

Ida Maza

Canadian Yiddish Writer & Activist

By Rebecca Margolis

During the interwar blossoming of Yiddish letters, poet Ida Maza (Massey) was at the forefront of its Canadian branch, both as a writer and an activist. Today, however, her writing remains largely untranslated and thus inaccessible in an increasingly non-Yiddish reading world. This brief survey of her literary and cultural activity offers an introduction to a key figure in Canadian Jewish cultural achievement.

For a millennium, Yiddish language and its culture served as a portable civilization for the Jews of Ashkenaz in their migrations across Europe, and most recently, to Canada and other new centres of settlement. With the emergence of modern Yiddish culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that included a popular press, theatre, educational institutions, and a spectrum of ideological movements, Yiddish writing became an important expression of modern identity for Ashkenazi Jews. For many Eastern European Jews, speaking, reading and writing Yiddish became a primary marker of what it meant to be a Jew. This period was characterized by an international explosion of new movements in Yiddish culture, notably in the intersecting areas of literature, politics, and education.

In the Canadian context, the onset of mass immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe after 1900 transformed the existing Jewish community into one that was almost entirely Yiddish-speaking. This immigrant community created a variety of institutions that functioned in Yiddish to meet their needs in their new home, from synagogues and charitable organizations to unions. Across Canada, in particular in the cities of Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg, a group of Yiddish writers actively promoted literature in newspapers, schools, libraries, and literary clubs. The group included both major and minor writers, most of them recent immigrants who developed their literary careers in their adopted homes in Canada: H. M. Caiserman, N. J. Gotlib, Benjamin Katz, Mordkhe Miller, Sh. Nepom, Shabse Perl, B. G. Sack, J. I. Segal, M. M. Shaffir, A. Sh. Shknonikov, Sholem Shtern, H. Wolofsky, Yudika (Yudis Tsik), Yaacov Zipper, to name just a few. The hub of this activity during the interwar period was Montreal, with Ida Maza one of the most prominent figures in its dynamic Yiddish cultural community.

Born Ida Zhukovsky (1893-1962) in Ogli, a small town in Tsarist Belarus, Maza received a traditional Jewish education, and settled in Montreal with her

family at age 14. In her thirties, she began to devote herself to Yiddish literature, in particular poetry. With the encouragement of Canada's best-known Yiddish poet and journal editor, J. I. Segal, she made her literary debut in the *Kanade* literary journal in 1925 with a poem called "Zunen shtral" (Ray of Sun). This poem reads:¹

<i>a zamdik bergl,</i>	A sandy hill,
<i>a kleyner kval,</i>	a small spring,
<i>afn zamd a zunen shtral.</i>	on the sand a ray of sun.
<i>shmeterlingen flien,</i>	Butterflies flutter,
<i>shpringen,</i>	bounce,
<i>dreyen zikh arum in ringen;</i>	spin in circles;
<i>shimerim di kolirin</i>	the colours shimmer
<i>af di fligl fun di</i>	on the wings of the
<i>shmeterlingen.</i>	butterflies.
<i>yeder zemdl vi</i>	Every grain of sand like
<i>a diment</i>	a diamond
<i>shpiglt zikh in kval</i>	reflected in the spring.
<i>vi an oysgus fun .</i>	Like an outburst of
<i>kolirn</i>	colour
<i>shpreyt af alts</i>	spread over everything:
<i>der zunen shtral.</i>	the ray of sun.

This simple and elegant poem offers one of the recurring motifs in Maza's writing: a snapshot of nature's beauty. Like the modernist poets who influenced her, in particular New York's *Di Yunge* (the Young Ones), her poem captures a moment that is at once personal and universal.

Maza went on to publish widely in literary and children's journals, anthologies, and in book form. She appeared in the lavish groundbreaking anthology, *Yidishe dikhterins antologye* (Yiddish Women Poets, Chicago, 1928), edited by Detroit Yiddish poet Ezra Korman, which highlighted the contribution of some seventy women to Yiddish literature from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries. Korman featured a series of Maza's poems on family and motherhood, including one titled "Kinder" (Children) that opens:

<i>veynen kinder durkh</i>	Children cry through
<i>di nekht,</i>	the nights,
<i>un shlofn in</i>	sleeping in the
<i>frimorgn;</i>	morning's sun;
<i>vakhn mames</i>	mothers keep vigil during
<i>lange nekht,</i>	long nights,
<i>shlofn nit un zorgn.</i>	unsleeping, their worry
	has begun.

Universal themes of love, motherhood, family, and death intimately exposed and expressed recur

¹ All translations are by Rebecca Margolis, with cooperation from Deirdre Brown on "Vi blimelekh in regn."

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throughout Maza's published work. She went on to publish five books of poetry and prose. Her first, *A mame* (A Mother), appeared in 1931 after the death of her first son, followed by *Lider far kinder* (Poems for Children, 1938), *Naye lider* (New Poems, Montreal, 1941), and the posthumous *Dineh: autobiografishe dertseylung* (Dina: Autobiographical Story, 1970).

At the same time, Maza wrote widely for a readership of children and young adults. Her final volume of verse, *Vaksn mayne kinderlekh: muter un kinder-lider* (My Children Grow: Mothers' and Children's Poetry, 1954) contains selections of her many children's poems because, as Maza writes in her introduction to the volume, "children are the reason that I started writing. I wrote both my happy and my sad poetry to children." The volume contains work taken from her earlier books, children's journals as well as unpublished poetry. The opening poem, "*Vi blimelekh in regn*" (Like Little Flowers in the Rain) from which the book's title is taken, reads:

*orim iz mayn shtibele,
mit an altn dakh,
vaksn in im kinderlekh
kinderlekh a sakh.*

Humble is my little house,
its roof is very old,
but my children grow within,
children strong and bold.

*geyt in gas a regndl,
vert in shtibl nas—
loyfn mayne kinderlekh
shpiln zikh in gas.*

Rain falls softly in the street,
the damp invades my home,
and my children run out doors,
to play, jump and roam.

*geyt in gas a regndl,
geyt er zey antkegn—
vaksn mayne kinderlekh
vi blimelekh in regn.*

A little rain falls in the street,
it comes to entertain.
And I see my children grow,
like flowers in the rain.

This poem forms part of a wider tradition in modern Yiddish letters of writing for children, and linking education with literature. Many prominent writers worldwide were teachers in the vast network of Yiddish schools, or authored pedagogical materials. In the case of Montreal, Ida Maza was not alone. Both Sh. Dunskey, author of translations of biblical works into Yiddish (Midrash Rabbah, 1956-1973), and poet J. I. Segal were teachers in the Yiddish schools and authors of poetry and other reading material designated for children: Dunskey collaborated on a revised version of a history text based on the writings of Simon Dubnov called *Yidishe geshikhte in fragn un entfers* (Jewish History in Questions and Answers, 1935, 1939); a selection of Segal's poems for children that appeared in the daily *Keneder adler* (Canadian Jewish Eagle) were published posthumously under the title of *Lider far yidishe kinder* (Poems for Jewish Children, 1961).

Maza's poetic voice, with its intertwined intimate and universal themes, reflects the venture of modern Yiddish poetry as a whole. During the first half of the twentieth century, both in Eastern Europe and its immigrant centres, Yiddish poets were respected as community spokespeople. Many wrote for the popular Yiddish newspapers that were read by hundreds of thousands of readers, and were household names. In the world of Yiddish of the 1920s and 1930s culture and politics overlapped, as did literature and activism. Writers allied themselves with political movements, and

were closely involved with Jewish institutional life.

Like many Yiddish writers of her time, Maza was both an artist and an activist. She was active in local Yiddish cultural life, heading an informal "literary salon" beginning in the 1930s in her home in Montreal's Jewish quarter where local and visiting writers and poets would gather and share their work. Nicknamed "*di mame*" (the Mother), Maza nurtured a broad community of Yiddish writers. She opened her home to local authors and artists on a regular basis, fed them, and listened to their work. As Maza's son, Irving Massey, recalls in his book, *Identity and Community: Reflections on English, Yiddish, and French Literature in Canada* (1994), the family home on Esplanade Avenue hosted a constant stream of visitors seeking aid, advice, or simply dropping in. There Maza hosted and entertained the many international stars of the Yiddish world—poets, writers, actors, artists—who visited Montreal from New York and abroad. Regulars at the salon included an array of poets: J. I. Segal, Esther Segal, Gotlib, Shkolnikov, Perl, Shaffir, Yudika, New York's Kadya Molodovsky, alongside painter Louis Muhlsofck, and, in the 1940s and beyond, Melech Ravitch, Rokhl Korn and other refugees and survivors from Nazi Europe. Most concretely, Maza provided a second home to the many poets who had immigrated to Canada alone, worked in factories and lived lonely lives in rooming houses.

Maza played an important role mentoring emerging writers, and encouraging established ones. In her essay titled "Mrs. Maza's Salon" published in *Apartment Seven: Essays Selected and New* (1989), English-language writer and poet Miriam Waddington describes her family's regular visits to Montreal from Ottawa when she was a teenager and a budding poet in the 1930s. She recalls that Maza read her poetry as a 14-year-old with the same seriousness as she did the writing of the great Yiddish poets who gathered in her home. Waddington discusses the important role Maza played in the lives of her guests:

"To these artists, most of them middle-aged and impecunious, and all of them immigrants, Mrs. Maza was the eternal mother—the foodgiver and nourisher, the listener and solacer, the mediator between them and the world. There she would sit with hands folded in sleeves, her face brooding and meditative, listening intently with her body. As she listened she rocked back and forth, and, as it then seemed to me, she did so in time to the rhythm of the poem being read. She gave herself entirely and attentively to the poem; she fed the spiritual hunger and yearning of these oddly assorted Yiddish writers whenever they needed her."

The Maza home served as a clearinghouse of information as the Depression and War years progressed. It hosted a constant stream of visitors seeking aid, advice, or simply dropping in. During this time, Maza became personally involved in rescue work among Jews trapped in Nazi Europe. Along with fellow activists and Yiddish writers Hirsch Hershman and Melech Ravitch, Maza worked tirelessly to bring refugees and Holocaust survivors to Canada, and to help them get settled once they arrived. She was also instrumental in publishing

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the work of Yiddish authors, in particular of the group of writers who settled in Canada after the Holocaust.

Like so many Yiddish writers of her generation, Maza made her career as a writer in Canada in a

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ment of cross-cultural creation and of the various shades within the Klezmer and Jewish music world. Part of my agenda with Ashkenaz is to expand the mandate, to do more with other styles of Jewish music, and more cross-cultural creation.”

The 2008 Ashkenaz Festival will be the Bar Mitzvah year—thirteen years since the festival began. Next year also coincides with the 60th anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel, and Stein feels it is important to help bridge the gap between the Yiddish revival in Europe and North America and the traditional spurning of Yiddish culture in Israel.

“I myself haven’t identified that much with Israel until the last year or so, when I visited Israel. I never knew where to place it in my own identity and I’m still trying to figure

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minority language. To some extent, she had no choice: Yiddish was her creative language, and the tongue in which she was inspired to express herself artistically. At the same time, writing in Yiddish was a political statement, in particular after the destruction of so many of the world’s Yiddish speakers in the Holocaust: we are here, and we will continue to write in our Jewish

it out. I needed to go to Poland first, smell the air and touch the ground where my grandparents came from and that tells me where I come from, as sad and bitter as that history is for Jews in Eastern Europe. And now I’m at another stage where I ask myself, ‘How do I incorporate Israel into my identity?’ ”

Stein also feels the need to pull Israeli Yiddish culture into the Ashkenaz tent here in Canada, and abroad. “There’s a certain disconnect between Israel and Ashkenaz/Klezmer/Yiddish music on both sides. The whole history of Yiddish being depressed and cast away in Israel, the fact that Klezmer music died and the Yiddish language and culture kind of died for a time and it’s only in the last generation or two that there’s been a revival. It’s interesting the revival has been in Europe and North America. Israel still has a lot of ambivalence and ambiguity in its own attitude about Klezmer music and Yiddish culture in general, and that’s what I hope to be part of—a broader world-wide solution in terms of bridging that gap.”

Another bridge Stein has planned for the 2008 Ashkenaz Festival is welcoming Jews from the former Soviet Union, who are the fastest growing Jewish community in Toronto. “Jews from Central [and Eastern] Europe are still grappling with their own identities, still grappling with making a living; they’re still dealing with that immigrant experience. In some ways they’re still going through what my grandparents were going through seventy years ago. As far as the Klezmer music scene, and the Yiddish culture world, in many ways that’s the most dynamic magnet drawing this Jewish renaissance out.”

language that has been with us for a thousand years of exile.

Due in large part to the massive decline of Yiddish in the last fifty years, Yiddish writers like Maza are largely unknown outside select circles. It is my hope that Maza’s writing will enter the pantheon of recognized Canadian cultural figures as well as the canon of Canadian literature. ♦

Last year a concert featuring musicians from the former Soviet Union was so successful the Festival will be doing it again this year. “We’re bringing some Klezmer and Yiddish musicians from Israel—which is unusual in itself—to perform here. So it’s going to be a mix of Jews from the former Soviet Union and Jews from Israel, some of whom themselves are from the former Soviet Union.”

At the time Stein spoke to *Outlook* in early June, he had just returned from a Klezmer Heritage Cruise in Ukraine, from Kiev to Odessa via the Dnieper River.¹ Stein was surprised to visit Jewish communities of as many as forty or fifty thousand. “I didn’t know there were that many Jews left in that part of the world. It’s an amazing story of survival. A lot of the Jews who survived did so by fleeing to the East, and they went as far East as all the ‘Stans’—Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan—and then gradually migrated back westward and now they’re in Ukraine. It’s very different from Poland. I was expecting that Ukraine would be more like Poland, where there would be more of an echo, a shadow of what once was, but we were also meeting full communities that are growing.”

Stein feels privileged to be in a position to use his musical and history background to make others appreciate the Yiddish cultural identity that resonates so strongly for him. “My Master’s Degree was in history, so I’m a trained historian. A methodology that is similar to that of a historian has served me well in my approach to learning about playing this music and about the culture. It’s made me culturally and historically savvy, so I think it’s an asset and part of who I am.” ♦

¹ For more information on this cruise, see Marc and AC Dolgin’s article, “Seeking Our Roots in the Ukraine,” *Outlook* May/June 2006. —Eds