

New Yiddish Library

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S E R I E S E D I T O R : D A V I D G . R O S K I E S

*The
Glatstein
Chronicles*

JACOB GLATSTEIN

EDITED AND WITH AN

INTRODUCTION BY RUTH WISSE

TRANSLATED BY MAIER DESHELL

AND NORBERT GUTERMAN



NEW HAVEN AND LONDON

THE GLATSTEIN CHRONICLES

By Jacob Glatstein,
translated by Maier Deshell and Norbert Guterman
Edited by and with an Introduction by Ruth Wisse

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Lublin, 1913. Jacob Glatstein (kneeling) with two of his friends:
Rottenberg (standing), a young poet later killed by the Nazis, and
Abraham Zimmerman (sitting), one of the early translators of
Western literature in Yiddish.

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◆◆◆ Introduction

RUTH R. WISSE

In June 1934, twenty years after he had arrived solo in New York City, Jacob Glatstein was summoned back by the family to the bedside of his dying mother in Lublin. Had he not been called for, it is unlikely that he would ever have returned to his birthplace. Glatstein at thirty-seven was then in the “middle of life’s journey”—precisely in the middle as it later turned out—married and the father of three children, employed in the editorial and news departments of the Yiddish daily *Morgn Zhurnal*, and hotly involved in Yiddish literary initiatives. First and foremost a poet, a Yiddish modernist with a growing reputation, he was at work on his fourth book of verse. Even less conducive to a transatlantic crossing than his personal circumstances was the turbulent international climate. With Hitler newly installed as chancellor of Germany and anti-Semitism on the rise in Poland, Jews were frantically trying to get out of Europe rather than in.

The voyage turned Glatstein prophetic. Initially buoyed by his release from daily routine, he became increasingly aware at every stage of his trip of the political drift of Europe toward fascism, communism, and anti-Semitism. By the time he returned to the United States, he had assumed responsibility for the Jews trapped on the Continent. For the next four years he sounded the alarm in a weekly newspaper column that warned alike against Hitler and Stalin and against the polit-

ical apathy of Western democracies that allowed murderous regimes to prevail. “Who is crazier,” he asked in August 1935, “the maniac Hitler driving the 600,000 Jews of Germany to their death at 90 miles an hour or the impassive bystanders watching it happen?” Why were American Jews silent in the face of mounting anti-Jewish attacks in Poland? He hammered at Soviet Russia’s repression of freedoms; the Arab pogroms against Jews in Palestine disturbed him all the more because Joseph Stalin hailed them as part of a Communist Revolution. With the nations engaged in constant swordplay over Jewish heads, he wrote, “the Yiddish writer feels like a strategist maneuvering invisible armies in legendary lands. No one has chosen him, yet he speaks into the wasteland where he hears only the echo of his own voice.”¹

Glatstein had always emphasized the subjectivity of poetry. No less subjectively, he now registered the growing threat. What became his most famous poem, “Good Night, World” (dated April 1938, in response to pogroms in Poland), slammed the door on the “big, stinking world” and made its way back to the twisted ghetto streets in an emotional-intellectual tangle of pride, sorrow, anger, regret, resolve, and dread. “Wagons,” a much softer lyric of the same year, sounded “bells of silence” for a community of Jews approaching its final hour. More than death, each member fears to remain alone in a world without fellow Jews. Glatstein found multiple ways, through lyrical wit and transparent paradox, to express the ironies of a private sensibility that is nonetheless subject to the common Jewish fate.

The most obvious literary outcome of the journey home was the book before us—the fictionalized personal account of a Yiddish writer who returns to Poland in 1934. Apparently conceived as a trilogy, this project was begun shortly after Glatstein returned to New York. The first installment appeared in the little magazine *Inzikh* (In the self) in 1934, and the book *Ven yash iz geforn* (When Yash set out) was published three years later. The second volume, *Ven yash iz gekumen* (When Yash arrived), appeared in installments in the New York weekly *Yidisher Kemfer* and as a book in 1940. A 1943 collection of Glatstein’s poems announced that the final volume of the trilogy was about to appear under the title *Ven Yash iz tsurikgekumen* (When Yash returned). But only a couple of fragments of that intended book ever surfaced,

turning the missing third volume into the unresolved conclusion of the project. The “Yash” scheme was conceived as filial homage to Polish Jews and did not survive their destruction.

The narrator Yash, bearing the nickname of the author, is the central figure and consciousness of the two books. Though his name appeared only in the Yiddish titles, whatever we are told about him in the book corresponds to what we know about the life of Jacob Glatstein. In fact, we learn more about the author from these novels than from any other autobiographical source—about his childhood, family, voyage to America, early difficulties of adjustment to the new language and surroundings, and the various jobs that supported him as he wrote poetry. There are no apparent discrepancies between the author’s biography and the parts of it he discloses here. Which is not to say that any great intimacies are revealed: as Glatstein told an interviewer in 1955, he did not feel comfortable with personal disclosures except through the veil of poetry, and could not write about himself, “or about my loves or about my non-loves—feelings about my wife or a beloved and things of that sort.” Long after they had abandoned religious observance, the virtues of modesty inculcated by Judaism continued to influence most Yiddish writers, Glatstein emphatically among them. He supplies in these books only the kind of information about himself that conforms to the scheme of his literary voyage. Future biographers still have their work cut out for them.

The community register of Lublin, Poland, then under tsarist administration, records the birth of three Glatzstejns in 1896. The one who concerns us here was the son born to Icek (Isaac), aged thirty, and his wife, Ita Ruchla, born Jungman, aged thirty-two, on August 7 (or 19th, according to the Julian calendar still in use under the tsarist regime).² Yankev, Yankele, Yash, or, in English, Jacob, considered himself fortunate to have been born into a traditional family—his maternal ancestors were rabbis. He received a traditional religious education with incremental exposure to secular subjects as he matured. Raised in the shadow of the nearby Lublin fortress and prison, Jacob experienced the roiling political conflicts around him from inside a large, cohesive, and supportive clan. The paternal Glatzstejn (Glatshteyn) tribe of seven brothers accounted for a large part of the boy’s education. One uncle

ran the religious cheder the boy attended in the equivalent of third grade. A second uncle, a tailor, introduced him to secular literature, and a third was cantor of Lublin's largest synagogue. Following in their father's footsteps, his two male cousins became choral directors and composers, while he himself developed a vital attachment to music. His interest in literature he attributed to his father, who sold ready-to-wear clothing for a living but encouraged his son to read the latest Yiddish and Hebrew publications in the hope that the boy would become a writer.

Literature was a popular sport in the Russia and Poland of Glatstein's youth, and disproportionately so among Jewish youth, for whom many other competitive avenues were blocked. In describing his high school education at the Krinski Commercial School, the author underscores how futile it felt to prepare for professions from which Jews would be barred, and how much cheerier it was to spend the time in autonomous artistic and literary pursuits. Glatstein said he could not remember a time when he was not writing. His friends debated the merits of writers the way Americans did baseball greats. Relaxation of tsarist censorship after the abortive revolution of 1905, though only partial as compared with the liberties enjoyed in Vienna or New York, encouraged an explosion of talent in journalism, belles lettres, theater, music, painting and sculpture, secular scholarship, popular entertainment, and politics. From early boyhood, Jacob accompanied his grandfather on his visits to Warsaw, the cultural hub of Polish Jewry, and by his early teens, on his own, he made the obligatory pilgrimage of every aspiring writer to the Yiddish "master," Yitzhak Leybush Peretz. One of Glatstein's early stories was apparently accepted though never published by the mass-circulation Warsaw Yiddish daily *Fraynd* (Friend). Had he remained in Poland, he would probably have moved to Warsaw to join one of its burgeoning literary and intellectual circles.

As it happens, however, the family member who proved most decisive in Glatstein's life was the youngest uncle who had moved to New York. Polish nationalism, with its intolerant by-product anti-Semitism, persuaded Glatstein's parents to let him join that uncle very shortly before the outbreak of World War I. When he arrived at what was then the most crowded place on earth, his local relative could not leave his job

in a cigarette factory to meet his ship. It took the eighteen-year-old some time to find his footing. While trading in one unsuitable day job for another, he attended night school, first to learn English and then to study law.

And yet New York was not altogether alien. With its critical mass of unsettled youth, the Lower East Side offered Glatstein the same kinds of literary opportunities he had found in Lublin and Warsaw. Yiddish, the common language of several million immigrants, generated newspapers, theater companies, publishing houses, humor magazines, a music industry, and an aspiring high literary culture. By the time he joined it, the local Yiddish literary community had already produced two literary “generations”—the so-called Sweatshop Poets of the turn of the century and the *Yunge*, the breakaway literary “youth,” who emphasized their greater aestheticism, inwardness, and preference for quietude to socially relevant verse. World War I accelerated the independence of the immigrant community from its European origins, to the point that after the war cultural influences began flowing from the new world to the old.

Once Glatstein had started law school and saw that he *could* become an American lawyer, he realized that he did not want to, gave it up, and threw in his lot with Yiddish literature. Together with another law school dropout, Nahum Borukh Minkoff, and Aaron (Glants) Leyeles, he launched a new poetry “movement” called *Inzikh* through a manifesto and accompanying anthology of verse that demonstrated aspects of their theory in practice. As its name suggests, *Inzikhizm* or Introspectivism—the third indigenous Yiddish poetry “movement” in America—insisted that poetry filter everything through the prism of self, which, in turn, mandated the use of free verse so that every new poem could emerge in the rhythm appropriate to its subject and creator. “The world exists and we are part of it. But for us, the world exists only as it is mirrored in us, as it touches *us*. . . . It becomes an actuality only *in us* and *through us*.”³ The signatories declined to write on Jewish subjects or in a Jewish style simply because they composed in a Jewish language, or to use the accepted Hebraic spelling for words of Hebrew derivation.

Glatstein’s first book, *Yankev Glatshteyn*, published almost simulta-

neously with the *Inzikh* manifesto of 1920, demonstrates some of the consequences of this insurgent spirit.

Lately there is no trace left
of Yankl son of Yitzhok [a traditional form of his name]
but for a tiny round dot
tumbling dazedly through the streets
with limbs clumsily attached.

The violence of the age has done violence to the person he was. That tiny dot from the first letter of Glatstein's name alludes to "dos pintele yid," the distilled Jewish essence of the young man who felt himself exploded into fragments. The new poetry expressed the sensations of an immigrant whose language is all that remains of his formative world. But by reverse inference, fragments of Yiddish could also create a new cultural homestead. Disconnected letters, after all, do join together to form meaningful, complete poems. Glatstein was able in one of his poems to summon up a Jewish childhood through the mere syllables of Yiddish nursery speech, and in another to evoke the sweetness of Torah study through the remembered translation of a word from the Song of Songs.

The unsettling freedom of America comes across in the poetry, prose, and journalism that Glatstein wrote over the next fourteen years. Many a poem seems to be inspired less by a strong emotion, observation, or incident than by an exotic word, such as *Brahma*, *Sesame*, *Sheeny* (pejorative for Jew), or the random sounds of *Tsela-tseldi* that the poet is eager to try out in Yiddish. The term *experimentation* hardly suffices to describe the many subjects that Glatstein addresses, the poses he adopts, and the poetic variations he attempts. Unlike his Yiddish contemporaries and predecessors who were raised mostly on Russian, Polish, and German literatures, Glatstein also read Anglo-American literature, including T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce—expatriates like himself, who rendered the disintegration of their inherited traditions as masterworks of wasteland and exile. In a short essay, "If Joyce Wrote Yiddish," Glatstein demonstrates how playfully a Yiddish poet could write ultramodernist prose, by using the perceived breakup of his native language to reinvent it in new combinations.

Opportunities and liabilities of Yiddish writing in America were one and the same. Though only decades removed from what scholars marked as its “beginnings” in tsarist Russia in the 1860s, modern Yiddish literature was already dispersed with its speakers to Argentina and Australia, emerging under political conditions as diverse as Bolshevik Russia and British-ruled Palestine. Never before in history had more than ten million Jews communicated in the same language: to be part of Yiddish literature meant staying abreast of developments all over the world and reaching a potential readership from Berdichev to Buenos Aires. Migration and travel became prominent subjects. Yet the same freedoms that allowed Jews to write as they pleased in Yiddish encouraged most of their fellow Jews to start using the languages of their adopted lands, or at least to ensure that their children learned languages of opportunity and professional advancement. Had he been just a little younger when he arrived in New York, Glatstein himself might have written in English, joining a literary community with more American-centered concerns. For a writer, language is fate—his raw material at one end of the creative process and his marketplace on the other.⁴ Glatstein came to understand that his fate as a Yiddish poet, in a Jewish language, was indivisible from that of its speakers.

The Glatstein chronicles stretch like a tightrope across a chasm. Book One, “Homeward Bound,” opens as the poet sets out for his native city and ends with the train conductor’s call for “Lublin!” Book Two, “Homecoming at Twilight,” picks up the hero as he recuperates from his mother’s funeral at a Polish Jewish hotel and ends with his impending return to America. Missing in between is the action that was the ostensible purpose of the trip. Where is the reunion with father and sister? Where is the pivotal deathbed scene? While we readers experience nothing like the narrator’s bereavement, we lament the absence of the homecoming we anticipated but are destined never to know. The curtain remains drawn over the encounter between son and parents that was to have been the central “event.” Instead, the *before* and *after* Yash chronicles frame the eclipse of his entire formative world. It is likely that Glatstein intended to feature the reunion with his dying mother as the centerpiece of the concluding volume, which

would have dealt with his return to America. In lieu of Book Three he wrote a cascade of poems that wrestle with a catastrophe dwarfing the “natural” death of a parent. When Glatstein’s father, brother, and family were murdered along with the rest of Polish Jewry, he evidently could not follow his intended literary scheme.

Yash begins his outbound journey in high spirits, delighted to be sprung from his daily routine. Pleasantly surprised by the fluency of his acquired English, he discovers that he is a consummate cosmopolitan, able to converse with passengers in Yiddish, Russian, German, and Polish, and, when necessary, to identify some sentences in Danish. As a professional newspaperman, he is curious about everything from the Sovietization of Russia to economic conditions in Chile, and as a student of the human heart, he is interested in the personal stories that flesh out the historical moment. Among the people he meets are a Schenectady socialist, a Jewish prizefighter, a socialite physician, a Wisconsin schoolteacher, members of a college student band, a pianist, and a painter. One of the passengers tells him, “You’re such a great listener, you have golden ears. Your ears are worth a million dollars.” This echoes what Glatstein wrote in one of his essays, “I have always liked human ears. I mean ears that can truly listen to someone else.” Those golden ears are the reason Yash transcribes many more aural than visual impressions, many more conversations than painterly scenes. He reports on encounters during the stopover in Paris and the train ride across Hitler’s Germany to Poland, encounters that convey the darkening mood of the continent.

But unlike the travelogue it otherwise resembles, this book moves simultaneously into the personal interior. On his first night at sea, rocking to sleep in his cabin, Yash is reminded of Fishl-Dovid, the over-anxious hero in a story by Sholem Aleichem who is trying to make it home to his wife and children in time for the Passover holiday.⁵ Fishl-Dovid has reason to worry, being rowed by a sadistic Gentile boatman across a thawing river. This momentary association discloses the world of Sholem Aleichem beneath the modernism of Jacob Glatstein, the nervous East European Jew who is embodied in the confident American, and the autobiographical impulse embedded in the reportage. The counterpoint between inner and outer voyages, past and present, liter-

ary inheritance and creative potential, continues from this point on. Memory interrupts and enhances the passenger's experience of the world; experiences trigger memory and self-understanding.

The book may be better described in musical terms than in categories of plot, characters, and dramatic action. No sooner does the ship leave the dock than the narrator feels himself subject to "marine law," whose function he had failed to appreciate when he was studying it in law school. The special qualities he attributes to life at sea are those of his prose: "Footsteps lighten, manners soften, voices lilt." People suspended at sea move gently, allowing for slower-paced narration. Whereas many a novelist uses a travel conveyance to heighten dramatic tension among strangers forcibly held together over a limited time, Glatstein relaxes the tempo and loosens the tension to allow for more genuine and prolonged encounter and reflection. The book's many allusions to music invite us to consider it in symphonic terms. Young and old, Jew and Gentile, European and American, male and female, coarse and genteel—the narrator arranges inharmonious voices so as to ensure that they do not drown one another out. The pulsating memories of the homebound Jew in troubled waters are like the solo instrument in this rich symphonic composition.

In boarding the ship, Yash has hoped to leave the newsroom and everyday life behind. "Maybe here I might succeed in ridding myself of the miasmas that had accrued to my being as a social animal, as a writer-for-hire, as Jew in a bloody world that—*pace* Shakespeare—demands only *my* pound of flesh." It is not to be. On the second day at sea, the ship's bulletin carries the news that Hitler has conducted a massive purge of the Nazi storm troopers (*Sturmabteilung*, or SA) and their leader Ernst Rohm. This would make it June 30, 1934. The news report suddenly sets Yash apart from the other Americans and Europeans he has been hobnobbing with and sends him in search of fellow Jews who will understand the menace to their tribe. Several days later, during his stopover in Paris, he learns of the death of the Hebrew poet Haim Nahman Bialik (July 4, 1934), who has provided the strongest spur and challenge to his career as a Yiddish poet. Thus, along with the travel encounters and the recovered memories, the third rail of the book is history-in-the-making—conveying the high voltage of the here and now.

Reviewing the first Yash volume shortly after its appearance, the not yet famous Isaac Bashevis Singer was dismayed by the absence of incident (“Jules Verne would not have wasted ten lines on a journey so bereft of adventure or romance”) and by the book’s apparently random organization (“At one point he lets his characters speak, and then, on a whim, he tells his own autobiography”).⁶ Adept at racy storytelling, Bashevis Singer failed to appreciate Glatstein’s thematic approach to composition. The third chapter, for example, introduces a collection of Russians returning to the Soviet Union who try to impress Yash with the advanced state of their society. Expansive in the Slavic manner yet carefully toeing the Soviet line, they provide a truer composite picture of the USSR than the *New York Times* correspondent Walter Duranty was then offering the American public. These encounters in turn remind Yash of how the “revolution” first penetrated his consciousness when his father held him up to watch a workers’ demonstration in 1905 and instructed him, “Yankele, never forget this.” Juxtaposing the naïve beginnings of the Revolution as recalled by a Jewish child with the boasts of its newly minted Soviet citizens, including a Jew who veils his Jewishness, spares the author any need for disparaging commentary. The Communist boast crumbles under the forced optimism of its celebrants.

There is nothing random, either, in the contrast between the two parts of the Yash chronicles, the first moving out into the wide world, the second sealed almost hermetically inside Polish-Jewish society. Book Two is situated in a small Jewish sanatorium-hotel in a resort town between Lublin and Kazimierz Dolny recognizable as the real-life Naleczow, and as a literary knock-off of Thomas Mann’s retreat in *The Magic Mountain*. Mann’s imposing novel had not long before been published in Yiddish translation (by Isaac Bashevis Singer), and Glatstein must have derived bittersweet pleasure from transposing its Alpine loftiness into a miniaturized Jewish version. The sanatorium functions in both works as the symbolic setting for a civilization in crisis, and in each case the outsider falls under the spell of the hospice he has come to visit. But Thomas Mann shows the incurable infection lurking inside Europe’s grandeur, while Glatstein uses a parallel scheme to disclose the irrepressible vitality of the condemned commu-

nity of Europe's Jews. The opening sentence, pronounced before we know by whom, echoes the Bible's "De profundis": "Even from the muck will I sing praises unto Thee, my Lord." *Blote*, or muck, is the Yiddish self-deprecating substitute for the "depths" from which the psalmist reaches for redemption. The whole book negotiates between the heights to which Jewry aspires and the misery into which it has been forced.

The stationary setting of this second book allows for greater historical penetration than horizontal coverage. Already in the concluding chapter of Book One, Yash had met aunts and cousins who were trapped in a spiral of bigotry and poverty and unable to leave Poland as he had done two decades earlier. The gates to America were almost sealed by then, and though the "land of opportunity" was then also temporarily mired in the Great Depression, an American in Poland was like biblical Joseph from Egypt, minus the salvific granaries or political influence. The image of Yash as an impotent Joseph first appears when he is appealed to by a seductive, unhappily married female relative, and it is memorably reinforced when a dozen petitioners approach him to carry messages to their American relatives. As compared with Glatstein's actual voyage to Poland, which included arrangements for the publication of a volume of his poems, Yash meets with no fellow Yiddish writers but instead joins an assortment of Jews in a voluntary "ghetto" not strictly of their own making.⁷ His sense of impotence grows with every demand on him that he cannot satisfy.

Framing Yash in the Polish chronicle are two powerful personalities, like older and younger prophets of modern Jewry. Steinman, whose "Even from the muck" sets the tone for the book, is a German-trained historian and custodian of Hasidic lore who serves the sanatorium guests as something of a modern Hasidic Master. He entralls his listeners with stories of his life that are like a composite history of the East European Jewish intellectual, raised traditionally, exposed to the influence of the secular enlightenment, and drawn back to his endangered people. Steinman's magnetic personality and his ideas about the holistic Jewish people are reminiscent of the Yiddish luminary Y. L. Peretz, whom Glatstein had met as a boy, and traces of that encounter may be found in Steinman's paternal interest in this potential

successor. Steinman excels at everything but succession: his devoted daughter is in no sense his spiritual heir, and there is no one remotely like him in the wings as he lies dying. Both the older man and the young writer realize that their personal affinity for each other cannot span the widening breach between the Jewish past in Poland and the Jewish future in America. The death of this public figure toward the end of the book signals the fading glory of Polish Jewry and allows Yash to experience the mourning for his mother that he had until then kept in check.

No less impressive than Steinman is a sixteen-year-old boy from one of the Hasidic dynasties that Steinman studies, a latter-day Nahman of Bratzlav (one of the early geniuses of the Hasidic movement), who wonders whether he might not be in the running for the assignment of Messiah. The boy invites the narrator home to visit his family—a rabbinic brother and rabbinic brother-in-law and their two wives—and to show off the literary fruits of his runaway imagination. The most dazzling of all the characters Yash encounters on this journey, the boy transcends the workaday world in his yearning to encompass all knowledge and to complete the work that God has left undone. “You’re a stranger here, you’ll go away soon, across the ocean,” he tells the narrator. “You will think that a confused young boy has been talking to you. But don’t be too sure.” We readers can’t be too sure either, for the boy’s poems and ideas impress us with their precocity and verve. Yet his brilliance, like a firecracker’s, threatens to explode in the process of shedding its light.

In the closing chapters, we meet a third representative of Polish Jewry, a well-to-do lawyer closer to Yash’s age, who becomes his companion on an excursion to the nearby resort town of Kazimierz. A fully acculturated product of the big city, Neifeld becomes Yash’s informant on Polish-Jewish relations just as Steinman was his guide to internal Jewish history and affairs. “Take deep breaths,” Neifeld says, “Polish woods can cure the sickest heart.” Both men would like to credit their native land with as much commendation as truth permits. But they cannot ignore the contrary evidence of Polish hostility, and the daylong excursion of Neifeld and Yash to Kazimierz, where King Casimir according to legend once cohabited with the lovely Jewess

Esther, becomes yet another of the several leave-takings from Poland that culminate in Yash's final farewell.

Among this book's several interwoven themes, let me highlight two. Neglect of the Jewish woman is implicit in Yash's inability to save his dying mother. At the hotel where he rests after the bereavement, a female relative comes seeking his help. He disappoints her, and then in a dreamlike dramatic sequence he feels helpless to rescue women from the predators who seek to harm them. One imagines that Glatstein visiting Poland must have experienced occasional pangs of guilt, yet they surface in the narrator only in relation to women who need his protection. At a later point in the book, Steinman and the narrator attend an evening dance that the hotel proprietor has organized for his guests. The sister-in-law of the young genius, one of the rabbis' wives, turns up, and explaining somewhat shyly that she loves to dance, invites one of them to take a turn with her around the dance floor. They decline and instead they allow her to be swept away by the most brain-damaged of the guests. When she leaves in dismay, they do not offer to accompany her home in the dark. "Neither of us was very gallant," Steinman comments, with good reason. Steinman also realizes that his spinster daughter has devoted her life to serving him. Finally, when Neifeld recounts how the Jews of Poland sacrificed Esther to King Casimir to achieve their ideal of Polish-Jewish symbiosis, he extends criticism of Jewish manhood to the national level. The narrator acknowledges his own and his society's failure to do right by their women, and rather than ascribe their failure of "manliness" to historical conditions, he takes the blame on himself.

In this connection, Yash is reminded of "a Spanish book I once read"—the allusion is to *Autumn and Winter Sonatas* by Ramon del Valle-Inclán. Like the momentary recollection of Sholem Aleichem's Fishl-Dovid at the outset of the journey, this evocation of the *Sonatas* at its conclusion adds a psychological and literary substratum to Glatstein's story. The Spanish work in question has been described as "decadent in every sense of the word": It depicts the last adventures of the Marquis of Bradomin, an aging Don Juan, who does not hesitate to seduce yet another young virgin despite the attendant anxieties of an arm lost in combat. As apparently alien to Glatstein's Yiddish culture as any

work could be, this tale nonetheless reflects Yash's state of heart and mind on the eve of his departure from Poland. Though the narrator gives no hint that he (or his author) had indulged in sexual misadventures, he shares Bradomin's torment over his waning powers:

It seemed to me now, in the twilight, that I had reached the autumn of my life. The whole day, the encounter with Neifeld, and even my mother's death seemed to coincide oddly with the downward movement of my own life, and all this was in step with Jewish life as a whole, maybe even with the twilight now settling over the whole world. . . .

All of us—myself and everything I remembered, and everything I forgot—would very soon find ourselves in winter with a hand shot off. That would be the hand which, I had vowed, I would let wither if I forgot Thee, Thee and everything that had ever been reflected in my eyes and brain.

Yash substitutes the psalmist's "hand" for the fighting arm that Bradomin lost in combat. His vow evokes the Jews by the waters of Babylon, weeping as they remember Zion, unable to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. The psalmist says, "If I forget Thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither . . . if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory even at my happiest hour." Yash had pledged his writing hand to an unnamed "Thee"—to the "Jerusalem" of Polish Jewry, since Jews were in the habit of re-creating their sacred space wherever they were permitted to sojourn. Familiar as he is with the works of decadence and modernism that insist on the untrammelled freedom of the self, Yash applies their libidinous passion to the Jewish predicament, which more than ever requires the allegiance of its cavalier. He fears that his writing hand will be blasted along with the object of his longing. Bradomin's need to prove his sexual prowess stirs Yash's fears of a shrinking talent just when he most needs his powers to do "Thee" justice.

Will the Yiddish writer fail his subject as the Jewish male fails his women? The book includes several auguries of such failure. On his deathbed, Steinman inspires the Jews with a melody, but once their conductor ceases to animate them, they are like an abandoned choir that stops in mid phrase. The young Messianic genius writes eye-popping stuff, none of which has yet been published, and—we are made

to realize—never will be. Neifeld seems to offer a promising artistic strategy when he draws the narrator’s attention to the song of a nightingale they hear on the road. “There was no trace of degrading sweetness in the nightingale’s song, no concession to debased popular taste.” This tribute suggests an “utterly unsentimental” and “intellectual” aesthetic ideal for the book itself, yet shortly after he has described this ideal of song, Neifeld brings himself to tears singing a Rosh Hashanah melody of a cantor named Slowik (Polish for “nightingale”) whom he remembers from childhood. What form of art, then, is adequate for the task that Yash knows he must assume?

As Yash contemplates his return to America, the packed suitcases beside his bed seem to him “the only real and solid objects in this world of shadowy forms.” The voyager who had originally hoped to shake off the “miasmas” of responsibility now sees nothing so clearly as the baggage he carries back with him. The poet will have to do his best to deliver all the messages that were entrusted to him by desperate men and women. The hybrid form of autobiographical fiction allowed Glatstein to record the actuality of Polish Jewry through the conduit of his own experience, fusing memory and observation, the private and the communal, as intricately as Lublin and New York are fused in him. In place of the suitcases, Glatstein provided these books, “the only real and solid objects” he could retrieve from a world he was otherwise powerless to rescue.

Editor’s Note: Although a bowdlerized English version of Book One, *Ven yash iz geforn*, was published in 1969 as *Homeward Bound*, I did not choose to adapt it for this edition but commissioned a new translation by Maier Deshell, retaining only the earlier title. By contrast, Book Two, *Ven yash iz gekumen*, had been finely translated by Norbert Guterman as *Homecoming at Twilight* (1962), requiring only slight emendations. Since Mr. Guterman died before I began this project, I took on the responsibility of editing his translation and of bringing both works together in a single volume.

These translations are as faithful as felicity will allow. One of the finest English translators from Yiddish, Maurice Samuel, believed that translations should never require glossary or footnote, even if this

meant inserting explanations—lengthy explanations when necessary—within the text. The present work does not go quite that far. Given that history, geography, and cultural features may create difficulties for different sectors of our readership, we have preferred to provide explanations outside the text, without encroaching on the original. We had in mind the common reader, including students of literature, who want to discover a new American work as much as possible “as its author intended.”

The title gave us the most trouble. When Glatstein called his books by the name of their otherwise unnamed narrator, he doubtless expected readers to make the association between *Yash*, the implied author, and himself. The English reader is, alas, scarcely any more familiar with the name of the author himself, so that calling the book *The Glatstein Chronicles* may produce an analogous effect. One of the passengers on his ship calls the narrator “Gladdy,” but the nickname’s Scandinavian provenance suits the speaker more than its subject. We use “Glatstein” in the title the way schoolboys might refer to one another, “Hey, Glatstein, how about that book you were writing?”

Translations from the poetry of Jacob Glatstein may be found in *Selected Poems of Yankev Glatshiteyn*, trans., ed., and with an introduction by Richard J. Fein (Philadelphia, 1987); *The Selected Poems of Jacob Glatstein*, trans. with an introduction by Ruth Whitman (New York, 1972); *I Keep Recalling: The Holocaust Poems of Jacob Glatstein*, trans. Barnett Zumoff (New York, 1993); Jacob Glatstein, *Poems*, selected and trans. Etta Blum (Tel Aviv, 1970); *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*, ed. and trans. Benjamin and Barbara Harshav (Berkeley, 1986); and in other anthologies of modern Yiddish verse.

In the absence of a full-scale biography of Glatstein, readers may consult Janet Hadda, *Yankev Glatshiteyn* (Boston, 1980); and Avrom Tabachnik, “A Conversation with Jacob Glatstein,” trans. Joseph C. Landis, *Yiddish* 1 (Summer 1973): 40–53.

NOTES

1. Glatstein’s column, under the pseudonym Itskus, ran in the *Morgn Zhurnal* between September 14, 1934, and April 29, 1938. This excerpt is from “A Writer’s Day of Rest,” November 27, 1936.

2. The date given in Jewish lexicons is August 20. I am grateful to Pawel Sygowski for his investigations on my behalf and to Monika Garbowska for her help throughout.
3. "Introspectivism," in *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*, ed. and trans. Benjamin Harshav and Barbara Harshav (Berkeley, 1986): 774.
4. I have treated this subject and these books by Glatstein in the following essays: "Language as Fate: Reflections on Jewish Literature in America," in *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, vol. 12 (Oxford, 1996): 129–147; "The Yiddish and Hebrew Writers Head for Home," in *Ideology and Jewish Identity in Israeli and American Literature*, ed. Emily Miller Budick (Albany, 2001), chapter 8.
5. The Sholem Aleichem story is "Home for Passover" (Af peysakh aheym, 1903), trans. by Julius and Frances Butwin in *The Best of Sholem Aleichem* ed. Irving Howe and Ruth R. Wisse (1979): 89–102.
6. I. Bashevis, "Fun der bikher-velt: "Ven yash iz geforn," *Zukunft* 44, no. 3 (1939): 182, 183.
7. For a fuller description of Glatstein's actual trip to Poland and analysis of the *Chronicles*, see Avraham Novershtern, "The Open Suitcases: Yankev Glatstheyn's *Ven Yash Iz Gekumen*, in *Arguing the Modern Jewish Canon: Essays on Literature and Culture in Honor of Ruth R. Wisse*, ed. Justin Cammy et al. (Cambridge, MA, 2008): 255–298.