

# THE YIDDISHISTS

OUR SERIES DELVES INTO THE TREASURES OF THE WORLD'S BIGGEST YIDDISH ARCHIVE AT YIVO INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH RESEARCH



From top: Illustration from Kleyne Mentshelekh (Tiny Little People), a Yiddish adaptation of Gulliver's Travels published in Poland, 1925. The caption reads, "With great effort I liberated my left hand."; cover page for Kleyne Mentshelekh

## GULLIVER IN YIDDISHLAND

Jonathan Swift, Oscar Wilde and Samuel Beckett were just some of the Anglo-Irish and Irish writers whose work was translated and adapted by 20th-century Yiddishists, says **Stefanie Halpern**

In his 1942 poem 'A Song of the Dean Jonathan Swift and the Yiddish Rhyme-maker Itzik Manger', the poet and playwright Itzik Manger imagines a nighttime visit from the Anglo-Irish writer Jonathan Swift, who was made Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin in 1713.

The two talk as old friends, eating, drinking, smoking and gossiping. Manger fills the poem with allusions to some of Swift's best-known works: The Dean finds himself stranded after missing the train for Lilliput, an obvious reference to Gulliver's Travels. As he sits beside Manger, Dean Swift chews on the mustard-dipped leg of a child, a not-so-subtle nod to 'A Modest Proposal', Swift's 1729 satirical essay attacking the British government's handling of poverty in Ireland, in which he suggests that the key to solving the economic crisis is for the Irish to eat their children.

Manger and Swift speak of the marriage of their old friend, the Devil. The Dean proposes sending the couple a gift

of Stella's golden brooch, a reference to 'A Journal to Stella', Swift's 1766 work based on letters he sent to his real-life lover Esther Johnson. Another gift, Vanessa's tears, alludes to his poem 'Cadenus and Vanessa', which was about another of his lovers, Esther Vanhomrigh.

Manger was born in Czernowitz, Bucovina. His family moved to Jassy in Romania and he then spent ten years steeped in the Yiddish literary circle in Warsaw, Poland. As a Romanian national, Manger was forced from Poland in 1938 and sought refuge in France. However, when the Germans occupied France in 1940, he fled to London, where he went on to immerse himself in English classical literature and poetry. Though he eventually became a British citizen, he loathed the decade he spent in England. His poem can be read as the exiled Yiddish writer's attempt to process Swift's works and the culture from which they derive.



Manger was not the only 20th-century Yiddish-speaking Jew to take an interest in Swift's 18th-century works. Between 1907 and 1939, there were at least five Yiddish translations and adaptations of Gulliver's Travels published in the United States, Poland and Russia. One such edition, published in 1925 by Farlag Yudish, a publishing house that specialised in Yiddish translations of literary classics, appeared in their Kinder-bibliotek (Children's Library) series alongside other beloved books such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, Edith Nesbit's The Enchanted Castle and fairytales by the brothers Grimm. Literature and journals for children and youth, both those written specifically in Yiddish and those translated into the language, were a lucrative branch of Yiddish publishing in the interwar period. Such material became especially important with the establishment of a Yiddish secular school network across Europe, whose goal was to teach a varied curriculum of mathematics, sciences, politics, history, and literature, using Yiddish as the language of instruction.

These translations of Swift's most famous work were also part of a proliferation of translations of world literature into Yiddish, including everything from Sophocles and Plato to Homer, Shakespeare, Balzac, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Zola, Dickens and Whitman.

Swift certainly wasn't the only Irish writer who found himself translated into Yiddish: Oscar Wilde, Samuel Beckett, and even the Irish folktales of Seumas MacManus found favour among Yiddish audiences. This vast body of literature in translation made it possible for Yiddish readers to encounter classics in their own language and through their own cultural lens, just as Itzik Manger was able to share hamentashn and toast "L'chaim" with his good friend, Jonathan Swift. ■

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