

## On the Beginnings of Yiddish Children's Literature\*

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It may not surprise you that I am tempted to start my talk about children's literature with a personal recollection. Although, as it is easy to see, it was some time ago, I still remember vividly the joy caused by Mother bringing home books to read. They had unusual shapes and bright colors. One was cut in the shape of a squirrel colored burnt orange on a green background, with his enormous tail up in the air. Inside there were more pictures and some text printed in bold, black letters. We, my sister and I, were just beginning to read, and reading the story inside was as much fun as looking at the pictures. In later years I was told, not without some slight reproach, that one of my nasty habits was to wake up in the middle of the night and demand—without any consideration for the right of the adults to be left alone at that hour—some story-telling. This love of story-telling is, of course, common to children of all ages and all nations, and is the ground on which children's literature originates and grows.

The study of children's literature is a specialized field, equipped with its own professional tools: journals, monographs, bibliographies, academic departments, and encyclopedias. In the field of Yiddish, it is still, for one reason or another, largely unexplored territory. Until recently, the origins of Yiddish children's literature were counted from the year 1886, when Sholom Aleichem's famous story "Dos Meserl" (The Penknife) was first published. Professor Chone Shmeruk of The Hebrew University, a foremost authority on Yiddish letters, has both extended and shortened our perspective in that area. In a paper on "Sholom Aleichem and Yiddish Literature for Children" read at the 2nd International Conference for the Study of the Yiddish Language and Literature held in Oxford, July, 1983, he stated that a young reading public of Yiddish books already existed in the 16th through the 18th centuries, even though the genre of children's literature as such was not known at that time (Shmeruk, 1984). But quite a few books from this period carry on their title pages the note "for young and old," a phrase which should be taken quite literally. As a matter of fact, young audiences contributed to the growth of literature in Yiddish, as they could understand only books written in their



**Figure 1**

*Illustration by Issachar Ryback from Little Stories for Little Children by Miriam Margolin.*

mother tongue. This situation persisted almost to the end of the 19th century, the young readers having nothing else to read but books created a long time ago and meant primarily for adults.

A conscious effort to change this situation was made by the famous pair of innovators of modern Hebrew literature, the poet Chaim Nachman Bialik and his friend and collaborator Yehoshua Ravnitsky. In the eighteen-nineties, they started a series of Hebrew children's books entitled "Olam Katan" (Small World) and approached Sholom Aleichem about a translation of his story "Dos Meserl," which had not been originally written as a children's story. Sholom Aleichem started to work on a new Yiddish version of his story for the series, but it did not appear in its changed form until 1903, together with eight other stories subtitled "Mayses far Yidishe Kinder" (Stories for Jewish Children). It never appeared in the Hebrew series (Shmeruk, 1983). Sholom Aleichem's stories for children remain the most popular and beloved fare in Yiddish juvenile literature, although it is still debatable whether they can be considered children's stories in the proper sense of the word. The traumas of childhood in the conditions of 19th-century Jewish life in Eastern Europe are described in these stories

with such intensity of feeling and sharpness of observation that only an adult audience can do them full justice.

A great stimulus to the development of Yiddish juvenile literature came from the network of modern Yiddish schools that emerged in the second decade of our century. Several children's book publishing enterprises were launched in the major centers of Jewish educational activity—Warsaw, Kiev and Kishinev. But there still was not enough material to meet the growing need, and the initiators turned to a familiar solution—childhood recollections and adaptation of stories about children. A major contribution to the field was the use of the works of I. L. Peretz, another great figure of Yiddish letters. His collection entitled "Folkstimlekhe Geshikhtn," a masterpiece of Jewish neo-romanticism, was a stylized version of ancient legends and folk tales. The stories conveyed the feeling of a remote past, and presented folk heroes, touching in their simplicity and unflinching faith, revealing the miraculous ways in which God governs the world. In their adaptation for children, the stories became classic Jewish fairy tales.

By 1912, the field had developed to such an extent that it became visible and ready for critical appraisal. The appraisal came from

the pen of Shmuel Niger (1913), one of the most prominent figures in Yiddish literary criticism. He stated that the development of Yiddish children's literature is a national task of the greatest importance and urgency. Niger praised the accomplishments up to that point, while making the following interesting observation: the pervasive tone in Yiddish literature for children is somber, and even sad. What Jewish children need and what is the natural ingredient in children's literature of other nations is joy and sunshine. For lack of native joy and sunshine, Niger advised publishers (and authors) to increase the number of translations from other languages into Yiddish.

Luckily for us, the growth of Yiddish juvenile literature progressed so well that elements of joy and light no longer had to be imported. The first of our selections, *Yingl Tsingl Khvat*, by the great Yiddish poet Mani Leib (1986), is one of the earliest and best examples. Basically, the poem is a recollection of childhood, with the shtetl as background. The little town in Eastern Europe is such a familiar landscape in Yiddish literature. But in Mani Leib's work, the shtetl is transformed into an enchanted land, a land so distant and far away that it lies beyond the reach of contemporaneity. Nature created an ideal environment for it, and life in these surroundings is idyllic and peaceful. The two groups that inhabit it, the Jews and the gentiles, live—surprising as it may be—in great harmony with each other. The children are in the foreground of this idyllic world, and their joys and games are described by the author with uninhibited delight and gusto. The events around which the story is built are—fittingly enough for the little shtetl where nothing of importance can really happen—the change of seasons, specifically the transition from summer to winter. The personification of seasons is a popular motif in children's literature. They assume the shape and characteristics of human beings. The scintillating, brilliant, snow-white winter, the most striking feature of an East-European landscape, was perhaps one of the elements that Mani Leib, the transplanted poet, missed most in his new American environment. His poetic genius found for winter an unconventional, authentic personification, that of a little Jewish schoolboy. This little boy, distinguished by his courage, a virtue which sets him apart from other schoolboys, is rewarded for this with magic powers. He is suddenly transformed into a mythological hero, the personification of the mysteries and beauties of nature and the universe. The poetic genius of Mani Leib transformed not only the little Jewish schoolboy into a mythological hero, but also the spirit of Yiddish children's literature, fulfilling the Yiddish critic's wish,



Figure 2  
Illustration by El Lissitzky from *Yingl Tsingl Kvat* by Mani-Leib.

introducing into this literature the daring, the brilliance and the dreams of a modern, and—if you will—liberated imagination. For this accomplishment, Yiddish children's literature owes Mani Leib a lasting debt of gratitude. I will not dwell here on the other outstanding features of the book, the illustrations by El. Lissitzky (see Figure 2), as the artist and his work have become more and more famous. The YIVO library has just received a request from Harvard University for a list of all our holdings of Lissitzky's work, as the Harvard Museum is preparing the first retrospective exhibition on him.

The other book selected for reproduction, *Little Stories for Little Children*, by Miriam Margolin (1986), is very different from the first. The author of the stories is not a literary genius, but a competent educator who implemented the most advanced educational ideas of her times in her work. The stories are written with the utmost simplicity and directness, as if told by a very young child. The absence of the first person in the narrative is deliberate, since a child of that age has not yet developed a sense of self. He or she relates the events without any comment or expression of emotion, but the observation of events and behavior is educational in itself, as it increases the child's awareness of his surroundings. The

educational philosophy behind the stories is to stay close to the life experiences of the child and to introduce, very subtly and unobtrusively, the values of the new society: self-reliance and positive social behavior. The significance of the book lies also in its imprint. It was a government publication, issued by the Jewish Section of the Commissariat for Public Education for the use of the vast network of Yiddish schools functioning then in the Soviet Union. However, political coloration and propaganda, so very pronounced in later Soviet schoolbooks, are absent here. The early twenties were still a period of relative liberalism, and the book was apparently chosen for its purely educational, and perhaps even literary qualities.

Our selection of the book, however, was not primarily for historical reasons. Despite the distance of time and place, it is still an excellent book for the very young. Its appeal is in its simplicity, both in the narrative and the illustrations. In fact, the illustrations are, perhaps, the greatest attraction of the book (see Figure 1). The artist, Issachar Ber Ryback, played the primitive. His drawings have all the characteristics of a child's visual representation—no dimension of depth, distorted proportions and an arbitrary mixture of structural elements. What they do have is drama and expression, emphasizing

events and objects that strike the child's imagination, and showing how he reacts to them. But of course, the pictures are not child's play. They are the work of a mature artist who succeeds marvelously in conveying to the viewer the charm and naïveté of human beings at the very beginning of their ascent to humanity. And what amuses and pleases us even more is that the little creatures and their environment have a distinctly Jewish coloration, much more Jewish than the somewhat restrained narrative.

May I say in closing that if the YIVO's initiative in publishing these two books will stimulate a wider interest in this little-explored field, we will consider it an achievement.

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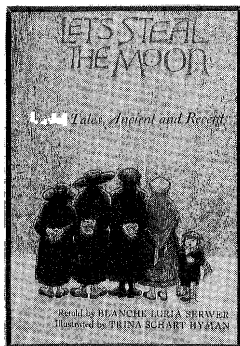
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\*Remarks at a celebration of the publication of two translations of Yiddish children's books from the YIVO Library, and of the receipt of a grant from New York State for the preservation of Yiddish children's literature on microfilm. The celebration was held at YIVO on January 8, 1987.

Dina Abramowicz, Head Librarian of YIVO, served as a children's librarian in Europe and has published extensively on Yiddish children's literature.

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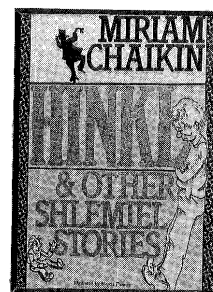
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