

**This draft of the article was written during the workshops led prof. Israel Bartal (in Jerusalem, January 2020 and Stockholm, February 2020)**

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**Ula Chowaniec**

## **Invention of a Jew**

### **Language as a Tool, Ideas as a Medium/ or Inventing of a Secular Jew?**

I will start this short essay on the personal note. More than 10 years ago I devoted several years of my studies to the writing of a Polish writer, Irena Krzywicka (1899-1994). Even though, her Jewish origins were clearly important and influential for her as a human being, thinker and writer, I have decided – in my close reading – to go along with her declarative affinity and belonging – exclusively to Polish literature. My “re-discovery” of this almost completely forgotten after WWII writer from the Interwar time meant to be an emancipatory gesture: I wanted to bring her into mainstream, and to certain degree I managed. Yet, this very successful, openly feminist and radical writer - by becoming “Polish” writer - was somehow deprived from her Jewish origins and belonging. Even though Irena Krzywicka herself often expressed her wish not to be treated as a Jewish person, even though she was very much assimilated Polish patriot, socialist, and she exclusively wrote in Polish, I have very serious doubts now – whether my emancipatory gesture dis not bear the characteristics of mainstream appropriation into the dominant culture, and which is a violating reading.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay I have no space for introducing the life and works of Irena Krzywicka, I use her only as an excuse to talk about the possibility of discussing a theme of Jewishness in the case of a writer who is completely assimilated, who creates exclusively (and living) in the country’s language, and finally – who declares belonging to the general culture and – in a way – dismiss her Jewish origins. How to use the secular Jewish identity as a reading tool? Where can it be useful? How can it “opens up” the text that hides its Jewish character (if it does)?

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<sup>1</sup> My first article on Irena Krzywicka appeared in 2002, then I have work and published about her in many post-conference volumes and finally my book on Krzywicka appeared in 2007, *W poszukiwaniu Kobiety: o wczesnych powieściach Ireny Krzywickiej* (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków). Later on, her Interwar novel was reprinted (in edited version, *Pierwsze krew*, 2009), also books and anthology by Agata Zawiszewska appeared (*Życie świadome: o nowoczesnej prozie intelektualnej*, 2010). So, in a way, Krzywicka became a generally known figure in the Polish literary milieu.

There are the questions that are very important for me. Thinking of them I wanted to present the Jewish “roots” of Irena Krzywicka, which is the tradition of the Bund and to present The Bundist idea of Jewishness, the idea of a secular Jew. And finally, I will conclude with the figure of another Irena, Irena Klepfish, the contemporary writer and poet, who is undoubtedly the poetic voice of the Bundist legacy on secularism and Jewishness.

### **How did we come to the Bund?**

Irena Klepfisz was born in Yaniseysk, in Siberia (where February average temperature is -18,8<sup>2</sup>) where her parents were sent for their socialist activities. Her mother Felicja Barbanel came from a completely Polonized family. She took her socialist passion from school, where she went with Rose Luxemburg.<sup>3</sup> When arrested she marries her colleague, Stanisław Golberg, and they are both sent to Siberia. There, Felicja Goldberg meets Yekutiel Portnoy (1872-1941). And the talks and relationship with this crucial Polish Bund’s activist change the life of Felicja forever: she not only became a life-time partner of the leader of the Polish Bund<sup>4</sup>, but also became a very devoted activist for the Jewish cause.

Even if, in her autobiography, *Długie życie Gorszycielki* (1994)<sup>5</sup>, Krzywicka refers to her mother’s activity and engagement in the Bund in rather sceptical way, presenting her childhood as haunted with militia and fear of being alone, there is no possibility that the socialist ideas of the home’s environment and the Bundist understanding of Jewish engagement did not affect her intellectually. The question - how, and where we can find the echo of the Bund in Krzywicka – requires all the re-reading of her writing, which I am planning to do, taking into account the activity of Yekutiel Portnoy in Polish history, the man that was Krzywicka’s father-in-law until his death in 1941.

Here – bearing in mind the complicated Polish -Jewish history - I would like to sketch shortly the history of the Polish Bund and to extract from it the idea of the socialist/secular Jew. Finally - as an conclusion – to talk about secular Jewish identity in today’s America and I analyse one poem.

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<sup>2</sup> Just a fun fact, but also showing the dramatical start of her life ☺ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yeniseysk>

<sup>3</sup> “The *Zweite Frauengymnasium* was a school that only rarely accepted Polish applicants and acceptance of Jewish children was even more exceptional.” (see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosa\\_Luxemburg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosa_Luxemburg)).

<sup>4</sup> Pickhan G. (2001) Kossovsky, Portnoy and Others: the Role of Members of the Bund’s Founding Generation in the Interwar Polish Bund. In: Jacobs J. (eds) *Jewish Politics in Eastern Europe: The Bund at 100*. Palgrave Macmillan, London

<sup>5</sup> Published after the death of Krzywicka and I never managed to find out whether Krzywicka approved the title. I suspect the editor of the autobiography and the Publisher using the catchy phrase rather Krzywicka gifting this title herself.

## **Polish Workers Organisation BUND**

General Jewish Labour Bund in Poland in the Interwar time was one of the most prominent Jewish organisations, engaging in the country's politics. Bund was active in Poland throughout the interwar time and despite many of the internal conflicts and splits it sustained its social role as a leading secular and socialist movement within Jewish community. The Polish Bund emerged from the General Jewish Labour Bund in Lithuania, Poland and Russia of the Russian empire that was created in Vilnius in 1897. The Bund had party structures established amongst the Jewish communities in the areas of the Russian empire. When Poland fell under German occupation in 1914, contact between the Bundists in Poland and the party centre in St. Petersburg became difficult. In November 1914 the Bund Central Committee appointed a separate Committee of Bund Organizations in Poland to run the party in Poland. Theoretically, the Bundists in Poland and Russia were members of the same party, but in practice the Polish Bundists operated as a party of their own. In December 1917 the split was formalized, as the Polish Bundists held a clandestine meeting in Lublin and reconstituted themselves as a separate political party.

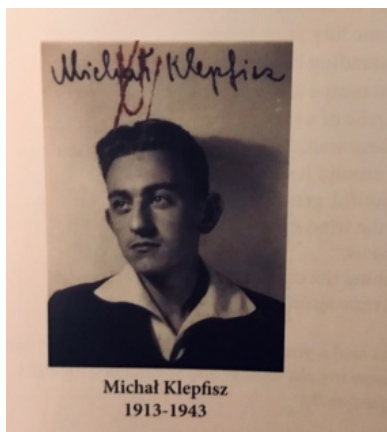
It is important to mention the Women's Organisation of Bund, The *Yidisher arbiter froy* (YAF). The knowledge of this movement I want to reclaim into cultural memory, because I found it very significant from the perspective of the development of second wave feminism, since many of the ideas of the late 1960s and the 1970s were present in the women's movement of the Bund. The YAF was chaired by Sheyne-Feygh Szapiro Michalewicz (1887-1985), known as Dina Blond, very important figure in sustaining the Yiddish culture in post-war America. It would be exaggeration to claim that women's movement in the Polish Bund was an influential movement, yet it recognized the area of social help that were neglected by many in the mainstream emancipatory movements. Among main goals were: 1. Lifting the intellectual and moral position of its members; 2. Popularising the life of the community among its members; 3. Providing tools to entertainment in free times (libraries, reading rooms, courses, chorus, excursions, concerts etc). The similar themes can definitely be found in all writing of Irena Krzywicka, for example. The women's initiatives were important in creating day-care (yasles), summer day camps for children, raising awareness in birth control, such YAF's involvement in creating Propaganda for Conscious Motherhood in 1932 in Warsaw (centre for women, where, for example, Irena Krzywicka was actively involved).

The Bund has always focus on the improvement of the Jewish situation within the state of residency and gaining the rights and possible full: political and cultural emancipation. Even thought, the official language was agreed to be Yiddish, the state languages were accepted,

hence the linguistic assimilation. But this linguistic assimilation can be also seen as the creating a new identity within the national languages: a language become a tool, the idea of appropriating language to Jewish aims. The Bund, being a Jewish party, opposed the assimilation with Polish society as well as the emigration of the Jewish population to Palestine. However, Bund did not exclude cooperation on the ideological level with Polish socialists. He demanded from the Polish State that the Jewish minority be granted broad autonomy. The goal to realize his ideas was extensive agitation among the Jewish proletariat. The Bund was also an anti-religious party, seeking to secularize Jewish social life. He protested against the Jewish Religious Community, which was dominated by Orthodox and Zionists. I am certain that many of the Jewish/ Bundist themes can be found and one day will be found in my re-reading of Irena Krzywicka. Yet, someone who could have been Krzywicka's daughter (or granddaughter), Irena Klepfisz (b. 1941) had to re-define the Bundist tradition and find her, "the post-holocaust" importance in the Bundist roots.

#### **Introduction: Who's Irena Klepfisz?**

Irena Klepfisz is a poet, Yiddish translator, and teacher of Jewish Women Studies. She was born in 1941 in the Warsaw Ghetto. She was smuggled out of the Ghetto, hidden in a Catholic orphanage, and eventually survived the war passing as a Polish child hidden in various families.



*Figure 1 The only photo of Michał Klepfisz, the Bundist leader*

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, in April 1943 claimed the life of her father, Michał Klepfisz, a resistance fighter and a Bund activist who was posthumously awarded the Virtuti Militari medal. After the Warsaw Uprising (1944), she and her mother, Rosa Perczykow-Klepfisz, hid in a village until the liberation. They then moved to Łódź and, in 1946, emigrated to Sweden, and in 1949, to the United States.

In her *The Secular Jewish Identity. Yidishkayt in America* (1986) Irena Klepfisz describes her understanding of Jewishness. No doubt, it is a story of the Eastern-European Jew of Bundist tradition, it is a perspective of a woman, a daughter, a daughter of a Bund hero, an heir of a secular pre-war tradition, a radical tradition. What are the main points that Klepfisz stresses? First of all, Irena notices that for her as young girl the secular identity consists of the following “facts”, the BUND’s ideological secular standpoints:

- There is no God
- Capitalism oppresses the working masses
- Main goal is to work for the classless society
- Jews have the right to be everywhere and they are not destined to return to their ancient homeland
- Yiddish is the *mame-loshn*, the languages of the Jews “The medium through which Jewish culture and politics are to be transmitted” (Klepfisz 1990: 143)

These “facts” are enrooted in the Bund tradition of Irena upbringing (again, the word - upbringing is a complicated term here, since her early childhood development is torn by the Holocaust and the years of survival). Yet, I write these points as facts in inverted commas since they are full of contradictions, such as:

1. Firstly, the socialist politics of Bund Irena Kelpfish learnt in USA was the politics away from its social contacts of Eastern European pre-war context. (“For years, I thought every Yiddish-speaking adult was to be addressed as Khaver or khaverte (male or female comrade), I simply didn’t know the Yiddish equivalent of a plain “Mr.” and “Mrs.”” (Klepfisz 1990: 145);

2. The Jewish right to be everywhere has been cruelly denied in the post-war antisemitism and her own story and the exile from Poland in 1946, what she vividly realized during her first visit in Poland in 1983, when she experienced the lack of Jewish culture first-hand.

3. The third contradiction was the diminishing position of Yiddish in post-war history. Even her own positioning to Yiddish forms this contradiction, since Yiddish was not her *mome-loshn* for during the war, as a child in order to “pass” as a Polish child Irena was encouraged to speak Polish exclusively.

4. And the next important new factor that changed the Bundist idea of Jewishness was the Holocaust. Undoubtedly, the Yiddish environment, the *yidische svive*, Irena was part of, was affected by the “destruction”, “*der khurbn*”, and her whole childhood is marked by the moment of commemorating the tragedy. Those commemorations (with her as a daughter

of a war hero) have been something that has influenced her enormously. Somehow the Bund pretended that the very core of ideology of the movement is not affected by Holocaust.

These inconsistencies of the socialist, Bundist identity Irena Klepfisz juxtaposed with the university education in the 1950s and 1960s in New York, where there were no Jewish courses, no appreciation of Yiddish language, and where the treacherous and devastating experience of assimilation was imposed. Treacherous - because it is done in a seemingly positive intention to get rid of the social differences such as accents and habits; this way assimilation can be seen as eliminating the possible painful experiences by eradicating the cultural memory. Yet, this lack of memory comes back and create a void. And this is what Irena Klepfisz realized in 1983 trip to Poland, and started to create a new language introducing the Yiddish in her English poetry as she explains: “this fragmentary language, this echo of European era and culture in which I never lived and about which I only heard second-hand like a family story, this *mame-loshn* might prove worth salvaging and sheltering. .... I do know that when I have presented my poems at readings, when I have formed the sounds, said the words out loud, those who had assumed Yiddish was a language of the past only, suddenly felt it had been revived” (p. 143).

### **Yiddish languages in English poetry as a radical gesture.**

Let’s see one of the examples of re-claiming the forgotten mother tongue and making it a vehicle of new poetic identity in the bilingual poems:

*Vider a mol*/ Once again

*Vider a mol*  
she tries to rise above circumstances.

Too much is at stake  
this morning  
*yedn frimorgn*  
                  every morning  
to see what can be wretched  
from the unconscious  
crowded darkness  
*fun ir zikorn*  
                  of her memory.

It is there

*di gantse geshikhte*

*fun folk*

The entire history  
of the people.

*Vider a mol*

she reaches out  
and tries to hold on  
clinging  
like a drowning  
person  
to a flimsy plank.

*Ober der yam iz groys*

but the sea is vast

*und di velt*

and the world

*afile greser*

even larger

*afile greser.*

This poem comes from the collection *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue. New Poems (1983-1990)*. The collections of the poems where Irena Klepfisz starts to juxtapose the English and Yiddish language together, in search for her own poetic voice and in order to express her own experience, and the experience of her generation. The best example of Irena Klepfisz's journey to find her mother tongues is *Di rayze aheym/The journey home*. A cycle of 9 poems: 1. Der fenster/The window; 2. Vider a mol/Once again; 3. Zi flit/ She flies; 4 A beys-oylem/A cementery; 5. Kashes/ Questions; 6. Zi shemt zihk/ She is ashamed; 7. In der fremd/ Among strangers; 8. Di tsung/The tongue; 9. Di rayze aheym / The journey home.

All the poems here creating one protagonist, a girl, a woman, a survival. Yiddish language is here as a symbol (or sound) of the lost world, and the anchor of the present world. The poetic persona of the poems, like in *Vider a mol/ Once again*, is perhaps the most identical to the poet herself out of all her writing. The poetic persona is a young girl who is lost between two languages, various foreign sounds: here we have a school situation of the teacher asking a pupil to repeat again, as she apparently made a mistake, and this situation for an insecure girl is a close-death moment (like drowning *Ober der yam iz groys.../ but the sea is vast*). The experience of the language confusion the reader feels immediately not understanding the part of the non-English words, as the poem is not directed to the Yiddish-speaking audience. A

displaced, lost in the foreign environment girl tries to survive (rise above circumstances) but her bewilderment seems to be increasing as if her lost dark memory is expanding into her immediate environment and the whole world. Taking into account Klepfisz's biography and the fact that as a child she refused to talk publicly and at school she always remained silent, we can even try to interpret the enlarged and irregular spaced between the words and verses in the poem as meaningful. Perhaps, the empty spaces and indentations are graphic representation of the girl/ "Irena Klepfisz" dramatic attempts to speak, her tries, heavy breaths, perhaps tears? The poem *Vider a mol/Once again* represents a poetic memory of Yiddish language and the Yiddish lost world as recovered in American poetry, but Irena Klepfisz in her poetry creates also a figure of a contemporary woman, Jewish secular woman, and this figure is another important feature of her poetry. It needs to be stressed that Klepfisz's secular background of the Bundist tradition has not gave her enough of freedom, so she didn't have to fight "her own" secular battles. Her own secular identity has to be expanded into the spheres that were important for her personally and for many Jewish women, namely her lesbian identity and the fact of childlessness, which in context of traditional culture always brings controversy. And this is where Klepfisz is the most radical in her Jewish poetic voice: she is not only openly secular and reclaiming socialist secular tradition, she goes further, she knows that her Yiddish language is weak, never her own completely, so she re-claims it but partially as part of her actual mother-tongue – English, and her third radical step is her standpoint against traditional sexual positioning of a woman and her role as a mother. Why and where is Klepfisz radical? She is a (1) Secular, (2) Childless and Lesbian, (3) Bilingual poet/reclaiming Yiddish. And - here is the most interesting element of the contemporary dialectic of past/present, she is radical not by rejecting the past but by re-claiming and rediscovering the part, the past of socialist movement, of Yiddish world, and the role of women in the Bundist tradition. I hope one day to look for the Bund in the stepdaughter of Portnoy's writing, in Irena Krzywicka. And in these plans, I found the meaning of the Bund in our contemporaneity.

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