Miriam Udel (ed. and trans.), *Honey on the Page: A Treasury of Yiddish Children’s Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2020); 352 pp;

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With *Honey on the Page*, Miriam Udel secures a long-deserved place for Yiddish literature among Anglophone scholarship on children’s literature, and indeed, children’s literature itself: it is endearing, evocative, carefully chosen, edited, and translated collection that offers a window into the depths and breadth of Yiddish culture without falling victim to the now- familiar notion that Yiddish belongs to a world of the past. Udel brings together stories from dozens of Yiddish writers, among which are significant literary figures in the world of Yiddish literature outside of children’s writing as well as a wide range of still-underread authors. Though few of these names, with perhaps the sole exception of Sholem Asch – whose best-known works in English are about as far from his children’s stories than you could imagine – would be easily recognizable to a broad, English-speaking audience, the collection bursts with a life and vibrancy that captures the reader with ease. It’s hard to fight against the desire to just open to a story at random and start reading.

Resisting that temptation is important, however, because it is in the introductory framing – along with the brief biographical portraits, and short contextual notes that precede each entry – that the anthology demonstrates its deep investment in historical research, and commitment to the social and educational ideologies that permeated the storytelling cultures from which the collection’s contents emerge. Childhood has long been recognized as a political category, emerging with the industrial and political turns toward modernity in the nineteenth century, and theorized within a wide range of political contexts. No less in the context of eastern European Yiddish culture, where—structured in some ways by Jewish religious traditions conceptions of adulthood—the political focus on childhood is deeply tied to the explosion of secular Jewish national movements in the years leading up to and following the “the Bolshevik overthrow of the tsars in 1917 that formally ended Jewish confinement to the region” known as the Pale of Settlement (p. 6).

These tumultuous decades saw three major political movements emerging within the broad (and diverse) world of Yiddish eastern Europe: the Bund, a Jewish labor movement who aimed for “Jewish cultural nationalism within the diasporic communities in which Jews were already living;” the Zionist movement, who sought to establish “Jewish life in the historical homeland of Palestine;” and Jewish participation in the communist movement where, though “only a small percentage of Jews were communists,” the Jewish people were significantly “overrepresented” among the leadership of various communist revolutionary parties (p. 7). These are particularly significant for the purposes of this collection, because of how crucial secular Jewish education was to all these movements: they established ideologically inclined school systems, and theorized different forms of education for children, which led to large-scale publication projects. Children were, for all these political movements, a key site of cultural and ideological fashioning, “a shortcut to national reform” (p. 9).

Yet, looming over this period was a sense of trepidation and fear over the possibility of cultural degradation and loss: with the easing of restrictions on Jewish movement, on cultural institutions, and the waves of migration between Europe and the United States in particular, came the concurrent risk—whether perceived or actual—of assimilation. Thus, Yiddish children’s literature of the period, Udel tells us, aimed for a wide and holistic kind of education: hoping not only to create from its youth a generation of literate, culturally aware, and politically engaged individuals, but to similarly instill in them a respect for the Yiddish and Jewish cultural and linguistic traditions they feared would be lost. Children’s literature is, in some ways, always didactic, but what marks the Yiddish literature that populates Udel’s collection as distinctive is that it seems to celebrate, first and foremost, Yiddish culture itself. As Udel says in her prefatory note “to the Young Reader”: “A language isn’t just a way of saying things: what you hope for, what you’re afraid of, what you dream about, or what you ate for lunch. A language is also a way of carrying a culture with you” (p. 1).

Nowhere is this metaphor quite so intense and purposeful as in Zina Rabinowitz’s “The Story of a Stick,” in which a stick carved with a biblical verse about the value and importance of charity becomes *the* marker through which four generations of a family, increasingly distant and alienated from their Jewish heritage, are able retain and rediscover a connection to their culture, community, and family history. Although piety, loyalty, faith, and kindness are all valued qualities that carry the characters through their journeys, at the core of almost all of these stories is community as a relational network of support that can transcend geography and generations. The eponymous stick initially symbolizes Jacob Guttman’s great acts of charity in a distant Jewish community, and bears meaning for his descendants because of its connection to their fathers for and the series of historical accidents that lead the stick to saving their lives; at the same time it becomes a symbol for all the other Jews that Guttman’s family encounters, not because it has protected them, but because it carries the memory of that initial charity – of support for a Jewish community that transcends national borders. More often than not, the stick serves as a reminder of Jacob Guttman’s love for the community, which is invoked in turn as the Jewish communities of Europe (and, ultimately, Israel) support, rescue, and eventually even repatriate Guttman’s great-grandson, even though himself has *no* knowledge of his Jewish heritage and history. He cannot even read the inscription carved into it, yet the stick remains as a valued piece of his heritage and culture, a tangible connection to the past, and to the Jewish communities with which they come into contact.

In order to highlight transnational, geographical, and temporal diversity of Yiddish culture and literature, Udel’s collection spans almost a century and crosses several continents, defying in its approach any possible sense that Yiddish culture or literature belongs to a distant, nostalgic past now lost.[[1]](#footnote-1) The organization and division of stories within the collection is somewhat arbitrary at times, half organized by content (“Jewish Holidays,” “Wise Fools,” “School Days,”) half by genre or structure (“Folktales, Fairy Tales, Wonder Tales,” “Allegories, Parables, Fables”) and, while the latter set of categorizations are certainly meaningful, it’s unclear as a reader moves through the collection how each of these parts and chapters fits together. The collection aims, it seems, to represent the expansive range of Yiddish children’s literature, rather than tie it too closely to diachronically developing themes or motifs. Because of this, as an anthology, it is rich and vibrant, including many stories that even the most dedicated contemporary student of Yiddish literature would have never encountered, and offers an equally rich and engaging set of stories for the scholar and young reader alike.

However, if as I said above, it’s in the framing passages and introduction that we see Udel and these Yiddish writers’ commitment to their social and political ideologies most evidently, it is also here that we encounter a few moments that raise eyebrows. The foreword by Jack Zipes is one such moment, which I will return to in a moment— though to have Zipes’ imprimatur, being among the foremost scholars and translators of children’s literature, cannot but help this collection find its well-deserved place on shelves. What gave me pause throughout Udel’s introduction, however, was the invocation of “authenticity” as a central criterion, even benchmark, through which to view and evaluate the collection: “several of the most passionate readers so far have been contemporary children’s authors, looking for inspiration in authentic Jewish storytelling of fifty and a hundred years ago as they create new cultural artifacts today” (p. 4); “I hoped to find authentic Yiddish cultural products that my students could appreciate after just a couple of semesters of language study” (p. 15). “Authenticity” is a difficult, and complex notion to invoke, especially in the case of Yiddish language and literature, where it is embedded in a long history of debates and tropes about the death of Yiddish and its disappearance with the large-scale destruction of eastern European Jewry in the Holocaust, as if all of the post-war, and current productions of Yiddish culture are somehow less-than. Moreover, to limit “authentic” Yiddish cultural products not only to the past, but also to a particular social-ideological Yiddish world, is also to elide ongoing and vociferous debates about the relationship between so-called (and broadly construed) secular Yiddish culture and literature and the Yiddish used within the Hasidic, ultra-orthodox communities, where it remains a vibrant and developing vernacular language, and among whom the stories in this collection are unlikely to be read.

Certainly, it is to this so-called secular world of contemporary Yiddish cultural engagements that the collection primarily speaks, a broad continuation and resurgence of interest in Yiddish is most often describe through the term “postvernacular,” coined by Jeffrey Shandler in 2004. This term attempts to describe and delineate a means of engaging with Yiddish language and expression that treats it first and foremost as a means of *symbolically* accessing Yiddish culture, in contrast to vernacular usage for day-to-day communicative or expressive purposes. That is: this collection marks itself, predominantly, as speaking to an audience who otherwise has little knowledge of or access to the Yiddish culture it represents: we need only look to the subtitle of the book, *A Treasury of Yiddish Children’s Literature* to see this implicitly acknowledged. This subtitle is deliberately attempts to place this collection in a lineage with Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg’s groundbreaking 1954 collection of Yiddish literature in translation, which in many ways set the tone for anthologies of Yiddish literature in English translation ever since then. The earlier collection’s purview was this same so- called secular Yiddish literature, its audience broad and ranging, its aim to establish Yiddish literature among the conversation of literatures in the Anglophone world, cementing its place as a world literature in translation. Udel’s collection seems no less ambitious and, it seems to me, no less successful: the collection is a celebration of possibility: its stories reckon with tragedy and destruction, not shying away from presenting the historical realities of Jewish history to their young audiences, but they are stories filled with kindness, piety, possibility, and, above all, the absolute necessity of community – and the celebration of communal networks of support that transcend time and geography.

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1. Europe, North American, Central and South America – recognizing and representing many of the major sites of Yiddish publication through the twentieth century and well after the Holocaust: Warsaw, Vilna, New York, Montreal, Buenos Aires, and Tel Aviv, among others. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)