



Letters written  
from J.I. Segal to  
other poets, 1926.  
Courtesy of Sylvia  
Lustgarten and  
Annette Zakuta.

“The abject poverty of Segal’s childhood appears in poems he published much later in his Montreal career”<sup>1</sup>.

### **Under a spent sun<sup>2</sup>**

At your hungry table, Mother,  
 In the grey impoverished markets  
 Where small vendors with stooped shoulders  
 Hunch from dawn to dusk  
 And over the poles of the telegraph wires  
 Fly the crows of early autumn.  
 And a winter sets in, a winter.  
 And it snows on the little people  
 And slaps them in the head with cold  
 and burns with storms and flames in the west  
 and frightens with wars and evil decrees.  
 And here in the corners such loneliness grows  
 until the first young onions appear in the market,  
 and a bird lands on the doorstep of a shop.  
 And a frightening funeral so forlorn  
 Passes through the market square.  
 And from everywhere one can see the stone wall  
 That encircles the cemetery.

“[This] poem about Montreal ... projects onto the city the astonishment coupled with silent fear experienced by many new arrivals”

### **Untitled<sup>3</sup>**

All of you in far-off villages  
 nestled in green forests,  
 All of you by one thousand  
 tortuous and winding ways,  
 From remote stretches  
 and distant edges,  
 All of you will yet come to me.  
 You will bring your purest hearts  
 to burn upon my altar.

In my labyrinth  
 Of passion and splendid-golden sin,  
 Where one thousand mighty bugles sound,  
 I shall reveal to you the sources  
 of my deepest joy!  
 And one thousand lights will shine upon you.

All of you in open fields,  
 You will all yet come  
 to my kingdom of stone.  
 Your rivers and your forests  
 you will leave behind  
 in silent peace.

Segal "would never forget the moment of his departure for America and the irreparable rupture it caused in his life."

### **O, call us back!<sup>4</sup>**

O call us back to the bright beginning  
 to the great archway of resplendent day

Golden fire in the heavens,  
 In the west a holy world.

We were such quiet boys  
 with our dreamy eyes turned toward God

We clung to beauty  
 Like Levites in the Holy Temple.

We set out into the distance  
 Like Nazarites into the desert.

Alas, ships captured us  
 Alas, the sea drove us.

We wander in the greyness of weeks  
 without an exit on the sands of a sea.

“After a long initial period of adjustment, a second exile in New York, and a devastating personal loss, Segal turned the Montreal landscape into a symbolic presence in his work [...] as he conveyed in this mysterious 1930 poem from his book *Lirik*.”

### **Autumn 1930<sup>5</sup>**

I shall go to the cold forest  
Near the rim of the mountain  
to pick golden flowers  
for your little mound of earth.

God, O good God,  
How you have made me old  
Earlier than all the old.  
I see you beside me,  
I feel you beside me,  
And I go to the cold forest.

Little trees are turning red  
at the edge of the great mountain.  
The beauty of early autumn,  
Yellow footprints of death.

God, O good God,  
Through the mournful red  
You now look at me  
With a golden eye  
At the edge of the cold forest.

This next poem reflects Segal’s sensitivity to the hardships faced by a “gentile people” – the French Canadians – with whom Montreal Jews found themselves sharing the same space.<sup>6</sup>

### **This is How God Sings In My Ear<sup>7</sup>**

And in your streets I shall light again  
my noble Sabbath lanterns.  
Your little Josephs in velvet hats

will walk beside you  
 carrying their prayer shawls in wine-red silken bags.  
 The large doors of the great synagogue stand open  
 as my great sun sets over the earth  
 and my sky is clear and still.  
 Growing by the picket fence of the synagogue garden  
 are slender mossy thorns,  
 wild weeds and nettles –  
 I know it very well.  
 It gladdens me to know it well.  
 I let you settle  
 on hill and vale  
 beside a gentile people.  
 Their little churches call to me  
 and the blue smoke of their prayers  
 rises and swirls before my eyes.  
 I also feel their restlessness  
 and the sorrow of their hard-earned, hardened  
 black piece of bread.

“In 1940... Segal entered a new stage in his literary career by transporting himself ...  
 into the familiar space of Eastern European Jewry [...] Although still under the spell of  
 a blazing modernity to which he aspired with all his being, Segal pursued his formal  
 experimentations while incorporating .... [traditional religious] themes into his poetry.”

### **From the Baal Shem Tov to Today<sup>8</sup>**

To the Baal Shem would come the poor.  
 The rich avoided his dwelling.  
 Jews from foreign lands and great distances,  
 And even from sorrowful and grey Lithuania.

After staying with him for three short days  
 They went home happy  
 With empty grey sacks slung over their thin shoulders  
 Through the fields of golden corn.

Whoever has little bread and whoever has more  
 God's kindness the balance will restore.  
 When a person travels here from afar

He has come to do good.

Always repeating God's first words:  
 Let there be light, light on all his paths.  
 What is light? A little tree here, a blade of grass there,  
 And the sweetly singing rivulets of rain.

“It was in Montreal in 1948 that [Segal] first met people who had survived [...] the destruction of European Jewry. The encounter ... between the generation of immigrants who had arrived before World War I and the Holocaust survivors, was intensely emotional [...] Everyone was aware that these Yiddish speakers would be the last to enter the country [...] In the following poem ... Segal symbolically welcomes the victims of Nazi atrocities to his city.”

### **White World<sup>9</sup>**

I shall remove from you your wounded body  
 and you will feel lighter.  
 I shall carry you, a sleeping dove,  
 away from here to another star.

After a day, a night or two  
 I shall kiss away from your frail mouth  
 the black bitterness of your silent pain,  
 and take away your pillow of stone.

Very early, so no one will see  
 I shall slip out with you like a weightless shadow.  
 On the streets glows the stillness  
 Of the first untouched untrodden snow.

And with the blue breath of early dawn we shall depart  
 On a light, white sled  
 With no gasp of fear, no trace, no fleck  
 Of the anguish you've endured.

In just one day, one hour, one moment  
 All your wounds will have fallen asleep.  
 Blessed be the whiteness of the earth,  
 Blessed be the blueness of the sky.

“Ironically, the poet’s coming to terms with the Montreal environment happened in the wake of the Holocaust, and only after he had abandoned, once and for all, his plans to join the New York modernist movement. The Jewish neighbourhood next to Mount Royal became a constant reminder [...] of the town of his childhood, Korets [...] One snowy night, he saw in the gardens of a residence for priests similarities to his Volhynian childhood.”

### **Winter in Montreal<sup>10</sup>**

Soft silken snow  
floats down over the ground  
as though the pale grey were sowing  
fresh peace on the earth.

Little trees grow luminous,  
their branches – children’s hands.  
In their stillness I have seen  
the land of distant silence.

They stand serene and calm  
Silvery light and pensive.  
In their stillness I have heard  
My village home at dusk.

On the long balcony  
the priests walk to and fro  
reciting psalms held in their hands  
with pious peace of mind.

The white gardens lie warm  
and the grey sky – nearby.  
On the horizon the mountain  
Dons a shawl of light mist.

“Segal’s refuge was the world of Hasidic ecstasy and mysticism, a world [...] where every physical form of life on earth became a symbol, an abstract allusion cloaked in mystery.”<sup>11</sup>

## **Purity**<sup>12</sup>

From my quiet days a road descends  
Into the coolness of the shaded valley.  
And having shed my heaviness and fear  
I shall meet you there some day.

Dressed in white, on the grey earth  
With pure, clear eyes, peacefully  
you shall sit – free of all your earthly burdens,  
with others as radiant as you.

I shall take your small white hand,  
And warm it in the breath of my mouth.  
High above us – hills of green.  
Westward the sun – like a golden pillar.

Throughout the world there are specks of sickly red  
But you are white and tranquil as the twilight.  
I leave you sitting at the entrance to your tent  
In the sun and shadow of the evening.

**1**

Unless otherwise indicated, the quotations that precede the poems are taken from Pierre Anctil's text immediately preceding Segal's poems in *Jacob Isaac Segal: A Montreal Yiddish Poet and His Milieu* (University of Ottawa Press, 2017).

**2**

This poem appears on page 123 of *Jacob Isaac Segal...* It is an excerpt from a poem entitled *Di mide zun*, published in Segal's book *Lirik* (1930), 141.

**3**

This poem appears on page 89 of *Jacob Isaac Segal...* It was published in Segal's book entitled *Fun mayn velt* (1918), 41.

**4**

This poem appears on page 124 of *Jacob Isaac Segal...* It was published in J. I. Segal, *Lirik* (1930), 49.

**5**

This poem appears on page 263 of *Jacob Isaac Segal...* From J. I. Segal, *Lirik* (1930), 78.

**6**

Translator's comment.

**7**

This appears on page 233 of *Jacob Isaac Segal...* From J.I. Segal, *Lirik* (1930), 259.

**8**

This poem appears on page 272 of *Jacob Isaac Segal...* It was published in J. I. Segal, *Dos hoyz fun di poshete* (1940), 84.

**9**

This poem appears on page 258 of *Jacob Isaac Segal...* It was published in J. I. Segal, *Sefer Yiddish* (1950), 204.

**10**

This poem appears on page 267 of *Jacob Isaac Segal...* It was published in J.I. Segal, *Lider un loybn* (1944), 103.

**11**

From Chava Rosenfarb, "Yud Yud Segal", unpublished manuscript dated November 13, 1988, pp 9-10. Cited on page 267 of *Jacob Isaac Segal...*

**12**

This poem appears on page 240 of *Jacob Isaac Segal...* It was published in J.I. Segal, *Lirik* (1930), 28.