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See Karl Run

Rutgers prof translates Yiddish poet's groundbreaking Shoa novel

by Judy Wilson
Special to NJ Jewish News

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Emil and Karl by Yankev Glatshteyn is not the first Holocaust novel written for children but it breaks new ground in several ways: First, the eponymous heroes are two young boys, only one of them Jewish, but both trapped in Vienna during the Anschluss (Germany's annexation of Austria). Second, the novel, written originally in Yiddish in 1940, has not been read by any non-Yiddish speaker until this year. And third, it is the first book written in any language for young adult readers about events leading up to the Holocaust before there was a Holocaust.

The author was a major figure in Jewish literature, said Jeffrey Shandler, associate professor of Jewish studies at Rutgers University in New Brunswick. He spoke to *NJ Jewish News* in his office in the university's Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life. Glatshteyn wrote "cutting-edge, high modern poetry," said Shandler. "I read these poems in grad school — nuanced, difficult, layered." This work was different. "When I first found Emil and Karl in a library and began to read, the librarian had to close the library around me."

Glatshteyn, born in 1896, immigrated to America from Poland when he was 18, but he returned for a visit in 1934, Shandler writes in the book's afterword. Seeing firsthand the discrimination and physical danger Jews faced across Eastern Europe, he returned to America to write two adult novels and the very prescient Emil and Karl.

He intended the book specifically for American students who attended public school during the day and *mitl schules* — secular Yiddish schools — in the afternoons and on weekends, Shandler said. “I was fascinated, wondering what it was like to read this book as a Jewish kid living in the United States just as the war was beginning.”

According to Shandler, Glatshteyn’s readers were Yiddish-speaking, mostly secular children of immigrants, and he wrote the book “to get them morally engaged with what was going on in Nazism, what people their age and even younger were suffering. He wanted them to think about an issue that had consequences for everybody, a human problem, not an isolated Jewish issue.” In his novel, not all the victims are Jewish, and not all the Austrians are evil.

The writer’s approach is sufficiently sophisticated that it would appeal to adults, Shandler said, but Glatshteyn structured his book like a classic children’s suspense novel. “My guess is that his models were the Hardy Boys, the Bobbsey Twins, Nancy Drew. All of these books have 25 chapters, each chapter ends on a high point so you want to find out what happens next, and the kids have adventures but they end up going home to have dinner with their parents — but not here!”

The parents in Emil and Karl disappear early in the novel: Karl’s mother, a socialist, is carried off by “three hulking men” who drag her away as “she spat in their faces” and “scream[ed] ‘Murderers!’” Emil’s mother, a Jew, “her hair half black, half white,” her spirit broken by what she has seen, is taken away by a friend, who promises to return for Emil. It is soon apparent to both boys that no one will come for them. They take to the streets, hiding in cellars, occasionally fed or sheltered by a kind stranger but all too often abused by other children and the adults they encounter. Endearingly, their greatest fear is not the Nazis but their fear that they will be separated.

These children “are coming of age as the adult world is in moral crisis,” Shandler said. “In a stable environment, kids can look to the adult world [for guidance]. Children bring a certain moral clarity — and a certain naivete — to the world,

but in this setting, they cannot always know whom to trust. People can do terrible things. Their protectors live side by side with their betrayers.

"My concern in translating was to find the right voice for someone reading this in English today," he said. "There are no anachronisms," he explained, "but kids today would find the language quaint, stilted, perhaps a little archaic." As a result, he had to translate "not only across language but across time."

Glatshteyn, who died in New York City in 1971, had not written for children before but he understood his audience because he too was a secular, Yiddish-speaking immigrant. "The key thing in his mind," Shandler said, "was for children to focus on what [Emil's and Karl's experience] feels like." As a result, he includes little "local color. He wanted kids to think of their own lives," Shandler said, to fill in details from personal experiences. There is a bleakness in the writing, empty spaces in the prose that effectively depicts a world going dark but makes the contemporary reader long for elaboration. In this book, Emil and Karl are coming of age but the rest of the world had yet to do so.

Burning hands

THE PEOPLE on the ground were scrubbing the pavement. That much was clear, but why were they washing the streets? And, what was even more puzzling, why were they doing it without brushes or rags, but with their bare hands?

But Emil and Karl did not have much time to wonder. The man in the uniform turned them over to someone else. He raised his hand and said, "Jewboys!"

"Very good!" said the other man in a calm, cold voice. And then, without warning, he shouted so loud that Emil and Karl froze. "Don't just stand there! Get down on the ground right now and start washing — and make it fast."

Emil and Karl dropped to the ground as if they had been shot. Immediately they began to rub the pavement back and forth. The two boys found themselves in a group of several dozen people, in the middle of which was a basin of water. There were four or five uniformed men who stood there, watching them.

"Dip your hands in the bowl. Don't scrub with dry hands!" Emil and Karl dipped their hands into the water and rubbed the stones.

After dipping his hands into the water about a dozen times, Karl's hands began to burn. The skin and even the bones of his hands were inflamed. When he dipped his hands into the bowl it felt as though he was putting them into fire.

Karl examined his hands. They even looked as if they had been set on fire. He stopped scrubbing the stones. He felt that if he rubbed them even one more time, he would scream from the pain, and he didn't want to scream out loud.

Emil wasn't far away, hunched over. Karl watched his friend scrubbing the pavement rapidly with his hands and crying softly to himself.

— From Emil and Karl by Yankev Glatshteyn, translated by Jeffrey Shandler

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The future of the mameloshn

WHY HASN'T Emil and Karl been translated and published in the 65 years since it was written? It's an obvious question with several answers, Jeffrey Shandler said. The book was eclipsed by the events that followed its publication in 1940, then by other books about the Holocaust that appeared after the war. But most important, Glatshteyn "was committed to writing in Yiddish — his world. There were 11 million Yiddish speakers in that world at the beginning of the war, but many, many fewer after," said Shandler.

The Rutgers professor is particularly interested in the question of what will happen to the mameloshn in the 21st century. "Many people call it a dying language and focus on the loss," he said. "I think it's more useful to see it as a language going into a whole new phase. There's a population that's engaged with the language for different reasons than they had before World War II.

"Yiddish is a cultural resource, and I find lots of reasons to learn it: access to literature, the pleasure of creating new works [in an old language], finding out how language — any language — works, and creating an understanding of how a language works relative to a culture and a place."

In his classes at Rutgers are students from a wide range of backgrounds, most — but not all — Jewish, some studying the

language and others interested in one facet of the culture, like American Jews in the media. New Jersey students have an advantage, however. This is one of five states with a mandated Holocaust unit as part of the high school curriculum. “When NJ students come here,” Shandler said, “the Holocaust is already part of their historical and moral background,” and in some it has awakened an interest in Jewish history and culture.

In his classes, “I teach students to do research,” he said. Jewish communities they might not be familiar with, like Roosevelt, a 1930s cooperative farming and manufacturing town, “just down the road.” His students learn how to talk to older people, who remember a Jewish life that no longer exists. “They read about Algerian Jews in my ethnography class and learn from studying phenomena they don’t know about, like Syrian Jews in Deal and Russian immigrants in Fair Lawn.”

Shandler, who graduated from Columbia University with a doctorate in Yiddish studies, became interested in Yiddish in the post-Holocaust era, “studying a culture that thrives in diaspora, that exists among other cultures and languages.” Shandler’s earlier book Adventures in Yiddishland, published in 2005, is about that culture.

Although he lives out of state, he said, “I know New Jersey from having lived just over the border in New York and Pennsylvania. For someone like me, studying contemporary Jewish life in New Jersey is a gold mine — so many communities living side by side, not like New York.” If Yiddish — the language and the culture — has a future, it is probably at places like Rutgers and in classes like Shandler’s, where that future will take shape.

— JUDY WILSON

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