Canada's population in those first few decades. At the turn of the century there were fewer than 17,000 Jews in Canada; only 30 years later the 1930 census reported more than 165,000, 96 per cent of whom still reported Yiddish as their mother tongue.

Not surprisingly, the writers who emerged in those hard times had a proletarian orientation. Most were decidedly working-class, being either tradesmen or unskilled labourers. Many escaped Europe already with a record of political agitation against absolutist, often anti-Semitic, regimes. Even those who were not political were soon radicalized by the poverty and harsh working conditions they encountered on arrival. Frequent recessions and strikes made difficult working conditions almost intolerable. It was indeed a cultural shock for many.

However, the "proletarianism" of many, especially the earlier Yiddish writers, was less ideological than a reaction to the difficult conditions they encountered on arriving. It manifested itself not in calls to revolution but in expressions of disillusionment, pessimism, and suffering in their new environment, or else it resulted in a poetry of nostalgia for life in the pious, simpler little towns they had left behind.

It was quite another matter with the radical socialists, whose commitment to marxism was much more assertive. It wasn't the simple pietism and *hassidism* of the *shtetl* (town) that they remembered; it was the unrelenting poverty and the violent revolutionary struggle that they recalled in their poetry. Moreover, their whole orientation was to the future rather than the past. So, in imagery of traditional socialist realism, they sang of the new social order and the future industrial paradise that they believed was forming after the Bolshevic victory in the Soviet Union. Moreover, they were convinced that the socialist victory was impending in North America and in the rest of the world—a victory that would bring a society without foremen or bosses, where their labour would provide them with plenty and all would be equal.

It is to this latter band of revolutionary "proletarians" that Yudica belonged, a group which included most prominently Mordechai Miller (1895–1946) in Winnipeg, Shabtai Perl (1906–1976) and Sholem Shtern (1906–1991) in Montreal, and Shimon Nepom (1882–1939) and Abraham Nisnevitch (1886–1955) in Toronto. It was a group that came to prominence in the 1930s and 1940s, the years of the Great Depression, the rise of fascism and Nazism, and of unprecedently friendly relations between the Soviet Union and the Allies during World War II. The influence of these three factors is what gives their poetry its clear distinctiveness as well as its unfortunate limitation.

Most of their work, tied to these specific political conditions, became dated and is now irrelevant. In a unique way Yudica's life and work both parallels and reflects the concerns and the limitations of the whole group and at the same time, because she was the only prominent woman among them, poignantly transcends it.

Her life, from her earliest childhood, was a bitter saga of relentless poverty and unremitting, unrewarding toil, made all the more harrowing by constant physical danger during her youth in Europe and by economic insecurity, loneliness, and deprivation in Canada.

She was born Yehudit Zik in 1896 in Gorzsd, in the Kovno region of Lithuania, near what was then the Tzarist border with East Prussia. She had—even for that time of political upheaval and vast migrations from Tzarist Russia—a very itinerant and violent childhood and youth that probably helps to explain her eventual political radicalism. Her father eked out a marginal existance as a mercantile clerk and when Yudica was still an infant he moved his family to London, England, where he apparently prospered. However, they had to return to her birthplace when she was six because her mother was adversely affected by the damp climate.

Gloria Lidsky Fuerstenberg, "I Light the Candles for You," pen and ink drawing, 1996.

Ensuing poverty forced the break-up of the family and the children were farmed out to more prosperous relatives thus, in effect, becoming orphaned. Yudica first lived with an aunt in East Prussia and shortly after with a married brother in Frankfurt, in the German Empire. There she must have received some secular education because she was fluent enough to begin writing poetry and fiction in German. While still a teen she had to work in a store.

When World War I broke out, still only 16, she was arrested and imprisoned as an enemy alien. During her year of internment she suffered terrible attrocities and also a severe shoulder wound incurred for disobeying a camp rule. Somehow, she managed to be released and to make it back to Moscow and Kharkov by way of Sweden and Finland. In Kharkov she found work in a school for young seamstresses where she learned the trade she was to practice for almost 30 years in Toronto. Apparently she was exposed to questionable company because she reputedly almost became a victim of the white slave trade which ensnared many young girls during WWI. Towards the end of the War we find her occupied as a governess in Lesitshonsk, and shortly after in Kharkov and Katerinoslav. Here she befriends and is encouraged by the writer Moishe Teitsh, becoming a part of the young writing circle that included the great Peretz Markish, as well as Hanah Levin and Shmuel Rossin.

Her contacts with these writers obviously bore fruit because her poetry, essays, and even some fiction begin to appear regularly in the better known Yiddish journals in Russia, Lithuania, and Poland. During these violent revolutionary years she also lived for a year in Rostov on the Don, where she suffered from a lenghty bout of typhoid. Upon recovery she managed to smuggle herself to Finland, where she was at first quarantined and then again imprisoned as an enemy alien. Eventually she reached Stockholm. In 1922, a politically calmer period, she returned to her birthplace and published her first volume of poetry in Kovno, titled appropriately *Naye Yugent* (New Youth). She was now so well enough known that Zalmen Reisen devoted almost a whole page to her in his great biographical dictionary of Yiddish writers.

In 1928, recognized internationally in the Yiddish literary world, she was included in Ezra Kerman's pioneering anthology, *Yidishe Dikhterins* (Yiddish Poetesses), published in Chicago. She continued to appear worldwide in journals and newspapers, increasingly in progressive ones like *Der Kamf* (The Battle), *Yidishe Kultur* (Yiddish Culture), *Zukunft* (Future), or *Di Morgn Frayhayt* (The Morning Freedom), and *Vokhenblat* (Weekly Page); in many collections and anthologies like J. I. Segal's

Canadian *Royerd* (Raw Earth), *Nyuancen* (Nuances), *Epoche* (Epoch), and H. M. Caiserman's *Yiddishe Dichter In Kanade* (Yiddish Poets In Canada) or N. Mayzel's famous *Amerike In Yidishn Vort* (America in Yiddish Word).

Yudica arrived in Canada in 1929, just in time for the Great Depression. Separated from her husband in Europe, she brought with her a three year old son, Gerald. After a short period in Montreal, where she worked in an orphanage, she settled in Toronto. Here, she eked out an impoverished existence working for almost 30 years in the garment factories on Spadina, particularly Tip-Top Tailors. Sometime in the late 1950s or early 1960s she moved to New York. For several years an occasional piece would appear by or about her in the *Vokhenblat* or in the *Morgn Frayhayt* and then she just vanished.

Her marriage couldn't have been very successful (her married name was Zaufer) and it is perhaps an indication of her marital unhappiness that there is no reference to her husband nor any allusion to the union in the three volumes of poetry she published while in Canada. The marriage did produce one positive result, her son, but also left her struggling to bring him up as a single mother.

Yudica's poetry reflects both her revolutionary commitment and her painful life. To the former belong the poems clearly exhortative, largely propagandist, and politically motivated. They strain for effect rather than universality, are narrowly topical rather than transcendent, and, rooted in their time and place and in an ideology now largely discredited, have become irrelevant. As for so many of her generation, marxism, the god that failed, absorbed and wasted much of her energy and her poetic gifts.

When she controlled her ideological bent, her poems, even while exhortative and still obviously slanted, could impress with their reflection of her genuine experience and the emotions she felt. In "Spadina," one of the more memorable poems reflecting her harsh and insecure working life in the garment district of Toronto, she rises above exhortation (as in stanza 5) to give poignant expression to her guilt for "abandoning" her child daily to go to work.

Thinly fragile is dawn's early air.
Spadina, street of stores and factories.
Lies under a web of gray
And dreams the dream of workers' fortunes.

Individual steps on echoing sidewalks
Merge with hundreds of steps together.
A sound that comes from laneways and streets.
A sound of toilers, of hands occupied.

Spadina, the street of the Labour Lyceum.
With stairs and chambers for labouring men.
With their own judges, with laws that are just—
Only unity is missing among the worker masses.

How many dreams are buried in the walls
Of the massive bricked in shops—
Of the young, who gave up their schooling
Fortune and future to find in work?

Spadina, the street of worker struggles—
I give you in example my personal fate:
My child, which I leave in gray mornings.
Hungry, abandoned, in rooms among strangers.

My sorrow, wandering without direction through ruined worlds.
Through horrible sufferings of peoples bleeding
To the clanging of wheels, machines and irons.
You soak in my tears and my youth.

Spadina, the street of stores and factories.
Of people who wait and pine for work—
The day that'll unite us all
Will be the golden key to freedom.

(*Shpliters*)

Here is a poem from a series which she headed "*Birgerkrig*" (Civil War), in *Shpliters*, which gives a sense of her experience of the upheavals in Eastern Europe during and just after World War I. In this series and in some of her other autobiographical, narrative, and dramatic poems she uses a persona, Etl, who reperesents a refugee during those harrowing years. In this poem, "*Di Raykhe Velt Makht Gesheften*" (The World Of The Wealthy Makes Business) she unloads herself of the classic marxist perception that war serves capitalism; but her anger is genuine and comes from personal grief.

Etl on highways—hurrying, faster
Through hunger and sorrow, through fire and blood.
The wealthy are screaming: "The Shoeless! The Reds!"
The Reds reply: "Bourgeois dogs!"

In endless generations masters and slaves
A bloody arena, sword against sword;
And nations, that desire freedom surpressed
Throw millions into the bloody game.

Under dawning skies the streets are deserted
Only wagon wheels roll on stony road:
Russian food for German hunger,
German rifles for Russian hearts.

World War II elicited from her some genuinely powerful Holocaust poetry, much of it focused on her birthplace in Lithuania and the fate which befell her own family. A good example are these two short stanzas from "*Ikh Tzind Di Likht Far Aykh*" (I Light The Candles For You) from her last book *Tsar Un Frayd* (Sorrow and Joy) where she skillfully combines the image of lighting memorial candles for the martyrs with memories of her mother preparing to light the candles greeting the Sabbath.

I light the candles for you—
Mothers and sisters
Of our great bleeding nation
For you martyrs, killed
In all the areas of the world ... (from stanza 1)

I light the candles for you.
In the flames you rise again.
My mother covers her head with her white kerchief
Like freshly fallen snow.
Her eyes look still, but full of apprehension,
That He, God forbid, not her joy destroy. (from stanza 3)

The love of her life was her child, and apprehension for his welfare as well as guilt about having to leave him among strangers while she was at work dominate the poems that are her best and most enduring. These are what we may call the "personal" poems as distinguished from her "political" or propagandist ones. They are genuine cries of pain at her helplessness, her victimization, at the mercy of conditions she cannot control, and most of all at being alone. Even when she takes pleasure from something, usually the simple games and joys of children or the wonders of nature in the passing of the seasons, she seems always surrounded by an aura of sorrow, of weariness from the struggle to maintain herself and her son. In one of her most moving poems, titled "*Harbstike Morgns*" (Fall Mornings), she describes the care she takes not to wake her son as she wearily rouses herself to go to work:

My child sleeps, wrapped in darkness.
I dare not turn on a light.
His little face shines, like a star in the sky,
In the shadows of awakening light I move
to give him a kiss.
I stand by his bed, quiet, alone like a shadow,
And stretch out my hand, pale, weary,
Every finger desiring sleep.
With them I touch my ltle boy's head,
Then kiss my fingers, which avoided tearing his sleep.

In another such poem, "*Azoy Blayb Ikh Shteyn*" (Thus I Remain Standing," as in "thus I hesitate") we see her guilt and pain as she hesitatates to leave her child in the early dawn for work.

Thus day-in, day-out I remain standing,
A stranger at my own door.
So great is my worry—leaving my sleeping child
Within four small walls.
He wakes himself and calls to me
Full of fright.
From behind some door commands a sleepy voice:
Sleep!
My child wanders around in the gray dawn
In the empty room.
Cries and calls,
Till all begin to rise.

In another poem, titled "*Ikh Vart Oyf Arbet*" (I Wait For Work), she provides a grim picture of her poverty. She describes herself—still dressed in summer clothing although it is already fall and very cold—waiting at dawn for possible work at a darkened factory, watching for the lights to go on in the sixth story of the building, and she muses:

In my heart a quiet nagging sorrow,
Which carries to my house—
A room on the second floor,
Dark, and cold.
I leave my child lonely-alone
To his own counsel.
Is he crying there? Is he sleeping still?
I watch the sixth story...

Sometime in the middle '50s she moved to New York with her son and his wife, Helen. Sadly, her last years were darkened by her son's premature death from leukemia in 1982. Yudika passed away in 1987, in her 90s, survived by her daughter-in-law and two grandchildren.

Although Yudica wrote many lyrics, her gift did not lie in lyrical but narrative and dramatic verse which reflected her real experience, her very genuine hardship and suffering. It is a tragic irony that her commitment to her radical ideology lost her the substantial attention and admiration which she at first justly received. It has deflected consideration from the large body of poetry in which she chronicled both the radical changes experienced by her generation in Eastern Europe immediately after the first World War, and the hardships of the immigrant experience in Canada, especially as it affected women who had to make their own way. Some of these poems of working-class immigrant experience compare well with the poetry of the great American Yiddish labour poet Morris Rosenfield, whom Yudica greatly admired. Perhaps, like Rosenfeld who also suffered greatly and for a time was not fully appreciated, she too will be re-discovered and recognized for capturing in her more personal poetry what Mathew Arnold called "the ebb and flow of human misery." Yudica certainly deserves attention for a body of poetry that records her valiant struggle to create a better world than she experienced and to survive with dignity as a single mother and as a poet.

A longer version of this paper was read at the 1992 Annual Conference of the Jewish Historical Society of Canada. All translations in this article were done by the author.

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THE TERRACE HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS GROUP

Words for Hope

I speak five languages,
But I have no words for the Camps.
The Eskimos have many words for snow,
But we know only one word for death.
I have only tears.
Enough tears for many lives.
I cannot cry and I cannot laugh.
I can talk, and I want to talk.
If the new generations will listen,
The Survivors might find words for hope.

This poem was created by the Holocaust Survivors' Group, a unique group of women, originating from a variety of different countries, cultures, and lifestyles. The Group's creative expression in the form of collectively-written poems are a tangible testament to the members' strengths and survival capacities, and the Group hopes that the collective nature of the Poems will speak on behalf of other survivors unable to articulate their feelings. This poem has been reprinted from Collective Poems: The Terrace Holocaust Survivors Group, *edited by Paula David (Baycrest Centre for Geriatric Care, Toronto).*

ANONYMOUS

Entitled

I sit in a corner, near the front door
and watch her work with my students.
The words slip from her mouth with ease.
"Know your boundaries, think about your power.
Understand what is welcome. Recognize what is not."
My students like her. I like her.
She is at ease, our sexual harassment officer.
She is entitled.

I lie in a corner, far from the front door
and watch him undo his belt.
The pants slip from his legs with ease.
He knows no boundaries. I have no power.
I am four, I am five, I am six,
Seven, eight, maybe nine.
I watch him lay his heavy body on top of mine. Groan hoarsely as he cums.
He is at ease, my grandfather.
He is entitled.

I sit in a corner, near the front door
and watch her work with my students.
The words slip from her mouth with ease.
"Mark your boundaries, use your power.
Take in what is welcome. Reject what is not."
My students like her. I like her.
But I am not like her.
Not at ease.
Not entitled.
Yet.