



They hailed from Belarus and Galicia – but New York was their muse

In the early 20th century, Yiddish poets from Europe made New York their home. Composer **Alex Weiser** (top right) spotlights their striking work, which became the inspiration for his new album

In 1955, Yiddish editor and critic Nachman Mayzel published an 896-page volume, *Amerike in yidishn vort* (America in Yiddish Literature). The tome, which included Yiddish poetry and prose focused on life in America, is a testament to the breadth of Yiddish-language contemplation of the New World. Each author is presented alongside their portrait, a birth and death date, as well as the date their life in America began. America was a place of rebirth for this immigrant generation, and for Yiddish literature itself.

Yiddish had been born in Europe, but America – and particularly New York – enjoyed a period as a golden land for the language. In the early 20th century, much of the city’s Yiddish theatre and literary scene even made its way back to Europe.

For poets such as Reuben Iceland, who had emigrated to New York from Galicia in 1903, the challenge was to craft a modernist culture in a millennium-old language popularly thought of as a provincial jargon. Iceland’s description of the New York skyline from his 1922 poem, *Nakht-refleks* (Night Reflex), is an example of his elegant response. It opens:

*Fun der veykher, flisndiker ovntlekher
groykeyt,
Raysn zikh di volkn-kratsers, vi rizn nakete,
Mit fintstere shterns un fayerdike oygn.*

*Against the gentle, flowing grey of evening
the skyscrapers scream, like naked giants,
with dark brows and fiery eyes.*

Iceland was a trailblazer in the Yiddish literary movement called *di yunge* (the young ones). The group celebrated an art-for-art’s-sake lyricism, and explored stillness and mood, eschewing the socially

engaged, sentimental attitudes of the earlier sweatshop poets.

One of Iceland’s contemporaries, Anna Margolin (right, born Rosa Lebensboym in the Belorussian city of Brest-Litovsk in 1887) had settled in New York in 1913 and was affiliated with another literary movement called in *zikh* (introspectivist). This group sought to combine an engagement with the world and a sense of introspection with *di yunge’s* poetic sensibility. Margolin’s poem *Brodvey, ovnt* (Broadway, Evening) opens with similarly evocative imagery:

*Der ovnt blit. Di gas roysht hel vi toyznt kvaln.
Es shvimen fayern aroyf fun zunsh toyb un koraln.
Vitrines – flamendike heyln. Vaserfaln
Fun tifn samet, zaydns shver un kil.*

*The evening blooms. The street rustles bright
as a thousand springs.
Fires swim up from sundust and coral.
Shop windows – fiery caves. Cascades
of deep velvet, silks heavy and cool.*

Her depiction mixes Broadway’s iconic imagery with nature metaphors that blur into the uncanny. As the poem closes, the last sounds of day form a tragic metaphor, “...dos letste vakhn. / Di letste sho fun gezegnen mit der erd” (the last watch, / the final hour of farewell on the earth).

There is nothing parochial about these gorgeous descriptions, which capture New York from a secular and modernist perspective. But by writing in Yiddish, Iceland and Margolin situate their poetry in a Jewish intellectual tradition.

My fascination with these poems and the idea of looking at New York as a Yiddish place led me to create a song cycle, in a dark blue night. For this work I set the



“The challenge was to craft a modernist culture in an old language”

poems mentioned here to music, and included settings for works of three other poets who wrote evocatively about the city: Morris Rosenfeld, Naftali Gross and Celia Dropkin. In Rosenfeld’s *Ovnt* (Evening), the Hudson River, “lost in thought in its cold silver-bed” murmurs a lonely good night to the setting sun. The city lights mirror the heavens in Gross’s *Nyu-york*, and are depicted as a giant honeycomb and a tree with golden fruit in Dropkin’s *Nyu-york bay nakht bay di breg fun hodson* (New York Evening by the Hudson Shore).

Many of the poems that moved me most depicted the city at night and portray the New York that I grew up with beyond the caricature of hustle and bustle. This aspect became the focus of the cycle.

The New York that these poets describe is eternal, and yet the Yiddish world that flourished there is a distant memory. As we create Jewish culture for the 21st century, this Yiddish New York deserves a place in our collective imagination. ■

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