

**Translated from the Yiddish and Edited by
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**IN DEFENCE OF YIDDISHKEIT: THE JOURNALS
OF YAACOV ZIPPER, A SELECTION: 1950-1972**

In memory of Max Motti Garfinkle

In late June 1950, after a hiatus of twenty-five years,¹ Yaacov Zipper, noted Montreal Yiddish writer and principal of the Jewish Peretz Schools for over forty years, resumed the practice of keeping a journal. From that date, with the exception of a three-year lapse in the mid-50s, he continued to write down his private thoughts for more than three decades, until 1982, some six-months before his death. The language of his notes was Yiddish, penned in a neat, minute, cursive handwriting, entered in small lined student notebooks measuring 7"x8" and consisting of 28 pages each. Some 31 of such notebooks and five larger ones measuring 8"x11" were found among his papers. In total, the journals consist of approximately 1214 pages of Yiddish manuscript. The project of translating and editing these journals was undertaken some years ago. We have now completed a first draft and are engaged in revising the 839 page typescript in preparation for eventual publication.

The existence of the journals only came to light following Zipper's death. He had never mentioned them to his family during his lifetime, nor did his will make any reference to them. This would suggest that the journals were intended as a private account of his inner life, a narrative, which for reasons we can

only guess at, he could not bring himself to share with others. It obviously served multiple purposes, functioning primarily as his commonplace book where he could record his version of things, noting his reactions to the rapidly altering shape of his familiar world; and it also served him as a writer's workshop where he could exercise his imagination in compositions depicting landscapes, character studies and elaborate reconstructions of troubling dreams.

Yaacov Zipper was born in 1900 and thus came to regard himself as a child of the century. In his personal biography he saw a compelling account of some of the momentous events in the history of modern Jewish society. He conceived his own life, and to some extent the lives of his siblings, as exemplary, for in his own family he saw enacted the drama of disruptive change that had transformed traditional Jewish life in Eastern Europe. And while he had enthusiastically embraced the new ideological currents that helped subvert the beliefs and customs of the old world, his conception of Jewish secularism remained rooted in the residual pieties of his remembered childhood.

His birthplace was the Polish town of Shebreshin and he was raised and educated in Tishevitz. His father, Rabbi Avraham Shtern,² author of commentaries on the Talmud, responsa, and Hassidic hagiographies, served as a shochet and dayan, a member of the local Rabbinical court. Zipper, the family's eldest, received a traditional Hassidic cheder education which equipped him with Yiddish and Hebrew and provided him with an indelible store of textual materials—Tanach, Talmud, Hassidic lore and legend—upon which he drew for the images and metaphors of all his future writings.

His youthful rebellion against his father's orthodoxy brought him to the *Hechalutz* movement, a Labour-Zionist organization committed to the renewal of Jewish national life in its ancient homeland. In the cultural and social program of the movement, Zipper found a vital replacement for the rejected religious culture of the home. His was a transvaluation which retained the devotional and spiritual energy of the traditional

belief system, while expressing itself in the bracing radical vocabulary of Jewish cultural nationalism and democratic socialism. Paradoxically, his attitude encompassed both a conscious rebellion against the stultifying decadence of shtetl life, and an intuitive desire to rescue from oblivion the precious spiritual and moral features of the millenia-old culture. This youthful attempt at reconciling the conflict between traditional religious life and the modernist secular ethos of socialist-Zionism articulated the most characteristic quality of Zipper's self-consciousness: He saw himself as a man of two worlds. By birthright he felt himself heir to his father's realm of sacred history; but at the same time realized that his modern outlook had—in the words of the Talmudic parable—"Banished him from his Father's table." His life-long struggle to achieve a viable synthesis of these two contending elements of his being became an enduring source of intellectual and emotional tension and, as such, served as the richest, most potent well-spring of his creativity, the recurring theme of all his imaginative fiction.

When Zipper resumed his journal entries in 1950, he was 50 years old and was recognized as a leading figure in the social and cultural life of Jewish Montreal. He had served as principal of the Jewish Peretz School since 1928, was an active member of the *Poalei Zion* and the *Farband*³—he never foresook the habit of referring to his fellow-members as *chaverim* (comrades)—participated in the cultural activities of the Canadian Jewish Congress, and served in many capacities at the Jewish Public Library. In addition he was a regular contributor to the *Keneder Odler*—Montreal's Yiddish daily, where he published numerous articles and literary essays.

In most respects then, at middle-age Zipper was an acknowledged public figure, widely known throughout the community for his involvement in Jewish education, as a writer of Yiddish fiction and literary criticism,⁴ and as a tireless activist in a whole range of Jewish causes. What even his closest friends or colleagues in the community could not have known was that the persona of the dynamic and energetic public figure was a

projection of only one aspect of his complex character—his daytime face to the world—which masked another emotional reality expressed only in the confines of his private journals.

Here, for over thirty years, Zipper noted his thoughts and feelings on public and personal matters of concern. In the public realm his major preoccupations included his growing sense of despair over the fate of Yiddish and the institution to which he had dedicated himself; and his attempts at mobilizing community support for the financing of Jewish education. In addition, he would often comment on current political issues such as the rise of Quebec nationalism and especially the numerous crises affecting Israel. In the private sphere he notes the onset of the aging process in himself and his family; the continual conflict between the demands of his communal responsibilities and his unsatisfied craving for the leisure and peace required for his creative writing; and—overshadowing everything—the growing tragic sense that all his efforts to assure a secular Yiddish culture in the Diaspora would not achieve the ideals he sought. His bleak frame of mind throughout this extensive period is constantly re-echoed in the two most common, most repeated words in the journals which are the Yiddish *Shvair*—hard, harsh, difficult—and *Bitter*—which needs no translation. The present-day reader of these sentiments, who knows that Yiddish as a Jewish vernacular did not survive the immigrant generation, will probably not be shocked to learn that Zipper—the champion of Yiddish—could not deceive himself about the realistic possibilities of the language’s survival in the face of North American assimilation. However, what truly astonishes is how an individual, so beset with misgivings, could have managed to maintain the energy and enthusiasm to promote Yiddish education in the face of such corrosive pessimism, and for some forty years continue to offer vital leadership to one of the most important educational institutions of the community.

Like all journals which ostensibly contain the private thoughts of the narrator, Zipper’s entries bear a significance beyond the revelations of personal circumstance. Because his public role in community affairs was so extensive, he was witness

to a wide-range of political and cultural activities in the organized community and commented on the manner in which it mobilized its resources in dealing with critical and often divisive issues. Given Zipper's ideology and social commitment, his was often a minority voice in the face of what he considered to be the moral insensitivity and indifference of the community leaders—he always placed that term within quotation marks to signify his sarcasm—an establishment, he felt, increasingly detached from the immigrant community by virtue of wealth and recently-gained social status.

The following selected entries are presented according to three themes: The first will address educational issues. It begins with Zipper's struggle to provide financial sustenance for the Peretz Shule and ends, decades later, with the amalgamation of the Peretz and Folk Shule. Secondly, it includes entries that demonstrate his literary sensibility and reflect on his concerns as a writer. And finally we present some entries of a personal nature, including eulogies and commemorations.

The initial entries are from the 50s—the post-war era which signalled the most profound demographic changes affecting Montreal's Jewish community in terms of income, education, mother-tongue, and place of domicile. Zipper's account focuses on his public role and tells of his attempts at dealing with the ever-recurring financial plight of the Peretz Shule, his appeal to the community leaders, and his anxiety about the future of secular Yiddishkeit.

Here is his entry for the End of July, 1950, commenting on the conference of the Labour Zionist Movement he is to attend. Both Folk Shule and the Peretz Shule were affiliated with the Movement.

Now I have to travel to a conference of the Movement [Poalei Zion] so the remaining time will also be wasted. It has been a long time since I have attended an education conference. It might be possible to effect some change there, and once again I'll

be able to familiarize the leadership with our financial troubles. Maybe they will provide us with a bit of deliverance. The financial situation of the school is so perilous that I'm terribly afraid that the approaching year might see the entire school threatened.

The financial crisis arises from the fact that the majority of children come from poverty and that the building has not been paid for. In addition there are the refugee children, each one of whom is a whole world of psychological and emotional hardships. This has led to continual deficits which jeopardize the whole school. We will have to become smaller in order to survive, and who knows whether it is already too late. And because of the financial crisis we don't even attend to the spiritual crisis which is even more severe.

It seems to me that the support group for a school such as ours has all but evaporated. The secularists have lost their power and the common people don't know what they want. They swim with the current, the newest fashion, and with anything that promises continuity and survival. They want a *Bar Mitzva*, but really desire the banquet that follows. Strive to join a synagogue, but are intent on mere belonging. They want to adopt Sephardic pronunciation and increase Hebrew instruction in order to identify with Israel, but are fearful of *chalutzit*.⁵ We have been left in a vacuum. Yiddish and East-European life no longer has many supporters. Suddenly we are looked upon as oddities. No one is prepared to sacrifice himself for this cause.

To this must be added the population shifts from the districts where our schools are located. The Talmud Torah⁶ will be unaffected. In the new districts they are building synagogues and alongside every synagogue a Talmud Torah. But we have to build independent institutions and there is no one to carry out that task. Everyone is affected by an internal weakness and only inertia keeps some of us going. The Movement is cool to its schools and we feel lost. It is impossible to discuss this with even my closest colleagues. It might be possible to raise these issues at the conference. Maybe. Knowing the "movers and shakers" of the school as I do, one can expect very little from

them, nor that they might be able to elevate themselves to the consideration of new policies.

About a month later, in his entry for Mid-August, 1950, Zipper transcribes his reactions to the conference.

Returned from the conference exhausted and depressed, but still somewhat renewed. Grew more intimate with some, amongst them the Auerbachs and Bialystotskys.⁷ Breathed in some writerly atmosphere, so I felt better. But the debate on the school issue at the conference added to my depression. It is a lot worse than I had imagined. The Movement, as much as it is concerned with education at all, is divided. The younger faction, represented by a group of intellectuals who never aligned themselves with the philosophy of Poalei Zion and refuses to accept it, see the remedy in a little Hebrew and the preaching of a diluted Zionism. Oddly, the Pioneer Women⁸ want a party-line school and argue that our commitment to the education of a culturally creative Jew should be fulfilled by Israel. In the *galut* (diaspora) mere rote learning will suffice, garnished with a bit of Hebrew. All else is overblown rhetoric and the pinching of cheeks to raise the colour. The old guard is still some thirty years behind, saying the same things but more nationalistically and holding forth about lofty issues when the minimum has yet to be attained. Meanwhile teachers struggle with empty classrooms and deserted halls. Cynicism engulfs the delegates and they argue over every word in a resolution. It makes a grievous impression. I did my best to argue my case. They let me speak and wanted to hear more of what I had to say. I spoke unequivocally, but only a small number heeded and acknowledged regretfully that something ought to be done. The rest of them rebuked me. You shouldn't speak so openly. One shouldn't reveal the doubts. They still cling to the old-fashioned rhetoric.

In early September, 1950, Zipper notes the situation at the beginning of the school year:

Opened the school in a discouraged mood. Who knows how we will be able to work this year. The neighbourhood is rapidly diminishing. Fewer children enrolled. Evening school suffered most—barely one class of Grade One. The community is moving out to the new districts and they are asking to open a new school there, but where does one get the land or money that would be necessary?

Under these conditions there will be less income from school fees. The situation is catastrophic. I called a meeting of the representatives of the local Movement. Only a few attended. The only ones who came with something concrete were the Pioneer Women, who pledged a thousand dollars, but no help from anyone for a campaign. We are surrounded by cold indifference.

The following May, 1951, with no aid forthcoming from his Movement, Zipper considers a plan for mobilizing the community for an unprecedented public confrontation with the Canadian Jewish Congress. Something of his strategic thinking is revealed in these entries for the first weeks of May:

An unbearable meeting of the Budget and Finance Committee took place. All the chaverim felt hopeless. The special committee of Congress had informed us that there were no prospects for campaigning for the sum of \$30,000. The national executive had rejected the request for a special subsidy for the refugee children. The shadow of school-closing clouded everyone's eyes. Even Zuker⁹, who is always the optimist, always enthusiastic and full of plans, was in despair.

The decision to embark on a public struggle was the only one that could have been taken. It was also decided to convene the entire school body on the 14th of May and propose this plan. At the same time a letter will be sent out to Congress rejecting their argument that this is merely a local issue.

May 10, 1951.

I can't relax and simply do nothing. I must express my own deepest feelings. So I write letters on behalf of parents and others. Every morning when the mothers are waiting for the kindergarten children, I feel that they look at me with mingled pity and reproach: Why don't you storm the walls. Writing letters won't do, someone must read them. Who—the general public, the Congress officials, or other prominent businessmen? How would it be if S. Bronfman himself received a letter from a refugee with a tattooed number. In our school there are dozens of such families. Let the refugee tell about himself, about the child that he has brought here safely. Let him describe how we treated him, how much effort and toil we have invested. Let Bronfman be reminded that wealthy Jews once supported *Yeshivot* and, as a result, gained immortality. They are now celebrating his anniversary. What does a few thousand dollars mean to him. I pour out my heart but do not feel any better.

The next day, on May 11, Zipper meets with Israel Rabinovitch, the influential editor of the "Keneder Odler" and seeks to enlist him in the cause:

Met with Rabinovitch. I go over the whole situation. He hears me out in his unemotional way. He is busy correcting page-proofs of his book which is being translated by A.M. Klein. He doesn't understand the whole issue. I make it clear that it is his affair as much as ours. All the delays and opposition to support us are due to the fact that ours is a school where Yiddish is taught in the proper manner and where the school has not made peace with denying its roots in the folk culture. There is a silent boycott by those Jews who have no attachment to the poor. We are constantly underfoot. Therefore they profess one thing and do something else or nothing at all. Maybe they think we will become sick and tired of it all and close down. It is the wealthy classes' disdain for the ordinary man and especially toward the

new immigrants. What do the refugees need a day-school education for, they complain, they should Canadianize themselves as quickly as possible.

Rabinovitch begins to show interest—asks about our budget and salaries. When he learns about the fact that our salaries are so low in comparison with other similar institutions, that our Yiddish teachers, the best, barely receive enough for sustenance, and even this has not been paid for nearly three months, it seems to me that his fingers itch to take up the pen. He plays with his pen, then inks in the numbers. “So what are you waiting for?”—he is almost angry with me. “Why are you silent? I want to write and sound the alarm. Certainly this is our cause. And why is the Folk Shule silent,” he asks without waiting for an answer, “don’t they realize that they are implicated in this as well?” We both fall silent. I really have no need to speculate about their behavior. They have never acted in any other way. The parvenu thinks that in this way his status and glory are elevated.

The financial hardships of the Peretz Shule continued to plague Zipper for years, the annual budgetary crises were always allayed by frantic interim measures. It is therefore not surprising to learn from entries dated January 20, 1955—four years later—that once again Zipper is caught up in desperate fundraising. What gives special interest to this entry is his report on a meeting with Sam Bronfman, president of Canadian Jewish Congress, in which Zipper, the confirmed socialist, conveys his unexpected impressions of the tough-minded, imperious tycoon.

On Tuesday the 18th, Zuker and I met with S. Bronfman in his office. What a spacious, well-designed place of calm. The wealth is not ostentatious. Simplicity and refinement in the furnishings and the wall-hangings. He received us graciously. He is acquainted with our problem and cannot understand why the leadership of Congress could not find a way to help us. Hayes,¹⁰

who was present, tried to justify their point of view, but Bronfman interrupted him, saying: "It looks as if they are just searching for an excuse." He feels that a vital institution should not be allowed to disappear because of eight thousand dollars a year. Our claim that we should be receiving relief funds for the refugee children we have taught—is one he agrees with. He agreed with us almost completely and promised to take up the matter at the National Executive next month. He asked us to postpone any planned action until he had a chance to raise the issue.

Throughout the discussion we had the feeling that we were speaking as equals among equals, as community activists interested in maintaining a community institution in need. At all the previous meetings there was always the feeling that we were beggars who were imposing ourselves on the community. He appears to be someone who sees things in a broader perspective without ulterior motive or bias. He is definitely inclined to help us, and knows that we can't balance the budget, and won't send away the children and thus cripple the school. We left him somewhat encouraged. Our visit was supposed to last fifteen minutes, but lasted over an hour.

As a result of this meeting a financial campaign was mounted which gave the Peretz Shule the resources to cover its deficit and fund the school until the construction of its new quarters in Cote St. Luc. Moving to the new district meant more than a geographical change. Zipper's entries describe the profound linguistic and cultural changes that confronted him in the new neighbourhood.

August 21, 1959.

The new school is truly beautiful and comfortable, but whether the ideals for which we sacrificed all these years will be able to strike roots in this new district with new people, remains to be seen. Who knows whether we are the right people to begin pioneering here? Yet finally we have lived to see

the move to the new building which is grand. I am still in disbelief that we really achieved this. Several activists attended the school opening, including Sarah Caiserman¹¹ and Zuker. And when we led in the children singing the first Yiddish song, it seemed to me that all those who gave us their support during the long years of anguish, were singing along. I controlled myself, but those around me were misty-eyed.

On September 11, 1959, Zipper, who had earlier worked almost exclusively with Yiddish-speaking parents, describes his new constituency.

Not everything is in working order. Even the teachers are not accustomed to the new area, let alone the children. About 100 new children were registered. The day school has fewer than the afternoon school. It will take a little time. Parents are coming in with questions and to discuss programs. The more intelligent they are, the greater the confusion in their minds. The conflict they had with their parents when they were young interferes with their ability to deal with the issues of Yiddish, identity, and religion. Some of them remain fearful of these issues—like the devil in the presence of incense. Others want us to provide as much of this content as possible in order to make things easier for themselves, to absolve themselves of any responsibility. It will take much work to clarify these matters.

At the end of September, 1959, Zipper notes the process of adaptation to the new locale, including his comparison of Cote St. Luc to the shtetl of his youth.

Little by little the school is taking shape. Much remains to be done before everything is as it should be—so that it truly becomes a place of learning for young and old. The interest of children and parents in each Yiddish word is very high. There is a very young population around the school, one that is eager to work and learn.

With considerable difficulty the school is being organized. A large number of children have been registered in the primary grades. The attitude of the parents is excellent. We still don't know one another, and a barrier exists between us. We are trying to understand each other. Language is a critical issue. We are forced to use a considerable amount of English which upsets the parents and activists of the former neighbourhood, including myself as well.

The sense of being back in the shtetl constantly overwhelms me. A kind of provincial aura suffuses the entire district. I wandered about so many years and now I find myself back in the shtetl. We're looking for a home here, which will make things easier. If someone, thirty-five years ago, had told me that we would be living nine miles away from the old neighbourhood, as far away as Montreal West, I would have dismissed it as a pipe-dream. Truly, a small-town setting. When work is over there is the sense of being removed from the big city. It is peaceful and beautiful, but detached.

The following June 3rd, 1960, graduates of the Peretz Shule organize a party to mark Zipper's thirty-five years at the school. This is his response.

When Sorke and I entered the school it was brilliantly lit and so full of surrounding faces that I was blinded. Coming down into the hall everything surged toward me as from a hidden world. Shining faces from many years ago peered at us from all sides. So much light all about. Graduates were there from the earliest years to the most recent, as well as my whole family. The entire evening was like a trance. Photographs of the first radiant days recalling how many dreams, how many melodies from the class trips to the Mountain. Everyone together. The first grade six that I taught. I became very attached to them. Today they are amongst the closest *chaverim* and activists. Such intimacy. And into my memory there comes those who have vanished, all of them seem to be whispering to my soul. The speakers were

Rivka, Esther G., Esther Zuker, and Shulamis. And their words were interspersed with song. Everything appeared so distant, yet so near. Something has taken root here, something saved. It is not a question of whether it was worth all the sorrow—could I have done otherwise? It strikes me that perhaps my mission has been fulfilled. I always knew, and always believed, that nothing is ever lost. In the harshest of times I felt that a great number of students had a special feeling toward me, that something of the good in myself was transmitted to them. But the warmth, the radiance, which flowed from that evening with such delicacy, was an overwhelming surprise. I don't know what I said to them. I still cannot find the words to express my feelings.

They gave me three gifts: their own presence, an album of greetings which I still can't approach, and a cheque for \$1200 for a trip to Israel for Sorke and myself. How can one respond to that? Possibly in the words of our forefathers, "With my staff alone I crossed the Jordan,"—solitary and alone I arrived here in Montreal and now I have a share in the history of this place. I shared with them the feelings that overcame me when I first traveled through the white fields of Quebec and asked myself whether the disguised *Eliyahu Hanavi* (Elijah the Prophet) would ever roam about here as he had in the *shtetlach* of my youth.

The evening left me with a marvellous feeling, both strengthening and stimulating. My gratitude goes out to them

But such joyous moments are rare. Once again the cultural conflict arose when the demands of young parents for a generalized Jewish educational environment clashed with Zipper's emphasis on the centrality of Yiddish. And the financial crises that had plagued him for decades resurfaced in the new school eventually leading to the long delayed amalgamation of the Peretz Shule and Folk Shule. Zipper for many years had been an outspoken advocate of community financial responsibility for Jewish Day Schools. Yet ironically, it was the imposition of strict financial guidelines by community leaders that resulted

in the merger—or as an embittered Zipper saw it—the disappearance of his beloved school.

August 30, 1960.

From all sides there are cries: Yiddish education is bankrupt; Yiddish is doomed; only Hebrew and a smattering of religion are significant. Here, a new generation struggles and asks, in English, naturally: Can you furnish us with new structures and an identity without dogmatism or artificial orthodoxy? I spend hours with young fathers and mothers who want to understand our basic beliefs. Many leave these meetings strengthened. But how strong are we? I am afraid that since we don't have suitable personnel to deal with this new generation we are liable to lose this opportunity, just as we had lost out earlier with our excessive radicalism and a total abandonment of the tradition. This is our last chance and we have such meagre forces.

November 27, 1960.

The last few weeks have been very hard. The financial crisis of the school is reaching a climax. The new activists have become frightened and are discouraged. They don't know how to arrange the refinancing in order to continue. My sleepless nights have returned. The shadow of catastrophe hovers over all our work. The truth is that I don't want to disclose to myself how despairing I am. I only hope that, as usual, new hidden sources of strength will surge up and we will be able to overcome.

Regrettably, these longed for “sources of strength” failed to emerge for another decade. The financial plight of the school required Zipper's involvement in relentless fundraising, including the humiliating prospect of seeking personal loans from chaverim and family. Most difficult of all was having to face his poorly-paid teachers who rarely received their salaries on time and were customarily two or three months in arrears.

Ultimately it was the availability of provincial funding for the Jewish schools which drastically altered the fiscal basis of day-school education. And finally, after many years of procrastination, the community assumed responsibility for Jewish education through the establishment of the Education Council. In a few short years the pressure for the unification of the two Labour Zionist schools resulted in discussions about amalgamation. The following entries illustrate Zipper's ambivalent attitude to these new developments.

September 5, 1969.

Financially we are in a harsh situation. The expenses increase and the income cannot keep up. The debts and high interest devour us. We live continually on loans, promissary notes, on the verge of bankruptcy. Something quite daring will have to be done this year in order to change this situation. Maybe we have to take up again the issue of amalgamating with the Folk Shule.

February 21, 1970.

Last Thursday there was a meeting of the executive where a report was tabled regarding the negotiations with the Folk Shule and the leaders of the community services. At the outset the mood was very gloomy. Almost as if everybody sensed the breakup of an era. Only after the clarifications that the amalgamation was necessary for our type of school system, and more effective for better community planning, did they begin to perceive the issue in a different light and gave the committee the authorization to negotiate officially and report back. The next day this decision caused the teachers to be depressed. Assurances that all would be done so teachers would not suffer, were of no avail. It is clear that being the weaker side, financially and numerically, we will have to concede more of our principles. In general, the tradition of personal relationships is different in each school.

My own mood is also very bleak. On the one hand, much would be gained through amalgamation. On the other hand, however, it is obvious that we must give in and accept their approach to Yiddish—which implies that the folk-culture tradition will be erased. And it is not yet apparent how we can assure that our teachers will not be the ones to be mistreated. Meanwhile, sleep does not come easily and it is difficult to resume literary work.

March 13, 1970.

I was very upset all week. It becomes more evident that the few *chaverim* who are the so-called leaders of the school see no other option than amalgamation, which in actual fact means accepting totally their program and their management. It will also mean that they will decide which teachers will be kept on staff and which will be let go. There will no longer exist on this continent a school which teaches Yiddish from the first grade. Realistically it is not a new beginning but rather a renunciation on our part of our right to exist. Meanwhile, no salaries have been paid for almost three months. I find it hard to determine how we erred so badly that it had to result in this state of affairs. I feel that it is primarily my fault. But could I have acted otherwise? Does this mean that I myself, in the course of my life, nourished an illusion, and also mislead a number of dear teachers and colleagues? There isn't even anyone with whom I can discuss this in depth.

Met with Wiseman.¹² He is physically broken, but spiritually he feels that he has emerged the victor. He will probably retire and leave for Israel next year. Our era draws to a close. He feels, however, that he has led the school—his life's work—to a safe haven with a new leadership suited to the new age.

June 17, 1970.

Last evening the board of directors of the Folk Shule unanimously accepted the detailed plan for unification with the

Peretz Shule. Had this taken place years ago, as we had desired, I would have been very pleased. Now the happiness is mixed with much sadness and anxiety. Some say that the abandonment of our ideological outlook enabled a valid arrangement to be made by a third party like the Congress and the leaders of the welfare funds. But in truth it signifies the commencement of community responsibility for education.

The second theme of the journal entries evoke Zipper's vocation as a man of literature. Throughout his life he endured the tension caused by the demands of his public role and his private calling as literary artist. Given the time-consuming responsibilities of his public role, it is amazing that his creativity produced five volumes of short fiction and novels, a long poem on the Holocaust, and two works of non-fiction, one being a collection of literary criticism and the other his account of a trip to Israel. All of these works were written in Yiddish and Hebrew. In addition he edited five volumes comprising commemorative works, his father's collected letters and Chassidic midrashim, and a trilingual anthology of Canadian Jewish writing (co-edited with Chaim Spilberg).

Here are several examples of his writing that speak of his vocation, or which transcend the usual notetaking style. In the first entry of the journals, dated June, 1950, he sets down the literary motive for resuming his diary entries.

Many years ago in the very early years of my youth I used to write down my thoughts and experiences. And at that time it meant that I intended to use them later in my life as writer. At this time I don't know why I want to begin writing these notes once more. There is a great desire to speak to oneself without disguise, if that is at all possible. Perhaps it is just a game, a kind of hobby, or an attempt to regain the habit of writing which has been seriously weakened in the last few years. Possibly, in writing for oneself, something might surface that would be of value to others. My faith in mankind, and even in those close to me, falters. I

have neither the desire to moralize nor entertain. But sometimes there is the wish to recall what has gone before. Days of my early youth often stand before me and beseech: Tell our story, reveal us once more, recall us once again before we disappear forever. Everyone of our generation is actually the last exemplar of a world that is no more and that will never return. The personal self-assessment begins to unfold. It comes into being by bits and pieces. It is worthwhile recognizing and verbalizing these thoughts so I'll return to the method of fragmentary notes, without embellishment, just as they strike me.

On December 20, 1957, following surgery at the Montreal General, Zipper gives this rich account of the surrounding visual images which merge into a phantasmagoric dream sequence.

All day yesterday the wind was howling. From my window I watch the rain soaking the mountain. Thick clouds pass rapidly in the greyness that covers the trees, constantly transforming them into various shapes which kept disappearing into the fog. Looking down at the moving cars, I see pedestrians trying to cross the road, bent over, helpless before the driving rain. Everything looks ghostly, presenting a picture of surreal shifting patterns. At the edge of the mountain where a new structure is going up, men are working on the roof in the wind and rain. They move from place to place with great care, like priests at their devotions. Rarely do they raise their heads. Their stooped posture matches their surroundings. I read into the night and suddenly a verdant and peaceful serenity descends on me. Someone leads me by the hand through green valleys and mountain ranges with the sun playing freely upon them. We are standing in a spacious hall which emits a deep-seated calm. Solid antique furniture, familiar from days gone by, leaves the impression that you are here for the first time, yet have never left. The voice that soothes you is also familiar, long known to you, the voice of an old friend that I last heard in his garden at home. My companion continues

to speak, "You probably thought that I am no longer here and that you would never see me again. But as you see, we have all been here for three thousand years. Later, all the dear ones will gather here." And soon the whole gang gathers together, warm and friendly as always. The room becomes more and more crowded with townfolk and strangers. Everyone knows me, but I can't recognize them all. Those assembled scramble toward the balcony which is lit by a strange green and pink light. I find myself facing a folding screen which blocks the way. I touch the pink light on the screen and it turns out to be laden with shreds of spiderwebs. Then from the second balcony the voice of someone hurrying by can clearly be heard, "Don't you see that everything is as insubstantial as cobwebs? With a true light all the shadows can be banished."

I open my eyes to see the pale reflection of the street lamp shining through the window. The tips of the trees on the mountain opposite my window are tranquil for some moments, then whipped by the wind, are instantly transformed into ghostly apparitions.

In the entry for September, 1958, Zipper self-consciously describes the process whereby memory becomes fiction.

Rested a bit at the sea-shore. Wrote a little. The book about Tishevitz grows slowly, but to those who are knowledgeable it will be a book about the shtetl in general. Both the form and the scope are simultaneously contemporary and historical. It is more than a tale and more than a fable. During the writing, I often feel that I have uncovered the essential soul of the eastern-European settlements of which Tishevitz was the last remaining town to have preserved elements from its earliest origins and all subsequent strata. When I knew it at the very end, there were still signs of its beginnings, and the end was already so near. Every page I write is a relived experience for me, more deeply felt than any other of my previous works. I often feel as if maturity and knowledge led me by the hand. Often I remain standing as before

a solid wall. The difficulty lies in the fact that I can't develop my characters further, but must leave them as they are remembered.

The entry for February 20, 1966, reminds us of the vital literary life that once made Montreal the Yiddish cultural centre of Canada. The occasion is a salon-evening at the poet Mordecai Husid's home in honour of the publication of Zipper's Holocaust memorial poem.

The Husids organized an evening to honour the publication of *I Have Returned Once More to My Destroyed Home*. Our select circle was there. As customary, Ravitch¹³ had to be the opening speaker. But as usual with him, everything is superficial and grey, more a counting of pages than insight and analysis. His ideas did not excite anyone. Husid comprehended the poem quite well. His remarks, though, were subverted by his high-flown rhetoric. This aroused Wiseman, Dunsky,¹⁴ Lermer,¹⁵ Shulamis,¹⁶ and Sela¹⁷ to dig deeper, and there ensued a lively exchange of opinions about the fact that in recounting a profound experience, the word obstructs more than it can express. It also inspired me to give them an insight into myself and reveal how I stand at the brink of chaos and cry out to myself in a still, small voice. I think that they understood my meaning. Sela, the Israeli consul, took my remarks most seriously. If only a large segment of educated, young Israelis would comprehend Jewish circumstance so openly, we would truly sense a commonality between us. There was also a harsh note present. Morgenthaler¹⁸ arrived, accompanied by Chava, who is herself a poet. But at the present moment they are so far from our world, seeking an abstract humanism with a neutral God or pagan deity. Without having heard the preceding discussion, he countered in the style of the *Haggadah's* heretic, "What is this worship to you?" by asking "Why should you remember and devote yourselves to this? Only the present is important." etc. etc. He got his reprimand from me in very cutting but tactful manner.

The Jewish immigrant ghetto of Montreal, located along the Main had, in the post-war years, witnessed a mass exodus to the western areas of the city and the outlying suburbs. In his May 2, 1967 entry, Zipper revisits the old neighbourhood and recalls its former position as the geographic and social centre of Jewish Montreal.

Yesterday was a wonderful spring day. I simply didn't want to stay indoors. I had the urge to take a walk through the old neighbourhood around the dwellings of our youth, our beginnings here. It had resounded with the ebb and flow of Jewish life, the Yiddish language, the hustle and bustle of Jewish labour, trade, when every corner sprouted new institutions, old synagogues, schools, clubs, and social halls. The appearance of the district has hardly changed. The same cracked sidewalks, the curved outdoor staircases of the dark, shabby houses that for a whole block seem to be poured from the same mould. The former synagogues are replaced, for the most part, by parking lots or apartment houses. The cornerstones which were in Yiddish, with the dates of the Hebrew and secular calendar, now have the Jewish letters effaced or painted over, leaving only the secular dates. That's the situation at the Peretz Shule and the Beis Yehuda Synagogue. Only the Keren Yisroel Synagogue, because it remains unsold, still bears the inscription, "Keren Yisroel, founded through the generosity of Reb Pinchas Parness." Children of all colours play in French and Italian, as well as English. You wander about and the past years reappear with their conflicts between the Left and Right, demonstrations, hopes, disappointments, achievements. And you suddenly feel that in this district there once existed something we used to call the "Jewish Quarter", and where there is such a quarter there is also the sense of being at home. And this has been erased in the new neighbourhoods. There you see individuals but not a Jewish community — it is no longer a Jewish Quarter. The sounds of our singing on the mountain in the summer evenings, and the cries of our winter snow-games still ring in my ears. That which still

remains here seems alien. The only sign of the past—the *Keneder Odler* office—looks like an abandoned stump in a cleared forest.

The next entry from this segment is set in a small hotel in Rawdon where Zipper has come on February 16, 1968, seeking to restore his depleted energies. His descriptions of the wintry landscape leads him to metaphysical contemplations on the human relationship to nature, his own place within the cosmos.

I stroll about in the pleasant countryside among trees that are lost in whiteness. What do I know about them and the silence that hovers over the mountains, and what do they know about me? Rarely does one see anyone drive by, the summer cottages are boarded up, only the single footsteps in the snow informs you that in one of the houses there is a caretaker who makes sure that the houses do not freeze over. The barking of a dog signals that someone is watching you from a window. On my walk I feel a kind of lonely yet familiar sense when I hear a dog bark. Is he also looking for companionship?

I felt as if I was in the most profound depths of this ever-changing silent life, but at the same time excluded from it. The stillness, which I cannot penetrate, propels me forward, and all the surroundings—which stand as motionless as they did yesterday and doubtless will remain so tomorrow—seem to say to me: You do not understand the essence of our existence nor can you experience our being. All at once the strange purple and blue vanish from the sky as if into an unseen space, and in its place a bright, restful glow on the rim of the far side of the mountain, is, with quiet assuredness, swallowed up by the dark of the evening.

Odd how thoughts come to mind. This senseless drama is eternal, it started before me and will continue after me. Is this the creation? Are we the only creatures to vanish without a trace, along with all our commotion? Where is our eternal existence?

Such metaphysical musings lead to the final entry from this section. It is one of several accounts of Zipper's discussions with his younger brother Yechiel, whose Yiddishkeit was based on the mystical Kabbalistic tradition, at considerable distance from Zipper's secular outlook

July 8, 1969.

Last evening Yechiel came for a visit. He was very talkative, alert, and braided one homily into another at great length. He speaks with great assurance, yet one can detect the weighty doubts with which he struggles. The essence of his words are that secularism and the entire way that we deal with reality is nonsensical and leads to catastrophe. He had foreseen everything, and all our efforts to search for a synthesis are futile. Only living in accordance with the Torah assures survival and has meaning. Yiddishkeit is not built on belief but on divine omniscience. Redemption is at hand—he casually informs me—and that a select few have attained true knowledge through the Torah. From his tone you infer that he belongs with these knowledgeable ones. He tells me that sometimes he blurts out forbidden things that should remain unspoken. He mixes fantasy with Talmudic lore. And his eyes shine with a strange glow.

The third group of entries are drawn from Zipper's personal reflections on a variety of subjects. These include a number of obituary notices on the death of well-known individuals as well as friends and relatives. In all cases their deaths marked the passing of the immigrant generation which, for Zipper, meant the irreplaceable loss of those who had lived Yiddish lives.

The first obituary note of December 29, 1962 records the death of the great Yiddish writer H. Leivick.

So H. Leivick, as well, is no longer with us. The conscience of our generation has departed with him. He was the

most eminent literary personality after Peretz and it was a privilege to have known him and to have been in his presence. He tortured himself searching for answers and we were hallowed, not merely in esthetic realms. He provided meaning and justification for one's own inner struggles. He gave voice to the modern individual searching for answers and meanings about being and creativity. Peretz had given significance to the generations past, but the modern Jew could not find his own meaning in that source. Leivick attempted to find meaning for our time in the traditional motifs. He did not attain a complete answer. He looked too deeply into the "comedy of salvation" so he intensified the tragic element and elevated the individual conscience to tragic heights. Meanwhile they mourn him with clichés—but the time must come when we will gain fuller comprehension. The sense of emptiness around us becomes deeper and more intense.

Another notice, for June 1, 1969 marks the death of Zipper's uncle—Fetter Leib—who had preceded the family to Canada and is recalled as a simple and generous man with deep ties to his old country origins.

Today we accompanied the uncle to his eternal rest, his grave lies beside the aunt who died last fall. After her death he could not regain his health. Somehow he lost the will to live. Today he lies in a fancy coffin which is absolutely inappropriate to the spirit and way of life of the person known to everyone as Label. Simple in his ways, a constant smile on his face, and despite all of his afflictions carried with him the scent of Zomlitz, his village in Volhyn. It had a deep river full of fish, a buzzing forest full of secrets, and velvet meadows where the water sprites dried themselves in the dazzling moonlight after their seductions. He also brought from there the Ashkenazi custom that every villager's home was a place for any peddler or wanderer to spend the night. They could rest, eat, and expect charity when necessary. That was the kind of house the uncle and auntie established here.

Theirs was the first home for each of the family members who arrived here with their help, as well as for their town-folk and anyone else in need. In my words at the funeral I referred to him as the Joseph of the family and I concluded: "The last ring from the chain of great souls from mother and father's side, has now departed, to lie with them and join them for eternity." We part from the mortal remains but cherish within ourselves the light which emanates from them.

On July 13, 1969, news of S. Belkin's death reaches Zipper. Belkin will be remembered as a central figure in the work of the Jewish Colonization Association and the historian of Jewish immigration to Canada, the subject of his study, Through Narrow Gates.

Last night I heard that on Friday the 11th, Shaya Belkin passed away in San Leandro, California. One of the last of that generation which, virtually empty-handed, established all the institutions that are to this day the basis of our local community life. He was a colourful personality, of multifaceted abilities, and a dear person. He lived through hard times and applied all of his organizational skills for the good of the people. Like many of his generation he belonged to the Socialist Party, and later the Poalei Zion.

He was the most intelligent chaver of his group, but never pushed himself toward the highest positions. He wrote the history of the party's participation in the colonization and immigration movement in Canada, with which he was personally familiar. In recent years he was embittered because the *chaverim* and the community did not sufficiently appreciate him, despite the fact that he knew he was held in great esteem by everyone. He was hurt that very little was done to disseminate his books, and living all these years in California, naturally he was all but forgotten.

We shared many hard time together, and joyful ones as well. There remains in my memory the gathering of extraordinary

elation on the night that the State of Israel was declared. Spontaneously, people went to his house to share the experience.

One of his closest friends, Louis Rosenberg,¹⁹ already aged himself, cried bitterly to me, “Nobody knows us any more” He too, in his own way, produced an enormous mass of work, and was the best statistician of the Jews of Canada. Now he is just a small cog at Congress which only now, finally, agreed to a tiny pension. It was pathetic to sit with him and listen to his experiences of those by-gone days. Viscerally, I respond to the passing away of this generation, as it fast approaches those in the second row, including myself. Beyond control, his tears scald me as if they were my own. The sorrows of old age seem to become more acute when we know the specific case.

On August 22, 1972, Zipper notes the sad passing of Canadian Jewry’s outstanding English-language poet A.M. Klein and remarks on the oddity of the Rabbi’s eulogy.

Today we accompanied to his eternal rest the truly great Anglo-Jewish Canadian poet A. M. Klein. Actually he had not been among the living for the past fifteen years since he suffered a nervous breakdown and never recovered. The real cause remains uncertain. The only thing that was said at that time was that he was overwhelmed emotionally and mentally by the fact that he couldn’t complete his profound interpretation of James Joyce, whom he esteemed greatly. There is probably more to it than that. What we knew of him revealed that he was quite inclined toward mysticism and some of his visions were clearly enunciated in his writings and speeches. He was deeply moved by the events of the war and the cataclysm that befell the Jews. His addresses upon his return from visiting Europe and Africa and his descriptions of Jewish life there, were highly poetic and a cry from the heart. In his *The Second Scroll* you could feel his great lyricism and the hallucinatory images he made his own. That he could not project all this into his art and thus remain unscathed is a tragic circumstance and a heavy loss.

At his funeral you could see almost all those who are survivors of the tumultuous years of the 40s and 50s. From socialists to the orthodox, assimilationists, Yiddish writers and cultural activists. And perhaps a few from the English community, as well. An odd feature of the sad funeral was the fact that the single eulogy was delivered by a strictly orthodox Rabbi, Rabbi Hirshprung, who had been his neighbour. Unfortunately, he tried to speak about poetry and naturally, he spoke in Yiddish. What a distorted mirror is our existence here: Yiddish writers and activists are, as a rule, eulogized in English, while an English poet was eulogized in Yiddish, and moreover in a traditional manner of the most ancient mode.

The next entry notes the retirement of a comrade-in-arms, and speaks to Zipper's heightened sensitivity to the passage of time and the sense of loss he feels at the departure from active teaching of his life-long colleague.

June 22, 1969.

Last night attended an evening in honour of Shimshon Dunsky. He served the Folk Shule for 46 years, and in his seventieth year he is retiring from his position as vice-principal, but keeps a teaching post for one class. There was a large crowd, a warm atmosphere, because he is truly a teacher of supreme grace—as the saying goes, a fine person and a true scholar. Our friendship extends for almost forty years. His career included much joy and many achievements, which were addressed by the speakers. Sitting there I had the feeling that I was attending my own departure from our whole epoch. We can't even call it the changing of the guard, since I cannot see the guards of the future. In the meantime we are leaving the scene. In the ceremony children with candles circled him about, singing, while I felt a cold chill run through me. In leavetaking we are praised but soon we are forgotten.

To some extent Zipper's own desolate mood of abandonment was sometimes offset by activities which returned him to his beloved role as educator. These occasions restored his faith in his own capacity as instructor, still able to impart things of value to the young.

February 3, 1970.

Last Sunday spent the day with leaders of the B'nai Brith Youth Organization. The seminar was held in St. Agathe. There were about forty young people, all students between the ages of twenty and thirty. In the morning I spoke on the shtetl, covering almost the same material I had used for the course at McGill. The impression was the same as before. They have a deep curiosity to know of the past and to find values from that time that are still relevant today. Most of them know almost nothing about Jewish culture and life—except for flowery phrases about Judaism. The impact of my lecture was very emotional. The questions posed by some of them were quite profound. After all these years it was a stirring experience for me to speak to genuinely young people whose appearance and diverse opinions were only a temporary barrier. In the course of the discussions it felt as if I were back among the youth of Ustilla and Ludmir, or the first years here in Montreal many years ago. The same questioning, the same inner debates and searching for the fundamentals of a world-view. We still have much to impart to them and can certainly communicate with them, indicating that they are not cut-off and can still learn from our experiences.

Zipper's journals, which continued until 1982, months before his death, are primarily a self-portrait of a singular individual who resolved to keep an account of his passage through time—yet these private notes have unintentionally become important historical documents. The journals were his reflecting mirror just as his life mirrored the century in which

he was born. In his notes he could address the myriad changes he and his world had undergone in the years that had taken him from his origins in pre-modern Eastern-Europe to his present-day role as modern pedagogue. During these years his faith had rested on the ideals of rationalism, tolerance, and enlightenment. From these he had sought to construct a particular form of secular Jewish humanism—Yiddishkeit—which would energize Jewish life and guarantee its future. By mid-century however—with the destruction of Europe’s Jews behind him, and the rapid acculturation of North American Jewry before his eyes, he could no longer avoid questioning the future of that future.

ENDNOTES

¹For a study of the journals Zipper kept on his first year in Canada, see “The Journals of Yaacov Zipper 1925–1926” by Ode Garfinkle and Mervin Butovsky in *An Everyday Miracle: Yiddish Culture in Montreal*, eds. Ira Robinson, Pierre Ancil and Mervin Butovsky, 1990, pp. 53–68.

²Yaacov Zipper changed his name from Shtern in order to evade the Polish authorities who sought to arrest him for political activities. He assumed his mother-in-law’s name and in gratitude to her he retained that name for the rest of his life.

³Farband. Fraternal order of the Labour Zionist Movement.

⁴Zipper’s works appeared in Yiddish and Hebrew. It was his practice to write the Yiddish first, to be followed, often many years later, by the Hebrew. His bibliography includes: *Geven iz a mentsch*, 1940; *Oif Yener Zeit Bug*, 1946; *Tsvishn Teichn un Vasern*, 1961; *Ch’bin Vidder in Mein Chorever Heim Gekumen*, 1965; *In Die Getzelten fun Avrohom*, 1974; *Fun Nechtn un Heint*, 1978; *Areinblicken in Yiddishen Litererishen Schaffen*, 1983.

⁵*Chalutzit*. The spirit of pioneering Israel.

⁶Talmud Torah. Religious schools at the elementary and secondary levels.

⁷Auerbachs and Bialystotskys. Efraim Auerbach was a Yiddish poet; A.B. Bialystotsky was a Yiddish essayist.

⁸Pioneer Women. Women's sector of the Labour Zionist Movement.

⁹Zuker. Leizer Zuker, veteran member of the Labour Zionist Movement, was a staunch supporter of the Peretz Schools.

¹⁰Hayes. Saul Hayes, Executive Director of Canadian Jewish Congress.

¹¹Sarah Caiserman. Yiddish activist.

¹²Wiseman. Shloime Wiseman, longtime principal of the Folk Shule (the Jewish People's School).

¹³Ravitch. Melech Ravitch, a prominent figure in modern Yiddish poetry.

¹⁴Dunsky. Shimshon Dunsky, vice-principal of the Folk Shule.

¹⁵Lerner. Arthur Lerner, economist and Yiddish activist.

¹⁶Shulamis. Shulamis Yellen, teacher, poet, and memoirist.

¹⁷Sela. Benjamin Sela, Israeli consul.

¹⁸Morgenthaler. Dr. Henry Morgenthaler, married at that time to the novelist and poet, Chava Rosenfarb.

¹⁹Louis Rosenberg. Research director of the Canadian Jewish Congress and leading demographer of Canadian Jewry.