

Under Alien Skies

By Andrew Firestone

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In 1949 when Yossel Birstein's volume of poems in Yiddish, *Unter Fremde Himlen (Under Alien Skies)* was published, Melbourne's Yiddish-speaking community greeted it with pride as a genuine homegrown product. For 29-year-old Birstein had arrived from Poland at sixteen, and had begun to publish poems in the local press while still a teenager, and his poetry instructor had been Melbourne's esteemed Yiddishist Jozef Gilgich. Now Birstein was working as the first paid secretary of the Carlton Kadimah Yiddish Cultural Centre, which launched his book.

I remember being shocked by how good Birstein's poems were when I came across them for the first time. It was 1996 and I was researching for a lecture at the Jewish Museum on the Yiddish poets of Melbourne. Birstein's short, lyrical prewar poems movingly describe a young newcomer's experience of alienation, and his sadness as he witnesses his own Yiddish culture dissolving away around him. (The poem given here, "a visitor on my doorstep", is a fine example.) The opening section of the book, though, is a poignant series of memorial poems for his parents and brother and sister murdered in Poland. Why had I never heard these fresh, powerfully moving verses about the war, recited at a Ghetto Commemoration? As I asked around about Birstein, I realised that his political allegiance had turned away those who could have introduced me to his work.

In his Polish provincial town of Biala Podlaska, Birstein had been a leader in the Zionist youth organization Hashomer Hatzair. He came to Australia in 1937, the eldest of four, and Reyzl, the next child, followed two years later—in the nick of time. Grandparents in Melbourne paid the fares and arranged their papers, and Birstein lived with them in the suburb of Carlton, which then resembled New York's Lower East Side, with as much Yiddish heard on the streets as English. On his arrival in Melbourne, Birstein worked in a clothing factory and began to write poems. He started the Kadimah Younger Set and was a member of the *Gezerd*, which supported the Soviet Union.

Many of his friends, Jewish and non-Jewish, belonged to a left-wing bohemian set of creative folk. Senior members were artists such as Noel Counihan and writers such as Judah Waten. One was the artist Yosl Bergner, who illustrated *Under Alien Skies*. He and Birstein had shipped out to Australia together, both sixteen years old and unaccompanied. Bergner

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Yossel Birstein and his wife Margaret in Paris, 1950, on their way to Israel.

remained Birstein's lifelong friend. His father, the famous Yiddish poet Melekh Ravitch, was then living in Melbourne. Pinkhas Goldhar, Melbourne's own Yiddish short-story writer, was an inspiration to Birstein. After Goldhar's untimely death, Birstein was instrumental as Kadimah secretary in the publication of his collected stories, possibly the most important Yiddish fiction to appear in Australia.

The war came and Birstein's parents, along with the two younger children, perished. Some of Birstein's strongest writing appears in the poignant series of fifteen memorial poems which open *Under Alien Skies*. Here Birstein makes his poetic response to the martyrdom of his family, and of other Jews of their Polish town of Biala Podlaska. He was 25 when he wrote most of these verses, in 1945.

Birstein married very young. For a short time he and his wife began learning Russian, in preparation for emigration to the "independent Jewish province" of Birobidzhan in the Soviet Union. However, after Israel came into being, they changed course: they were preparing for *aliyah* to a kibbutz when Birstein's book was published. The Kadimah gave Birstein an official sendoff "*bay gedekte tishn*" (banquet style), and well-wishers came to the wharf to see him and his family off.

In Israel, Birstein turned to prose, first in Yiddish, eventually in Hebrew. He died five years ago, in Jerusalem. Israelis remember Birstein warmly as a "slice-of-life" storyteller in Hebrew, due to a regular radio program he conducted in the 1970s. Thereafter, he only wrote one more poem.



Three years ago, while attending a Yiddish course in Tel Aviv, I became aware that Birstein's poetry is hard-

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Poems by Yossel Birstein

A visitor on my doorstep

I clean away the plenitude from my table,
remove my wellbeing, as if another's clothing.
A visitor is on my doorstep—
come to stay for ever, he's intending.

He sits down at the table by me, near,
to wait until these become my own:
the misfortunes of his body,
his sadness, and his fear
which lies hidden beneath his load of silence.

On bowed shoulders his head is firmly set,
and I can tell he waits for me to say:
I want to be humiliated like you,
like you I also want to be depressed.

I don't know if I tell him that or not,
but over me starts swaying low
the heavy fate of my father's lot
which my father too hid silently below.

It may be that my father—it is he,
this visitor seated by my side
silent, heavy and constricted, as if awaiting
my forgiveness for some wrong he's done.

But it could also be, the visitor is simply me,
and I'm beside myself, by sorrows overcome—
waiting for a word to rise in me
waiting, to tell myself something.

Translated by Leigh Fetter

At your fiery wedding

You would have been a virgin bride by now
with all the graces of the young and chaste.
Instead, Death snatched you to his side
and married you in haste.

Who was missing at the ball?
Everyone came; strangers, neighbours, all.
The devil danced a reel with the whole world,
with you—and all Israel in one.

How beautifully you danced; with flare, with flame.
Only our people can dance the same,
committing to the fire both body and heart.
Only our spirit and flesh know how to dance this part.

I alone did not turn up at all
to dance at your fiery wedding ball.

Translated by Beni Gothajner

ly known in Israel. I had recently completed a website devoted to translation of the Warsaw poet Yisroel Shtern, who died in the Warsaw Ghetto. There and then I decided to make my next project a website for Birstein's poetry, so that Israelis and Australians could get to know these fine poems. Once again the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation at Monash supported my project.

Birstein's widow Margaret in Jerusalem lent full support, and Yosl Bergner in Tel Aviv gave permission to display his drawings from the book. I assembled a team of English translators on three continents—much more easily, this second time around. All translations were checked for accuracy by me, with assistance from my Yiddish mentor Romek Mokotow. After some difficulty, a fine Hebrew translator was found as well, Hannah Galay of Tel Aviv.

I spent many hours systematically searching through Melbourne's Yiddish newspapers to uncover Birstein's publications there, and posted them on the site together with the book. Anyone with an interest in Yiddish poetry can study the development of Birstein's skills from his first published poem at nineteen, and can also follow the improvements he made to the poems for book publication.

Along the way I naturally satisfied my curiosity about Yossel Birstein the man, and this too, together with a photo gallery, found its way onto the site (to the delight of his relatives). His sister Rose Stone still lives here in Melbourne, and was of great assistance. An account generously provided by University of Melbourne researcher Dr. June Factor fills out Birstein's wartime experience in the 6th Employment Company.

What made Birstein a writer? He was a great reader as a youngster, as his teenage studio photo on the website shows. His sister Rose says his writing only began on the way to Australia—long letters home that their mother read aloud with great pleasure. He would certainly have been impressed by his friend Bergner's father, the leading Yiddish writer known by his pen-name, Melech Ravich. Ravich had been secretary of the Yiddish Writers' and Journalists' Union in Warsaw and for several years was a leading light in Yiddish culture in Melbourne. He was the founding principal of Melbourne's first Yiddish Sunday school.

Birstein and his sister Rose were the only members of their family to survive the war. *Unter Fremde Himlen* was dedicated to his murdered family and the first long sequence of poems was devoted to them.

I have examined the book's critical reception, in Australia and America. That initial sequence of rawly imagined Shoah poems was too much for the reviewers of 1949, Yankev Glatstein in N Y and I. I. Rapoport in Melbourne. They had their own losses and those of their readers to contend with. Incredible as it seems today, their reviews praised his work without giving any inkling of the success of his memorial poems.

I believe Birstein may have set out to match in verse the original Australian contribution of his mentor in prose, Pinkhas Goldhar. In this I think he succeeded, and if you visit www.YiddishPoetry.org, even if you don't read Yiddish you can still enjoy his work. Beni Gothajner in Melbourne has provided outstanding translations of the initial memorial series of poems, and some of the U.S.A.'s best Yiddish translators have ensured that nearly every poem has been translated. One of these, *Sings*, was set to music this year by Ben Nissenbaum in Melbourne. And, at last, one of his poems has been heard at a Warsaw Ghetto Commemoration. ♦