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## **Author Biography & Related Information**

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## **Erratum**

Entries in the Bibliography of Moyshe Levin's Writings for Children were updated due to new findings in the National Library of Poland.

## Moyshe Levin (Ber Sarin) of Yung-Vilne and His Solo Publishing Venture for Children

### INTRODUCTION

Moyshe Levin (1907–1942), a multi-talented author and artist, used the pseudonym Ber Sarin for the works he wrote for young children. Despite a difficult early life and impaired hearing, he created lively, joyous stories for children in the form of Yiddish rhythmic poetry. He illustrated them himself in vivid color or black and white and self-published many of them as small booklets in Vilnius (Vilna), Lithuania in the late 1930s. According to Kazdan (1954), “The stories were extremely successful with children and teachers,” yet Levin is a little-known contributor to the body of modern Jewish children’s literature that flourished in Eastern Europe between World War I and World War II, perhaps in part since he was murdered during the Holocaust and thus had a truncated career. Most of his writings for adults remain buried in Yiddish periodical literature and some of his works were lost (Fuks 1956–1981).<sup>1</sup>

Levin, who was active towards the end of the interwar period, appears to have been inspired by Sholem Aleichem’s “*Dos meserl*” (“The Pocket Knife”), a work which was adapted for children and Mendele Mokher Seforim’s children’s story “*Dos kelbl*” (“The Calf”); by prominent writers such as Y. L. Perets, Mani-Leib, Leyb Kvitko, Itsik Kipnis, Kadia Molodowsky, and Der Nister, all of whom published children’s literature; and by artists of the caliber of Marc Chagall, El (Eliezer) Lissitzky, and Yisakhar Ber Rybak, who all illustrated Yiddish books for children (Bar-El 2010).

One of the major driving forces for the bustling market of Jewish literature for children was the proliferation of Jewish schools of various political and religious stripes. The choice of language of instruction in Jewish schools usually was a sign of allegiance with a particular political or religious orientation. This was frequently the case in literature as well. Children’s education and literature in Hebrew was typically Zionist, while Yiddish usually indicated secular and socialist affiliations, except in the case of Agudas Yisroel schools, which were religious (Bar-El 2010; Hoge 2016; Udel 2016; Sholokhova 2016).

Levin was part of the Yiddish educational, literary, and artistic ferment, and his socialist, humanist, and universalist convictions are reflected in his work. His love of nature, affinity for animal characters, examination of both modern urban and rural life, and his encouragement of children’s curiosity, imagination, and exploration are evident in his writings and illustrations. Levin’s books have survived in limited numbers in only a handful of libraries; some of his stories

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Yiddish are by the author, unless otherwise noted. The author would like to thank Dr. Chava Lapin for her generous help translating the titles of Moyshe Levin’s books. Any mistakes in the translations are the responsibility of the author.

are now available in digital form on the internet.<sup>2</sup> Levin's life and work, primarily his writing for children, and the history of his do-it-yourself publishing and distribution enterprise, are the subject of this article, which is followed by an annotated bibliography (see [appendix](#)), the first to include all of Levin's published books for children.

## BIOGRAPHY OF MOYSHE LEVIN

The three most significant biographical sources on Levin are an entry by Khayim-Leyb Fuks in the *Leḥsiḱon fun der nayer Yidisher liṭeratur*, recently translated into English by Joshua Fogel (Fuks 1956–1981); information in an introduction to a reprint of Levin's works by his friend and contemporary Hersh Smolyar (Smolyar 1958); and an article by another friend, Abraham Golomb, in *YIVO Bleter* (Golomb 1947). Additional biographical sources are cited in Fuks; these are brief biographies in works that also place Levin and his writings in the context of the literary group Yung-Vilne. Another English source is Sol Liptzin's chapter "Young Vilna" in his 1985 book, *A History of Yiddish Literature*. Levin does not have an individual entry in either edition of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* or in the *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, though his name is mentioned twice in both encyclopedias: in the article on Yung-Vilne (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*) he is listed as a group member; and in the article on the *Literarische Tribune* (Literary Tribune, *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*) as a contributor to that periodical (Cohen 2010). In the Summer 2017 issue of the *Pakn Treger* (Glintzer, 2017; Mazower 2017), Levin is mentioned briefly, and his photograph appears. According to Fuks (1956–1981; see Joshua Fogel's translation into English), Levin



**Figure 1.** Moyshe Levin, 1930s?, illustrated by Bentsye Mikhtom (*Di goldene keyt* 42, 1962, p. 135)

... was born in Vilna, Lithuania, into a family of a poor glazier. During the years of WWI, he wandered homeless through Russia, before returning to Vilna. In 1922 he graduated from the seven-class secular, Jewish public school of L. Gurevich, worked for a time as a touch-up man in a photography studio, and later (in 1928) graduated from the Vladimir Medem Teachers' Seminary. Until 1934 he worked as a teacher in Jewish secular schools in the Vilna region, and later the police (because of his revolutionary activities) revoked his right to continue teaching. From his early youth he was blessed with a painter's talent, and he thus took up painting portraits, drawing posters, and making illustrations for Yiddish-language books. He worked with a publisher of children's literature, while at the same time becoming a member of the literary group "Yung-vilne" (Young Vilna). While in his school years, he published poems in *Yugnt-veker* (Youth alarm) in

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, a collection of Levin's stories for children: <http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc212439/sarin-ber-kh-vel-aykh-dertseyln-a-mayse> and examples in the bibliography.

Warsaw (1922) and in *Folkstsaytung* (People’s newspaper) in Warsaw. From 1927 he also published stories and novellas in: *Vilner tog* (Vilna day) (1927–1939);<sup>3</sup> *Yung-vilne* (1934–1935); *Etyudn* [*Etudyn*] (Studies) in Vilna (1935–1937); *Zibn teg* (Seven days) in Vilna (1935–1936); *Literarische bleter* (Literary leaves), *Folkstsaytung*, *Vokhnshrift far literatur* (Weekly writing for literature), *Foroys* (Onward), and *Der fraynd* (The friend), among others—in Warsaw; and *Forverts* (Forward) in New York, from which he received a prize in 1937 for his story “Dray shpigl[e]n” (Three mirrors). ... Until the German invasion of Russia in June 1941, he was living in Vilna, where he was politically active in the leftist labor and cultural movement. He was the Vilna delegate to the first conference of Yiddish writers in the Lithuanian Soviet Republic in Kovno (May 1941). In those years he placed work in *Vilner emes* (Vilna truth), *Kovner emes* (Kovno truth), the weekly *Shtraln* (Beams [of light]), and the anthology *Bleter* (Leaves) in Kovno.

Golomb (1947) alludes to emotional problems Levin suffered as a result of his experiences and rootless wanderings during World War I: Golomb was a friend of Levin’s at the teachers’ seminary which Levin entered in 1923. Golomb describes how hard Levin had to work to stay on track in his studies and social and moral life. In addition to his severe hearing loss, Levin grappled with these difficulties throughout his life—today he might have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder—and despite them became a prolific writer, artist, and devoted teacher. The source of Levin’s hearing impairment was presumably genetic since according to Sutzkever (1962), Levin’s father was deaf. Elhonen Vogler (1955), a contemporary of Levin’s, described how Levin read his works at Yung-Vilne’s literary evenings to enthusiastic applause which Levin himself could not hear.



**Figure 2.** Moyshe Levin among his Yung-Vilne colleagues (Chana Mlotek, “Elhanan Vogler, A Yung-Vilne Poet,” *Forverts*, February 20, 2009, <https://yiddish2.forward.com/node/1906.html>)

<sup>3</sup> Based on a letter Levin wrote to the *Yidisher literatur fareyn* in Vilna (September 17, 1935), requesting to join the organization, he used the pseudonym Moyshe Vin when publishing at the *Vilner tog* (the letter is at the Harvard College Library, Leyzer Ran Collection, Notes and Clippings: Collection 7, Box 3, Mosheh Levin Folder).

Levin taught in the Tsentrale Yidishe Shul-Organizatsye (Central Yiddish School Organization) school system, the secular Yiddish schools in Vilna, run by the Bund and popularly known as the TSYSHO schools from approximately 1928 until 1934, when the police revoked his right to teach because of his revolutionary activity (Zimmerman 2010; Fuks 1956–1981). Though he was no longer formally able to teach, Levin remained an educator by writing and illustrating books for children. Most members of Yung-Vilne, the writers and artists group he belonged to in Vilna in the 1930s, had grown up in poor or working-class families and shared a leftist outlook. Levin was no exception, and it is in the context of Yung-Vilne that Levin’s artistic creativity and philosophy may be best understood. The group did not espouse a particular literary or artistic philosophy and never adopted a manifesto, allowing its members to explore many different genres. The group published three eponymous issues of a periodical. Among its members were Chaim Grade and Avrom Sutzkever, who both later achieved great renown as Yiddish authors (Fuks 1956–1981; Liptzin 1985; Cammy 2004, 125–126; Cammy 2010, and references there; Schulman 1946, 16; 28–29).

All of Levin’s stories discussed in this article, for children as well as adults, were published in 1937 and 1938, towards the end of the interwar period. This was a difficult and sometimes dangerous time for Jews in Poland, including Vilna, particularly after the death of Jozef Pilsudski, Poland’s highly influential Minister of Defense, in May 1935: the economic status of Vilna’s Jews deteriorated, quotas were instituted in universities, Jewish stores were boycotted, and anti-Semitic incidents and pogroms took place in some areas, including Vilna. The Vilna pogrom of 1936 is described in Levin’s short story for adults “*Tsalel der glezer nokh ’n pogrom: dertseylung fun di November-țeg in Vilne in 1936*” (Tsalel the glazier after the pogrom: a story of the November days in Vilna in 1936). As Yung-Vilne was under suspicion by the secret police, apartments of members were searched, and the police stormed their meetings. Issues of the group’s magazine *Yung-Vilne* were confiscated and one of the editors, Shmerke Kacerginski, was arrested and nearly sentenced to six months in prison. As reported by Cammy (2004, 132), “After a substantial deliberation, the judge asserted that despite his distaste for the magazine’s content he could not find any criminal intent in it. Kacerginski was freed and the confiscated issues of ‘Yung-Vilne’ were released with the appropriate changes.” (see also Bacon 2010; Cammy 2001; Fishman 2017, 10–11; Lisek 2004; Zalkin 2010).

Despite the threatening political situation and economic hardships, Levin forged ahead with his art and writing. His sketches and stories for adults reflect and illustrate the dark times in a stark, realistic, almost documentary fashion, sometimes laced with humor and satire. His short stories for older children, also written in a realistic, though sad and heartrending, manner, nonetheless include rays of hope. In contrast, however, his stories for young children exude a positive and optimistic outlook; a reader would never guess the difficult circumstances of the time period from the content of the tales. Only one story, *Feter shpeter* (Uncle Later the procrastinator), alludes to violence. It is a tribute to Levin’s talent, character, and fortitude that he was able to convey such joy in his stories during such oppressive times.

As described by his friend and colleague Hersh Smolyar, Levin's devotion to creating books for children was so intense that he scrimped and saved in order to publish his stories and distribute them. Smolyar eulogized Levin in the introduction to a posthumous collection of many of Levin's works for children, *Kh'vel aykh dertseyln a mayse* (I'll tell you a story), published in Warsaw in 1958 by Farlag Yidish bukh (item 15 in the bibliography; see [appendix](#)):

When you hold this booklet in your hand, have in mind that these stories were written by a human being with a large, warm, and bold heart, a person who dedicated his life so that Jewish children would no longer have to know the terrible evil of the enemy who steals the bit of bread from their mouths, sleep from their eyes...

Ber Sarin (the literary pseudonym of Moyshe Levin) loved the people, the ordinary Jewish people, who made their living from honest work. More than anything, he loved children. It was for them he wrote his beautiful, playful, and clever stories.

And he not only wrote them. He also drew the beautiful pictures for his stories.

And not only did he illustrate them. He himself published his stories and distributed them.

He lived in difficult times, the Jewish children's writer Ber Sarin. At the time, [late 1930s] in capitalist Poland, there were no government publishers to publish textbooks and stories for Jewish children. The private publishers were primarily concerned with their profits and it was not financially worthwhile for them to publish storybooks for children with pretty color pictures. So the writer and teacher Ber Sarin, whom the then Polish authorities had forbidden to teach in 1934 because of his revolutionary tendencies, saved, *groshen* by *groshen*, and bought everything needed to publish his stories and distribute them to Jewish children. (Smolyar 1958)

Levin was politically active in the leftist labor and cultural movements in Vilna until the German attack on Russia in June 1941. When the Nazis approached Vilna, he fled to Minsk on foot. In the Minsk ghetto, he became a liaison between the partisans in the forest and the organized underground resistance in the ghetto. He also created false Nazi documents and passports (Fuks 1956–1981).

In March 1942, Levin was murdered by the Nazis. It is presumed that his wife, Sarah Yambra, and his daughter met the same fate. Levin was about thirty-five at the time he was killed. Sarah, also a teacher in Vilna, evacuated to Minsk with her husband (Kazdan 1954). It is possible that Ber Sarin's pseudonym was inspired by his wife's name, or perhaps by Nikolai Berzarin, a So-

viet general who began his military service in 1918. It is possible, though unlikely, that he had contact with Levin, and that the pseudonym Ber Sarin is based on the name Berzarin.

Hersh Smolyar recounted and memorialized his friend's final days:

When we organized an underground fighting group in the Minsk Ghetto to create a resistance to the Hitler beasts, and start a partisan division, one of the first to join was the children's writer Ber Sarin. We would gather in his house; it became our headquarters. We hid ammunition, clothing, and food for those who went to the partisans in the forest. Ber Sarin was a very industrious person. He accomplished whatever he took upon himself. Once the Hitlerists grabbed him for forced labor to clean and repair the Minsk jail. Recognizing his skills, the jail authorities made Ber Sarin a brigadier. The Minsk underground fighting organizations made good use of his position. Ber Sarin became our scout. He would bring news of what was happening in the enemy camp; he made connections with fighters who were arrested. Ber Sarin had a great ability—he was able to orient himself in any neighborhood. He became the topographer of the fighting organization in the ghetto. He drew maps in order to mark exactly where the enemy had military and weapons. He would also mark the path that Jews could use to leave the ghetto and not fall into the hands of the murderers.

So it was until a day in March 1942.

... We knew in advance that on that day the Hitlerist beasts had decided to carry out a pogrom, to kill all the Jews who were in the ghetto and let only those working in forced labor live. We quickly let all the Jews know about this and everyone who could went to work outside the ghetto. Ber Sarin, as brigadier, took many Jews to work with him.

... On March 2, 1942 [Purim day, see Miron 2009], starting at dawn, the brown murderers started to search the ghetto and went with dogs to all the courtyards. But they found few Jews. Then they lay in wait for the Jews to return to the ghetto in the evening from forced labor, so they could drive them out of the city and kill them there. The fascist bandits also fell on the group of workers which Ber Sarin was leading. The chief of the jail turned to Ber Sarin and told him to leave the group of workers, in order to keep him alive. At that, the Yiddish children's writer staunchly answered: "If I leave, it will only be together with all the rest of the workers!"

Thus was murdered the proud, courageous, freedom fighter and friend of humanity, the Yiddish teacher and children's writer, Ber Sarin. (Smolyar 1958)



## WORKS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Levin wrote two primary types of works for children: Short, rhymed stories for the very young, and longer, more contemplative stories for students in higher grades. The short stories for pre-school children and young readers were all illustrated by the author. These tales for very young children were typically set in the greater world, a universal world, rather than a specifically Jewish world (items 1–15 in the bibliography). The longer stories, for older children, utilized a larger vocabulary and sadder, more sophisticated, and serious themes. In spite of this darkness, the stories also exhibit signs of hope for the future. These works for children in upper grades take place in impoverished Jewish Vilna and portray aspects of life in a realistic fashion. The city of Vilna is itself an integral actor in these stories and the site-specific locale of Jewish Vilna is essential to the character of the story, in contrast to the stories for young children which take place in a happier, more joyous, world. The works for older children were published under his birth name, Moyshe Levin (items 16–18 in the bibliography), while those for younger audiences were published under his pen name, Ber Sarin.

Levin's books for preschool and young children are realistic and only rarely include fantastical or magical elements. All the stories are in rhyme and the rhythm propels the stories forward, ideal for reading aloud. They are set in different seasons and frequently portray idyllic themes of nature, such as the lifecycle of a bean, life on a farm, plants and animals, or children and snowmen.

Some stories touch on such themes as moving from one place to another, the negative aspects of procrastination, the contrast between the city and the country, and dreams of growing up and exploring. The books do not emphasize political, patriotic, or moralistic content, though there are life lessons, such as appearances may be deceiving, new beginnings are hard, and prescriptions of the importance of being on time, perhaps a prerequisite for life in the city. In general, the stories are positive and upbeat, and the children appear to have the basics of life: a place to live, clothes to wear, and food to eat. There are indications in some stories that the children may have even more than the fundamentals, an unusual depiction for a writer with socialist leanings, though perhaps the author is displaying a wish that all children ought to have what they need in life. For example, in *Itsele Meylekh* (Figure 3), the titular boy appears to have his own room, has enough clothing to fill a suitcase, and can afford to take a train to visit a relative. The



**Figure 3.** Ber Sarin, *Itsele meylekh der gikher pamelekh* (*Itsele Meylekh, the speedy slow-poke*), *Wilno*: U. Margolis i S. Klaczko. Lit. N. Mac i Syn, 1937, p. 1. All images are from the collection of Mrs. Fay Rachkovsky Berger, except as noted—see more in footnote 9.

children in *Balmelokhes* (So, who sews socks?) visit a variety of craftspeople that sew clothes for them, prepare food for them, and even appear to be serving them.

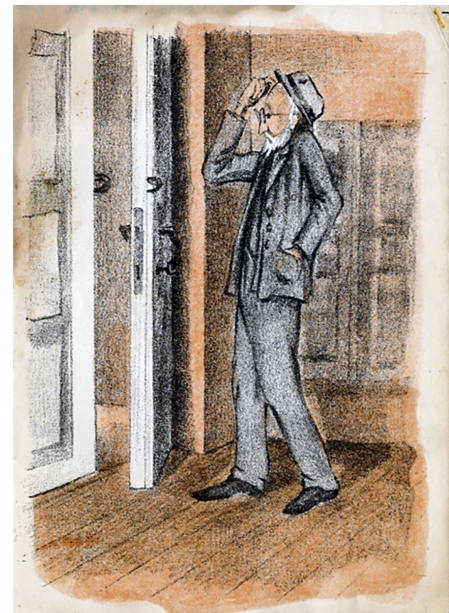
It is worth noting that few human adults appear as active characters in most of Levin's stories for young children. Some of the stories are essentially variations on fables, with animal characters and life lessons spiced with humor and cheerful illustrations to leaven the instructional message. Other stories are fun and entertaining, for example, *A krigeray* (Barnyard brouhaha), in which animals quarrel over who is the "fairest of them all." Perhaps even here there is a hint of a lesson regarding prejudice: some animals object to other animals being asked for an opinion about which animal is the prettiest, and declare: "What? Will a horse (or pig, etc.) judge me!?" though the argument is forgotten as soon as the animals are fed, much like cranky, hungry children that calm down and cheer up once they eat. Other stories are primarily educational and informational: milk comes from cows, wool comes from sheep, it is fun to play with a snowman but a snowman melts when it gets warm. Some stories have elements and motifs that appear to draw from, or are reminiscent of, fables, since animals speak for humans, but such parables have been adapted to create original stories and do not always end with a lesson. The story which best exemplifies a classic fable is *Kitsi un Murele*, in which Kitsi and Murele, two kitten sisters, live a cozy life of leisure with their mother. They endeavor to be independent and catch their own mice, but fail, prompting the mother cat to reassure them that "all beginnings are difficult."



Figure 4. Ber Sarin, *Bebl bebl bob* (Beanie, beanie, bud; Wilno: Farlag far kinden [Ber Sarin], Mac i syn, 1938), p. 4–5

One unusual story describes the personification of a bean plant in *Bebl bebl bob* (alliteration based on *bebl*, the Yiddish word for “bean”; Figure 4). The small bean in this story successfully escapes the fate of the dinner plate and befriends a young boy who protects the bean. Levin refers to the boy using a phrase occasionally used in Yiddish children’s literature: *yingl tsiṅgl*. The rhyming phrase, “yingl tsiṅgl, little boy, little tongue” calls to mind, and may have been inspired by, the famous 1918 story *Yingl tsiṅgl khvat* of Mani-Leib (pen name of Mani Leib Brahinsky, 1883–1953). By the time Moyshe Levin came of age, Mani-Leib was a well-known author and may have influenced Levin.<sup>4</sup> *Yingl tsiṅgl khvat* is the tale a Jewish boy who acquires a magic ring and a horse from a nobleman and finally brings a welcome of winter to his village after an endless, muddy autumn. The insistent beat of Levin’s phrase *Bebl bebl bob ... yarf mir niṭ arayn in ṭop* (Little bean, little bean... don’t toss me into the pot) is oddly reminiscent of the witches stirring the cauldron in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, though it is not known if Levin knew English, read Shakespeare in translation, or had an affinity for the famous Bard. The story also features animals that enjoy watching the bean do tricks, and a hen that helps the boy fetch a stick to aid the bean sprout to grow up straight and tall.

Animals are the primary actors in many of Levin’s stories as they are in children’s literature in general, and in Yiddish children’s literature as well (Hoge 2016; Mantovan 2016). In Levin’s work, depictions of animals include cat mothers and kittens, mouse mothers and mice children, relationships of cats and dogs, and disagreements among animals. The animals in the stories may be divided into four categories: domestic, such as dogs, cats, and mice; farm animals; wild animals, e.g. birds; and unusual or exotic animals, such as zoo and circus animals (*Dem feter Mikhl’s bikhl* (Uncle Mikhl’s zoo book); *Moyshele=ḳoyshle=ṽayn* (Little Moyshele-koyshele). In a number of the stories, animal parents interact with animal children; these relationships serve as surrogates for human ones. If there are adults, they are generally offstage or only incidentally present, such as in *Balmelokhes* (So, who sews socks?), where grown-ups represent various professions, or little Moyshe in *Moyshele=ḳoyshle=ṽayn* (perhaps named for the author himself?), whose parents have limited patience for his unceasing, incessant questions. Moyshe’s parents can’t afford a ticket to the circus for him, so he resolves the problem himself. One of the few adult figures who is a main character in his own book, *Epesvos* in *Epesvos miṭ di briln oyf zayn noz* (Father Nature with the glasses on his nose), is a fantastical all-knowing Father Nature figure, not a realistic person—the sole mythical or magical persona in the books for young children. In *Itsele Meylekh*, a mother appears briefly, but is ineffectual in convincing Itsele to be ready on time. The saga of *Feter shpeṭer* (Uncle Later the procrastinator; Figure 5)



**Figure. 5.** Ber Sarin, *Feter shpeṭer* (Uncle Later the procrastinator; Wilno: Farlag far kinder [Ber Sarin], Mac i syn, 1938), p. 2

<sup>4</sup> For more information on Mani-Leib, see <http://yleksikon.blogspot.com/search?q=mani-leib>.

is another exception, a story which features only adults, though the main character always plans to do things but never gets to them until it is too late. He behaves more like a child than a responsible adult. The Russian children's story *Vot kakoi rasseiannyi* (That's how absentminded) by Samuil Marshak, a Jewish writer, may well have influenced Levin.<sup>5</sup>

Levin's protagonists, children as well as personified animals and plants, are generally independent figures, forgers of their own destiny, who run their own worlds. Moyshele, for example, succeeds in attending the circus because he befriends circus animals, who appeal on his behalf to the owner of the circus. The animals in the Moyshele story are not trapped in the circus; they appear to have freedom of action since they invite Moyshele to visit them when they are home in Africa or the Carpathian mountains. Perhaps the lack of responsible adult figures is a consequence of Levin's wanderings during World War I as a child.



**Figure 6.** Ber Sarin, *Ven ikh vel zayn a groyser* (When I grow up; Wilno, U. Margolis i S. Klaczko. Lit. N. Mac i Syn 1937), p. 1

<sup>5</sup> The adventures of Marshak's absentminded protagonist were also translated into Hebrew by Leah Goldberg; her *ha-Mefuzar mi-kefar azar* became a classic children's book in Israel (Bar-Yosef 2010; Genzeleva 2010; Arad 2005; Levi 2017?).

*Ven ikh yel zayn a groyser* (When I grow up; [Figure 6](#)) takes place in a world with no adults: the action occurs entirely in a child's imagination—and what a fertile imagination it is! A young boy has a toy broomstick horse and visualizes the horse transforming into an airplane, a wooden Pegasus. The boy rides over fields and cities, overtakes planes, trains and cars, and flies to far-away lands with snakes and crocodiles. Towards the end of the story he declares that he will not be afraid (to fly) since he already knows how to ride his stick horse so well. The illustrations of the flying horse are a perfect visual companion to the boy's fantasy.

It is instructive to compare this story to other Yiddish children's stories featuring horses. In Mani Leib's *Yingl tsingl khvat*, for example, the horse is strong and so fast that it is almost able to fly. This impression is reinforced by El Lissitzky's expressive illustrations. Although the horse is not presented as magical, it seems as though the magic ring that Tsingl Khvat acquired from the nobleman along with the horse powers its ability to nearly fly (Koller 2016). Magic is not present in *Ven ikh yel zayn a groyser* (When I grow up), for here the broomstick horse in the form of a winged mechanical horse is fueled by the child's creativity and brain power. Another horse, a realistic one, is featured on the cover of Leyb Kvitko's *Akh, az ikh vel oysvaksn* (Oh, when I grow up),<sup>6</sup> illustrated by Y. Dayts. It was published in Odessa, probably in the 1930s. Both works have similar titles, but Kvitko's is an example of Soviet propaganda. The cover illustration is a boy on a horse, but although this boy dreams about riding a horse, and flying in a balloon, it is all in service of his country and the revolution—he hopes to join a Soviet military unit (Sholokhova 2016). Though all three boys wish to ride horses and explore, their fantasies take different forms: *Yingl tsingl khvat* stars a plucky, heroic Jewish boy from a far-away village unreachable by normal means of transportation, where Jews and Gentiles live together in peace. The village is mired in an eternal fall which never turns to winter, and the village is full of mud, in which Tsingl gets stuck on his way home from *heder*. A non-Jew, a good *porits* (nobleman), sees Tsingl, rescues him, takes a liking to him, and offers him the choice of either a magic ring, or a swift horse. The young boy dares to ask the nobleman for more than he originally offered—both the magic ring and the fleet horse. The nobleman obliges and immediately vanishes. Tsingl transforms into a supernatural other-worldly spirit boy who disappears, to his mother's eternal sadness. He brings snow, and happiness, to his relieved village with seven turns of the magic ring. He presumably goes on to explore the world like the generous nobleman who rescued him, and will continue to return to the village to create snow whenever the village needs it, but he will never return home.

Kvitko's book is a patriotic Soviet story urging children to grow up and serve the state, and Levin's story is an imaginative exploration of the world in a realistic style: three very different conceptions of Jewish boys on horses and their hopes and dreams. The context of the stories is different as well. Mani-Leib's is initially set in a distant imaginary village where Jews and Gentiles live happily; Kvitko's takes place in a Soviet context where Judaism is not mentioned and is apparently irrelevant—though the story is in Yiddish and presumably meant for Jewish children; and Levin's boy explores the world at large, without regard to religion or nationality. Mani-Leib's *Yingl tsingl khvat* is a complex, sophisticated work; analyzing it is beyond the scope

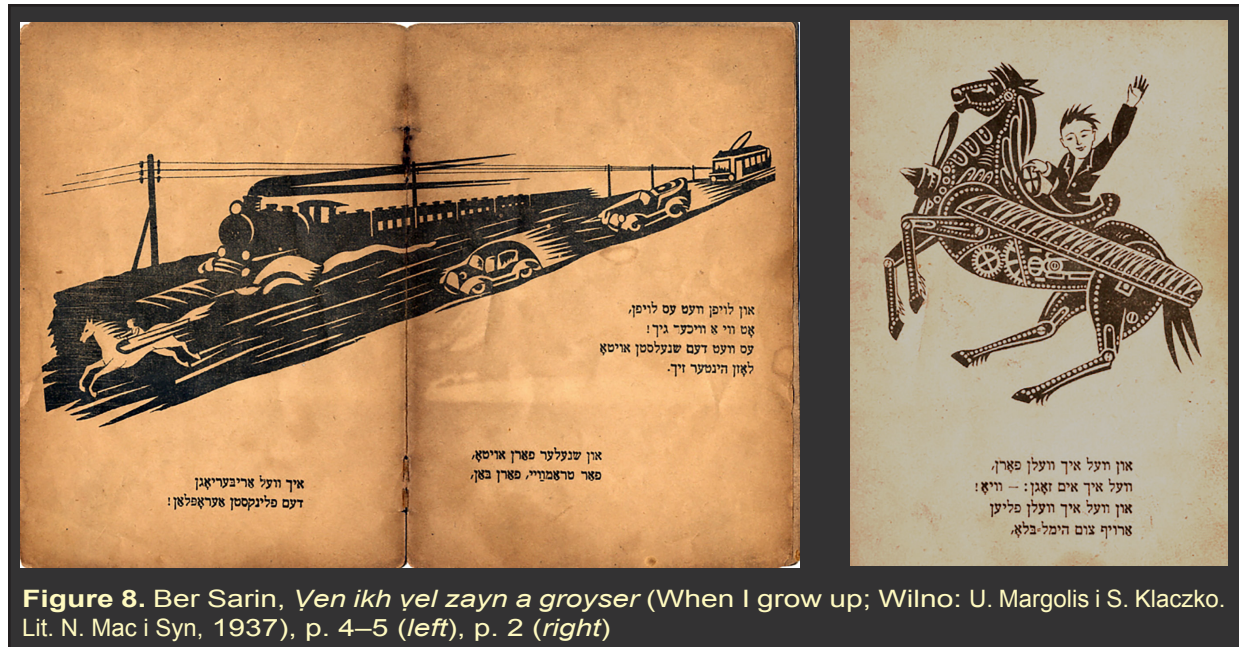
<sup>6</sup> The book is available in digital format on the Yiddish Book Center website, at <http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc213475/kvitko-leib-dayts-y-akh-az-ikh-vel-oysvaksn>.

of this article and is discussed in other places, some mentioned in the “sources” section. Kvitko, like Levin, wrote books in rhyme for children, in addition to other works (Estraiikh 2010a). Levin and Kvitko were born almost a generation apart, as Kvitko was born around 1890. Levin was a socialist who lived in Poland at a time when publicly espousing leftist leanings was dangerous and was forced to stop teaching because of his political convictions. His books for small children are free from politics; his writings for older children and adults explore economic inequities. Kvitko was a Communist who had a successful though somewhat checkered career in the Soviet Union, despite writing works as blatantly favorable to the Communist government as *Akh, az ikh vel oysvaksn*. Kvitko was arrested in 1949 during the Stalinist purges, together with other Yiddish writers and members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, and executed on August 12, 1952, the “Night of the Murdered Poets” (Estraiikh 2010a).

Levin’s story *Yen ikh yel zayn a groyser* celebrates curiosity, adventure, and hope. It embodies a universalist spirit and is a prime example of Levin’s work. As is typical of his writing, Levin’s stories for young children are set in the world at large, rather than a specifically Jewish world (see Figure 8). For example, some of the farm stories mention or include illustrations of pigs, an animal which would not be found on a typical Jewish farm (Figure 7). *Feter shpeter* is one of the only stories with a specifically Jewish setting; it is clearly stated that the action takes place



Figure 7. Moyshe Levin, *A křigeray* (Barnyard brouhaha; Wilno, Farlag far křinder [Ber Sarin], Mac i syn, 1938), p. 4–5



**Figure 8.** Ber Sarin, *Ven ikh vel zayn a groyser* (When I grow up; Wilno: U. Margolis i S. Klaczko. Lit. N. Mac i Syn, 1937), p. 4–5 (left), p. 2 (right)

in a shtetl; this shtetl does not appear to be a completely safe environment, since Feter shpeter’s home is ransacked (see [Figure 5](#)).

*Makhn mir a mentsh fun shney* appears to be set in a shtetl, based on the illustrations and hints in the text, but the setting is not specifically stated. The other stories are universal, with almost no Jewish content, but, of course, Levin chose to write in Yiddish, a Jewish language. Additionally, the children in some of the stories have Jewish names, e.g., Moyshele, Nisele, Zisele, Itsele, and some of the people in the illustrations have what might be identified as a traditional Jewish appearance, such as Feter Shpeter who has a beard and wears a hat.

The illustrations in Levin’s books for young children are all his original drawings and are lively and vibrant. His work ranges in style from sketches and line drawings, primarily in a primitive folk style, to extremely detailed and sophisticated depictions, including modernist forms possibly influenced by cubism, constructivism, and social realism. He worked and published in both black and white and color. Further study by an art historian and comparison to the work of contemporary artists might yield more informed conclusions. The opinion of historian Lucy Dawidowicz, a native New Yorker who spent a year studying in Vilna in 1938, is relevant to this discussion. She went to an exhibit of a Yung-Vilne artist and commented:

The charcoal drawings that I saw had little individuality, most of them reflecting the combined influences of Käthe Kollwitz and socialist realism.

Where would artists with originality have come from? I knew that the development of the arts of drawing, painting, and architecture had been inhibited by the biblical injunction against making graven images. Unlike music, which for centuries had been integrated into religious worship, the plastic arts had hardly any place in Jewish life, except for the ornamentation one might find in the synagogue. Furthermore, what could one have expected, when Poland itself had such a weak artistic tradition? In Vilna, when people talked about the fine arts or music, they usually meant folk art and folk music. The nationalist movements that had swept Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century sparked interest in national cultural roots and everywhere national groups began digging up their native arts and crafts. The Jews had done that too and in Vilna the An-ski Museum, in the Kehillah building, consisted of historical ethnographic exhibits. [...]

Vilna had no resources for training and developing artists and art appreciation, nor did the Jews there have a sufficient tradition to build on [...] Nor did Vilna have the facilities, except perhaps through the elementary school, to foster appreciation of, and develop the taste for, the fine arts. (Dawidowicz 1989)

In light of Dawidowicz’s comments, particularly in regard to the weakness of both Polish and Jewish artistic traditions, Levin’s experimentation with different styles is noteworthy.

## ON RURAL AND URBAN CATS

Levin had an affinity for stories with cats, both in his work for young readers and his stories for older children. Levin’s cats are empathic, sympathetic beings, with the exception of the tomcat in *A mayse yegn mayzelekh yayse*, the only one of Levin’s stories which is not original. This tale is described as “*iberdertseylf*” in the Yiddish statement of responsibility, and “*mesupar*” in the Hebrew statement of responsibility, essentially a story which is “retold” or “as told by.” Levin’s story of mice on a farm who learn that looks can be deceiving is based on Aesop’s fable “The Cat, the

Rooster, and the Young Mouse,” where young mice mistake many different animals for the cat until they finally meet the real tomcat, the “murderer.” Even on a farm, life is precarious.



**Figure 9.** Ber Sarin, *Faryos hoř der hunř faynř di řats* (Why does the dog hate the cat?; Wilno: U. Margolis i S. Klaczko. Lit. N. Mac i Syn, 1937), p. 2

Perhaps during Levin’s life as a poor child in Vilna or while wandering during World War I, cats were part of his life, possibly a cat kept him warm, as the mother cat describes in *Di řats dertseylf*: she tells her kittens how she kept warm the children of a poor family she lived with during a cold winter in Vilna,

before the landlord evicted the family (and the cat) for non-payment of rent once winter turned into spring and the weather became a little warmer. Even the recalcitrant cat in *Faryos hoř der hunř faynř di řats*, who reneges on an agreement of friendship with the dog (Figure 9), can be



understood as a character who does not want or resists change and therefore does not want to move with the family, rather than as a disloyal friend. Perhaps this story alludes to the people on the move, as so many Jews were during the interwar years, frequently relocating from the countryside or small towns to urban areas.

One cat story explicitly describes the move between the city and the country. *Di kats oyf zumer-voynung* (The cat in the summer bungalow colony) tells the adventures of an urban cat family that rents a country home for the summer. The cats do not know how to behave, and at night, while the neighbors are asleep, the kittens hurt their new neighbors and damage their property. In the morning, when the kittens' misdeeds are brought to their mother's attention, the cat family makes amends and learns how to behave in the country. In this story, the country has rules of behavior that call for compromise, getting along with others, and ethical behavior, virtues which the cats may take back to the city with them. Once these rules are established and adhered to, many different types of animals can be civilized and live together in peace and harmony. The story may be an analogy for the ability of all sorts of people to live together, a theme in keeping with Levin's universalist philosophy.

Though not explicitly stated, when viewed as a body of work, Levin's stories reflect the life of many Jews between the two world wars: Jews still live in small towns or farms, attached to nature and animals, but many dream of seeing the bigger world, be it a circus, a city, or the world's wonders. Indeed, during the interwar period, many young Jews left home, especially when they lived in rural areas, to go to cities that generally offered more opportunities, such as employment or attending university, though the urban situation for Jews changed for the worse toward the end of the interwar period. In reality, the actual city was not a panacea, certainly not for the masses—many of Levin's stories set in Vilna describe the lives of impoverished Jews. Like the kittens in the story, children were sent to the country or camps run by philanthropic organizations for the summer to get proper nourishment and fresh air. *Di kats oyf zumer-voynung* (The cat in the summer bungalow colony) ends with the description of the kittens being as "fat and fit as tigers" when they return to the city after the summer, which was of course the desired result for the children who went to the country for the summer.

Levin's works for adults should be briefly noted in this context, though they are not the focus of this article. His stories for adults were written during the same period (late 1930s) as his children's books and share similar elements with his books for older children. The poor Jewish neighborhood of Vilna is the setting for many of these stories, which are examples of social realism. The stories depict the sights and smells of the streets of Jewish Vilna: Jewish glaziers, young intellectuals and teachers, merchants, storekeepers, relations with non-Jews, economic inequality and class differences, poverty and hunger, prostitution, pogroms, religious and generational gaps between parents and children, the ineffectual efforts of charitable and welfare organizations, relations with relatives in America, American films in Vilna movie theaters, and political convictions such as socialism and Zionism and their effects on people and communities. Most of the stories are serious, but despite the difficult topics and themes, some are humorous; they

bring Jewish Vilna of the 1930s to life (for an analysis of Levin's stories for adults, see Cammy 2004, 125–126). His best known work for adults, a collection of short stories entitled *Friling in keltershtub: noveln un humoreskes* (Spring in a basement apartment: short stories and humorous sketches), appeared as a book published by the press of B. Kletskin in Vilna in 1937.

One of the stories in this anthology is sinister and troubling, its realistic nature bringing to mind the horrific life experiences of Levin himself. In sharp contrast with Levin's stories for children, where cats and mice are frequently depicted as benevolent, sympathetic characters, in *Kats un moyz-shpil* (Cat and mouse game), both cats and mice take on menacing roles, and even mice turn into predators. The boss, Lazar Bik, depicted as a cat, is the well-off owner of a Vilna bindery who cruelly mistreats and abuses his young orphan apprentice Yisrolke, taken in from a Talmud Torah under false pretenses. Yisrolke is described as a petrified mouse that darts back and forth in constant fear of his cat boss, Bik. In an episode that rivals the rat scene in room 101 in George Orwell's *1984* (first published in 1949, years after Levin's), Bik forces Yisrolke into a small cellar full of mice and rats and closes the door on him. Yisrolke is terrified of the creatures, but usually he is able to hang onto a ladder to avoid them; however, on this occasion, Bik leaves him hanging much longer than usual and Yisrolke falls down into the cellar. The mice creep into his shirt and pants and bite him, and Yisrolke screams for his dead mother, and even for Bik.

## WORKS FOR OLDER CHILDREN

Between 1937 and 1939, three of Levin's works for older children were published as individual booklets by *Kinderfraynd* (Warsaw), the children's journal sponsored by TSYSHO (bibliography nos. 16–18; Bar-El 2006, 309–345, 473–474). These stories, unlike his tales for young children, were published under his real name, Moshe (Moyshe) Levin. In contrast to his works for young children, Levin's works for older children take place in an obviously Jewish milieu. They are set in impoverished Jewish neighborhoods in the city of Vilna, and realistically portray aspects of the day-to-day reality of life in Jewish Vilna. The stories mention social class more overtly than his works for young children, but these allusions are part of the setting of the story—and Levin knew how to tell a compelling story—and not simply propaganda vehicles. Although the stories depict poverty, they nonetheless end on hopeful or inspirational notes. In keeping with the leftist linguistic convention of the time, the stories for older children utilized the “naturalized” Yiddish spelling, in which words of Hebrew origin are spelled out phonetically, a process that facilitated reading them but negated the Hebraic origins of the words (Bar-El 2006, 313–314; Cammy 2004; Fishman 2011). The books for younger children employ both original Hebrew forms and phonetic forms for Hebrew words. The reason for this inconsistency is unknown.

*Der yazon* (The flower pot) is the story of a mother and son who go shopping for Passover, but since prices were skyrocketing they cannot afford to buy anything for the holiday other than a flower pot with an onion plant sold by a gentile. The onion plant, a sign of nature and growth, reminds the mother of her childhood, close to nature in a shtetl, and the green plant brings great joy to her city child, but it disturbs the father since it blocks out the light. By the end of the story, the reader fears that both the child and the onion plant are about to die; however, the child is only

dreaming, and the dying onion plant explains to the child that it will live again and go on to light up the lives of other poor children.

The holiday of Passover does not constitute a religious element in the story; rather, it is used as a calendar marker to describe a time of year and an economic situation. The family is not depicted actually celebrating the holiday in the story. Perhaps the mention of the high prices and inflation indicates that prices went up before the holiday or that holidays tempted poor families to spend beyond their means. This story is replete with symbolic possibilities, beyond the scope of this article.

*A denkmol baym taykhl* (A memorial at the river), a non-fiction work, is based on the true tragic story of Mieczyslaw Dordzik, a young Pole who drowned while rescuing a Jewish child, Chatskel Charmatz, from a flood in Vilna. Seven year old Chatskel lived in the poorest part of Vilna, and his mother had forbidden him to leave the house while she went to market to sell oranges. However, it was the first beautiful spring day after a long winter and Chatskel went to the Vilenka river, which was usually peaceful and idyllic, but on this fateful day melting snow caused the river to flood. The book describes how Dordzik's memorial was erected and honored by all of Vilna's inhabitants, despite differences of national, ethnic, and religious origin, an idealistic vision of humanity, a cause close to Levin's heart (Ran 1974, v. 2, 54; Szyk 1939). The book includes a photograph of the monument.

In *Di kats dertseylt*, a mother cat, who has the misfortune of being ginger-colored, tells her sad life story to her kittens and explains why she is terrified of being cast out of her current home, back into homelessness and poverty. Her tale describes Jewish neighborhoods in Vilna, and the young reader identifies with the mother cat that has lived with both poor and middle-class (merchant) families. The story ends on a happy note, when the cat's owners overcome the superstition that ginger-colored cats bring bad luck and let the mother cat remain together with her kittens. This story is illustrated by B. Gumener and is Levin's sole children's book that he did not illustrate himself.

## PUBLICATION HISTORY

Levin's books for young children were published in two groups. Eight titles were published simultaneously in April 1937, both in Yiddish and in Hebrew translation by Shelomoh Yahalom (see, for example, *A mayse vegn mayzelekh vayse*; [Figure 10](#)). A second collection of six titles was published in Yiddish in November 1937, though they bear a publication date of 1938. The lists of both sets of books in *Liṯerarishe bleter* (Literary leaves) do not note the physical number of books printed, but the print runs were probably limited.

The initial eight books (items 1–8 in the bibliography) were featured together in a listing in the *Naye bikher* (New books) column in *Liṯerarishe bleter* on April 16, 1937. This cultural weekly was published in Warsaw between 1924 and 1939.<sup>7</sup> After listing the books, the following note appears:

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<sup>7</sup> The periodical was digitized for the Jewish Historical Newspapers Project and is available at <http://web.nli.org.il/sites/JPress/English/Pages/Liṯerarishe.aspx>.

All these eight booklets were published in several colors with charming illustrations by the author. The publisher is indicated (Why Only in Polish?) on the last side [i.e. back cover]—U. Margolis and S. Klaczko. The same booklets, with the identical illustrations, were published in Hebrew, translated by Shelomoh Yahalom.

The publisher, U. Margolis and S. Klaczko, is something of a mystery. It is not mentioned in Leyzer Ran’s monumental work on Vilna, *Yerusholayim de-Lita* (1974), nor in a variety of web searches, other than in connection with Ber Sarin’s books. Perhaps, as indicated by Hersh Smolyar, the books were actually self-published, though a printer, N. Mac and Son, is also listed on the back cover of the books in addition to the publisher. An “S. Kliatsko” appears in a photograph of an anniversary book for printers in Vilna (Yoyvl-bukh 1936, 100), but it is not known if he is identical to S. Klaczko.



**Figure 10.** Ber Sarin, *A mayse vegn mayzelekh vayse* (A tale of little white mice; Wilno: U. Margolis i S. Klaczko. Lit. N. Mac I Syn, 1937), cover (right); and Hebrew translation (left) by Shelomoh Yahalom: *Ma’aseh be-akhbar ve-hatul akhzar* (The Jean Sorkin Moldovan Collection of Yeshiva University Museum, Gift of the Jesselson Family)

An unusual linguistic aspect of the publication history of Levin’s books in rhyme for children is that the eight Yiddish books published in 1937 were simultaneously published in Hebrew translation with identical illustrations, by the same publisher, U. Margolis and S. Klaczko, (items 1–8 in the bibliography). The Hebrew translations were all by Shelomoh Yahalom—a name which is unknown, as far as can be determined, in any other context, and may be a pseudonym. This dual language publication is worthy of note since Levin was not a Zionist and was quite committed to Yiddish, though some TSYSHO schools, including the school in Vilna, did teach Hebrew in addition to Yiddish (Zimmerman 2010). Current scholarship refers to the Hebrew translations of Levin’s works as “intended to encourage Hebrew knowledge in young children” (Goldstein 1995; Bar-El 2011). This certainly is correct and apparently the motivation for the Hebrew translations in 1937—to provide attractive Hebrew stories for beginners—but the contemporary liter-

ature does not mention that these books were originally in Yiddish. Further, four of the eight Hebrew books were translated into English by Shai Tzach in the 1990s and are currently available online (items 5–8 in bibliography).<sup>8</sup> The English translations were done as part of a volunteer project under the auspices of the Center for Jewish History (Tzach 2017).

Levin's next (and final) group of six Yiddish children's works was also listed in *Liṭerariṣhe bleṭer*, again in the *Naye bikher* (New books) column, on November 12, 1937, though the publication date provided for the books is 1938, and 1938 is the date printed on the books themselves. Copies of some of these books at the National Library of Israel display the date November 8, 1937 stamped on the back cover; it would appear that the books were indeed issued in 1937.

Four of these six books are similar in layout and style to the first group of books, published in April of the same year. Of the remaining books, one is written in a panel format, similar to a comic book, targeting slightly older readers: *Moyshеле=ḳoyshеле=ṽayn*, about Moyshеле's adventures with the circus. The other book, *Balmelokhes*—about children getting ready to go on a walk and all the craftspeople they meet as part of the preparation for the walk—is for young children. It is laid out in a shorter and wider format which differs from the other children's books.

This group of six books, (items 9–14 in the bibliography) was published by the Farlag far ḳinder (Children's press), which was the name Levin used for his own press, as indicated on the back cover of the books: "Wydawca [publisher]: Ber Sarin." These six books were printed by N. Mac and Son, the same printer as Levin's April 1937 books (items 1–8 in the bibliography). Unlike the earlier books, these were not issued simultaneously in Hebrew. As far as can be determined, they were the only books published by the Farlag far ḳinder (see one of them for example; Figure 11).

In Warsaw in 1958, Farlag Yidish bukh (Yiddish Book Press) published a collection of reprints of eight of Levin's children's stories as a memorial to him. The orthography in this reprint has been altered so that all words of Hebrew origin in the Yiddish text are spelled in the "naturalized form". This follows the pho-



**Figure 11.** Ber Sarin, *Feter shpeter* (Uncle Later the procrastinator; Wilno: Farlag far ḳinder [Ber Sarin], Mac i syn, 1938), front cover (right) and back cover (left)

<sup>8</sup> These four Hebrew books are part of The Jean Sorkin Moldovan Collection of Yeshiva University Museum, Gift of the Jesselson Family.

netic form, not the Hebrew orthography that was employed in the original 1930s books, sometimes—though not consistently—with vocalization (e.g. the Hebrew word for “animals”, *khayes* as pronounced in Yiddish, was represented in Hebrew orthography in the 1930s books as *hayot* and in Yiddish orthography in 1958 as *khayes*). In the 1958 edition, the illustrations are reproduced in muted two and three-tone color rather than the full color of the 1930s publications, and the original title pages are omitted. Farlag Yidish bukh was established in postwar Communist Poland in late 1947 and supported in part by the government and in part by annual subscribers. It published historical works and was the first to publish, in 1953, the letters of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, “the fighters for peace who have been sentenced to death,” under the title *Briv fun toyt n hoyz* (Letters from death row; Likhtenshteyn 1954, translated into several languages).

The 1958 reprint collection was edited by Levin’s friend and fellow partisan in the Minsk ghetto, Hersh Smolyar (1905–1993), who also wrote a biography and tribute to Levin in the introduction. Smolyar, an ardent Communist from Zambrow, Poland who was active in Jewish cultural organizations, moved to Warsaw after World War II and eventually relocated to Israel in 1971 (Beyder 2011, 266–267; Estraiikh 2010b, Fuks 1956–1981). He described his friend Levin and his days in the Minsk ghetto:

The writer Ber Sarin still had many, many stories to tell. I only heard some of them in the cramped rooms in the ghetto, in the time of Hitler’s dark night, he told them to his one and only beautiful, intelligent little daughter. We will never hear these stories again. They were killed together with their author, who could not write them down in the ghetto. His daughter also will not tell them. The brown murderers killed the child...

Only these few stories remain, which the publisher “Yidish bukh” is giving as a present to Jewish children. The memory of the good, kind, heroic Yiddish writer, who gave his life in the fight for his Jewish brothers and sisters, for all Jewish children, also remains with us. (Smolyar 1958)

## LEVIN’S BOOKS IN LIBRARIES

Today, few copies of Levin’s books for young children published in the 1930s are extant. They are held primarily by the YIVO Institute in New York, the National Library of Israel (NLI) in Jerusalem, and the Polish National Library in Warsaw; additionally, five of the Yiddish books are part of the collection at Musée d’art et d’histoire du Judaïsme, and four of the Hebrew translations are at the Yeshiva University Museum in New York. Another collection of Yiddish books, in the possession of Mrs. Fay Rachkovsky Berger (mother of author), sparked the interest of the author in Ber Sarin’s work.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Fay Rachkovsky Berger received the books as gifts from her father, Shalom Zvi Rachkovsky, a resident of Kovno (Kaunas) Lithuania, who sent them to her in Chicago, IL between 1939 and 1941, when she was a young child.

The books in that private collection, as well as many of the other copies examined, have the stamp of a Vilna bookseller and distributor, S. [Shelomoh] Funk, on the back cover. The Funk family had been book dealers for several generations in Vilna, and their store even served as a lending library frequented on Fridays by “workers and girls,” who came to borrow novels to read over the Sabbath (Lunski 1937). A letterhead from the 1930s indicates the variety of books and other goods sold by Funk in the store at 10 Rudnicka, and notes that discounts were available to schools and teachers (Ran 1974, v. 2, 345).

The copies of the books at the NLI were almost all donated by *Hevrat dorshe ha-Universitah ha-Ivrit bi-Yerushalayim, Varshah*, a society in Warsaw that supported the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, which officially opened in 1925. These books are in pristine condition and appear to have been given to NLI immediately upon publication in 1937–1938.

Levin did not fare well in library catalogs: in order to locate his works, a potential reader today needs to search for “Levin, Moshe[h],” “Lewin, Mojzesz,” “Levin, Moses,” “Lewin, M.,” “Levin, Moyshe,” “Ber Sarin,” “Ber Sorin,” “Sorin, Ber,” “Sarin, Ber,” “Ber Saryn,” “Saryn, Ber,” and variations using the first initial “B,” in library catalogs. Most libraries did not realize that Ber Sarin and Moyshe Levin were the same person. The digital age has given new life to some of his works and today some of them are accessible online (under variants of his name) and may be enjoyed and consulted by new generations of children and adults. Some of the variations are listed in the Virtual International Authority File.<sup>10</sup>

## AFTERWORD

Though the Levin family was killed, Ber Sarin’s memory lives on in his work. Despite his difficult childhood, he created works that brought joy to many children, both during his life and beyond. He had loyal and devoted friends, who ensured that his legacy would endure: Hersh Smolyar and Avrom Sutzkever (a colleague in Yung-Vilne), who both survived World War II. In 1962, Sutzkever republished Levin’s story, “*Shmulyes shtub fort avek (dertseylung)*,” (Shmulye’s home leaves town) together with a brief biography of Levin, in the Yiddish literary quarterly he founded, *Di goldene keyt* (The Golden Chain). The story was originally published in the 1938 *Almanakh fun yidishn liṭeraṭn un zshurnalistn-fareyn in Vilne*, 112–121 (Baker 2016; Wisse 2010; Cammy 2004, 126).

I hope this article will foster new interest in Levin’s oeuvre, including his literature for adults, and encourage study and comparison of his literary and artistic creations with works for children by other authors and artists, both well-known and unsung, who flourished during the interwar period.

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<sup>10</sup> See Levin’s page on Virtual International Authority File, at [https://viaf.org/viaf/21996998/#Lewin,\\_Mojzesz,\\_1907-1942](https://viaf.org/viaf/21996998/#Lewin,_Mojzesz,_1907-1942).

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## APPENDIX: BIBLIOGRAPHY OF MOYSHE LEVIN’S WRITINGS FOR CHILDREN

This bibliography is divided into Levin’s writings for young children and his writing for older children. Within each section, the works are arranged chronologically by year of publication, then alphabetically within each year. Dimensions of books provided when available.

### I. WORKS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN (UNDER THE PSEUDONYM OF BER SARIN)

**These eight books, all published in 1937, were featured together in a listing in the *Naye bikher* (New books) column in *Literarische bleter* on April 16, 1937. After the listing of the books, the following note appears: “These eight booklets were published in several colors with charming illustrations by the author. The publisher is indicated [in Polish] on the last page [i.e. back cover]—U. Margolis and S. Klaczko. The same booklets, with the identical illustrations, were published in Hebrew, translated by Shelomoh Yahalom.” In addition to Yiddish titles, printed in the original script, all eight Yiddish books include Romanized titles in Polish on the back covers.\***

1. *Dem feyer Mikhls bikhl* (Uncle Mikhl’s zoo book). Ber Sarin. *Tseykhenungen fun mehaber*. Wilno: U. Margolis i S. Klaczko. Lit. N. Mac i Syn, 1937. Added title on back cover: *Dem Fe-ter Michls Bichl*. 8 p., color cover, 4 p. black and white, 4 p. color illustrations, 16.5 × 12 cm.

דעם פעטער מיכלס ביכל. בער סארין. צייכענונגען פון מחבר.

*ha-Matanah shel ha-dod*. B. Sarin. *Tsiyure ha-mehaber*. ‘Ivrit: Shelomoh Yahalom. Wilno: U. Margolis i S. Klaczko. Lit. N. Mac i Syn, 1937. Title on back cover: *Hamatana szel hadod*. 8 p., color cover, 4 p. black and white, 4 p. color illustrations.

המתנה של הדוד. ב. סרין. ציורי המחבר. עברית: שלמה יהלום.

*A child receives a book from his uncle. The book has illustrations and descriptions of many animals. The animals live in a zoo which the child hopes to visit with his uncle.*

\* All eight Hebrew books have Hebrew titles, printed in the original script; seven of them include Romanized titles in Polish on their back cover.

2. *Epes vos mit di briln oyfzajn noz* (Father Nature with the glasses on his nose). Ber Sarin. *Tseykhenungen fun meḥaber*. Wilno: U. Margolis i S. Klaczko. Lit. N. Mac i Syn, 1937. Added title on back cover: *Epes vos mit di briln oyfzajn noz*. 8 p., color cover, 4 p. black and white, 4 p. color illustrations, 17 × 12.25 cm.

**עפעסוואס מיט די ברילן אויף זיין נאז.** בער סארין. צייכענונגען פון מחבר.

*Mashehu ha-sav*. B. Sarin. *Tsiyure ha-meḥaber*. 'Ivrit: Shelomoh Yahalom. Wilno: U. Margolis i S. Klaczko. Lit. N. Mac i Syn, 1937. Title on back cover: "*Maszeḥu*" *hasav*. 8 p., color cover, 4 p. black and white, 4 p. color illustrations.

**משהו הסב.** ב. סרין. ציורי המחבר. עברית: שלמה יהלום.

*Story of a mythical father Nature figure, who teaches bears to hibernate and birds to migrate south for the winter, among other natural phenomena.*

3. *Faryos hoṭ der hunt fajnt di kats* (Why does the dog hate the cat?). Ber Sarin. *Tseykhenungen fun meḥaber*. Wilno: U. Margolis i S. Klaczko. Lit. N. Mac i Syn, 1937. Added title on back cover: *Farvos hot der hunt fajnt di kac*. 8 p., color cover, 4 p. black and white, 4 p. color illustrations; 17 × 12 cm.

**פארוואס האט דער הונט פיינט די קאץ.** בער סארין. צייכענונגען פון מחבר.

*Madua' ha-kelev ko 'es 'al he-ḥatul*. B. Sarin. *Tsiyure ha-meḥaber*. 'Ivrit: Shelomoh Yahalom. Title on back cover: *Madua hakelew koes al hechatul*. 8 p., color cover, 4 p. black and white, 4 p. color illustrations. Wilno: U. Margolis i S. Klaczko. Lit. N. Mac i Syn, 1937.

**מדוע הכלב כועס על החתול.** ב. סרין. ציורי המחבר. עברית: שלמה יהלום.

*The dog and cat were the best of friends and even signed a contract of eternal friendship, until the owner of their house moved. The cat refused to leave without the mice, and the dog decreed it would never again befriend a cat. Includes illustrations and names / descriptions of several types of dogs.*

4. *Itsele meylekh der gikher pamelekh* (Itsele Meylekh, the speedy slow-poke). Ber Sarin. *Tseykhenungen fun meḥaber*. Wilno: U. Margolis i S. Klaczko. Lit. N. Mac i Syn, 1937. Added title on back cover: *Icele mejlech der gicher pamelech*. 8 p., color cover, 4 p. black and white, 4 p. color illustrations, 17 × 12 cm.

**איצעלע מיילעך דער גיכער פאמעלעך.** בער סארין. צייכענונגען פון מחבר.

*Bereli ḥiyer ḥopez* [i.e. *ḥofez*] *u-me'aher*. B. Sarin. *Tsiyure ha-meḥaber*. 'Ivrit: Shelomoh Yahalom. 8 p., color cover, 4 p. black and white, 4 p. color illustrations.

**ברלי חור חופז ומאחר.** ב. סרין. ציורי המחבר. עברית: שלמה יהלום.

*Itsele tries to do things quickly and be on time, but the more he rushes, the later he gets, since something always goes wrong. In the Hebrew book, the titular boy is named Bereli.*

5. *Makhn mir a menṣh fun shney* (We're making a snowman). Ber Sarin. *Tseykhenungen fun meḥaber*. Wilno: U. Margolis i S. Klaczko. Lit. N. Mac i Syn, 1937. Added title on back cover: *Machn mir a mencz fun sznej*. 8 p., color cover, 4 p. black and white, 4 p. color illustrations, 17 × 12.25 cm. Digitized book available at [http://search.cjh.org:1701/beta:C-JH\\_SCOPE:cjh\\_digitoool313899](http://search.cjh.org:1701/beta:C-JH_SCOPE:cjh_digitoool313899).

**מאכן מיר א מענטש פון שניי.** בער סארין. צייכענונגען פון מחבר.

*Ish-sheleg*. B. Sarin. *Tsiyure ha-meḥaber*. 'Ivrit: Shelomoh Yahalom. Wilno: U. Margolis i S. Klaczko. Lit. N. Mac i Syn, 1937. Title on back cover: *Isz-szeleg*. 8 p., color cover, 4 p. black and white, 4 p. color illustrations.

**איש-ש.ל.ג.** ב. סרין. ציורי המחבר. עברית: שלמה יהלום.

Translated into English from Hebrew by Shai Tzach as *Snow-Man*, available at <http://swf.digital.cjh.org:8080/new.html?pid=mm-1998.889.swf>.

*A group of children makes a snowman and they all play together. The children warn the snowman that if he gets warm, he will melt. One of the children lets the snowman into his house for the night to keep warm, but by the morning the snowman has melted into a puddle.*

6. *A mayse yegn mayzelekh yayse* (A tale of little white mice). *Iberdertseyłt un ilustrirt*, Ber Sarin. Wilno: U. Margolis i S. Klaczko. Lit. N. Mac I Syn, 1937. Added title on back cover: *A majse wegn majzelech wajse*. 8 p., color cover, 4 p. black and white, 4 p. color illustrations, 17 × 12 cm. Digitized book available at [http://search.cjh.org:1701/beta:CJH\\_SCOPE:cjh\\_digitoool313834](http://search.cjh.org:1701/beta:CJH_SCOPE:cjh_digitoool313834).

**א מייסע וועגן מייזעלעך ווייסע.** איבערדערציילט און אילוסטרירט, בער סארין.

*Ma'ašeh be-'akhbar ye-ḥatul akhzar*. B. Sarin. *Mesupar u-metsuyar me-et* B. Sarin. 'Ivrit: Shelomoh Yahalom. Wilno: U. Margolis i S. Klaczko. Lit. N. Mac i Syn, 1937. Title on back cover: *Maase b'achbar w'chatul achzar*. 8 p., color cover, 4 p. black and white, 4 p. color illustrations.

**מעשה בעכבר וחתול אכזר.** מסופר ומצויר מאת ב. סרין. עברית: שלמה יהלום.

Translated from Hebrew by Shai Tzach as *A Tale of a Mouse and Vicious Cat*, <http://swf.digital.cjh.org:8080/new.html?pid=mm-1998.891.swf>.

*A mother mouse tries to teach her baby mice to beware of cats. The mice are frightened and think every animal is a cat, until they meet a real cat and learn that looks can be deceiving. This story is a retelling of a known work, as indicated in the authorship statement on the book. Based on Aesop's fable, "The Cat, the Rooster, and the Young Mouse" (see at <http://www.storyit.com/Classics/Stories/catroostermouse.htm>).*

7. *Mu... mu... oṭ iz undzer ku* (Moo ... Moo ... this is our cow). Ber Sarin. *Tseykhenungen fun meḥaber*. Wilno: U. Margolis i S. Klaczko. Lit. N. Mac i Syn, 1937. Added title on back cover: *Mu... Mu... oṭ iz undzer ku*. 8 p., color cover, 4 p. black and white, 4 p. color illustrations,



16.75 × 12 cm. Digitized book available at [http://search.cjh.org:1701/beta:CJH\\_SCOPE:cjh\\_digitooll313411](http://search.cjh.org:1701/beta:CJH_SCOPE:cjh_digitooll313411).

**מו... מו... מו... איז אונדזער קו.** בער סארין. צייכענונגען פון מחבר.

*Mu... mu... ha-parah ba-'ahu.* B. Sarin. *Tsiyure ha-meḥaber.* 'Ivrit: Shelomoh Yahalom. Wilno: U. Margolis i S. Klaczko. Lit. N. Mac i Syn, 1937. Title on back cover: *Mu... Mu... Hapara baachu.* 8 p., color cover, 4 p. black and white, 4 p. color illustrations.

**מו... מו... הפרה באחו.** ב. סרין. ציורי המחבר. עברית: שלמה יהלום.

Translated into English from Hebrew by Shai Tzach as *The Cow in the Meadow*, <http://swf.digital.cjh.org:8080/new.html?pid=mm-1998.892.swf>.

*Story of life on a farm. Humans use products from farm animals—milk from cows and goats, eggs from hens, wool from sheep, and feathers from geese.*

8. *Ven ikh yel zayn a groyser (When I grow up).* Ber Sarin. *Tseykhenungen fun meḥaber.* Wilno: U. Margolis i S. Klaczko. Lit. N. Mac i Syn, 1937. Added title on back cover: *Wen ich wel zajn a grojser.* 8 p., color cover, 4 p. black and white, 4 p. color illustrations, 16.75 × 12 cm. Digitized book available at [http://search.cjh.org:1701/beta:CJH\\_SCOPE:cjh\\_digitooll313867](http://search.cjh.org:1701/beta:CJH_SCOPE:cjh_digitooll313867).

**ווען איך וועל זיין א גרויסער.** בער סארין. צייכענונגען פון מחבר.

*Keshe-ani ehyeh gadol.* B. Sarin. *Tsiyure ha-meḥaber.* 'Ivrit: Shelomoh Yahalom. Wilno: U. Margolis i S. Klaczko. Lit. N. Mac i syn, 1937. Title on back cover: *Ksze'ani eheje gadol.* 8 p., color cover, 4 p. black and white, 4 p. color illustrations.

**כשאני אהיה גדול.** ב. סרין. ציורי המחבר. עברית: שלמה יהלום.

Translated into English from Hebrew by Shai Tzach as *When I Grow Up*, <http://swf.digital.cjh.org:8080/new.html?pid=mm-1998.890.swf>.

*A child rides a toy broomstick horse and imagines the places he will go and the things he will see when he grows up and travels on a winged horse and how he will explore the world without any fear.*

### **Books with publication date 1938 [Published November 1937]**

9. *Balmelokhes (So, who sews socks?; literally: Craftspeople).* Ber Sarin. *Tseykhenungen fun meḥaber.* Wilno: Farlag far kinder [Ber Sarin], Lit. N. Mac i syn, 1938. Added title on back cover: *Batmeloches.* 8 p., color cover, 4 p. black and white, 4 p. color illustrations, 12.25 × 17.75 cm.

**באלמעלאכעס.** בער סארין. פארלאג פאר קינדער, ליט. נ. מאץ און זון, ווילנע 1938.

*Story of a brother and sister who want to go for a walk. The book describes the clothes they need and the people who make them. The children work with a tailor and seamstress, a hatter, a sock maker, a shoe maker, and so on, until they are ready to go outside.*

10. *Bebl bebl bob* (Beanie, beanie, bud). Ber Sarin. *Tseykhenungen fun mehaber*. Wilno: Farlag far kinder [Ber Sarin], Lit. N. Mac i syn, 1938. Added title on back cover: *Bebl bebl bob...* 8 p., color cover, 4 p. black and white, 4 p. color illustrations, 17.5 × 12.5 cm.

**בעבל בעבל באב.** בער סארין. צייכענונגען פון מחבר. ווילנע: פארלאג פאר קינדער, ליט. נ. מאץ און זון, 1938.

*Personification of a bean who escapes the cooking pot and lives to create a new bean plant; a depiction of the lifecycle of a bean.*

11. *Feter shpeter* (Uncle Later the procrastinator). Ber Sarin. *Tseykhenungen fun mehaber*. Wilno: Farlag far kinder [Ber Sarin], Lit. N. Mac i syn, 1938. Added title on back cover: *Feter Szpeter*. 8 p., color cover, 5 p. black and white, 3 p. color illustrations, 17.5 × 12.5 cm.

**פעטער שפעטער.** בער סארין. צייכענונגען פון מחבר. ווילנע: פארלאג פאר קינדער, ליט. נ. מאץ און זון, 1938.

*This book is set in a shtetl. The story of a man who procrastinates and is the laughingstock of the town because he always plans to do things but never actually does them until it is too late.*

12. *Kitsi un Murele* (Kitsi and Murele). Ber Sarin. *Tseykhenungen fun mehaber*. Wilno: Farlag far kinder [Ber Sarin], Lit. N. Mac i syn, 1938. Added title on back cover: *Kici un Murele*. 8 p., color cover, 8 p. color illustrations. Digitized book available at [http://search.cjh.org:1701/beta:CJH\\_SCOPE:cjh\\_digitool257221](http://search.cjh.org:1701/beta:CJH_SCOPE:cjh_digitool257221).

**קיצי און מורעלע.** בער סארין. צייכענונגען פון מחבר. ווילנע: פארלאג פאר קינדער, 1938.

*The story of two kitten sisters, Kitsi and Murele, who live a cozy life of leisure with their mother. Their mother tells them that they are growing up and must catch their own mice. They don't succeed—indeed the playful sisters just keep bumping into each other—and their mother reassures them that “all beginnings are difficult.”*

13. *A krigeraj* (Barnyard Brouhaha; literally: A quarrel). Ber Sarin. *Tseykhenungen fun mehaber*. Wilno: Farlag far kinder [Ber Sarin], Lit. N. Mac i syn, 1938. Added title on back cover: *A krigeraj*. 8 p. color cover, 4 p. black and white, 4 p. color illustrations, 17.5 × 12.5 cm.

**א קריגערײ.** צייכענונגען פון מחבר. ווילנע: פארלאג פאר קינדער, ליט. נ. מאץ און זון, 1938.

*A dispute among farm animals who quarrel over which animal is the most beautiful. Uproar ensues until the animals are fed, and the fight is forgotten.*

14. *Moyshеле=koyshele=yayn* (Little Moyshеле-Koyshele). Ber Sarin. *Tseykhenungen fun mehaber*. Wilno: Farlag far kinder [Ber Sarin], Lit. N. Mac i syn, 1938. Added title on back cover: *Mojszele Kojzele Wajn*. 8 p., color cover, 4 p. black and white, 4 p. color illustrations, 17 × 25 cm.

מוישעלע=קוישעלע=וויין. צייכענונגען פון מחבר. ווילנע: פארלאג פאר קינדער, 1938.

*This story is drawn in panels, similar to a comic strip, but without balloons for dialogue and is for slightly older readers than the other works written by Moyshe Levin using the pseudonym Ber Sarin. Moyshеле is a curious child, he wants to know who sits in the radio and how a car moves without horses, and he asks his parents many questions. The circus comes to town. Moyshеле does not have money for a ticket so he sneaks in. The owner tries to throw him out, but Moyshеле befriends the circus animals, who refuse to perform unless Moyshеле is allowed to stay. The owner lets Moyshеле sit in the best seat for the duration of the circus. When the circus finally leaves town, all the animals invite Moyshеле to visit them at their homes if he is ever in Africa or the Carpathian Mountains. Moyshеле is sad. The author says there will be another book with more of Moyshеле's adventures, but another book never appeared.*

## 1958 Reprints

15. *Kh'vel aykh dertseyln a mayse* (I'll tell you a story). Ber Saryn. Red. H. Smolyar. *Ilustrirt durkhn mehaber*. Varshe: Farlag Yidish Bukh, 1958. On verso of title page: *Opowiem wam bajke*. Ber Saryn. Ilustracje wykonai autor, B. Saryn. Warszawa: Idisz Buch, 1958. 80 p., color illustrations, 21 cm. Digital book available at <http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc212439/sarin-ber-kh-vel-aykh-dertseyln-a-mayse>.

כ'וועל אייך דערציילן א מייסע. בער סארין. אילוסטרירט דורכן מחבר, ב. סארין. רעד. ה. סמאליאר. ווארשע: פארלאג יידיש בוך.

*Biography of Ber Sarin by the volume's editor, Hersh Smolyar, on pages 3–8. Includes reprints of eight of Ber Sarin's stories from 1937 and 1938. The illustrations are reproduced in muted two- and three-tone color rather than the full color of the original publications, and the original title pages are omitted. The following stories are included: Epesynos miṭ di briln oyf zayn noz, A mayse yegn mayzelekh yayse, Ven ikh yel zayn a groyser, Makhn mir a mentsh fun shney, A krigeray, Feter shpeter, Bebl [Beb] bob, and Mu... mu... oṭ iz undzer ku. The orthography has been altered so that all words of Hebrew origin in the Yiddish text are spelled in the "naturalized form," spelled out phonetically, e.g. חיות vs. כאיעס [khayes=animals], whereas in the original books, published in 1937 and 1938 the original Hebrew form, sometimes vocalized, was generally, though not always, used. Includes an additional story in rhyme, with no illustrations, as the final one (pp. 73–80), entitled: Di ḳats oyf zumer-yoynung (The cat in the summer bungalow colony) about a cat family from the city which rents a bungalow for the summer, unintentionally harm their new neighbors, make up with their neighbors, repent, and learn how to behave in the country. It is not known if this piece was published previously.*

## II. WORKS FOR OLDER CHILDREN

### 1937

16. *A denkmol baym taykhl* (A memorial at the river). Moyshe Levin. Varshe: Kinderfraynd, numer 16, driṭer yorgang, [Serye] beyś, 1937. Added title: *A denkmol bajm tajchl*. M. Lewin. Warszawa: "Kinder-Frajnd," 1937. 16 p., photo, 20 cm. Digitized book available at <http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc204245/sorin-ber-a-denkmol-baym-taykhl>.

א דענקמאל ביים טייכל. מוישע לעווין. ווארשע: קינדערפריינד, נומער 16, 3טער יארגאנג, [סעריע] ב, 1937.

*A tragic story, based on the true story of Mieczyslaw Dordzik, a twelve-year old Polish boy who drowned while rescuing a Jewish boy, Chatskel Charmatz, from drowning in the Vilna flood of 1931, and the monument subsequently erected to Dordzik by Jews and non-Jews alike. The children of Vilna take great pride in this monument to another child. The background of the story is the difficult life of Chatskel Charmatz and his mother, set in a poor Jewish neighborhood in Vilna.*

### 1938

17. *Der vazon* (The flower pot). Moyshe Levin. Varshe: Kinderfraynd, number 1, [Serye] beyś, 1938. Added title: *Der Wazon*. M. Lewin. "Kinder-Frajnd," Warszawa, 1938. [15] p., 19 cm. Digitized book available at <http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc204246/levin-moyshe-der-vazon>.

דער וואזאן. מוישע לעווין. ווארשע: קינדערפריינד, נומער 1 [סעריע] ב, 1938.

*The life of a poor Jewish child in Vilna is brightened by the green leaves of an onion plant in a flower pot. The family's poverty is described in detail. The onion plant seems to die but promises the child that it will revive to brighten the lives of other poor children and their families.*

### 1939

18. *Di kats dertseylt* (The cat's tale). Moyshe Levin. *Ilustrirt*: B. Gumener. Varshe: Kinderfraynd, 39/1938, number 8, [Serye] beyś, 1939. Added title: *Kot opowiada*. 16 p., illustrations, 19 cm.

די קאץ דערציילט. משה לעווין. אילוסטרירט: ב. גומינער. ווארשע: פארלאג "קינדערפריינד," 1938/39, נומער 8, ב [סעריע] 1939.

*A mother cat tells her sad life story to her kittens and explains why she is worried that she will be thrown out of their home. Despite the superstition that a ginger-colored cat brings bad luck, her current owners realize that business has prospered since she came into their lives and decide they will let her stay and raise her kittens. The mother cat's tale is set in Jewish Vilna, where the cat wandered in the streets and from one poor or mean family to another, before finding her current home.*