AARON ZEITLIN'S CUBAN EXILE

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Aaron Zeitlin (1898-1973), active in Warsaw before the start of World War II and in New York thereafter, is one of the rare poets to have written significant works in both Hebrew and Yiddish. Even more exceptionally in the context of the secularizing tendencies of modern Jewish literature, Zeitlin combined a keen knowledge of European classics with an assertion of faith steeped in the Kabbalah.

At the time of the Nazi invasion of Poland, Zeitlin found himself in New York, working on the play, *Esterke*, produced by the famous Yiddish actor and director, Maurice Schwartz. Its music was composed by Sholom Secunda, who had won great fame with the crossover hit *Bay mir bistu sheyn*, sung by the Andrew Sisters in an English rendition that conserved the Yiddish title and refrain.[1]

Zeitlin's text of *Esterke* included lyrics to several songs, one of which might well be recognized to this day by a general American audience. The song in question, *Dona, dona* (originally called *Dana, dana, dana*), was popularized in the 1950s and '60s by the folksingers Theodore Bikel (in the Yiddish original) and by Joan Baez (in an English translation).[2]

This *gilgl fun a nign*, this "migration of a melody" – the performance of a Zeitlin song by the *chicana,* Joan Baez – is not the poet's sole connection to Latin America. After working on *Esterke*, Zeitlin departed for Cuba to await a permanent U.S. visa, and while there he penned some

1 The title is usually cited in the German spelling, *Bei mir bist du schön.*

2 The song is included in *Theodore Bikel Sings More Jewish Folk Songs* (Bainbridge Records, CD #BCD 2508, orig. released on Electra Records #EKS 7165 in 1959), *Joan Baez: Volume 1* (Vanguard Records, CD #VMD 2077). Baez's English version, *Donna donna,* was translated by Arthur Kevess and Teddi Schwartz. For the original Yiddish lyrics, see *Dona, dona* in Eleanor Gordon Mlotek and Joseph Mlotek, eds., *Pearls of Yiddish Song* (New York: Education Department of the Workmen's Circle, 1988), p. 175.

poems. He placed most, but not all, of them under the rubric *In goles-Kuba* ("In Cuban Exile").[3]

A student of Yiddish literature cannot neglect the avatars of a tune through time and space. Such transformations constitute the subject of one of the masterpieces in the language, the classic writer Y. L. Peretz's story *A gilgl fun a nign* ("Migrations of a Melody"). Peretz recounts the intergenerational transmission of a Hassidic melody; as the tale ends, we wonder whether anything will remain of the tune or of its Jewishness, for the girl who sings it has been orphaned: *Di muter hot shoyn lang nit gelebt un der foter iz shoyn lang geven in Amerike* ("Her mother was no more among the living and her father had long ago emigrated to America").[4]

The migration of a melody to far-off America is the subject of one of the poems Zeitlin wrote in Havana: *Karmensita, oder di doyres-keyt* ("Carmencita, or The Generational Chain" [1: 326-27]). Listening to a dark-skinned singer in a basement cabaret, the poet detects in her song *an alter al-khet, fartsaytishe kol-nidres* ("an old *al-khet, kol-nidres* from long ago" [1: 327]) – sounds of the *mea culpa* prayers intoned on Yom Kippur. In a forward to one of the volumes of his collected works, Zeitlin explains that the poem *Karmensita* is "based on the widespread, though academically unproved assumption that the *kol-nidre* melody comes from Marrano times in Spain" (2: xi). Yet just as we may wonder whether Joan Baez fully grasped *Dona, dona* as an allegory of Jewish fate, so the poet asks, "What could a Carmencita know" of the song she sings? (*Vos veys a Karmensita?* [1: 327]). However, the poet can decode – *ikh eyner veys* ("*I* know") – the transgenerational Marrano message that the dark singer conveys: *Zingt oys Karmensita/ an umes groyln/ fun Shpanye biz Poyln* ("Carmencita sings out [or: Out of Carmencita sings forth (both readings are possible[5])]/ a people's terror/ from Spain to Poland"). The

3 Aaron Zeitlin, *In goles-Kuba* in *Ale lider un poemes*, 2 vols. (New York: Bergen-Belsen Memorial Press, 1967-70), vol. 2, pp. 317-32. Further references to these volumes will most often appear parenthetically in the text, in the form: volume number, followed by a colon, followed by a page number. Translations and ellipses are mine, unless otherwise noted.

4 Y. L. Peretz, "Migrations of a Melody"/*A gilgl fun a nign*, in Sol Liptzin, trans. and ed., *Peretz* (New York: YIVO, 1947), pp. 264, 265.

5 *Karmensita*, as a foreign name, does not require the dative ending; *oys*, in Polish dialect, can mean "from, out of"; and Yiddish does not always require agreement in number between subject and verb, especially when the verb comes first.

parallel is clear: just as Sephardim escaped persecution by going to the New World, so the Yiddish poet from Warsaw finds safety in Havana.[6]

But how far does the analogy go? Is there any sense in which Zeitlin identifies himself as a Marrano? To answer that question, we must make an excursus through a long dramatic poem in which Zeitlin reworked the topos of the Spanish expulsion. Entitled *Dos yor 1492: a historishe fantazye* ("The Year 1492: An Historical Fantasy" [1: 304-12]), this poem takes the form of a conversation among three personalities: Christopher Columbus; the Iberian Jewish scholar and royal financier don Isaac Abarbanel; and Luis de Torres, the polyglot who underwent baptism one day before Columbus's departure, in order to become the Genoan's interpreter. According to some accounts, de Torres was the first European to set foot on Cuba and to use tobacco.[7]

Zeitlin's "The Year 1492" begins as don Isaac Abarbanel, whose attempts to bribe Ferdinand and Isabella have failed, curses Spain and enjoins Jews never to return. A proto-Zionist (and we must recall that Zeitlin was a profoundly committed Zionist), Abarbanel decrees the Jews must depart for the East, for that is where they belong. Alluding to the refusal portrayed in Psalm 137 to sing of Jerusalem in Babylon, Zeitlin has Abarbanel proclaim that it was a sin to have sought to praise God in a foreign land, and for that the Jews are being punished.

The *converso* Luis de Torres is far less sure of God's will, and even of His justice. He asserts: *Ven ikh bin Got, farakht volt ikh di knekht,/ vos taynen eybik, az ikh bin gerekht* ("If I were God, I would despise those slaves/ who eternally claim that I am just" [1: 306]). Don Isaac is shocked by de Torres's profanation: *Vos lesterstu?* ("How dare you blaspheme?"), he responds. Yet such ambivalence toward God, which at once recognizes Him as the ultimate master and throws Him into question, might well be an eternal Jewish characteristic, an antinomianism at the core of Jewish belief. Far more certainly and relevantly, it is at the heart of Zeitlin's theology. "Being a Jew," he writes elsewhere, "means expecting to hear any day,/ even if you are a nay sayer,/ the blare of Messiah's horn" (*Zayn a yid heyst . . . / dervartn tsu hern a lyade tog/ (afile az m'iz a koyfer)/ s'kol fun meshiekhs shoyfer*).[8] Note that Zeitlin is not asserting that the denier of God is wrong; rather, it is his own trust in

6 *A gilgl fun a nign* is also the underlying theme of Zeitlin's *Hesped af a sinsonte* ("Elegy to a *sinsonte*") (2: 326-28). A *sinsonte* is a species of songbird.

7 See, for example, Cecil Roth, *A History of the Jews: From Earliest Times Through the Six-Day War*, rev. ed. (New York: Schocken, 1989), p. 356.

8 Zeitlin, "To Be a Jew"/*Zayn a yid*, trans. Robert Friend, in Irving Howe, Ruth R. Wisse, and Khone Shmeruk, eds., *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* (New York: Penguin, 1988), p. 538.

God that he sometimes presents as scandalous.[9] Zeitlin even has God, during the Holocaust, doubt His own existence, only to have it proven to Him by the glorious self-sacrifice of Janusz Korczak. (This is in the verse poem entitled *Yanush Kortshak* [1: 138-39]. Korczak, a world-renowned pediatrician heading an orphanage in the Warsaw ghetto, followed his charges to the gas chamber, even after the Nazis offered to spare him.)

Zeitlin's quarrel with God, while it may be universally Jewish or just plain universal, is also very Ashkenazic. Witness the oft-cited Yiddish proverb: *Az Got zol voynen af der erd, voltn im mentshn di fentster oysgeshlogn* ("If God lived on earth, people would break the windows of His house").[10] If in "The Year 1492" the poet can be aligned with the proto-Zionist Abarbanel, there is also some parallel to be drawn between the polyglot Zeitlin (at home not only in Hebrew and Yiddish, but also in Polish, Russian, and English) and Columbus's interpreter Luis de Torres with his disputatious Ashkenazic mind-set.

In effect, de Torres asks: they want us to go east? *Af tsu lehokhes di goyim* ("to spite the Gentiles"; he does *not* say that, but he might as well), "let us travel even further westward" (that he *does* say: *lomir zhe nokh mayrevdiker forn* [1: 307]). "Sailing westward leads eastward," Zeitlin has Columbus proclaim (*Der veg tsum mizrekh – durkhn mayrev firt er* [1: 306]). The Genoan explorer (who for Zeitlin is definitely of Jewish background) maintains that "all roads lead" not to Rome, but "to Jerusalem" (*keyn Yerushelayim firn ale vegn* [1: 311]). From the viewpoint of Zeitlin's *conversos* in "The Year 1492," Judaism supplants Christianity, not vice versa.

In his 1929 play about the messianic figure Jacob Frank, Zeitlin condemns Frank's antinomianism: the path to redemption through sin, which led the would-be messiah to embrace Catholicism.[11] In "The Year 1492," Zeitlin judges Luis de Torres's apostasy far less harshly. First of all, it is moot: Columbus maintains that neither the waters of the baptismal font nor those of the sea can extinguish God's love for Israel. Secondly,

9 This is clear, for example, in a 1946 addendum to one of Zeitlin's Havana poems from 1939: *Koykhes eybershte, ir vet nokh vayzn, vayzn vos ir kent!/ . . . / Vos hot ir shoyn vider ot do ongeshribn, ikh bet aykh, hilflozike hent, gram-shtramendike hent!?* ("Eternal forces, you will show, show what you can do!/ . . . / What have you once again just written, I ask you,/ helpless hands, rhyming-shrhyming hands!?" [*Lid mit a shpeterdiker tsushrift* (1: 54 [ellipsis in the original])]).

10 Nahum Stutchkoff, *Der oytser fun der yidisher shprakh* (New York: YIVO, 1991 [orig. ed. 1950]), p. 704, §606.

11 Zeitlin, *Yankev Frank: Drame in zeks bilder* (Vilna: Kletskin, 1929).

Zeitlin presents de Torres's actions as essential to the ultimate establishment of Jews in America. In prophetic tones, de Torres declaims toward the end of the poem:

> S'kumt a tsayt –
> un visn vet men, az der yid de Tores
> iz fun zayn alter ume nisht antlofn.
> Oykh dort, in vaytn mayrev fun der velt,
> oykh dort, don Yitskhok, veln lebn yidn. (1: 312)
>
> (There shall come a time,
> when they shall know that the Jew de Torres
> did not run from his ancient people.
> There too, in the far-off west of the world,
> there too, don Isaac, Jews will live.)

Now Zeitlin finds himself, like de Torres, in Cuba, where he meets someone who might well be a descendant of Columbus's interpreter. He narrates this encounter in the poem *Der gayego* ("The *gallego*"):

Fregt der alter gayego: ir zayt a khudio?
– Gevis.
– Oyb azoy – efsher veyst ir ver *ikh* bin?
A yid tsi a goy? Dos katoylishe vayb mayns
farshelt mir di yorn, vayl kh'shtam fun maranos.
Kh'gey zeltn in kloyster. Iz zogt zi: derfar,
tsulib dayne zind, du farsholtener umkrist,
farzitst undzer tokhter. Zi makht mir dem toyt,
dos vayb mayns, un knit rak far getsn un kusht
di hent fun galokhim. Nu, khapt zi der tayvl.
A yid bin ikh oykh nisht. Es brent nokh in mir
a pakhed an alter, un kh'kon nisht farshteyn
ayer kol-nidre ot do, in Havane.
Nishto do, in ayer Yon-Kiper, keyn trern.
Nishto do di moyre far inkvizitorn.
Der iker: nishto do di moyre far Got.
Vi nor ir hot tsayt – azoy shpilt ir in kortn,
un dortn,
dort oybn, zitst Got un er tsornt. Un gornisht.
O, vos iz gevorn, zogt, vos iz gevorn
mit aykh, ir khudios? Keyn shpur nisht fun shrek.
Me hot gor in gantsn far Got nisht keyn moyre
un oykh nisht, lehavdil, far inkvizitorn,

vos konen zikh plutsling bavayzn in keler.
Vu keler, ven keler? Der tog iz a heler
un di sinagoge bay aykh a geroyme.
Ikh eyner hob moyre nokh alts. In khaloymes
bay nakht ze ikh shayters: me firt mikh tsum fayer. (2: 322-23)

(The old *gallego* asks: "Are you a *judío?*"
"Certainly."
"If so, perhaps you know who *I* am?
A Jew or a Gentile? That Catholic wife of mine
curses me, because I descend from Marranos.
I seldom go to church. So she says to me: 'It's
because of your sins, you accursed non-Christian, that
our daughter stays single.' She'll be the death of me,
that wife of mine, who kneels before idols and kisses
the hands of priests. So, let the devil take her.
Nor am I a Jew. There still burns within me
an old dread, and I can't understand
your *kol-nidre*, here in Havana.
On your Yom Kippur here, no tears are shed.
You know no fear of inquisitors.
Most of all: there's no fear of God.
Whenever you have time, you play cards,
and there,
up there, God sits and grows wrathful. So what.
"And what has become, tell me, what has become
of you *judíos*? No trace of fear.
No fear whatsoever of God
or (excuse the comparison) of inquisitors
who can suddenly raid your hideout.
What hideout? Which hideout? Today it is bright out
and your temple's nice and roomy.
I, on the other hand, am still afraid. I dream
at night of autos-da-fé: I'm led to the pyre.")

In regard to the title, Zeitlin is a poet who likes annotating his works, and in footnotes to the poem he defines the word *judío* as *yid* and, more surprisingly, glosses the term *gayego* as *Shpanyer* ("Spaniard"). Thus he displays a familiarity with the Spanish spoken in the Caribbean isles, where this term meaning a native of Galicia, Spain (not Galicia, Poland) may refer metonymically to any Spaniard.

However, early twentieth-century Cuba had welcomed a significant

number of *gallego* immigrants in the strict sense of the word, and Jews found themselves on occasion in competition with merchants among the *gallegos*.[12] Moreover, Spanish Galicia had actually been home to some Jewish communities. One rather fanciful account advances the joint theses of Columbus's Galicianness and Jewishness, despite his presumably Genoan background ("la galleguidad [y] el origen judío de Colón, fuese o no genovés").[13]

Such considerations notwithstanding, nothing assures us that the encounter Zeitlin depicts in *Der gayego* is based on a real incident. Whatever politically correct Judeophilia may now exist in Latin America, in 1939 things were different. No doubt, "Cuba's overall record in permitting [Nazi-era Jewish] refugees to enter was among the best in the world."[14] Yet though anti-Semitism did not flourish on the island, certain factors promoted it there: a general mistrust (in the wake of the Spanish civil war) of possible leftist elements among European newcomers; and Nazi propaganda efforts, which culminated in the well-known fate of the St. Louis, which had sailed into Havana harbor. That ship, loaded with German Jews, was refused docking privileges by the Cuban authorities. Its passengers returned to Europe, where they met the fate of all Jews under the Nazis.

In such a context, would a Cuban Catholic of Spanish origin have wished to foreground his Jewish descent? The generic label Zeitlin affixed to the poem "The Year 1492" – "An Historical Fantasy" – may likewise apply to *Der gayego* as well. Just as I detect in the other poem Zeitlin's identification with the *converso* de Torres, so in *Der gayego* we cannot situate the poet solely in the voice that protests assuredly of his Jewish identity. We have to see Zeitlin in the Marrano as well. After all, the confident Jew is allowed to speak just one word, *gevis* ("certainly," in verse 2), whereas the religiously ambiguous figure has the floor in the near-entirety of the poem.

The Marrano is neither fully Jew nor Gentile, but has elements of both. In what sense would Zeitlin, the most religiously Jewish of significant Yiddish poets, have been Christianized? Yiddish modernism was characterized by a Christological obsession. It suffices to recall Sholem

12 See Robert M. Levine, *Tropical Diaspora: The Jewish Experience in Cuba* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1993), pp. 17-18, 56.

13 José Ramón Onega, *Los judíos en el reino de Galicia* (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1981), p. 437.

14 Levine, *Tropical Diaspora*, p. 132.

Asch's once immensely popular novels on Jesus, Chagall's wartime depictions of crucified Jews, and Lamed Shapiro's pogrom tale entitled *Der tseylem* ("The Cross").[15] Zeitlin was far less welcoming to this crypto- and not-so-crypto-Christianity, but he was not free of it. The recently-deceased luminary in the field of Yiddish, Professor Chone Shmeruk of the Hebrew University, studied Zeitlin's presentation of the crucified Jesus in *Esterke* at length.[16] Similarly, in Zeitlin's *Lid fun nokh-Maydankesher emune* ("Poem of Faith after Maidanek" [1: 129]), Christology is evident in the reference to Hitler as *anti-meshiekh* ("the anti-messiah"), corresponding to the Antichrist. In Zeitlin's prose poem *Yanush Kortshaks letster gang* ("Janusz Korczak's Final Path" [2: 43-93]), which praises anew the Warsaw ghetto pediatrician, there are elements that seem supremely Christian: an emphasis on trusting, child-like faith, which reminds us of Matthew 18:3: "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven"; and an exalted contemplation of the faces of dead children, which recalls the Catholic cult of the bodily relics of saints. Similarly, Chateaubriand, the French Romantic defender of Christianity, became convinced of God's existence upon viewing the face of his recently deceased father.[17] With regard to *Yanush Kortshaks letster gang,* it does not seem coincidental that Janusz Korczak has the same initials as Jesus Christ in Polish; moreover, the expression *letster gang* ("final path") permits associations with the *via dolorosa.* Christological themes are also present in Zeitlin's *Der galekh shlogt zayn Got* ("The Priest Beats his God" [1: 327-28]) and *A sheyn moralish lid fun Khanele der meshumedes* ("A Beautiful Moral Song of Hannah the Apostate" [2: 479-80]). There is another poem by Zeitlin about a young woman apostate, who wonders about the incomprehensible prayers her father mutters (*Lid fun a meshu-*

15 See, for example, Sholem Asch, *Der man fun Natseres* (New York: Kultur-farlag, 1943), trans. Maurice Samuel, *The Nazarene* (New York: Putnam, 1939); Chagall's 1943 painting *Yellow Crucifixion*; and Lamed Shapiro, *Der tseylem* in *Di yidishe melukhe un andere zakhn* (New York: Yiddish Lebn, 1929), pp. 137-61, trans. Curt Leviant, "The Cross" in *The Jewish Government and Other Stories* (New York: Twayne, 1971).

16 Chone Shmeruk, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature: A Case Study in the Mutual Relations of Two Cultural Traditions* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, Hebrew University, 1985), pp. 98-106.

17 This is recounted in fictionalized form in François-René de Chateaubriand, *René* in *Atala, René, Les aventures du dernier Abencérage*, ed. Fernand Letessier (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1962), p. 190.

medes [1: 392-93]). She should perhaps be compared to the old maid daughter expiating her father's origin in *Der gayego*.

Let us now consider how Zeitlin could have identified with the Marrano's incomplete Jewishness. It has often been pointed out how many Jews who had settled in Cuba – not necessarily the refugees from Hitler, but the Yiddish-speaking community already established there – saw the island as a *pis-aller*, an alternative to the United States, whose stringent quotas had banned them. These Jews, as one contemporary Yiddish account put it, chose to "make their America in Cuba," to create a simulacrum of the United States on Cuban soil.[18] The Marrano – and by extension Zeitlin – cannot identify with the comfort of these *gringo*-ized Jews and their roomy proto-suburban synagogue. If the Jews are such, then neither the *gallego* nor Zeitlin can consider himself a Jew.[19]

In this regard, Zeitlin's choice of the word *sinagoge* in verse 26 is telling. I translated it as "temple," because the term "synagogue" already denotes something traditionalistic in English. In Yiddish, only a reform temple would be a *sinagoge*. A traditional place of worship would be a *shul*, a *beys-medresh*, a *kloyz*, a *shtibl*. An unassuming Hassidic prayer house might indeed be less like the Havana *sinagoge* and more like where the Marrano prefers to pray: a *keler*, which I translated as "hideout," to get the rhyme with "today it is bright out" (verse 25: *Vu keler, vos keler? Der tog iz a heler*). Actually, *keler* means "cellar," and one must remember that Carmencita sang her Yom Kippur-like tune in a basement cabaret: *[Zi] zingt in kabaret./ Kelerdik-maranish/ tsitert in ir shpanish/ an alter al-khet* ("[She] sings in the cabaret./ Cellar-like, Marrano-like,/ there trembles in her Spanish/ an old *al-khet*" [1: 326]).

Carmencita's lament is far more moving than the synagogal liturgy in verse 13 of *Der gayego*: *ayer kol-nidre ot do, in Havane* ("your *kol-nidre*, here in Havana"). Underground Judaism is more authentic than the official variety. Not surprisingly, therefore, the crypto-Jew is acutely aware of the danger imminent in 1939. While the unconscious Ameri-

18 Quoted in Levine, *Tropical Diaspora*, pp. 20, 179.

19 Levine expounds upon the irreligiosity of the island's Yiddish speakers, many of whom had arrived in "the peak years of Cuban immigration, 1919-21": "The first Ashkenazic synagogue, Adas Israel, opened only in 1925. Even the president of the Orthodox synagogue kept his store open on Saturday" (*Tropical Diaspora*, pp. 26, 23). Zeitlin may have also had in mind the reform temple of the United Hebrew Congregation, an organization founded in 1906 by American Jews settling in Cuba.

canized Jews play cards (verse 17), the Marrano knows that Israel's fate is to be led to the fire (verse 28).

Given Zeitlin's identification with the *gallego*, we may wonder whether we should take the reference to Galicia in its Polish sense. Strictly speaking, Zeitlin was a Varsovian, not a Galician; born in Byelorussia, he calls himself a Lithuanian Varsovian: *a Litvakl a Varshever* (*In suke* [32]). But in the loose parlance of American immigrant Jewry, one was either a *Litvak* (a Lithuanian, i.e. Russian, Jew) or a *Galitsyaner* (commonly speaking, a Jew from anywhere in Eastern Europe outside the former Tsarist empire). Zeitlin, speaking in Polish Yiddish dialect, would have assuredly been called a *Galitsyaner* by at least some of the coreligionists he came across as he worked on *Esterke* in New York. (Another possible play on words with respect to the *alter gayego,* as the Marrano is called in verse 1: he can be seen as Zeitlin's *alter ego*, his *alter goyego* [sic]; the lexeme *goy* is vocalized as *gay* in the pejorative appellation of non-Jewry as *dos gayes.*)

The poet's rejection of identification with the Americanized Cuban Ashkenazim reminds us of the various poems in which Zeitlin, after his return to New York, criticized American Jewry for its self-confidence and vulgarity. For example, in *Meshiekh un der rabay* ("The Messiah and the Rabbi" [1: 456-57] – note the English word, rather than *rov*), Zeitlin mocks a wealthy rabbi, reconstructionist or conservative: Reverend Kenneth Knepl, with a *voylerishn kapl/ af a voylerishn kepl* ("a mischievous skullcap/ on a mischievous head"), is taken to task for inveighing against the ancient Jewish belief in the coming of the Messiah. Similarly, there is Zeitlin's poem *Af an azkore-ovnt* ("At a Commemorative Evening"), where a speaker derives a facile lesson of tolerance from the Holocaust:

> Vi gut er veyst tsu *hendlen* di keys
> fun di zeks milyon!
> Vi fayn er kon
> *derlangen* troyer!
> Nisht umzist iz er a loyer. (1: 98 [emphasis in the original])
>
> (How well he knows to *handle* the case
> of the six million!
> How finely can he
> *deliver* sadness!
> Not for naught is he a lawyer.)

In this regard, *Der gayego* most resembles Zeitlin's *Monolog in pleynem yidish* ("Monologue in Plain Yiddish" [1: 98-104]), a *tour de force* from 1945 written in Anglicized Yiddish. In this monologue, the poet records

what he has supposedly heard from another Jew from Warsaw, one who had come to the United States several decades before he had. At first, as in *Der gayego*, there would seem to be little basis for identification between the poet and the interlocutor whose words he reports. Zeitlin's compatriot tells him that it is pointless to write in Yiddish: *Dzhuish iz shlekht op bay undz ... Svitsh tsu an ander layn, Mister Zaytlen* ("Jewish is bad off by us ... Switch to another line, Mr. Zightlen"[20]).

Yet as the poem goes on, the earlier immigrant emerges as a figure for Zeitlin, feeling as the poet that something within him has been annihilated with the Jews of Warsaw. Similar to the *gallego* wavering between Judaism and Christianity, Zeitlin and his plain-speaking New York Jew are on the threshold between life and death: *Bot enihau,/ geshtorbn, geshmorbn – a lebn makht ir?* ("But anyhow,/ died, *shmyed* – do you at least make a living?" [1: 101]). If the *gallego*'s spouse is literally a Gentile, the simple New York Jew's wife might as well be one: she *veykt zikh afn bitsh* ("goes sun-worshiping on the beach," we might say nowadays), *un s'hot nisht keyn yidishn tam* ("and that has no Jewish flavor to it" [1: 100]). Like the *gallego* who bemoans in verses 16 and 22 the lack of fear of God among the Jews in Havana (*nishto do keyn moyre far Got*; *in gantsn far Got nisht keyn moyre*), so the *Galitsyaner* in New York asks: *Vu shtekt do ergets Got?/ In der alter heym iz er geven,/ zol er dzhost in Amerike nisht zayn?* ("Where is God hiding here?/ He was in the old country./ Is He just not in America?" [1: 103])

For the Jews who would "make their America in Cuba," the United States was Zion. The Jewish refugees awaiting visas in Havana in the late 1930s were less confident in their vision of the New World. The earlier immigrants, often young and filled with optimism, had chosen to embark upon new lives; the Hitler-era refugees frequently arrived after their lives had been broken. Thus while Zeitlin hails America in one poem as *dos gute land* ("the good land" [2: 321]), in another poem a refugee's long-awaited visa to the United States becomes a *vize tsum opgrund* (a "visa to the abyss" [2: 326]).

Like the *gallego* caught between Judaism and Christianity, like the

20 Zeitlin, *Ale lider un poemes*, vol. 1, p. 99. The *Z* of the poet's name is pronounced like *ts*, and the *ei* is pronounced (in standard Yiddish) like the *ey* in the English word *hey*. The Varsovian is at once inauthentically Americanizing the poet's name (regarding the *Z*) and most authentically rendering it as a Polish Jew would (regarding the *ei*, which he pronounces as an *ei* in German, and which I render in the text as *igh*).

plain-speaking New York Jew who is neither dead nor alive, the émigrés in "Visa to the Abyss" are *tsvishn der velt un yener velt* ("between this world and the beyond" [2: 326]). Their difficulties loom all the greater in direct proportion to the decline in the number of visas available: *Un vos shtarker di tsores – alts karger di vizes./ Host a lebn gelebt – un vu iz es, vu iz es?* ("The greater the troubles, the fewer the visas./ You've lived a life: where is it, where is it?" [2: 326]). In Zeitlin's Polish dialect, the words *vu iz es?* ("where is it?") would be pronounced *vi iz es?*, producing a rhyme with *vizes* ("visas").

Vi iz es? can also mean "How is it? What's it like?" This is precisely the question regarding America asked in another Havana poem by Zeitlin, *Der alter Her Ginter* ("Old Herr Günther" [2: 330-31]). Herr Günther, with his Gentile-sounding name, is like the baroness in Freud's famous joke: the doctor refuses to take her labor pains seriously, so long as she cries out "Ah mon Dieu, que je souffre" in French, and "Mein Gott, mein Gott, was für Schmerzen" in German. Only when she screams, in true *Galitsyaner* Yiddish, "Ai, waih, waih," does the doctor concede, "Es ist Zeit" ("It is time").[21] Similarly, Herr Günther in Zeitlin's poem mixes Yiddish into his German as he expounds upon his wariness of the United States, to which he has finally obtained his long-awaited visa:

> ...Vos toygn *mir denn diese*
> *Papiere*? Ikh hob *angst. O, Gott, wie* zet *denn* oys
> *dieses Amerika*? Vi shtelt men dort a fus?
> Vi efnt men a tir? Arop fun shif –
> Un shoyn Amerike?[22]
>
> (... Of what use to me are these
> papers? I'm afraid. Oh God, just what is
> this America like? How does one set one's foot down there?
> How do you open a door there? Just get off the ship –
> and already you're in America?)

21 Sigmund Freud, *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* in *Gesammelte Werke,* 6th ed. (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1987), vol. 6, p. 87. The Yiddish is erased in the English translation, which makes the joke incomprehensible: *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960), p. 81.

22 Zeitlin, *Ale lider un poemes*, vol. 2, p. 331. In transcribing the Yiddish, I have spelled German words as such and italicized them.

Note particularly the passage from the German term "Amerika" to the Yiddish *Amerike*.

Herr Günther wonders to what purpose he has waited so long:

> *So ist das ganze* lebn, –
> hot Ginter tsugegebn tif batsart.
> *Immer* vart men un vart, un ven men krigt –
> fregt men: af vos hob ikh gevart? (2: 331)
>
> ("That's all of life for you,"
> Günther went on to say, deeply troubled.
> "You keep waiting and waiting, and when you get what you wanted,
> you ask: 'What was I expecting?")

In *Dos ani-maymen-gezang* (1: 113-14), Zeitlin extols the martyrs who went to the gas chambers intoning *Ani-maymen* ("I believe"), the hymn based in Maimonides' twelfth principle: "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah and, though he tarry, in spite of all this I will await him daily, that he should come."[23] In a rather aggadic disregard of chronology, Zeitlin has the doomed Jews awaiting redemption even *after* they have died:

> [Zey] zingen far der shkhite: ikh tu gleybn
> in onkum fun dem goyel dem gegartn –
> un vel af yener zayt nokh vartn. (1: 114)
>
> ([They] sing before the slaughter: "I do believe
> in the coming of the yearned-for redeemer –
> and shall continue waiting for him in the beyond.")

Despite the message of faith, one can detect despair in the notion that one must wait for redemption even after death.

Like Herr Günther, Zeitlin wonders at times what he has been waiting for. This emerges clearly in a poem apposite to our meeting here,[24] entitled *Ruf tsu Yerushelayim* ("Call to Jerusalem" [2: 357]). In this poem from 1968, Zeitlin asks why he stays in New York and does not settle in the reunited Holy City. Of course, he is seventy years old by then, but

23 Translated in Roy A. Rosenberg, *The Concise Guide to Judaism: History, Practice, Faith* (New York: Mentor, 1990), pp. 124-25.

24 This paper was originally read in Jerusalem on August 3, 1997, at the Twelfth World Congress of Jewish Studies.

that's not the answer he gives. Instead, Zeitlin muses: Does he remain far from Jerusalem because he desires even greater mercies from the heavens? Is it because he has grown accustomed to the travails of Diaspora and its 1900-year-old wait for redemption? The final reason he advances convinces me the most: "Perhaps it is . . ./ because I know that even complete redemption/ could not justify/ the burning of my people." Or in Yiddish:

> Efsher derfar . . .
> . . . vayl ikh veys, az oykh geule fule
> iz nisht bekoyekh tsu farentfern
> mayn folks farbrent vern? (2: 357)

Complete redemption is not complete. The *converso* is not quite converted. Zeitlin places some two-score poems under the phrase *Netsekh Yisroel* ("Israel's Eternity" [1: 215-331]), yet he portrays Jews who have survived the years of Catastrophe – himself included – as not entirely alive. I shall end with Zeitlin's forthright expression of his paradoxical view of things in a poem about the Caribbean. It is entitled simply *Shures geshribn in Kuba* ("Lines Written in Cuba" [2: 331]):

> The sea is full of unrest even while the sun rests.
> Though resting in silent brilliance,
> the sea pursues in thirsty longing
> the undulating tail of a thought,
> which is both yes and no,
> which keeps on fading,
> but knows no fading.
> It's way, way off – grab it!

Or in Yiddish:

> Der yam iz ful mit umru oykh in zunru.
> Afile az er rut in shtiln blank,
> yogt er zikh mit dorshtikn farlang
> nokh dem khalyedikn ek fun a gedank,
> vos iz i yo, i neyn,
> un halt in eyn fargeyn –
> un veys nisht fun fargang.
> Folg mikh a gang – un fang! (2: 331)