

## **YISROEL SHTERN: a biographical sketch (1955)**

(b 1894 – perished in the Warsaw Ghetto between 1940-1943)

by **Menakhem Flakser**<sup>1</sup>

Translated by Mindle Crystel Gross (2006)

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Yisroel Shtern was born in the town<sup>2</sup> of Ostrolenke in Lomza District, on the border between Congress Poland and Lithuania. A broad river, the **Narew**, encircled the town. Memorials to past wars could be found in the surrounding fields. The workers of the town would toil hard all the week, finishing the clothes, the shoes, and the hats which the local peasants would buy twice weekly on Wednesdays and Fridays, when they came to town for market-days. The town shopkeepers too looked forward to these occasions.

In his response to Zalman Reyzen's questionnaire, for his *Lexicon for the Jewish Literature and Journalism*, Shtern stated that he was born at Shevuos 1894, i.e., he wasn't sure of the exact date of his birth. He had been born into a terribly poor household. His father was a *melamed*<sup>3</sup> who had died young, leaving his widow to feed and raise three small boys<sup>4</sup>. In addition, his mother's father, an old Jew with a white-grey beard who was a scribe, lived with them. He checked tefillin and Torahs to ensure that they were *kosher*; and once in a very great while, on a rare occasion, would write a Torah for a Mishna Fellowship<sup>5</sup> or for the butchers' *shtibl*<sup>6</sup>. This

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<sup>1</sup> (all notes by Ed. unless indicated): we are grateful to the Congress for Jewish Culture, who published this in Yiddish in 1955 as the first article in *Lider un Eseyen*; the only book of Shtern's to appear to date. Flakser appears to have written it for the book's publication. Shtern probably died in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942: see Rachel Auerbach's testimony on the website (written after the book's publication.) *Some biographical information about Flakser is given at the very end of this article.*

<sup>2</sup> Y.:*shtetl*: At the time of Shtern's birth, Ostrolenke's population was four and a half thousand Jews of a total pop. of 8,000. By 1915 this had grown to 6,000 Jews of 14,000. About half the Jews were Hasidim (Shtern's community). At his birth the township was in Russia close to the Prussian border; after the First World War it became part of Poland and the Polish name is Ostrołęka. It is between Warsaw and Białystok, near Łomża.

<sup>3</sup> teacher of traditional learning to young children (usu. 3 – 10y) in *cheder*: a poorly paid position of low status.

<sup>4</sup> His brothers were: Hersh, who trained as a shoemaker but became an actor and folksinger in Warsaw; he was well-liked at the Writers' Union, Tlomackie 13, where everyone called him Hershele; and Shimon, the youngest, who lived in Ciechanow where (unlike Yisroel) he was an active Zionist. He too wrote poetry, and some was published in *Shprotsungen* (Warsaw) in the late 1920's.

<sup>5</sup> (Jon Levitow):Mishna Fellowship: devoted to the study of a *perek* (chapter) of Mishna each week, usually for working people who as youngsters had not had the opportunity to study Jewish law beyond *cheder* level; they would meet after work after the *Maariv* prayers. It functioned usually as a social organization as well, with regular events like a Purim *shpil* and help for members in times of need, etc.

did not afford him a substantial living... and it became the responsibility of his widowed daughter to support him as well.

I remember her as young and blooming, with a good head on her shoulders. She became a pastrycook and used to sell her cakes to the town's housewives of an evening. She enrolled the children in *kheder*, and later on even sent them to study in the *yeshiva*. Yisroel, the eldest and most talented of the boys, studied in the Lomzhe and Slobodke *yeshivas*. When he came home for the holidays he would pray in the Ger *shtibl*. While at prayer, he would stand facing the *seforim*<sup>7</sup> cabinet and bury his head between the long covers of the *yoyre-daye* (the second part of the *Shulkhan Arukh*, in which the laws concerning kashrut are detailed.) Seldom did I see him praying along with the congregation.

As an older *yeshiva* boy, Yisroel studied for a short time together with other outstanding students with my father Henoeh Flakser. My father had ordination as a rabbi, and for many years had boarded with his father-in-law, R' Efrayim Goldbruch, that remarkable Jew to whom Shtern later devoted one of the few poems of his that bear a dedication.

More than once, as a young boy, I was awakened on a cold winter's morning when the lamps were suddenly lit in our house and the air became saturated with the sounds of communal Torah study.

World War I found Shtern in Vienna, the Austro-Hungarian capital city, where as a Russian citizen he was detained<sup>8</sup>. During those few years he navigated all the modern philosophical and literary currents for which Vienna was then famous.

Shtern came to Warsaw<sup>9</sup>, but was nowhere to be found in literary circles. Instead he linked up with a *musarnikes'* collective<sup>10</sup> on Sapierzynska

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<sup>6</sup> Y: *shulekhl* little synagogue, but we give *shtibl* as it is widely used in Eng. now. Flakser is describing a lack of authority in the scribe: in both instances, his work is of less standing than that of a scribe for a regular synagogue. The Mishna Fellowship's Torah, being for study and not for worship, didn't need to be of the highest standard. (R.Mokotow, pers. comm.)

<sup>7</sup> Books for religious study, many of folio size.

<sup>8</sup> Y.: *internirt* (R.Mokotow): internment in camps (though prevalent since) was not then practised, and most likely he had to report regularly to the police. He may have gone to Vienna to avoid being drafted into the Russian army as many young men did.

<sup>9</sup> in 1917.

<sup>10</sup> It would be interesting to know whether this was "minimalist" or "maximalist" – (Encyc Judaica: musar movement) – the maximalist version is vividly depicted in Ch. Grade's wonderful tale "My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseynner" in Treasury of Yiddish Short Stories, ed. I Howe and E Greenberg (1954). Either way, study was communal and highly charged emotionally, aimed at moral improvement. The musar movement was non-Hasidic, and Shtern's attendance at both this and Breslav may have been unique. But Jon Levitow, in his essay on this site 'Yisroel

Street. His poems began to appear in various magazines, such as *Ringen* and *Khalyastre*, without arousing any particular reaction. Only when a poem of his was printed in a Friday edition of *Moment*<sup>11</sup> did Hersh Dovid Nomberg<sup>12</sup> appear at the Writers' Union at Tlomackie 13, shouting: "Who is this Shtern? Where is he?"

Shtern however kept his distance from every literary group. Those were tumultuous times, times of deep belief in a literary Warsaw. Markish arrived from Russia with the song "*Top Hat on the Feet and Boots on the Head*". Uri Zvi Grinberg came from his father's *beys-din shtub*<sup>13</sup> in Lemberg, and Melekh Ravitch from Vienna with hints of Spinoza in his poetry. They came out in the *Literarische Bleter*; many books were published. The rooms of Tlomackie 13 would be packed with youth from Chasidic homes, attending stormy literary evenings and discussions. But Shtern stayed on the periphery of all this. He might be found in the Litvak Talmud Fellowship<sup>14</sup> at Nalewki 39, or in the *shtibl* of the "dead chasidim", the Breslaver, on Dzielna Street.<sup>15</sup>

More and more Shtern retreats into himself, as into a separate world, even when he appears among his fellow writers. No one knows what Shtern does, how he supports himself. I will not forget the picture of how, on a wintry evening, I finally arrived at the "room", or more precisely, the den, where Shtern lived. Upon a dilapidated iron bed, amidst a mountain of rags, lay an unshaven Shtern deeply asleep. He would "disappear" from the world in this way for weeks on end and then reappear, to bring out a brilliant essay in a newspaper or magazine, and less frequently, a poem.

He was filled with bitter protest against the life around him and refused to come to any compromise with life. I can remember a single occasion when the Writers' Union succeeded in situating Shtern for several summer months in an editorial office to proofread there, in order to help him keep

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Shtern's "Crowns to Adorn the Head of Yiddish Criticism" and the Path of Yiddish Literature' – see his footnote 10 and the text it refers to – makes a case for a bridge across the two.

<sup>11</sup> *Friling in Shpitol*, in 1924.

<sup>12</sup> Nomberg, an older writer, was a guiding spirit of the Writers' Union at Tlomackie 13.

<sup>13</sup> i.e., he was a Rabbi without a post whom people consulted at home for judgments on kashrut etc. So was the father of I I Singer and Bashevis Singer, who both provide detailed accounts in their memoirs. (Lemberg=Lwow=Lviv today)

<sup>14</sup> (Jon Levitow): *Khevera Shas*, an acronym for the Talmud deriving from the Shisha Sedarim, the Six Orders of the Mishna that the Talmud discusses. The study of the Talmud was the most important male occupation for non-Hasidim or "Litvaks". (*cont. at end of document*)

<sup>15</sup> The Encyc Judaica entry, "Nahman of Bratslav", too long and complex for summary here, sheds valuable light on Shtern's life and thought.

body and soul together. He rebelled mightily against all the restrictions which life brings upon us.

His satisfaction lay in wandering the streets, peering deeply into the faces of the outcasts and the persecuted, standing with a beggar on a street corner, and ending the day with a book in the Litvak Talmud Fellowship.<sup>16</sup>

These abnormal living conditions led to Shtern's serious illness, so that he spent many long months in hospital. It is from there that his clear and bright "Hospital Poems" emerged, among his most important creations. It is a great pity that his other epic poem "*R' Efrayim Goldbukh*" remained unfinished. This was my grandfather, and mine is the responsibility of explaining this remarkable person.

Efrayim Goldbrukh grew up in Kotsk, and from there he brought the approach of denying all established forms for which R' Mendele Kotsker was renowned.<sup>17</sup> Efrayim Goldbrukh's was one of the town's prosperous households: he owned an apartment block right at the market and a well-appointed shop, and there was more than sufficient income. His wife Freydele was a wonderful homemaker and would travel to Warsaw to purchase goods. She got along well with the aristocrats and the military who were her customers. Efrayim Goldbrukh could afford to sit and study, but that did not fulfill him. He had a feeling for doing good for others, and this feeling filled his entire being, allowing him no respite. He would take from home whatever came to hand, and bring it to those who needed it.

Later on he could be found before dawn, any time from 3am, standing at the door of the shul, to charge every Jew who came to pray a *kopeke*. They paid gladly, laughing at him behind his back "He has a stall in the center of the market and begs *kopekes*?" But Efrayim Goldbrukh paid no attention to their ridicule. With the money he would buy chickensoup for women who had given birth, and take care of widows and orphans; and he even single-handedly set up an old-age home, where he would mingle in a fatherly way with the residents.

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<sup>17</sup> The following summary of the Encyc Judaica entry is given for the light it sheds on Shtern and on his unfinished epic poem: to Menahem Mendl of Kotsk (1787 – 1859) is credited "the marked restlessness of the Hasidic mind, especially... among Polish Jews". His approach was a harsh contrast to the founder of Hasidism, replacing love for all with a furious zeal for finding truth for a select few. The honest search for it constitutes the truest worship of God, he taught: there must be no rote prayer, no attention must be paid to outward appearances, and emotional bias must be overcome; so that often a man has to go against himself and society. To this end, more like the Gaon of Vilna than the Hasidim, he advocated study, while warning that pride and conceit were hazards as serious as idol-worship. He spent his last 20 years alone in a room, his disciples passing food in to him.

Perhaps it is not entirely correct that Efrayim Goldbrukh was chased out of his rich house “*like a dog*”, as the poem says. But I remember the arguments throughout my childhood between grandfather and grandmother concerning these aforementioned activities.

How little Shtern thought about his profession of writing can be seen from the fact that for the more than 20 years that he lived in Warsaw in the very thick of things, he never thought of gathering his works together and publishing a book. His favourite literary milieu was at Hillel Tsaytlin’s. Shtern was a frequent guest at his house on Sliska Street, where restless souls would grapple for solutions to the Jewish Question.

Among Warsaw writers it was rumored that a tragedy had occurred in Yisroel Shtern’s personal life, which cast a pall over all his remaining years. The occurrence remained a secret, deeply buried in his soul. It was said that in some way this had led him to take his place with the *musarnikes*.

World War II brought Shtern, along with millions of other Polish Jews, under the terrible rule of the Nazis. He suffered poverty and hunger and, no matter how hard the few surviving communal activists tried to help him, as Emanuel Ringelblum bears witness<sup>18</sup> Shtern several times swelled up from hunger and illness. For a short while he was successfully settled in a *shop*<sup>19</sup> where he was fine, doing all kinds of heavy work. But one day, all the workers of the shop were taken to the *umschlagplats*, and from there to the Treblinka gas chambers.

As Ringelblum and other witnesses relate, Shtern wrote much while in the ghetto, but the manuscripts of this remarkable man and extremely unusual poet were destroyed along with him.

## **Menakhem Flakser**

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<sup>18</sup> Ringelblum himself does refer to Shtern on several occasions. His information would have come from Rokhl Auerbach – see her memoir, written after the War, on this website.

<sup>19</sup> term used in Ghetto for German factory of slave labor.

**Menakhem Flakser** (from Rayzen's Leksikon):

b.in Ostroleka in 1898, his lit. career commenced whilst a proofreader in Warsaw, with poetry in "Ringin" (1921) no.3, and Khaliastre (1922), and in the Varshever Almanakh (1923). He was then in Paris for some time, submitting articles to Lit. Bleter in 1924 about Chagall and other Jewish painters. Back in Warsaw in 1926 he worked for the magazine Varshever Ekspres and his story Oyf der Mil appeared in Varshever Shriftn (1926) . He translated several novels from Russian, including two by Ilya Ehrenburg; as well as Anatole France's Flowers and Rilke's Song of Love and Death (in Lit Bleter).

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Footnote 14 cont.(JL) The study groups mentioned in Flakser's essay existed in almost every city and "shtetl," highly stratified according to the level of education and social status of the participants. The Talmud Fellowship, educationally and socially, would have been above the Mishna Fellowship.

Because the education you got as a child often depended on how much money your family had, study groups like the Mishna Fellowship and the Shas Fellowship often divided up along class lines and would function as social as well as educational organizations, throwing annual parties, helping members in times of need, putting on plays at Purim time, etc.