

Bella Briansky Kalter

IDA MAZA (A MEMOIR)

Ida Maza, Yiddish Poet, born July 9, 1893, died June 1962; Ida Zhukovsky at birth; at age fourteen emigrated with family from a small town in White Russia to Montreal; there, in due time, she married Alexander Massey, born Maza, his name anglicized by immigration officials when he arrived in Canada. Their first child died of an illness at age ten, and in 1931, Ida's first book of poetry, titled *A Mame*, was published.

The verses, born of her grief, and many of her poems in all the years to come, have an undertone of sadness, even when playful, even when celebrating life...as in many Yiddish songs for children where the words are wedded to a melancholy refrain. Was it her way of communicating her connectedness to the child who had died? Like Heine she turned her pain into poetry, into a universal *Weltschmerz* to cradle others' grief and sadness along with her own.

A remarkable attribute of Ida Maza's was that she was able to turn the poetry that sustained her into acts of giving, like a sorceress not only turning her own pain into poetry but of the souls who came to her for advice and help. She was as an icon of the human condition, attracting troubled souls to her person.

Everyone's pain in her tending became not strictly one's own, but was made the responsibility of the community. Many a family who never before had shared their home with strangers would be swayed by her hypnotically even-paced, soft, persuasive voice, to accommodate a destitute refugee. Hospital social workers found themselves admitting patients with no insurance

or any other means of payment. Instances of Ida's persuasive powers personally affecting me and my parents and family show the magnitude of her influence on people: a landlord under Ida's penetrating, heavy-lidded gaze, suddenly turned out to have an affordable flat to rent, after all—for my parents, for instance, when they landed penniless, with children, in Montreal; under her penetrating gaze, the Talmud Torah's budget was miraculously made to stretch to make possible the employment of my father, Pinchas Briansky, Hebrew teacher whose meager wages the Jews 'Up North' could no longer afford; an orthodontist, under Ida's winning ways, was convinced he wasn't so busy as not to be able to take on another patient, a nursing student—myself—who could pay no more than half of the monthly ten dollar stipend a second-year student earned; and it was Ida, of course, who was able to convince a well known busy artist, Alexander Bercovitch, to take on a student, gratis, a young girl just out of high school—my sister, Rita Briansky, who went on to become a well known artist in her own right. The list of people Ida Maza salvaged from despair is endless, beyond my ken. But how my life and that of my parents and sisters came to be enriched through association with Ida and her husband Alexander Massey bears telling, as it illuminates their influence on the lives of countless others.

How did the Massey's come into our lives? My father, Pinchas Briansky, of Bransk, Poland, who had resided in Grajewo since his marriage in 1918 to my mother, Hava Goldstock, arrived, in 1927, in Ansonville, twin city to the paper-mill town Iroquois Falls, in the far reaches of Northern Ontario. He came there under the auspices of my mother's sister and brother-in-law, Clara and Jake Perlmutter who owned a haberdashery, where Alexander Massey appeared several times a year from Montreal with silken ties and poetry recitations (reading from both his own poems, and from such classics as Homer and Ovid). I do not know if Mr. Massey was already a traveling salesman and coming Up North before my mother and sisters and I arrived on October 29, 1929, the day of the Wall

Street Crash. In those two years before our arrival, my father had saved enough for our fare selling supplies to lumberjacks, in a makeshift accessory store of my uncle's in the wilds of nearby Nellie Lake. Upon our arrival my father began to work for my uncle in the Ansonville store, and its adjoining living quarters became our home until our aunt and cousins returned in the summer from Toronto.

Looking back to that time, it appears that Mr. Massey was part of our lives from the beginning, his engaging smile, his poetry offerings, and the tales of the big city, Montreal, highlighting happy memories of my Canadian childhood. He spoke to us of his family whom, one day, he hoped we would meet: his wife Ida Maza, a published Yiddish poet—a real poet, he was wont to insert with a winsome chuckle, not a dabbler of verses like himself—and their two handsome sons; and oh, yes, he mustn't forget to mention the brilliant nephew, Marvin Duchow—a musical genius—who, in a time to come, as it turned out, would marry my beautiful, older sister, Rebecca.

To get back on track. The time came when I would leave Ansonville for Montreal. I had completed high school, been accepted as a nursing student at what was then the Woman's General Hospital on Tupper Street, and the Massey home on Esplanade Avenue became as my own, and Ida Maza became a surrogate mother to an impressionable young woman in need of a poet's ear. Upon entering nursing school, I was thrown as by a cyclone into the vortex of life's cycle—came face-to-face with birth and death, for the first time, heard life's first and last breath, and with it came the awakening of the self's need for a supportive love. Ida Maza, mother to all, I quickly discovered, could be as sympathetically attentive to a naive young woman's needs as to those of the poets who were engaged in expressing themselves in lyrical writings around her dining room table.

All the poets I was to meet on my days off-duty at the hospital, appeared to have need of the support they found in Ida, which in turn helped sustain her. Even Ida's next-door neighbor, the established poet Melech Ravitch—elegant in appearance,

with eloquent speech that flowed as from the pages of his poetry—appeared, as did the others, to be carrying hidden wounds. Was it because they were Poet Jews, and the recent persecutions were beyond the grasp of a poet's pen? I see Melech Ravitch still, with pensive demeanor, as in the act of composing a poem, restlessly pacing from one area in Ida's small dining room to another. He seldom looks at the others who are either seated on the couch that rests against the wall behind the table, or on the chairs on either side and in front of it, Ida occupying the central chair from where she can best see them all. She is mesmerically rocking to and fro, as to the beat of an inner concentration, as braids and unbraids the fringes of the tablecloth.

And where is Mr. Massey (whom Ida lovingly mostly addresses as Mazele) all this time? When he isn't on the road with samples of ties and shirts, he is taking care of his *Altechke*—the Yiddish for Little Old One—as he lovingly is wont to call his wife, serving cups of tea to her guests and platters of cakes that he has carefully chosen in one of the neighborhood bakeries. He is in and out of the adjoining little kitchen, keeping abreast—you can tell by the way he chuckles or grimaces—of the heated discussions focusing on a single line, or even a single word, of a poem. That they do not call him over to ask his opinion doesn't seem to bother him. It is Ida's world. He respects her guests and their dedication to the poem. But he is a man apart from them. He is a man whose poetry comes alive in the confines of a space all his own. Only when he died would the poems that he had written and hidden away in a suitcase beside a suitcase of tie samples, be discovered.

They are all gone these poets of Yiddish who made their home in Montreal, and sought comfort at Ida Maza's table. Separately and together they were of a period in time where the Yiddish poet's spirit was breathing its last, breathing deeply in to stay alive as it was about to be snuffed out.

Melech Ravitch, who was a respected poet even before he left the Old Country, I've already tried to describe. Others included: J.I. Segal, of restless demeanor; Shabsi Perl of easy-

come, troubled laughter; N.I. Gottlieb, family-man wedded to a poet's soul; Moshe Shaffir, of genteel voice and manner, softly intoned words resonating as from a well's echoing depths; Rachel Korn, commanding the other poets' respect with a woman's self-assertion; Nathan Goldberg, frail in appearance, who revealed *himself* in lines I inspired after a chance walk with him on Esplanade Avenue "...naive joy she squeezes from bitter fruit, tickles a sad unwilling world..."; A.M. Klein, whose poems continue to inspire scholarly investigation, I was privileged to meet as a young nurse by way of an article I wrote for the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*, which he edited; Miriam Waddington, young poet friend of the Massey's, whom I was fortunate to meet in their home, and who went on to become one of Canada's elite writers, and who has warmly and vividly portrayed Ida Maza and her world in her book of essays, *Apartment Seven*.

There were visiting poets from New York, contemporaries of Ida's, who were welcomed with open arms into the Maza-Massey home. I heard Ida speak reverently of Joseph Rolnick so often, he resides in my consciousness though I do not remember actually meeting him. The world-beloved Shlomo Schmulevitch, whose tender songs rocked many a child to sleep in Poland before the Holocaust, I still see before my eyes. Ida had entrusted him to my mother's care when every bed and couch in the poet's Esplanade flat (a few minutes' walk away from my parents' on Park Avenue) was giving rest to others; and one day, when I was off-duty and arrived at my parents' door, my mother glowingly introduced me to the poet, Shlomo Schmulevitch, whose meals and a comfortable bed she was for a time privileged to tender. How old was he at the time I do not know. He had a story-book visage, twinkling mischievous eyes that shone in a pink round face crowned by a pate of gray hair; and in my presence he sang a ditty about the nasty tricks of old age. He affectionately tweaked my young cheek, as in reassurance that I had a long way to go before succumbing to such discomforts, and made my mother blush with his jovial, easy manner.

He had been invited to give poetry readings at the *Folkshule*, and my little sister Shirley was given a role to enact, that of an umbrella, she remembers, in one of his plays for children.

I keep going back and forth in time and place in speaking of Ida Maza and how she enriched the lives of all who came into her fold. Time gone, time recalled, shifts kaleidoscopically, memories sorting themselves into different patterns that make up the whole of life.

More about my time with the Massey's. Besides weekly visits to their home on my days off from the hospital, I am also treated like a member of the family during summer vacations spent with them in a pension or rented cottage in the Laurentian Mountains. I accompany them on a car trip to Ottawa, where, besides seeing the sights of the Capital City, we visit dear friends of theirs, the parents of the actor Loren Green. Every place I was privileged to be with them, in the richness of discovery, is like none other since visited. Had I become daughter to a couple who missed having a daughter of their own? It is fortunate that their sons appeared not to mind being subjected to a surrogate sister: Earl—also known as Israel—the older son, was no longer living at home, but when he showed up on a visit, was cordial and friendly; Irving, the younger son, who went on to become professor of English (and whose book, *Identity And Community*, contains a chapter devoted to his mother), accepted my presence, I guess, as he did all of his mother's protégés. I just happened to be there—sometimes in their home, sometimes in their Laurentian Mountain retreats in the summertime. It was in the Laurentians that I got to see Ida Maza, in communication with Self...came upon her, sometimes, sitting on a stone in a field or wood, looking from blue sky to surrounding green pastures, in silent reverie—wishing I was an artist, able to consecrate what then I saw.

But artists there were a-plenty who sought to capture Ida Maza's unique kind of beauty: sallow, broad-cheeked visage—accentuated by dark, smoothly combed hair—from which the dark eyes, resting like orbits behind their lids, took

on a penetrating light as they looked outward, looked inward, from the soul's sphere. Some of these artists I met and got to know in the Massey household on Esplanade, in Montreal, some turned up unannounced, for tea, lunch or dinner, in the Laurentians, there, sometimes getting Ida to sit for them. The artists I remember best are Muhlstock, Rapaport, Malamud, and most affectionately, Bezalel Malchi, whose sculpture of Ida's head, I believe, is still in the Montreal Jewish Library. He and his wife Grune are sweetly remembered as well for the *eingemachts*, beet preserves, they always served their guests, or brought on visits to other people's homes. My sister Rita Briansky drew and painted Ida Maza many times, once as she sits reading to a spellbound group of children in the Jewish Public Library. This painting hangs in the children's section of Montreal's Jewish Library to this day.

When Ida died—for those of us who knew and loved her, and looked to her for inspiration, and for solace when grieved or hurt—her death was felt as the passing of a spiritual mother, the one who had nurtured and sustained the poetry in our lives. Though she and I communicated in English, the language I had come to think in and speak since I left my parents' home, when it came to trying to express my sense of loss, I found myself grieving for Ida in the language of her poetry, and wrote the following words:

IN MEMORY OF IDA MAZA

Ikh hob shoy'n gezungen alle mayne lider
I am done with all my poetry

mayn tzayt iz shoy'n ariber,
my time has entered eternity,

yetzt vel ikh ruen oif der kishn
now I will rest on the pillow

baglayt mit mayne shoen.
attended by my hours.

Shloft oykh mayn ersht ingele
Sleeps also my first little boy

un mayn lib Mazele,
and my beloved Mazele,

genug shoyn geveynt nokh zey
enough of weeping after them

layg ikh zikh avek lebn zey.
lay I myself down next to them.

Un iyr mayne kinder
And you my children

velkhe blaybn iyber
who remain behind

vaynt nit, vaynt nit nokh di shlofendike lider,
weep not, weep not for the songs that are sleeping,

lange yorn hobn mir zey tzuzamen gezungen,
long years have we sung them together,

gedeynkt dan nor zeyer nign,
remember then only their melody,

mitn lebn ken men zikh nit dingen.
and accept life's destiny.

Un gedeynkt aykh mayn shtibele
And remember as well my little house

avu iz geborn mayne lider,
where my songs were born,

gedeynkt nor alle unzere tzuzamendike shoен
remember only all our hours together

vel ikh shtil shlofen un bsholem ruen.
and I will sleep undisturbed and in peace forever.

(Yiddish poem, transliteration and English translation
by Bella Briansky Kalter)