A Stroll through “Lover’s Lane”
by Aron Glantz-Leyelles
Translated from the Yiddish by Julian Levinson

“Lover’s Lane” is long, snake-like, rising and sinking into valleys, and it leads to a cemetery. I don’t mean this symbolically.

It’s a Jewish cemetery, piously planned, tended with care, and it carries the proud name of King David. All along a chain of hills — pine trees, oaks, birches: Pear branches murmured over silent tribes of Jews.

The tombstones, their names in gold and black outline — Tell of the lands from which they’ve come to die. How communities of Jews came from afar, and not all of them became fathers or grandfathers.

The trees converse over them — elegiac, ballad-like. You see a group in a corner — you hear strains of a new kaddish.

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Un derfrit tsi a bey-soymle, tsi do on simbolik.

Sia a yidisher bey-soymle, fs geplant un lb gekhovet, um er trog den sholoten nisn fun dem kinig dovid.

Rand arum a keyf fun berger — sones, dembes, bezes, Franse tayvyn roysn ibe ame yido-gezes.

Di matstoyts mit di nemen-gold in shvartse karbin — Zogn on, fun vil lender m’tsakmen shurban;

Vi es hobn zikh fun vont gefan yido-eides Un nisn ale zamen do gevuentes, rezdes.

Preplen bemeier ibe zey, elevn halashit, Zoss a gupe in a vinkl, herveyem kaddish.

poem that gets lost in translation). With the exception of the fourth stanza, every couplet rhymes a word from a different language source: a German word (“tohle”) rhymes with an international word (“symbolik”), a Latin word (“pulkhovets”) rhymes with the Hebrew name of Israel’s promissed king (“Dovid”), etc. The final lines even introduce a French word (“balaadik”) alongside a Hebrew word (“kaddish”).

The international content for the poem’s discourse is mirrored in the phrase about the various lands from which the Jews have come to die.

But Leyelles’s skillful act of selecting and combining words from different strains of Yiddish comes up against a limit. The poem’s English words: stand apart, set off by quotation marks and placed at the beginning, not the end, of the line. It is as though English is the one language that is unassimilable into Yiddish. Part of this, to be sure, is because English speaks in a tidy topology, while Yiddish has become a language of mourning. And yet this dichotomy is somewhat too strict for this poem. After all, there is a playfulness in the poem’s use of rhyming words, as we have seen. And the final line hints that something new and curious is astir, even among Yiddish speakers. We might ask what this “new Kaddish” is that is heard at the end of Leyelles’ poem? Could it possibly be something like this poem itself? To write a subtle, demanding poem in Yiddish in 1937 was, after all, an act of faith, an affirmation that the language of the Jewish diaspora could still matter to someone, somehow. — Julian Levinson

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