

# Menke Katz Z"L

1906-1991



## Where Yiddish Laughs and Cries

April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Raquel Yossifon  
in collaboration with  
The Kiever Synagogue of Downtown Toronto

# Menke's Poems

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Performance: Joanna Czaban & Music Daniel Galay

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Reader: Masha Kalmanovitch

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Reader: Miriam Borden

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## Folk song : וואו איז? — Where is?

Performers: Claudia and She-She

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Reader: Alon Nashman

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Performers: Ori and Stacie Carmona & Music: Charles Heller  
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Reader: Gustavo de Oliveira Emos  
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## XX. בראַווער פחדן - Brave Coward

Reader: Miriam Borden  
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composed by: Charles Heller

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Reader: Raquel Yossiffon

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XII. Two Lovers

Performers: Masha Kalmanovitch

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Reader: Barbara Harshav

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XIV. אויף מיין מצבה - On My Gravestone

Readers: Benjamin Miller & Masha Kalmanovitch

Inmitn Tog p. 95 / Harshav p. 676

XXV. On the Death of a Day Old Child

Reader: Masha Kalmanovitch

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• Harshav: *Menke: The Complete Yiddish Poems*, The Smith 2005

\*\* All of the visual art presented in this program is by **Rivke Katz**



## A note from the creator:

This event, dedicated to celebrating the poems and life of Menke Katz, is my personal creation and vision. The curation of these poems, narration, and art are a tribute to Menke's life and his invaluable contribution to the Yiddish language and culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is a mere sampling, a dip into the deep and rich legacy that Menke has left us. These poems, and several of them small excerpts of much longer poems, are presented here non-chronologically. They are meant to evoke a tiny portal into Menke's creative world.

His works are many and diverse—no single cultural event could presume to exhaust the treasury of Menke's images, sounds, memories, and ideas. Indeed, the more of Menke you read, the deeper you become drawn to the fantastic beauty and tragedy his writing conveys.

For myself, as a director and writer, Menke's individual vibrancy and iconoclastic response to the literary 'kingmakers' of his era resonates very deeply with my own work. Menke's refusal to be silenced and the incredible artistic resilience he manifested throughout his career is an inspiration for everyone. Not only did Menke continue to work ceaselessly at his craft with a vibrancy and intensity conveyed in every stanza, by all reports, he did so with incredible joy. His personal warmth and incredible energy imprinted all who knew him.

May this event honoring his memory and legacy—the fulfillment of a promise made once upon a time—be a blessing and an inspiration for all of us!

Many thanks, *zeyer a shayenem dank*, for coming to share this tribute with us, and to our dear performers and partners that have helped to realize this vision.

-Raquel Yossiffon

**Raquel Yossiffon**, Ph.D., is a writer, director, dramaturge, and mythologist based in Santa Fe, New Mexico and New York. Her current work focuses on the conflict between civilizing systems and the emancipation of the repressed voice. Spanning theatre, opera, film and radio, her innovative performances and productions have met great acclaim. Her work has been performed internationally in Yiddish, Hebrew, and English. Ms. Yossiffon currently has several genre-bridging projects in development.

yossiffonproductions@gmail.com

## About the performers 1 (in order of appearance)

**Joanna Czaban**- is a singer from Poland.

**Daniel Galay** – Composer and Pianist, M.A. University of Chicago, National Conservatory, Buenos Aires and Tel-Aviv University Rubin Academy of Music. Many of his compositions are based on Yiddish and Hebrew texts, including those of Sutskever, Markish, Uri Tzvi Grinberg, Zelda, Amichay, Tzvi Kanar. Galay has also composed and written original librettos in Yiddish. His Symphonies and orchestral works have been performed in Poland, Belarus, Argentina, Paraguay and Israel. Awards: Premier Minister Composition Prize. 2009, Life achievements on the field of Jewish Music 2020.

**Masha Kalmanovitch** is writer, performer and translator. Her artistic Yiddish career began as a child actor in Goldfadn's "Shulamis" and Leyvik's "A Khasene in Fernvald." She is a playwright, and also co-authors and dramatizes many stories and literature. Her other projects include research in contemporary Yiddish-speaking communities and the oral histories of holocaust survivors.

Since 2012, **Benjamin Miller** has helped coordinate Ottawa Yiddishkayt (OY!) (now Ontario Yiddishkayt), a group that celebrates Yiddish language, arts, and culture through get-togethers and resource sharing. OY! is best known for collaborating on projects like Yiddish fortune cookies, Yiddish Kite Flying, a downtown Toronto Yiddish sukkah, and more!

**Miriam Borden** is a doctoral student in Yiddish Studies at the University of Toronto, where she teaches Yiddish language classes and works with local Yiddish library collections.

**Claudia and Shelley (Sheh-Sheh)** are the performers and arrangers of music from “Yiddish Songs” for Oxford, a collection on music from Mikhalishek, the childhood village of Menke Katz. They are also daughters of Troim Katz Handler and granddaughters of Menke Katz.

**Alon Nashman** is a performer, director, creator, and producer of theatre. Since graduating from the National Theatre School of Canada, he has performed in Canada as well as internationally to critical acclaim. He is the founder of Theaturtle a portal for essential, ecstatic theatre. He is in the process of developing several innovative projects.

<https://www.alonnashman.com/>

**Zishe Carlow** was born and raised in New York. He acted with the Folksbiene for ten years before moving to Madrid, where he currently teaches English and works in theater. He recently filmed the role of Rabbi Mintz in Woody Allen's new film Rifkin's Festival.

**Stanley H. Barkan** is a poet, translator, editor and publisher. He is a graduate of University of Miami with a masters in linguistics from NYU. He is the founder of Cross-Cultural Communications Review Series of World Literature and Art, prolific publisher of award winning, international literature. He is currently publishing a new book of translations of Menke’s poem “Death of a Day Old Child.” [cccpoetry@aol.com](mailto:cccpoetry@aol.com)



## About the performers 2 (in order of appearance)

**Reb Noyekh** (Noah Barrera) is a Yiddish educator, writer, translator, and YouTube content creator. Learn more about his work here: <https://www.yiddishwithnoyekh.com/>.

**Gustavo de Oliveira Emos** is an undergraduate student in literature at the University of São Paulo, and a language learning enthusiast. He is active in the Yiddish scene in the city. He volunteers his time at the Jewish Museum of São Paulo, organizing expositions, cataloging, and translating written material in Yiddish, Hebrew, and German. He takes part in reading and translation circles. Since April 2020 he works as a Yiddish teacher, both privately and for institutions. He is an instructor at [yiddishwithnoyekh.com](http://yiddishwithnoyekh.com), and in the project “Viver com Ídiche” in The Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro. Together with his colleague Reb Noyekh, he produces Yiddish educational content on Youtube.

**Ori Carmona**, Clarinetist is a graduate of the Israeli Conservatory of Music in Tel-Aviv and holds a Bachelor of Music from the Glenn Gould School in Toronto. He has performed with the Israeli Defense Forces Orchestra and the Glenn Gould School Orchestra, under the batons of Leon Fleisher, Simon Streatfield, Mario Bernardi, and many others. He has held the positions of principal and associate principal clarinetist with Opera York between 2006-2008. He is also the Ba'al Koreh at the Kiever Synagogue.

**Stacie Carmona**, Soprano is a graduate of the Glenn Gould School, the University of Toronto's Opera Division and Pacific Opera Victoria's Resident Artist Program, Stacie has performed with the National Ballet of Canada, the National Arts Centre Orchestra, the Etobicoke Philharmonic, Opera York, the Canadian Opera Company Chorus, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Israeli Chamber Orchestra and Opera Oshawa. She is an avid performer of contemporary music, including several world premieres.

**Charles Heller** is the Composer in Residence at the Kiever Shul.

**Barbara Harshav** has been a translator of works from French, German, Hebrew and Yiddish for over forty-five years. She has published over fifty books of translation including works of poetry, drama, fiction, philosophy, economics, sociology, and history. Along with Benjamin Harshav, she is the translator of Menke: the Complete Yiddish Poems, The Smith (2005).

**Dovid Katz**, a Vilnius-based Yiddish linguist, author, and educator, and Holocaust historian, founded Yiddish studies at Oxford and Vilnius. He edits the web journal Defending History and is at work on the Yiddish Cultural Dictionary. His website is <http://www.dovidkatz.net>.

**Marinka Yossiffon**, producer (J.D. equivalent, Universidad Torcuato di Tella) is the head of the Programming Committee at the Kiever Synagogue of Downtown Toronto. She is a writer, translator, human rights researcher, and PhD candidate at the University of Toronto.



## Further Resources and Information

**Dovid Katz'** webpage contains digitized content on the art and biography of Menke Katz'

<https://www.dovidkatz.net/>

<https://defendinghistory.com/menke-katz-in-april-2021-his-30th-yortsayt-and-115th-birthday-online-resources>

[https://www.dovidkatz.net/menke/Biography/Menke\\_biography.pdf](https://www.dovidkatz.net/menke/Biography/Menke_biography.pdf)

**Kiever Synagogue of Downtown Toronto—**

<https://www.kievershul.com/>

**UJA Federation, Committee for Yiddish—**

<http://committeeforyiddish.com>

**Toronto Workman's Circle—**

<https://toronto-workmens-circle.org>

**Beit Leyvik—**

<https://www.leyvik.com/>

**Cross Cultural Communications-**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanley\\_H.\\_Barkan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanley_H._Barkan)

contact: [cccpoetry@aol.com](mailto:cccpoetry@aol.com)

### TO A BROOKLYN POET

*(for Menke Katz)*

Build me no monuments in Borough Park,  
Statues for wild pigeons to decorate.  
Let no one scurry through my attic  
Nibbling bits and pieces of my life  
Over the inkwells and the broken cups.  
Just let my words live freely in the  
Land of Manna, the third heaven, or where  
Only children play, delighting in honey milk  
Of the stars and mooncakes of the angels.  
O Lord, let the insects sing my lyrics,  
The worms feast on the flesh of my soul,  
The furry beasts make selahs for each dawn.

*Stanley H. Barkan*

**And many thanks to our friends and institutional partners  
for their incredible support!**

Dovid Katz, Shelly Handler, Vivian Felsen (UJA Committee for Yiddish), Mel Cederbaum (Toronto Workman's Circle), Daniel Galay (Beit Leyvik), Alex Weiser (Yivo)

# A brief sketch of Menke's life:

Menke Katz was born in Svintsyan (Lithuania) on the second night of Pesach 1906. Part of his childhood and youth were spent in Micháleshik (near Vilna, present day Belarus), where Menke and his family endured the ravages of the First World War, including the loss of Menke's dear elder brother Eltchik. The family emigrated to New York arriving on July 22<sup>nd</sup>. 1920 to reunite with Menke's father. In New York the youthful Menke, already writing poetry in English, had a chance encounter with the Yiddish poet Abba Shtolzenberg. The friendship which developed was his introduction to the New York Yiddish literary scene, and he quickly became incorporated into the New York intellectual Yiddish leftists and a member of the *Proletpen* writers' group, writing and publishing in Yiddish. Through these leftist circles, Menke was introduced his first wife Chaske Blacker a Yiddish writer; they married in 1926 and relocated to Los Angeles with Menke's first two children Troim and Noah, where Menke practiced the trade of watchmaker, learned from an uncle back in Michaleshik. Relocating to New York, Menke earned a degree in the Yiddish Workers' University and studied rabbinics and Kabbalah at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Continuing to write, Menke gained renown as a Yiddish teacher. The impulse of transmission of both the Yiddish language and Yiddish cultural memory became more acute in light of the decimation of the Holocaust. Concurrently, disputes about Menke's literary independence and non-conformism led to two major breaks (after *Three Sisters* in 1932 and *Brenendik Shtetl* in 1938) from the leftist literary and social circles that had been his previous support, companionship, and ideological sparring partners, leaving Menke isolated and lonely. Menke's second marriage in 1950 to Rivke Feldman coincided with a final rupture with the leftist circles and a phase of Zionistic and overtly religious elements in Menke's writing. He and Rivke and their son Dovid (Hirshe-Dovid, born in 1956), lived intermittently in Safed, Israel (1954-1956; 1959-1960) where the ideological suppression of Yiddish made life insufferable for Menke. Once back in New York, the unmoored Menke found a stable, welcoming and rewarding environment writing experimental English poetry, particularly in collaboration and with the support of Harry Smith. Menke became known as editor of *Biterroot* magazine for thirty years. He was an opponent of rhyme—his essay “A Word or Two Against Rhyme” led to a Poet Lore symposium—and an innovator in form—most famously the *Unrhymed Unrefrained Double Chant Royal*. Winning acclaim for his English poetry, the Stephen Vincent Benet Award twice, and a Pulitzer Prize nomination in addition to an assortment of other awards, Menke returned to the cultural Yiddish nest in his last years. Throughout his life, he loved entertaining guests over l'chaims singing Yididsh folksongs, accompanied on his mandolin. His last days, in the family home in upstate New York were spent writing and reconnecting with surviving Jews of his Litvish homeland. Menke Katz Z”L (1906-1991).

-This brief biography is extracted from D. Katz, introduction to Harshav “Menke, the complete Yiddish Poems, 2005.”

# A Few Words about the Poetry

The poems performed today are a tiny drop in the wonderful collection of Menke's nine Yiddish and nine English published works. The poems read today are not presented chronologically, many of them are excerpts of longer poems. They have been woven together to narrate an impressionistic reflection on Menke's story, selected from eleven of Menke's eighteen books.

Much of Menke's artistic career, particularly his early writing in Yiddish, unfolded in the context of and under the shadow of his tempestuous relationship with the critics, editors, and leaders of the Leftist, often pro-Soviet, New York Jewish intelligentsia that had been his first cultural and literary community during his emergence as a Yiddish writer. Menke's creative spirit, valuing independence of subject matter and independence of thought, would not conform to the ideological dictates of the Leftist artistic objectives: proletarian art that would elevate and inspire the working classes in preparation for the revolution.

Even at the onset of his career, Menke's publication of his first book *Three Sisters*, an erotic inner-city psychodrama, caused him to be expelled from his leftist writers group *Proletpen*. Menke's inspirations, subjects and the intimate, personal reflections of the work were considered degenerate by these critics, who sought to promote poetry and poets that would serve the communist cause, as narrowly interpreted by themselves. Menke's sole attempt to conform to these strictures resulted in the poems published in his second book **Der Mentsh in Togn** (Dawning Man, 1935). This work elevating the proletarian class and socialist ideals, an example of which is the poem *Zushe in the Worker Poet's Smithy*, won Menke the critical recognition and cultural acceptance that he had sought. But the success it brought him may have seemed a betrayal of his artistic soul; towards the end of his life, he regretted sacrificing the poetic quality of his poetry to ideology in this one book.

However, in his subsequent third and fourth books, Menke reverted to even more personal, radical and non-ideological themes; the **Brenendik Shtetl v. I and II**, (Burning Village, 1938) summon up the ghosts, characters, and dreams of Menke's childhood shtetl. The poems collected in these volumes, such as *Eltichik*, recreate the beauty of the Old World life as well as the ravages and horrors of the first World War. These poems, his most intimate yet, once again met with critical rejection from the Leftists: who, while recognizing Menke's immense talents, continued to consider the collection of poems to be too rooted in the *shtetl*, too personal, absorbed with the past, emotional and tortured. But according to Menke, the introspective perspective of the poet should also be a fundamental component of Socialist art. In responding to the criticism generated by **Brenendik Shtetl**, Menke began to forcefully assert his artistic autonomy. In **Der Braver Pakhdn** (The Brave Coward, 1938) of which *Di tfile fun baraban* (The Prayer of the Drum) is the final poem, Menke struck out for the independence of poetry from politics and the need for a spectrum of emotion in poetry, one that includes both beauty and grief. These poems defend the poet's right to dwell on the past, to dwell on unhappy themes, to refuse to serve the causes of the day. After an onslaught of personal attacks against him in the Frayhayt, some making fun of his poems to his beloved grandmother Moyne, he responded with his next book of poetry: **S'hot dos vort mayn Bobe Moyne** (Grandmother Moyne Takes the Floor, 1939). Among its poems: *Ikh bin di bobe Michaleshik*, *Braver Pakhdn*, and *Amol iz geven* are examples of the poetic tone of Bobe Moyne, written in the voice of the maligned grandmother who rises from the cemetery in her Lithuanian shtetl to take on the critics from the "electric god of New York."

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The 1939 death of Moshe Olgin, one of Menke's most vocal critics but also the last of the tolerant editors who relished a good old literary debate, resulted in a critical change in the leadership of the leftist editors; they became more intractable and ideologically rigid, leaving Menke further estranged from the publishing world. Various poems of **Tsu dertseyln in freydn** (To Tell it in Happiness, N.Y. 1941) comprise a reflection on the political struggles in Europe during the war. The two that appear here *Olgin Ze!* and *Un efsher mayn kind*, are also an expression of Menke's isolation and wonder about his own place in the literary world. *Olgin* is also an elegy to Menke's "dear friend and colleague" who had been a faithful sparring partner during Menke's career. This deep loneliness and grief, personal but universal in the wake of the destruction of the holocaust, is conveyed so movingly in *A Krole der Aynzamkayt*, comes through in **Der Posheter Kholem** (The Simple Dream, 1947). This book also signified the deepening breach between Menke and the Leftist publishing establishment, exacerbated by the Soviet suppression of Jewish authors and the tide of McCarthyism in the United States that led to a purge of Yiddish from schools purportedly to distance these institutions from communism. In his preface to this volume, Menke, so unmoored, speculated whether he would ever write another book.

He did of course, continue to write; but the post-war period brought changes in Menke's personal life that led him and Rivke Katz to a sojourn in Israel, drawing him decidedly and finally away from leftist ideology. The last Yiddish book that Menke would publish for two decades **Inmitn tog** (Midday, 1954) harnesses many of these themes. *Der Shlos* is a meditation on isolation and ostracization. *Soyne Fun Yidish* rails against the factions suppressing the Yiddish language and *Af mayn matséyve* conveys the mournful and joyous imperative of its preservation. *In Toyznt Tor Arum* he marvels at the unchanging nature of the world and its beauty.

The long English turn of Menke's writing began in the late 1950s with publication of poems in *Commentary*, then the *New York Times* and *Atlantic*, with **Land of Manna** (1965) appearing as his first English book. In it, *At a Patched Window* appears, ironically the very poem he was writing in 1925 when Abba Shtolzenberg discovered him on New York's Lower East Side and opened the Yiddish world for him. *New Year's Eve on Broadway* is an ode to the beauty and sadness of the New York. These two poems speak strongly to the disparity between the visions and hopes for the New World and the bleakness of their reality. The selection taken from **Burning Village (1972)**, an English retelling of the narrative of the original Burning Village Yiddish volumes (not a translation), contain new reflections on earlier themes: *Menke* and *Bread of Famine* revisit shtetl memories in fantastical retellings. *Two lovers*, from **Nearby Eden** (1990) like so many of the poems in that volume, expresses love and longing of family.

Menke's return to Yiddish in two more volumes, the first **Tsfas** (Safad, 1979) consists of poems written during the period '54-'56 and '59-'60 when Menke lived there with his family. The powerful *Moshiyakh* is an example of the work form this volume combining transcendent mystical themes, love poems to Israel and Menke's ever-present longing for his Lithuanian homeland. Menke's final Yiddish work, **Menke Sonetn** published posthumously (Menke Sonnets, 1993) contains the magical and vibrant poems of Menke's final days. *Yiddish Koydesh*, *Af mayn New Yorker Gas*, and *di Tsavoe* all reveal Menke's exploration of his "Menke Sonnet" form of increasing-decreasing syllabic length of the lines. These poems thematically and visually moving, are the simultaneously heart-wrenching and joyous legacy of Menke in his last days.