

POOR MATZA: SELECTED STORIES

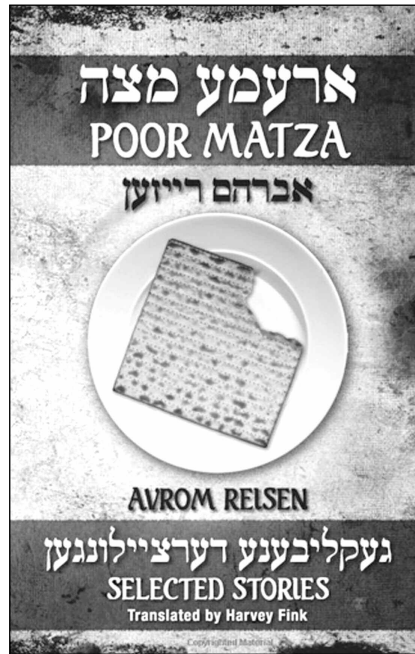
By Avrom Reizen. Translated from the Yiddish by Harvey Fink. Windshift Press, Bowser, BC, 2011. 234 pages.

Reviewed by Al Stein

For his third book of translations of Yiddish masters, Harvey Fink has chosen one of the great poets and short story writers, Avrom Reizen, whose prolific writing reflects the many social, economic and political changes that swept through Jewish life in Europe and North America during the tumultuous years of his lifetime, 1876—1953. Reizen also founded and edited many literary periodicals and anthologies in which the work of new generations of Yiddish poets and story writers from around the world were presented.

In all his work Reizen proclaimed Yiddish “as the national language of the Jewish people.” In 1905 he wrote in the prospectus to his new weekly *Dos Yidische Wort* (The Yiddish Word), “Yiddish is not just a means to educate the masses, but a goal in its own right, for it will also serve the Jewish intelligentsia, reflecting all the trends and aspirations of the wider world, so that the Jewish intellectual interested in higher questions will not have to resort to other literatures and languages which alienate him from the Jewish people.” In 1908, Reizen

AL STEIN is a member of the Peretz Centre and the Outlook Collective in Vancouver, where he pursues his interest in Yiddish culture and language. He appeared in our July/August issue with a review of Passionate Pioneers: The Story of Yiddish Secular Education in North America, 1910-1960.



played a leading role in organizing the historic Yiddish Language Conference in Czerowitz which proclaimed Yiddish a Jewish “national language” alongside Hebrew.

Reizen was above all else a *folkstimlekher* (for the ordinary people) writer, and the stories Fink chose to translate portray Reizen’s “deep sympathy with the common folk ... whom he lovingly embraces with all their strengths and shortcomings, neither preaching, judging nor condemning” (Fink’s introduction). Most of the thirty-five stories in this book have never before been translated into English. Some are monologues, some are vignettes, others are longer narratives. Some take place in the old-country, others in the new-country. “There is often little plot, but he is a master of the unspoken; his situations and language are fraught with suggestion, implication,

and echoes. Behind Reizen’s unsentimental treatment of the everyday there is a constant probing and searching for the humanity in ordinary human behaviour” (introduction). The last story in the book, “Days with Avrom Reizen,” was written by his friend and colleague, Moische Nadir, and published in 1933. Fink says of it, “There are few portraits of Reizen, the writer, as candid and fresh. It paints a picture of a good and thoroughly decent man, the modest Yiddish writer who during his lifetime was admired and loved as much by his intellectual peers as by his ordinary, working-class readers.” For some reason, Fink again chose not to include original dates of publication of these stories, although many of these dates appear in the original text.

In this book, Harvey Fink again demonstrates his gift as a translator from Yiddish, a gift that only a knowledgeable Yiddishist can hope to have. Fink’s translations are not always literal, and this will no doubt upset some Yiddish language purists. He takes liberties purposely to ensure that the nuances of Reizen’s observations and language are made fully accessible to the modern Jewish or non-Jewish reader. Fink further enhances the reader’s ability to appreciate these stories from life, but from another time, by providing footnotes for Yiddish and Hebrew words or phrases which are quoted verbatim, romanized, in the book, because they are untranslatable. Fink’s decision to do this is absolutely correct. When Reizen wrote these stories, Yiddish was the lingua franca of most of the Jewish population of Europe and North

THE OUTLOOK ON BOOKS

America, and these Jews would have understood the many references to the Torah, the Commentaries and to Orthodox liturgy and practice. Today, most Jews, the reviewer included, are no longer so familiar with this important part of their heritage. Fink's footnotes and glossary are essential to a full understanding of these stories.

Some of the stories reflect the growing emancipation of the younger generation and their increasing willingness to risk challenging authority, whether at home, inside the traditional Jewish community or within the surrounding non-Jewish community. The stories of Reisen, a socialist and humanist, portray the growing demand for social justice, the growth of Jewish socialist workers' organizations, and national political movements such as Zionism. Fink's translations of these stories faithfully reflect

Reisen's sympathetic, non-polemical, gently ironic and often humorous handling of the personal challenges faced by individuals in these turbulent times of cross-generational, cross-class and cross-cultural conflict. Fink says, "in his stories—like a painter with a few deft brush strokes—he depicts the lives of ordinary Jews, mothers, children, workers ... pious Jews and atheists, parvenus and poor folk." Reisen's Yiddishist cultural ideology, *mentshlekhkayt*, the imperative for genuine empathy, honesty and fairness in all human relations, underlies even the simplest, most self-evident of these stories, but always in a non-didactic way. The greedy, the dishonest and the wilfully ignorant and insensitive, who provoked outrage and vitriol in other authors such as Nadir, are negated by Reisen through the use of gentle irony and subtle humour.

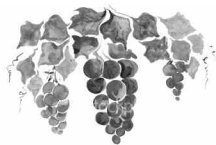
Fink's translations are particularly adept at transmitting these important aspects of Reisen's style.

Fink's short biographical introduction sets the stage wonderfully for an appreciation of the author and the enjoyment of stories that will not only carry you into the past, but more importantly, enliven your present. The Peretz Centre *Leyn Krayz* (reading circle) in Vancouver is currently reading and discussing these stories in Yiddish. The members greatly enjoy having Fink's translations and footnotes on hand for comparison and explanation. ♦

The book is available at the Peretz Centre in Vancouver (604-325-1812), or from Amazon.com.

See page 20-21 in this issue for a bilingual selection of Avrom Reisen's poetry. – Eds.

Greetings from Vancouver



*May the New Year
usher in a world at peace*



United Jewish People's Order
V a n c o u v e r , B C