

Faith Jones

**“WANDERING IS YOUR FATE”: ESTHER SHUMI-
ATCHER-HIRSCHBEIN WRITING ACROSS BOUNDARIES**

On the cover of the premier issue of an avant-garde Yiddish literary magazine, a bird is flying, a soft right-to-left swoosh of head and feathers interrupted by harsh, geometric up-and-down wings. Or perhaps the wings are not actual wings but an industrial road through a serene landscape stretching sideways across the page. They could even be a bridge over water flowing below. Read from bottom to top, the geometric forms – be they wings or a human construction – spell, in Yiddish, “Albatross.”

Published in Warsaw in 1922 and then in Berlin in 1923, and edited by Uri Tsvi Grinberg, a complex figure in both Yiddish and Hebrew literature, *Albatros* was one of several ambitious and short-lived periodicals that gave voice to Eastern European artists, many of them in transit between Russia and the west, or Russia and Palestine.¹ Heavily influenced by German expressionism, these publications were notable for their integration of art, contemporary design, experimental type, and other innovations. It is curious, then, and striking, that *Albatros* took its name from a poem by a Canadian woman, Esther Shumiatcher, who was simply passing through Warsaw at the time Grinberg was gathering materials for his first issue, and who only recently had begun to write. The three poems by Shumiatcher (“Albatross” and two others) that appeared in the first issue of the journal were among her earliest publications. While no explicit editorial statement was made about the choice of title, the opening pages of the journal featured a

“Proclamation” written in Grinberg’s trademark dense, metaphorical language, which shed light on the editor’s vision and the resonance of certain themes for this group of refugee-intellectuals:

Door and battlements are open to the Four Winds, where the eternal Pilgrims are pulled, the sin of restlessness, of purified all-world — all-people recognition. Albatrosses from the young-Yiddish writing. Spiritual food: our own flesh; veins; nerves. Drink from our own bone-goblets: pulsing blood. And black Sabbath bread — our shewbread: suffering. — What else do we lack in this Kingdom of holy poverty? We, the sung-out caravan of God’s poor folk.

Albatrosses. Writers —²

Shumiatcher’s poem, itself a much more straightforward meditation on Jewish homelessness and artistic desire, may have meshed with European sensibilities to create the kind of murky, mythological image that embodied the dislocations and contingency of life for the group of Yiddish writers, the *Khalyastre*, gathered then in Warsaw:

Albatross

Albatross,
Albatross,
your body – mother of pearl,
your bronze wings,
water and sky – your eye.

Albatross,
flowing waves –
your game.
Crashing foam –
your day.

Wandering is your fate:
navigating the winds
behind steel ships.
Circling,

your hunger groping
towards earthy descent.

And when light
is drowned in darkness –
the waves
are your home,
the waves
are your bed.
Albatross,
Albatross!

Shumiatcher came to be in Warsaw during a long trip she made with her husband, the Yiddish playwright Peretz Hirschbein, from 1920 to 1924. On this trip, the two traveled through the South Pacific, Asia, Northern Africa, and Europe. Much of her early poetry, short lyrics based on the exotic and unfamiliar locales and peoples she encountered around the world, geishas in Japan, Maoris in New Zealand, dates from these travels. Even the metaphorical poem “Albatross” likely was inspired by an actual albatross, encountered on her travels in the North or South Pacific. Shumiatcher’s arrival in Warsaw was her first meeting with members of the *Khalyastre*, foremost among them Grinberg, Peretz Markish, and Melech Ravitch.³ Her husband, an older, established writer with deep connections to virtually every community of Yiddish artists, due to a lifetime of ceaseless travel in which he sought out likeminded Jews, provided her entrée to the group. The *Khalyastre* ethos was marked by a vigorous reinvention of Yiddish language and linguistic norms, an exuberant yet taut literary style, and a rejection of realism. Without fitting this description or subscribing to a particular literary credo, Shumiatcher appears to have had no trouble either socializing – in the case of Ravitch, forming a life-long friendship – or having satisfying creative exchanges with the *Khalyastre* while she was in Warsaw, although these relationships were not without their difficulties.

Shumiatcher was born in 1899⁴ in Gomel, one of 11 children of Judah and Chasia Shumiatcher. The family immigrated

to Calgary about 1911.⁵ As in many immigrant families, every person worked from a young age and contributed to household finances. These energetic and talented siblings later became lawyers, musicians, and entrepreneurs, but only after a number of years were spent working at menial jobs and helping their mother, who took in boarders.⁶ After Shumiatcher's high school graduation she worked in meat packing plants and in restaurants as a waitress. Her family was active in Calgary's small, cohesive, and largely Yiddish-speaking Jewish community. In 1918, Shumiatcher was chosen to present flowers to a visiting dignitary, Yiddish writer Peretz Hirschbein, after his talk to the local community. He continued on his speaking tour, but a few weeks later, while on a train bound for Alaska, he realized he was too sick to travel. He returned to Calgary, where he boarded with the Shumiatcher family to wait out his illness.

Even sicker than he realized, Hirschbein was nursed through the Spanish flu by Esther Shumiatcher. Hirschbein was almost 20 years her senior, but it was not long before they decided to marry, which they did in Calgary on 11 December 1918. Shortly thereafter, they left Calgary for New York. On 16 November, while Hirschbein was ill, his play *A Farvorfener vinkl* (*A Secluded Nook*) had opened in Maurice Schwartz's Irving Place Theatre to ecstatic reviews and public acclaim. It was his first great success and marked a turning point in Yiddish theatre, exchanging nineteenth century melodramas, historical epics, and broad comedy for a naturalistic style, gentle humour, and literary merit – also aided by Schwartz's professional staging. As soon as Hirschbein was able, the couple returned to New York where Shumiatcher found herself drawn into a world of artists, writers, actors, and intellectuals. According to several sources, she already had written poetry in English before meeting Hirschbein, but under his influence she turned to Yiddish, debuting in the New York journal *In zikh* in 1920.⁷

Melech Ravitch was primarily a poet when he met Shumiatcher in Warsaw. Later in life he turned to journalism and feuilletons as his primary medium; he produced numerous volumes of memoir that were marked by their lively familiarity

and a charming deference to those of his acquaintance whose foibles he lovingly recounted. Over the years he produced several impressionistic memoirs of Shumiatcher for the Yiddish press, and from these we are left with a wonderfully nuanced picture of the personal and literary relationships that surrounded Shumiatcher. In a column he wrote years later, his “Literary anecdotarium,” Ravitch gave this picture of Shumiatcher’s first visit:

Esther Shumiatcher

A name which is not too hard but rather too different is that of the well-known Yiddish writer, the wife of Peretz Hirschbein. As soon as Hirschbein came with his young wife to Warsaw – after World War I – the complications began with the name Shumiatcher. Everyone wanted to be very gentlemanly – her name was then only beginning to be heard in literary circles – everyone was constantly embarrassed since in Warsaw there was such great respect for writers that if you didn’t say their names correctly you’d quickly be reprimanded. Esther Semiatitsky . . . Esther Shumer . . . Esther Shumiatch . . . Esther Shumiatchov – but no-one ever happened to say, even by accident: Esther Shumiatcher. And Shumiatcher just happens to be the writer’s name. And the more people realized that they could trip up in pronouncing the name, the more they were driven to err, like Sholem Aleichem’s famous hero always doing exactly what he was trying not to. One time Alter Kacyzne had to chair a literary evening where Esther Shumiatcher would be among those appearing. He had practiced the name a hundred times, wrote it in big letters on an index card he carried in his pocket, and additionally asked a friend to stand in the wings and, when the moment came to say the name, prompt him. Kacyzne used to always be a little rattled, and played up being rattled, but this time he really was. He had been warned that should he too mispronounce the name of the

beautiful, young writer, he would be tarred and feathered. The moment arrived and he said the name with perfect enunciation: Esther Shumiatcher – but then lost his nerve and began to stammer and correct himself: I mean, Semiatitsky, Shumer, Shumiatitch, Shumiatov . . .⁸

According to Ravitch (writing in a separate essay), the Warsaw Jewish literati were enchanted yet bewildered by Shumiatcher, a tiny, exotic-looking creature, dressed in turbans and flowing robes, like the “Biblical illustrations of Abel Pann or Ephraim Mose Lilien.”⁹ She spoke so quietly at times he found it hard to hear her, and she made it yet harder by speaking in metaphor and allusion, even when speaking of everyday life:

Markish, Markish, so much Spring is en-Springed outside today, did you go outside yet to drink from Spring? – or

Uri Tsvi, Uri Tsvi Grinberg, when will you finally hear the flapping of the albatrosses? – or

Ravitch, Ravitch – today is the 12th of September, have you written a poem about it yet?

More problematically, Ravitch reported that much of Shumiatcher’s poetry was too slight and lyrical to catch the mood of the young rebels, especially in print. He noted that when she read at literary gatherings, she imparted an emotional connection to her poetry, but otherwise his sense was that her early poetry “hung on thin silk threads, or straight down from heaven, or on the branches of a palm tree and rocked in the drowsy tropical wind” – in spite of the occasional poem like “Albatross” that appealed to the fiery Warsaw intelligentsia.

Shumiatcher meanwhile pursued a literary vision that was entirely personal. Neither stopping long enough in any locale to become absorbed in a group like the *Khalyastre* or *In zikh*, nor participating in the internecine warfare of Yiddish literary life, she seems to have thrown herself into her life with Hirschbein and her writing (and later, her son). Her creativity developed and matured, she found new motifs or delved more deeply into

earlier ones, but she never fit neatly into either the Yiddish or modern American literary streams.

Shortly after her marriage, Shumiatcher published the first of two children's plays intended for use in the Yiddish secular schools. There is no indication that they were ever performed for an audience, but they may have been used in the classroom. Both were written for child casts. *In Tol (In the Valley* 1920) is a half-mystical, half-real journey of a young girl, Esther, as she searches for her dead mother. One evening as Esther prepares for bed, three neighbour children arrive, afraid to stay alone at night when their parents are away. Following clues laid out to Esther in a dream, the four children set out to find Esther's mother in a nearby valley. They continually lose one another in the valley, finding mysterious adults who are both caring and menacing. They wonder if an old woman gathering herbs for sick children might be Esther's mother, but she sends them away. Eventually they must find each other and their way back to their lives. Shumiatcher's child characters have no clear understanding of death, but they understand loss and fear that define their lives. Even those with parents are not necessarily comforted by them; they are vulnerable to the animals and adults they encounter in potentially dangerous situations. Interestingly, these children move between real life and the dream-state valley with no disruption of consciousness.

A second play, *Pasn likht (Streaks of Light* 1925), followed Shumiatcher's first long trip with Hirschbein. This play was directly inspired by traveling through the pogrom zones of Eastern Europe. Here, a group of orphaned children attempt to survive together after their village is devastated. The children take on various adult roles; identify priorities based on survival (finding a source of water) or values (the most advanced student among them teaches the younger children to read); become frightened of either staying together or separating; starve; fall in love; form factions which cannot reconcile, even in the face of certain death; and are otherwise microcosms of the entire Jewish people. A non-Jewish child who takes refuge among them is a point of contention, for example. And

there is no easy answer, as some of the children opt to find adults to care for them, while others decide to stay together in their own, certainly doomed, but self-directing community. The play is nothing short of bleak and extraordinarily painful to read – as it must have been to write.

Already publishing her poetry in numerous literary journals, after *Pasn likht* Shumiatcher turned her full attention to her adult medium. She and Hirschbein traveled again to Eastern Europe in 1928-29. On this visit they spent 10 months over a cold winter in the Crimea visiting Jewish collective farms (one of several ultimately unsuccessful Soviet projects for resettling displaced Jews and reorienting them to rural labour). On this voyage they visited Shumiatcher's home town of Gomel, Belarus and stayed in Warsaw for several months.¹⁰ They returned to America late in 1929, and Shumiatcher began gathering her poems for a first collection.

The resulting book, *In shoen fun libshaft (In the Hours of Love)*, was published in 1930 to mostly negative reviews. Even Ravitch apparently abhorred it and claimed her poetry lacked teeth.¹¹ Particularly irritating to many critics were the exotic locales evoked in the poetry: they complained that the writer appeared too detached from her subject matter. Her other poems, mostly very short (running from eight lines to a full page, but rarely longer), on a range of subjects both serious and playful, including love poems and nature lyrics, do not seem to have aroused much interest. Ravitch later recalled teasing Shumiatcher about her ode to a potato, a poem he actually published in the literary supplement to the newspaper he edited (the Warsaw *Folkstsaytung*). Unusual for the Yiddish press, his paper did not pay for publishing literature, so the next time the families ate together Ravitch and his wife served Shumiatcher the largest potato they could find at the market, saying "Your honorarium!"¹² Yet when it appeared in her collection, the whole appeared less than the sum of its parts.

The most damaging review was certainly Shmuel Niger's strafing criticism that appeared in the influential New York literary magazine *Di tsukunft (The Future)*. He began by

referring to her poems about different cities and places as a kind of innocent game, in which the poet arranged cities into “little letters and little lines”¹³ (using a line from a poem of hers about writing poetry); but each city, he complained, lacked its particularity, simply appearing as background:

The “little letters and little lines” are put together in poems, shorter and longer, pale and not so very pale, in verses which rhyme and in free verse – the poems extend over 300 or so pages, and the lines stretch out, but . . . but what is the underlying line? A hard question to answer. It’s hard to find some kind of motif, idea, form, rhythm, which can pull all the “hours of love” (love of what? the little letters and little lines again?) together into a single strand, into, to speak grandiloquently, a *life*. [ellipsis in original]

Niger went on to complain that the poems were too undifferentiated and too shallow, and quoted some of Shumiatcher’s less interesting lines of poetry to support his point. He did not mention anywhere in the review the poems that dealt with other themes – they comprised fully half the book – which left the reader to assume that *In shoen fun libshaft* was 300 pages of travelogue in verse. When he mentioned the poem about her hometown of Gomel, it was in a list of the exotic locales covered in the book:

We read all the poems, both the pale and bloodless, and those that have a drop of color in their faces, and think: they are called “the hours of love,” but they were written in hours not amatory but amateurish, in hours of amateurish lyricism . . .

As was common in the Yiddish press, Shumiatcher’s book was reviewed in conjunction with other books by women writers. Throughout her career Shumiatcher frequently was reviewed in this manner, a form that lent itself to proclaiming a single woman writer among the two or three under review as worthy of serious consideration. This format usually seemed to work to Shumiatcher’s disadvantage. She published her first two books concurrently with books by the extraordinary stylist

Malka Lee, and comparisons as well as joint reviews of the two writers abound. This comparison was always to Shumiatcher's disadvantage. Lee's intense and powerful images were more to the taste of the Yiddish literary world, and Shumiatcher's gentle touch regularly was overlooked.

But not all Shumiatcher's poems were tranquil or sweet. Even in her first book of poetry, the least emotionally-charged of her works, several themes emerge. In particular, the poem about Gomel is worth consideration on its own terms, without comparison to other poets or to Shumiatcher's other poems of the same era.

Gomel, 1905-1928

I went away from you when I was just a sprout
 and anger was already in my face.
 It tracked me like a loyal hound
 fear darkly foreboding axe and crow-bar,
 and puffy feathers on the stony cobbles
 and yours a nauseating word
 — *bei zhidov*

Enough of you, my words, always repeating,
 repeating;
 it's only an echo of the wholly darkened past,
 and everything happening as in a dream . . .
 enough of you, my always-repeating words.¹⁴

In this poem the fury of Shumiatcher's poetic voice is notable. Only 29 when she wrote it, there is a maturity in the return to a traumatic event of her childhood (and of the life of the Jewish people), and the realization of the hold it still has over her imagination. She notes the passage of time as in some ways illusory: there is no distance from a past that is not "wholly darkened" but still present, an inescapable "loyal hound." Whatever her immigration and relative safety in the west may have achieved, and despite her preference as a writer for lyrical quietude, she is unable to make sense of her world through the "always-repeating words" which are both the words of the pogromchiks and of her own poems.

While Shumiatcher surely must have been disappointed with the reception of *In shoen fun libshaft*, she continued writ-

ing. In New York in 1934, she wrote her poem cycle “Nine Months” while pregnant. Her son Omus was born on 3 October 1934, and a cycle of birth poetry followed this event. “Nine Months” was published in January 1937 in the periodical *Zamlbikher (Anthologies)*. This time her work was received with a lukewarm tone by Niger, who mentioned the poems in passing in a literary column in the New York intellectual daily *Der tog (The Day)*. While acknowledging that the theme was new to Yiddish poetry, he was fully convinced that “the most poetic lines are not those in which the lyrical intimacies of subject are discussed. Rather, intimate lyricism finds expression in prose. A poetic expression is found exactly in that which is socially prosaic.” He noted that Shumiatcher’s lead was followed closely by Malka Lee, whose “Poems of Birth” were published in *Hamer (Hammer)* in April 1937, and expressed relief to find Lee’s poetry good enough that “if other lyrical confessions of other women writers are as good as Malka Lee’s, there’s nothing to fear.”¹⁵

When Shumiatcher’s second book of poetry, *Ale tog (Every Day)*, appeared in 1939 it included her birth poems. *Ale tog* received more critical attention. Several reviewers took pains to mention the improvement over her previous book and the innovation of “writing on a theme which until not long ago was almost completely missing from our literature.”¹⁶ Another critic put it more forcefully:

From the first line of the poem series “Birth” – “A life grows in me” – through verse after verse and poem after poem the writer reveals for us a rich maternal joy, which is not only rare in our literature, but I honestly cannot find any poems with such deep maternal experiences and artistic scope in a half dozen other literatures.¹⁷

This assessment can be taken as more than hubris. It was not uncommon for Yiddish intellectuals to know not only half a dozen European languages but to be familiar with their literary traditions and modern literatures, particularly Russian and German and to a lesser extent English and American writing. It

is interesting to note that current research into English-language literature supports this reviewer's assertion: according to the compiler of an anthology of birth poetry in English, the first literary, for-publication writing on the process of birth itself (rather than on the raising of children) was Anne Sexton's poem "In Celebration of My Uterus" which appeared in the 1960s, well after Shumiatcher and Lee's work.¹⁸

The same reviewer who so strongly appreciated Shumiatcher's birth poetry was principled enough to mention that previously he had dismissed Shumiatcher's work but now regretted that dismissal in light of the mature poetic voice he found in *Ale tog*. He also lauded the unforced language in which she conveyed detailed observations of nature. What he did not mention were the more specifically "Jewish" themes also present in this work, and that Shumiatcher appeared to be striving for a synthesis of particularity of the historic moment she found herself in and the historic voice of the Jews, as in, for example, this poem which mimics the language of Genesis:

Without Form and Void

Evening lies against my window heavy and tired.
 Day is a battlefield:
 my every limb groans.
 I stand mute, accused:
 a people bleed to death –
 and here we
 walk around
 worrying
 as on every other day.
 Our cart
 laden with heavy truth.

O, Darkness,
 retreat for a moment from my door!
 Blood screams from the deep.
 I await orders.
 But nobody stirs
 and nobody steps forward.
 We make meals at the appointed times
 and speak holy words

of Cain's portion
and the cry of
Abel.

O, Darkness,
retreat for a moment from my door!
At my headboard – a burning gallows,
a mother runs mad in the streets
wringing her hands amid the wasteland.

It is night.
Darkness in blood.
I hear the breath of my people:
with blood the day expires
and the sand flares like a wildfire.
Outside autumn blazes:
on every face recognition
and also darkness upon the smallest creature.
Outside autumn blazes
and dark without form and void.

Shortly after publication of *Ale tog*, Hirschbein received an offer to write screenplays in Hollywood. Previously two of his plays had been made into movies (one silent and one in Yiddish) but he was now to turn to English-language screenplays for regular distribution. In 1940, Shumiatcher, Hirschbein, and Omus moved to Los Angeles. One screenplay, a wartime propaganda movie, was produced in 1943, but already Hirschbein's health had begun to deteriorate with the first signs of ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease) that killed him in 1948.¹⁹ This era was obviously the most painful and disruptive of Shumiatcher's life. Even though Hirschbein was so much older, she would have assumed that he would live past 68, and that at least they would be able to raise their son together. Hirschbein was her major literary influence, as well as her staunchest supporter, and her life was bound up with his not only emotionally but also creatively. The couple also faced a sudden loss of income. Productions of Hirschbein's work and a joint touring and speaking schedule had provided most of the family's income up to this point. With Hirschbein unable to work – and following his death – Shumiatcher had no source of income and

no particular skills to put to work. She ultimately depended on her family for money.

After Hirschbein's death Shumiatcher remained in Los Angeles to raise Omus, who eventually left to attend college in New York. In 1956 her final volume of poetry, *Lider (Poems)*, was published by a committee of friends, stalwarts of the Los Angeles Yiddish community, who raised the funds for production.²⁰ The poems in this book, which together form her most mature as well as her most personal writing, attest to her intense grief at losing her life's companion, and the profound impact her marriage, sexuality, and subsequent widowhood had on her creative life. The poems cover family relationships (including poems about and to her mother); love and Eros; illness, death, and grief; motherhood; portraits of friends; nature; and a six-poem cycle to the Yiddish language. For the first time, she added "Hirschbein" to her surname: on the page of *Lider* her name appears as Esther Shumiatcher-Hirschbein.²¹ One critic wrote of the erotic poetry: "This is how Shulamith would have expressed herself, had she thought in Yiddish."²² Of the grief poetry, another critic said, "This is a healthy sadness – if one can say that – which compels one to live, a sadness which makes state of mind and human endeavor deep and creative."²³ Not all reviewers were similarly impressed. I. B. Singer, writing in the New York daily *Forverts* under his pseudonym Yitskhak Varshavski, approved only of the love poetry, though this appears to tell us more about Singer than about Shumiatcher as a poet: "It's good to know that someone among the Yiddish women writers can still be entranced by a male, and feel his kiss to be 'the eternal essence.'"²⁴

After the publication of *Lider*, Shumiatcher appears to have written poetry very occasionally. She continued to lecture and travel widely, probably her only source of income. Appearances in New York, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, and Toronto were noted in the Yiddish press throughout the 1950s. In 1960 she went to Israel and stayed for over two years. In 1962 she returned to Los Angeles to an adoring community of Yiddishists:

Respected Guest in Los Angeles

The writer Esther Shumiatcher-Hirschbein, our local hero, having spent two and a half years in Israel, is now returned to L. A., though only for a short time. The culture club put together an evening of welcome in honor of the writer on Saturday, November 24. An audience of over 300 listened with strong interest to her interesting lecture about life and work in Israel. Esther read from her new poems, which are ready for publication, called “Predestined Earth.”²⁵

Around this time, Shumiatcher relocated to New York to be closer to her son and his family. From that time until her death in 1985, she does not seem to have had a particularly active creative life, although occasional projects no doubt were fulfilling. She co-translated Hirschbein’s play *A Farvorfener vinkl*, probably for production.²⁶ Two of her talented family members, brother-in-law Lazar Weiner and niece Minuetta Kessler, both working composers, set some of her poetry to music.²⁷ She continued to be active in Yiddish literary circles, and today she is remembered by older members of New York’s secular Yiddish-speaking community.

Shumiatcher’s creative life seems to have been unusually closely tied to her adventurous and supportive partnership with Hirschbein. Unlike many English-language women writers before the current generation, for whom marriage spelled the end of creativity or who retreated from the world entirely in order to write, Shumiatcher’s marriage was the centrifugal force from which her poetry emanated. In contrast, her reception by male critics – there were virtually no Yiddish-language female critics until the 1950s, after much of Shumiatcher’s output had already been published – is all too familiar. She was sequestered into a separate category of “women writers,” compared only with other women writers, and given little critical analysis on her own terms – all of which suggest the patronizing and gendered ideology of cultural criticism.²⁸ Shumiatcher took pains to make a case for herself and other women writers, argu-

ing that women had separate stories to tell but neither separate nor lesser value in communal life. In her own words:

We continue to be hounded by the institution that the Jewish tradition has apportioned to the Jewish woman – a footrest in Paradise. This has influenced the psychology of Jewish women and gave rise to a kind of spiritual dejection. There is no doubt that the Jewish woman has had, in all generations, potential in the realm of spiritual endeavor. Literature has passed over a number of important moments in the life of the Jewish woman, many life passages remain buried under a mound of ash. Overnight the rebirth of the Jewish woman took place, like a sudden storm through her life. She saw herself lost, spiritually naked before the great events of our time. It is time to put aside the traditional *mekhitse* [division between men and women in a synagogue]. I say this in opposition to those who in literature divide up writers into separate categories. It shows no respect to the literature to do that. There is no gender separation in art or in expression: womanliness – an expression you hear used so often – is completely flavorless. I am one of those women writers who wish to be writers, but I don't deny that the woman depicts specific human experiences, which she conceives through her observations as a woman and a mother, that you cannot find among male writers. The entire physical otherness of women is such that even in the social and political spheres we react to events differently than men. In the example of the current Jewish tragedy, Yiddish women writers also reacted, but the voice was a different one.²⁹

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Notes

¹*Albatros* ran to four numbers. Another example of this genre is the Berlin publication *Milgroym (Pomegranate)* that ran to six issues between 1922 and 1924.

²*Albatros* 1 (1922): 3. Translations appearing in this essay are mine.

³*Khalyastre* means “gang.” Originally an epithet hurled at the young literary upstarts by an outraged Yiddish press, the term was worn as a badge of honour by the three leading members.

⁴Dates given vary from 1899 to 1905. Given the indisputable date of her marriage – December 1918 – anything later than 1900 seems very unlikely. I have identified 1899 as the most likely year of birth since it appears in the earliest biographical notes about her, such as the *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese un filologye* vol. 4 (Vilnius: B. Kletskin, 1930) 556-59. The later appearance of other dates would seem to indicate that Shumiatcher was not above shaving a year or two off her age when she felt herself approaching an unfortunate round number. The date of marriage was ascertained using the telegrams of congratulations in the YIVO Hirschbein fonds.

⁵Again dates vary. Shumiatcher’s poem “Gomel, 1905-1928,” considered later in this essay, may have prompted the assumption that 1905 referred to the year she left Gomel. It seems rather to be the date of a pogrom. While the better-known Gomel pogrom took place in 1903, around the same time as Kishinev, Shumiatcher was probably too young to remember Kishinev and instead remembered a smaller 1905 pogrom. Sources supporting a 1911 immigration date include: *Hemshekh antologye* (New York: Hemshekh, 1945) 184; *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur* vol. 8 (New York: Alveltlekhn yidishn kultur-kongres, 1981) 598; and *Canadian Jewry: Prominent Jews of Canada* (Toronto: Canadian Jewish Historical Publishing Company, 1933) 169 (entry on Shumiatcher’s brother, Abraham Shumiatcher).

⁶The family also used the last name Smith. For a complete account of the family’s accomplishments, see Brian Brennan, “The Shumiatcher Saga,” *Calgary Herald* 8-10 Mar. 1997. Most famously, one Shumiatcher brother created the white “Smithbilt” cowboy hats which for over fifty years have been a symbol of the city of Calgary, recognized internationally and presented to all visiting dignitaries.

⁷*Hemshekh antologye* (New York: Hemshekh, 1945) 184. There is no indication that her English writings were published. Shumiatcher’s poetry did not adhere strictly to the manifesto of the *inzikhistn* (introspectivists)

either, but such alliances between members and non-members of literary groups were common among Yiddish writers.

⁸Melech Ravitch, "Literarishe anekdotarium," *Der veg* 24 Mar. 1945: 5. The name Shumiatcher is a toponymic surname meaning "from the town of Shumyachi" (Russia) found in Gomel and other areas of Belarus. Alexander Beider, "Shumyacher," *A Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from the Russian Empire* (Teaneck, NJ: Avotaynu, 1993) 541. Kacyzne was not a *Khalyastre* member; he belonged to an earlier generation of Yiddish writers. Kacyzne wrote historical dramas for the stage, "folk" ballads, and mystical short stories. In 1941, while trying to escape the Nazis, he was beaten to death in Ukraine by collaborators.

⁹Melech Ravitch, "Ester Shumyatsher-Hirshbayn," *Keneder odler* 19 Dec. 1958: 3. The following two quotes are taken from the same article.

¹⁰Nahman Mayzel, "Mit der heyser brukhe af di lipn: tsum opforn fun Perets Hirshbayn un Ester Shumyatsher in Poyln," *Literarishe bleter* 8 Nov. 1929: 877.

¹¹Several times in his later writings, Ravitch mentions writing a negative review of *In shoen fun libshaft*, apparently entitled "A Woman Writer Travels the World Behind a Veil," but I have not been able to locate this review. He makes a point of noting that it did not interfere with their friendship: "Esther was always incredibly disciplined, exactly like her Peretz. In all the times we have seen each other since, she has never mentioned my review." Melech Ravitch, "Ester Shumyatsher-Hirshbayn," *Keneder odler* 19 Dec. 1958: 3-4.

¹²Melech Ravitch, "Ester Shumyatsher-Hirshbayn," *Keneder odler* 19 Dec. 1958: 4.

¹³Sh[muel] Niger, "Naye lider," [in column "Fun der bikher-velt"] *Di tsukunft* Sept. 1932: 558. The two quotes that follow are taken from the same review. See pp. 558-59.

¹⁴*In shoen fun libshaft*, p. 213. "Bei zhidov" (Russian/Belarusian): "beat the Jews," the rallying cry of pogromchiks.

¹⁵Sh[muel] Niger, "Geleyent un geshribn," *Der tog* 6 June 1937: 9. However irritating these invidious comparisons must have been, there is no indication that women writers fell out among themselves because of them. Shumiatcher and Lee apparently remained on friendly terms.

¹⁶Ezekiel Brownstone, *Impresyes fun a leyener* (Chicago, 1941) 116.

¹⁷L. Feinberg, "Dos lid fun zayn," *Yidishe kultur* Sept.-Oct. 1939: 80. Ravitch also said later that her pregnancy and childbirth poems made him

appreciate Shumiatcher's literary talents. Melech Ravitch, "Ester Shumyatsher-Hirshbayn," *Keneder odler* 19 Dec. 1958: 3.

¹⁸Charlotte Otten, "Foreword," *The Virago Book of Birth Poetry* (London: Virago, 1993) xv.

¹⁹Omus Hirshbein, telephone interview, 3 Oct. 2003. Information on Hirschbein's movies can be found at www.imdb.com.

²⁰This was not unusual in Yiddish literary circles and was no less prestigious than having a regular publisher. In fact, it was taken as a sign of honour and esteem that individual supporters put their time and money behind the effort.

²¹Confusion may arise from the various ways both Hirschbein and Shumiatcher spelled their surnames throughout their careers. For simplicity, I have used the established bibliographic forms of their names, but it is worth noting that the spellings "Hirshbein" and "Shumiacher," and later, when she hyphenated her name, combinations of all four variants, appeared in their lifetimes. Their son and his family use the spelling "Hirshbein." Shumiatcher also was called Ethel within the Shumiatcher family.

²²Salomon Kahan, "Esther Shumyatshers 'Lider,'" *Literarische un zhurnalistiche fartseykhnungen* (Mexico City: Komitet tsu fayern durkh a kultur-tat dem mehabers finf un zekhtsikstn geboyrntog, 1961) 104.

²³Abraham Lis, "Lider fun Esther Shumyatsher," *In zkhus fun vort* (Tel Aviv: Farlag Y. L. Perets, 1969) 63.

²⁴Yitskhak Varshavski [I. B. Singer], "Tsvey naye idische bikher," *Forverts* 28 Apr. 1957: 12. "The eternal essence" is a quote from one of Shumiatcher's poems. Singer's reference to a lesbian or anti-male theme in Yiddish women's writing is hard to understand. I am not aware of any lesbian poetry in Yiddish that predates the current generation of Yiddish poets. This may have been some sort of shot at a particular woman, or simply Singer's generalized inability to appreciate female independence.

²⁵*Khezhbm* Jan. 1963: 53. The poems referred to may have been published in periodicals, but I have not been able to locate them.

²⁶The typescript of this translation is in the collection of the Dorot Jewish Division of the New York Public Library. It is undated and gives no indication of a date of production.

²⁷Lazar Weiner, *Five Yiddish Songs* (New York: Transcontinental Music, 1953); Minuetta Kessler, *In Hours of Love* (Belmont, MA.: Musical Resources, 1982).

²⁸Even Malka Lee, in her day so much more enthusiastically embraced than Shumiatcher, is virtually untranslated and unstudied in Yiddish classrooms today. It required a specifically feminist project to make Lee's work available to a wider audience. See Frieda Forman, et al., eds., *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers* (Toronto: Second Story P, 1994).

²⁹Quoted in Melech Ravitch, "A Shmues mit Ester Shumyatsher," *Di presse* 26 Aug. 1945: 12.