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by **Rivke Galin**, translation by **Lydia Moët**

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דריי לידער פֿון רבֿקה גאַלין

Three Poems by Rivke Galin

Rivke Galin
translated by Lydia Moët

Introduction: During her lifetime, Rivke Galin (1890–1935) was well-known and highly regarded as a children's poet. Though shy and hesitant to share her writing, she was coaxed into the limelight by her husband Noyekh Mishkowsky and by the teachers of the Sholem Aleichem Yiddish kindergarten in Harbin, Manchuria, where she lived between 1917 and 1921. While Harbin at that time was blessed with a fine Yiddish library, it was lacking in material suitable for children, and Galin volunteered to contribute plays, poems, and stories for the teachers to share with their young charges.[1] After returning to the US she began to submit her poems for publication, and her work was widely published in children's journals such as *Grininke beymelekh*, *Kinderland*, and *Kinder-velt*, as well as in general interest papers such as the *Forverts*, *Fraye arbeter shtime*, and *Der tog*. When she died of tuberculosis at the age of forty-five, her obituary in *Der tog* praised her work as "the finest contribution to Yiddish children's literature."[2]

Galin's writing for adult readers was, and remains, less well-known, although some of her poems for adults were published during her lifetime (including four in Ezra Korman's anthology *Yidishe dikhterins*) and her husband reports that these were well received.[3] She must have been surprised by the praise: According to her husband, "she very seldom read her poems aloud, and then only for those very close to her. She often wondered why people published her poems, or why they asked her to write more."[4] But her work was nevertheless much admired, and after her death a group of friends, led by Dr. Yechiel Kling and including Bertha Kling, Celia Dropkin, Mani Leib, and other members of the Yiddish literary set, convened the Rivkah Galin Book Committee to publish a posthumous collection of her work, *Lider un dertseylungen*. The poems in the collection are remarkably easy to read, with a simplicity of language that belies their emotional depth; the clarity of communication and confident rhythms make it easy to see how she found success as a children's poet, even while the latter section of the collection deals very much with adult themes. Her writing for adults includes characteristically passionate love

[1] Noach Mishkowsky, introduction to *Lider un dertseylungen*, by Rivke Galin (Rivkah Galin Book Committee, 1938), 5.
[2] Y. Shteger, "A dikhterin far yidishe kinder," *Der tog* (New York), September 15, 1935, p. 5, https://www.nli.org.il/en/newspapers/?a=d&d=dertog19350915-01. Translation mine.
[3] Mishkowsky, *Lider un dertseylungen*, 8.
[4] Mishkowsky, *Lider un dertseylungen*, 8. Translation mine.

poetry, wrenching poems about her beloved sisters and her daughter Taybele (who died in 1925 at the age of six, from an unknown illness), and numerous poems about her body, her illness, and how it feels to know that one is dying.

Indeed, Galin spent much of her adult life in the shadow of death, contracting tuberculosis around 1910 and never fully recovering. She was determined to experience life to the fullest in spite of the limitations of her illness, and was clear that she never wanted to be viewed as an invalid; her husband writes that even in her last few years, when she was spending six months of each year in hospitals or sanatoria, she refused to talk about what transpired there and did not like to have her illness acknowledged by those close to her.[5] Nonetheless, many of her poems for an adult readership are preoccupied with the awareness that she is not long for this world—a concept she explores from several different angles in her work.

Most of the poems she wrote on this theme approach the cause of her foreshortened life in very oblique terms; "Tsu mayn doktor"/"To My Doctor" is one of few that discuss her illness and its treatment specifically. The poet portrays her doctor as kind and well-meaning, but his "remedies," and his faith in them, come across as laughably insignificant next to the vivid figure of Death looming by her sickbed. In place of treatment, she begs for the fortitude to accept her inevitable end peacefully. She is by no means resigned to her fate—rather, she fears it in a way that those blessed with good health are unable to grasp—but she yearns for something approaching acceptance, to be able to face it without fear.

A recurring theme in Galin's poetry is the awareness that healthy people, however well-intentioned, cannot put themselves in her position: She posits that those who are chronically or terminally ill inhabit something of a separate reality from others. This is strongly evident in "Dos tsoyber land"/"The Enchanted Land," which was chosen by the book committee as the opening poem for the latter section of the book, comprising her work for adult readers. The poem is a short, almost mystical portrayal of her entry into the ranks of the severely ill, who are described as inhabiting a country, a "tsoyber land," that is inaccessible to most. The inhabitants of that country live life at a more intense pace than outsiders, experiencing "a thousand years / in one instant." The concluding image, of directly grasping "the fire of life" with bare hands, is a resonant one indeed, recalling the burning bush of Exodus and the idea of standing on holy ground.

It's tempting to see "Dos tsoyber land" as something of a mission statement (as the committee may have done), and to wonder if perhaps Galin came to appreciate the heightened perspective that her illness gave to her. However, a poem like "Mayn mazl"/"My Fate" utterly disabuses us of this comforting notion. The rousing, defiant tone of the poem is reminiscent of Henley's "Invictus" (also a tuberculosis poem, written in the Royal Infirmary in Edinburgh[6]), but in place of the famed stoicism of that poem, "Mayn

[5] Noyekh Mishkowsky, *Mayn lebn un mayne rayzes* (Noyekh Mishkowsky Book Committee, 1947), 1:330.
[6] Edward H. Cohen, "The second series of W.E. Henley's hospital poems," *The Yale University Library Gazette* 78, no. 3–4 (2004): 128–50. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40859569.

mazl" burns with a palpable rage at the injustice of the poet's life and all that has been taken from her.

In translating these poems, it felt deeply important to maintain the rhyme and meter of the original as much as possible. Reading Galin's work, it's very clear that she loved and delighted in rhyme, and that she enjoyed experimenting with meter; in the adult section of her collection, I haven't yet managed to find two poems that use the same meter and rhyme scheme. Unsurprisingly for such a shy and private writer, she doesn't seem to have written down her thoughts about her own poetry, but one can well imagine that she may have found a sense of creative freedom within these restrictions, and I am even drawn to consider her chosen poetic forms as something of a metaphor for her foreshortened life—an outpouring of emotion within a tight, constrained space.

To My Doctor

My doctor is a good one
Who helps in hours of need
Who suffers through my pains with me
And comforts me indeed.

“I’ve brought you remedies, my dear
That come from far away.
I’m certain they will heal the pains
That stab you day by day.”

My doctor, you do not believe
These kind words that you say.
I feel the cruel approach of Death,
So cold and quiet and gray.

I feel his chill breath on my skin,
His thin and bony hands,
His black wings flutter in my room
Against my wall he stands.

And with one hundred staring eyes
The end, the end is here!
To him I’m tiny, just a worm
Awaiting him in fear.

Perhaps you can import instead
From distant Orient
The calm of gray-haired sages
When they know their time is spent.

I would, like them, encounter Death
Free from pain or crying.
Shining bright, my heart at peace,
With singing and with wine.

The Enchanted Land

Somebody from somewhere came,
And took my hand.
Led me over paths of pain,
Into a land.

On the border between God and Man,
There hangs a bridge.
And there the deepest woe is mixed
Together with bliss.

There they live a thousand years
In one instant;
There they hold the fire of life
In their bare hands.

My Fate

I laugh at you, you trifle!
I'm not afraid of you.
So come, my bloodied enemy,
Here's my door—come through!

You robbed me of my peaceful nights,
The light of all my days—
Breathed all your poisons into me
And went your merry way.

You've tangled me irrevocably
In anguish, woe, and pain;
What more have you in store for me,
O wretched Fate of mine?

I'm purified and I am strong,
I'm higher now than you.
I laugh at you, you trifle!
Here's my door—come through!

צו מײַן דאָקטער

מײַן דאָקטער איז אי גוט, אי ליב,
און העלפֿט מיר אין געפֿאַר,
ער פֿילט מיט מײַנע ווייטאָגן,
און טרייסט מיך אין מײַן צער.

„רפֿואות האָב איך דיר געבראַכט,
איך האָב זיי אימפּאָרטירט פֿון ווײַט,
און דאָס וועט זיכער היילן דיר
די שטעכעניש אין זײַט.“

– דו גלייבסט אַליין ניט, דאָקטער מײַן,
אין דײַנע גוטע רייד:
דער טויט, דער קאַלטער, גרויזאַמער
ער לויערט שטילערהייט.

– איך פֿיל זײַן קאַלטן אָטעמען,
די קנאָכעדיקע הענט,
די שוואַרצע פֿליגלען פֿלאַטערן
אין צימער אויף די וועגט.

– מיט שטאַרע אויגן הונדערטער
דער סוף, דער סוף איז דאָ.
און ווי אַ וואָרעם ווער איך קליין –
מיך שרעקט די לעצטע שעה.

– צי קענסטו אימפּאָרטירן מיר
פֿון אָריענט, פֿון ווײַט,
די חכמה און די רויִקייט
פֿון אַלטע, גרויע לײַט?

– איך זאָל ווי זיי באַגעגענען
דעם טויט אָן שרעק, אָן פֿײַן,
אַ ליכטיקע, אַ רויִקע,
מיט לידער און מיט ווײַן.

דאָס צויבער לאַנד

ס'איז עמעצער פֿון ערגעץ געקומען,
געגומען מײַן האַנט.
געפֿירט מיך דורך פֿײַנלעכע וועגן,
געבראַכט צו אַ לאַנד.

בײַם גרענעץ פֿון גאָט און פֿון מענטשן,
דאָרט הענגט אַזאַ בריק.
דאָרט מישט זיך די העכסטע פֿאַרצווייפֿלונג
צוזאַמען מיט גליק.

דאָרט לעבט מען דורך טויזנטער יאָרן
אין קורצן מאָמענט,
דאָרט האַלט מען דעם פֿײַער פֿון לעבן
מיט נאַקעטע הענט.

מײַן מזל

איך לאַך פֿון דיר, דו נישטיקער!
איך שרעק זיך ניט פֿאַר דיר,
נו קום, דו בלוטיק שׂונא מײַן,
איך עפֿן ברייט די טיר.

דאָס ליכט פֿון טאָג, פֿון נאַכט די רו
האָסטו גערויבט בײַ מיר.
דו האָסט דײַן גאַנצן סם און גיפֿט
אַרײַנגעהויכט אין מיר.

דו האָסט אַרומגעפלאָנטערט מיך
אין וווּיטאָג און אין פֿײַן,
וואָס נאָך, וואָס נאָך קענסטו מיר טאָן,
דו, וויסטער מזל מײַן?

איך בין געלײַטערט, איך בין שטאַרק,
כ'בין העכער איצט פֿון דיר.
איך לאַך פֿון דיר, דו נישטיקער!
איך עפֿן ברייט די טיר.