

The Collected Works
of Esther Kreitman



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THE LIBRARY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

ESTHER KREITMAN

COLLECTED WORKS

EDITOR, ANITA NORICH

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Publisher's Preface

Esther Kreitman (born Hinde Ester Singer, 1891–1954) was an important Yiddish translator and writer, who has for too long been overshadowed and shunned by her two famous brothers, Isaac Bashevis and Israel Joshua Singer. She was also distanced from her mother, and trapped in an unhappy marriage.

Kreitman produced an impressive corpus of novels, short stories, and essays, modelled on her own experiences as a woman living across Europe through two World Wars and the Great Depression. Her writing tackles important societal, historical, and economic injustices, giving a voice to the poor and furthering the feminist cause.

The Library of the Jewish People is pleased to present in full Esther Kreitman's Collected Works, including never-before translated short stories and other works, thereby honoring her work in her own right and doing justice to this hitherto neglected writer.

We are happily obliged to thank the editor of this volume, Anita Norich, for enlisting her deep knowledge of Kreitman's life and her tireless efforts to locate, translate and edit her works; our Managing Editor, Uri Bollag, for bringing this volume to completion; Rachel Miskin and Ruth Pepperman for editing the texts; Tomi Magerman for the typography; and Tani Bayer for designing the covers worthy of this author.

The Library of the Jewish People will continue to bring both well and lesser-known writers from the fields of Rabbinics, art, and politics to contemporary English speakers. While we are saddened to think about how much esteem Esther Kreitman could have enjoyed during her lifetime without the familial, societal, and economic burdens, we are grateful to be enriched by her writing and hope that this volume will contribute to her finally receiving her place among the towering figures of Yiddish writing during the twentieth century.

Matthew Miller, Publisher
Jerusalem, 2026

Timeline

	Esther Kreitman	Jewish Context	Global Context
1891	March 31: Hinde Esther Singer is born in Bilgoraj, Poland. Her parents are Pinkjas Mendl Menachem Zynger (a hasidic rabbi) and Basheve Zylberman.		
1893	Birth of her brother, Israel Joshua Singer, who would go on to become a noted Yiddish writer.		
1897		First Zionist Congress held in Basel, Switzerland. General Jewish Labour Bund in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia (Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeter-bund in Lite, Poyln un Rusland) founded in Vilna, Russian Empire.	
1903			Publication of <i>Q.E.D.</i> , the first novel of Gertrude Stein.
1904	Birth of her brother, Isaac Bashevis Singer, who would go on to become a noted Yiddish writer.		
1906	Birth of her brother, Moshe Singer, who would go on to become a rabbi.		
1912	Marries Avraham Kreitman, a diamond cutter, and moves to Antwerp, Belgium.		
1913	Birth of her son, Maurice Kreitman. He too would become a writer, better known by his pseudonym, Maurice Carr.		
1914		The World War will lead to the collapse of empires, the rise of communism and the creation of new states, all of which will have profound impact on Jewish life.	Outbreak of WWI.

1915

Birth of Saul Bellow.

UK government issues the Balfour Declaration, pledging themselves to help establish a Jewish National Home in the Land of Israel.

Russian Revolution of October sees the Bolsheviks seize power in a coup. The Russian empire is replaced with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

The last days of the Russian Empire sees the abolition of the Pale of Settlement and the formal granting of de jure equal rights to Jews.

Bais Yaakov school system for Orthodox girls founded by Sarah Schenier in Krakow, Poland. The initiative is approved by Yisrael Meir Kagan (the Chofetz Chaim) the leading Ashkenazi Orthodox thinker of the age. It revolutionizes education for Jewish girls and young women. Before this there had been no organized education for women in the Orthodox world.

The Bolshevik revolution, initially supported by many Jews, will lead to a long period of persecution of Jewish culture and religion in the USSR and its satellite states.

1917

1918

World War I ends.

Poland's ambiguous relationship with its Jews – which represented the leading Jewish community of the world in terms of population and cultural and religious influence – leads to the Polish parliament passing antisemitic laws discriminating against its Jewish citizens. There is active support for Zionism, including military training.

Republic of Poland is founded. One of the few countries in Europe at the time to allow women to vote.

1919

Britain receives the Mandate for Palestine, transforming the unilateral Balfour Declaration into binding international law.

1920

Israel Joshua Singer publishes *Pearls*, a short story that brings him to the attention of the literary world.

1921

1925

Isaac Bashevis Singer publishes *In Old Age* (*Oyf der elter*), his first published work, winning the literary competition of the Literarishe Bleter.

General Introduction

Anita Norich

Esther Kreitman (1891–1954), or Hinde as she was called in the family, was a translator and the author of two novels, a collection of short stories, and uncollected stories and essays that appeared in the London and Belgian Yiddish press and beyond. She was born in Bilgoray, Congress Poland, and died in London. She spent several years in the small town of Leoncin where her father served as rabbi, then at the Hasidic court in Radzymin where her father taught, and in Warsaw before moving to Antwerp and then London. In 1912, a marriage was arranged for her with Avram Kreitman, a diamond cutter. They lived in Antwerp until they and their infant son went to London at the outbreak of World War I. The marriage was not a happy one and the couple spent significant periods of time apart. Kreitman returned to Poland twice between the two world wars, once in 1926 and again in 1929. At the end of World War II she went to Paris and was deeply moved to find Yiddish culture flourishing there despite the traumas suffered by its activists.

Hinde was the oldest child in a famous and, from all indications, discordant family of writers. Her parents, Pinchas Mendl and Batsheva, emerged from the radically different religious worlds of Eastern European Jewry: Pinchas Mendl was an adherent of Hasidism, characterized by its devotion to a *tzaddik* [a righteous man] and by its enthusiastic, emotional expression of religious devotion; Batsheva was the product and follower of *misnagdim* (literally: opponents; specifically opponents of Hasidism), characterized by their devotion to rationalism, learning, and a distaste for what they regarded as the excesses of Hasidic practice. Six children were born into this family: Hinde, the Yiddish writer Israel Joshua Singer (1893–1944), two daughters who died in early childhood, the Yiddish Nobel Laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904–1991), and Moshe (1906–1944), the only son to remain within the family fold, following his father into the rabbinate and perishing with his mother and wife in Russia during the Second World War. The three Yiddish writers all produced autobiographical novels or memoirs, and, despite their differences, they all described their parents in remarkably similar terms, pointing to what they perceived as the reversed gender roles in the family. Pinchas Mendl was described as sentimental and was repeatedly called a *batlen*, an impractical, unworldly man; Batsheva was consistently described as a more aloof parent, an intelligent, learned woman, more worldly and much less emotional than her husband, “*a froy mit a mansbilishn kop*,” as I. J. Singer wrote – “a woman with a man’s head.”

Kreitman was, by all accounts, the unhappy product of this mismatched pair and was equally mismatched with her own husband. Within the Singer family, Hinde was regarded as something of an embarrassment, an hysterical subject to nervous breakdowns or, as Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote, an ill woman who was either mad or epileptic or possessed by a *dybbuk*, the wandering soul of Jewish legend – usually male – who enters the body of another – usually female – and must be exorcised. That last diagnosis is the only one we can definitively reject, but it is also the most revealing one. (What the family thought of as her “fits” were most likely petit mal seizures.)

The dybbuk signals transgression and for Bashevis there could be no more apt image for this transgressive woman who wrote Yiddish literature, speaking in a voice that sounded strikingly like that of modernist male writers.

Kreitman was an active participant in the London literary magazine *Loshn un lebn* (Language and Life) and in socialist politics. Her book publications began with two translations from English to Yiddish, both produced in Warsaw during her second visit there. In 1929 she published Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (*Vaynakht*), following it in 1930 with George Bernard Shaw's *Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism* (*Di froy in sotsyalizm un kapitalizm*), which had appeared in English only two years earlier. Her choice of texts to translate only underscores the pervasive myth of her contrariness since it could not be supposed that these titles would meet with a particularly warm reception from the Yiddish readers for whom they were intended. The letterhead she printed in London attests to her interest in translation. One of her London addresses (56 Lordship Park, Stoke Newington, N.16) appears under the heading: Commercial, Patent & Legal Translations. Her husband's lack of employment meant not only that the family moved often, but also that she had to find other work, primarily in handiwork trades.

Kreitman's novel *Der sheydim tants* (1936) was first serialized under the blander title, *Dvoyrele* (in London's *Di post*, 1934). It was translated by her son, Maurice Carr, in 1946 and contained significant changes intended, no doubt, to make it more accessible to a post-war English audience. The novel traces the life of a teenager who is denied the educational and social advantages her brother enjoys and is finally married off to a hapless diamond cutter. Her second novel, *Brilyantn* (1944), appeared in Heather Valencia's English translation as *Diamonds* (2010). It is the story of a diamond merchant and his family in Antwerp in the years before the family's flight to London as World War I approaches and depicts their changed circumstances once in London. Kreitman was also publishing short stories and essays during the two decades before her death. Many of these were

The Dance of the Demons (Deborah)

דער שדים-טאַנץ

A novel

ראָמאַן

Translated by Maurice Carr

Introduction

Anita Norich

The Dance of the Demons' Yiddish text was first serialized in 1934 in the London journal, *Di post*, under the title *Dvoyrele*, then published in 1936 as a book under its current title, *Der sheydim tants*. It was translated in 1946 by Esther Kreitman's son, Maurice Carr. The novel depicts a young woman's desire to escape the constraints of a restrictive religious environment, a family in which she is regarded as little more than a household drudge, and the madness (or depression?) that threatens to overwhelm her. In addition to this personal and psychological turmoil, Kreitman traces the emergence of its protagonist's modern political and cultural consciousness, a consciousness that had long been the hallmark of modern Yiddish literature but was now noteworthy because it was associated with a female character.

The protagonist, Deborah, envies her mother's learning. She envies, in fact, all learning, whether secular or religious, and reads whatever is available – psalms, secular poetry, grammar books, Karl Marx, storybooks of every kind – whenever she can steal time from

Chapter 1

It was the Sabbath. And even the wind and the snow rested from their labors. The village of Jelhitz, a small cluster of wooden cottages and hovels, stood hidden away from sight at the edge of the Polish pinewoods – to all appearances nothing more than one of the many snowdrifts covering the land. But within, Jews were comfortably asleep in their beds after the heavy Sabbath dinner.

All was silent in the village, but nowhere was the quietude so impressive as in the large house by the synagogue which stood facing the common meadowland and the frozen river. Here lived the rabbi, Reb Avram Ber, and unlike most of his flock, he did not snore in his sleep. As for Raizela, his wife, her breathing was so gentle, that whenever Deborah peeped into the bedroom to see whether her parents were astir yet, the fourteen-year-old child grew anxious, wondering whether her mother was breathing at all.

The warmth and the shadowiness of falling dusk were cozy inside the rabbi's house, but Deborah, as she sat beside the tiled stove, reading, felt lonely and sorry for herself to the point of tears.

Earlier in the day she had overheard her father say:

“Michael is showing great promise in his studies, the Lord be praised! One day he will be a brilliant Talmudist.”

Michael was her younger brother who, in accordance with the centuries' old custom of Orthodox Jews, was being brought up to spend all the days of his life in the study of the Talmud.

“And Father, what am I going to be one day?” Deborah then

suddenly enquired, half in jest, half in earnest, for, as long as she could remember, never had a word of praise fallen to her lot.

Reb Avram Ber was taken aback. It was an accepted view among pious Jews that there was only one achievement in life a woman could hope for – the bringing of happiness into the home by ministering to her husband and bearing him children. Therefore he did not even vouchsafe Deborah a reply, but when she pressed him, he answered simply:

“What are *you* going to be one day? Nothing, of course!”

This response did not at all satisfy Deborah. It was quite true that most girls grew up only to marry and become drudges, but there were exceptions, such as her own mother, Raizela, who was highly educated, a real lady, and as wise as any man.

To be sure, in his heart of hearts Reb Avram Ber disapproved of his wife’s erudition. He thought it wrong for a woman to know too much, and was determined that this mistake should not be repeated in Deborah’s case. Now, there was in the house a copy of Naimonovitch’s Russian Grammar, which Deborah always studied in her spare moments, but whenever her father caught her at this mischief he would hide the book away on top of the tiled stove out of her reach, and then she would have to risk her very life to recover it. She would move the table up against the stove, set a chair on the table, herself on the chair, and after all that trouble, clouds of dust and loose leaves from torn books, disused feather dusters and God knows what else would come fluttering and tumbling down – everything, in fact, except the Russian Grammar. Nevertheless, during her fourteen years of life, she had managed to learn all its contents by heart, and still she was dissatisfied. How tediously morning changed into afternoon and evening into night! How wearisome was her housework, and yet, beyond that, she had few real interests. She was forever lacking something, herself hardly knowing what. A strange yearning would stir in her, an almost physical gnawing sensation, but it had never before been so painful as on this wintry Sabbath afternoon, when all was quiet within and the world outside was muffled with snow.

She sought refuge in daydreams. She recalled how the family had first come to Jelhitz many years ago, arriving at nightfall; how the bearded pious Jews, in long gabardines, black top boots and peaked cylindrical caps – a fashion surviving from the Middle Ages – came forward with lighted candles to greet their new rabbi, crying in unison:

“Blessed be thy coming!”

What a splendid figure Reb Avram Ber had cut in his rabbinical garb – black buckled shoes, white stockings, satin gabardine and broad-brimmed black felt hat.

As she remembered all this, and saw again the smile – grateful and almost childish – that had settled in Reb Avram Ber’s longish fair beard, hot tears slowly trickled down her flushed cheeks, senseless tears for which she could find no justification.

When Michael burst into the room and found his sister crying, a psalter in her hand, he laughed so boisterously that his parents woke up in the next room. Michael and Deborah were never on very friendly terms. And he snatched this opportunity of poking fun at her, calling her a fool for staying indoors, for poring over the Psalms with tears in her eyes like a miserable old sinner whiling away dull old age with penitence. As for himself, he had been out on the river, which stretched away frozen, hard as a sheet of steel, with snow-covered fields all around, with a blue, transparent, Sabbath sky hanging above, wonderfully silent. After his exertions, Michael’s cheeks were flushed, his ears tingling with frostbite, and the bright gleam in his eyes flashed with ever-changing tints – now black, now brown, then coppery. He had come back brimming over with life, and his sister, who always stayed indoors and meekly bore the stagnation of their home life, seemed to him now more pitiful than ever.

He became more subdued when his father entered the room.

“Have you been getting on with your studies, Michael?” Reb Avram Ber asked with a sleepy yawn.

“Yes, Father.”

Deborah gaped. She endeavored to catch Michael’s eye, but he was reading some religious tract very studiously, and there was nothing in

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The Hungry Ones

די הונגעריקע

[*Belgische bleter*, vol. 3, no. 2, Feb. 1937]

[Edited version of “*Di hunger-marshirer*,” (The Hungry Marchers),

Dos fraye vort, March 9, 1934.]

The day was in tears. Timidly, the sun hid behind dark clouds. It knew that it didn't shine for the poor, so it was afraid to tease them. Suddenly, it was pitch black. The clouds creeping across the sky resembled a group of half-paralyzed cripples. The sky was so low, it looked like it would fall down at any second and destroy everything and everyone in its wake.

An ugly, cold, unyielding rain dripped, freezing the emaciated marchers. Their worn, thin raincoats – many full of holes – were no protection against the rain. It clung to them, making even clearer their limbs and pointy shoulders. Their filthy knapsacks swung on their narrow backs or dragged them down.

Sallow twenty- and thirty-year old people with drawn, wrinkled faces appeared. Here and there could be seen a healthy face, with color in its cheeks. And then, again, pale, drawn faces telling of long-endured hunger and the kind of pain that ages people.

It was difficult to walk in their torn, soaked shoes and blistered, purulent feet. For hours, they trudged through the pouring rain in rows that stretched through rich Oxford Street to the sad, well-known Hyde Park. Hyde Park, the “home” for all the homeless, for worn-out

streetwalkers and those unemployed who no longer had even a few pennies to pay for a night's lodging.

Surrounded by policemen as if they were criminals, they plodded past rich, luxurious buildings that rose up proudly and securely in their Sunday rest.

Hundreds of wax ladies in store windows, dressed in fantastically rich dresses and furs, seemed to tease the poor women who had marched all the way from Scotland in order to display their own attire to London.

"Look, Mama, how beautiful!" said a young child with an old face who had marched with her mother all the way from Shoreditch. She dragged her mother by the hem of her red, drenched raincoat. "Look how beautiful it is," said the child, pointing to a wax figure in a sky-blue flowery silk dress. It revealed a pair of well-formed shoulders, a thin white throat, a charming bare back and, behind the dress's train that lay folded over red velvet, a pair of silver dancing shoes peered out.

But when her mother didn't turn around, the child's striking brown eyes stared at the mannequin as she chewed a piece of damp bread.

Another child, carried in his mother's arms, kept looking around with a pair of frightened, startled eyes and, like a grownup, kept himself from crying. The child attracted everyone's attention with his frighteningly pale appearance.

"What a shame," said the women looking on. One, a tall woman in a grey fur coat, sorrowfully expressed her opinion of the poor woman who was almost falling to the ground from weariness.

"She should be ashamed of herself for taking along a sick child!" she said to her husband, a tall, clean-shaven Englishman who held a large open umbrella protecting him and his wife from the rain.

"Ignorance!" he said disapprovingly.

The couple quickly disappeared into the mass of male and female workers who had arrived in the thousands despite the heavy rain. Meanwhile, the marchers streamed from all sides. At the main entrance, a man in a sandwich board welcomed them, saying:

"Tremble, you unbelievers. God will take His revenge on you!"

The marchers remained calm, quiet. Their eyes looked nearly extinguished, but still there remained a spark that could flicker once again.

The police were not interfering.

The local unemployed Londoners were less weary than those who had come from afar. They brought a bit of life to the scene.

People called out:

“Down with the new bill!”

Singing the “Internationale,” the people dispersed throughout the large park. The marchers sat on the soaked ground, their wet rucksacks beneath them. They tried to eat their damp, unappealing sandwiches.

On the platform appeared both prominent and unfamiliar speakers. Strong and heartfelt words were spoken. Thousands upon thousands of sympathetic ears listened attentively and with fellow-feeling. Evening fell quickly. Many of the people had already slipped into the neighboring cafes. The lucky ones made themselves comfortable in cushioned chairs, ate heartily and let themselves be served by young waitresses in brown dresses and lemon-colored aprons.

Having rested and listened with great appreciation to the speeches of the leaders, the walk was now different. Once again, rows formed. The “Internationale” rang out more loudly, the shouting was more lively. Once again, the cadence of thousands of feet could be heard as they went back to their temporary “homes.” Among the marchers were some young people in green shirts and flannel pants with green berets on their heads. They carried a flag that asked:

“Why are the Greenshirts marching?”*

People shrugged their shoulders. They didn’t understand. What were those Greenshirts doing here?

“But that’s what we’re asking too!” said the Greenshirts, laughing.

The park was empty and huge. Even the Indian with his colorful,

* The Greenshirts were members of the political Social Credit Party of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

strange clothes who stood on a soapbox and called out the names of horses for no apparent reason, even he was getting ready to go home.

Darkness descended on the park. Those unfortunate people who had been rejected by life began to arrive with their baggage. They unpacked their things and got ready for a cozy night of sleeping in the wet park.

The Relic

אַטלעסענע קאַפּאַטע

Translated by Morris Kreitman

The Gliskers had lived in the open country, on the fringe of the forest, for ages. Yudel Glisker inherited a store which for generations had supplied the needs of the peasantry in the countryside for many a mile around. And he ran it quite single-handed. A tall and broad-shouldered Jew, who was well capable of standing his own ground, he held the respect of the peasants.

Of an independent nature, he did not even allow his wife to lend him a helping hand, except at such times as he went to town to replenish his stock. A woman's place, contended Yudel, was in the home beside her children. It was safest for both parties....

However, Rachel, his wife, thought otherwise. Knowing full well, though, that when Yudel said no, he meant no, and he was by no means the worst of husbands, she left him to his own devices. To find some outlet for her dormant energy, she took to dairy-farming on her own account.

Yudel raised no objection. So long as she did not meddle in his affairs, she was free to do as she pleased. He was all the more willing to agree, because it would give those idle wenches of his something to do. He even went so far as to help her pick a few head of cattle, paying the peasants their due and chinking glasses with them over a bottle of vodka.

Rachel carried on business no less efficiently than Yudel. Like her

husband, she refused to depend on others, doing everything herself. She milked the cows, heated the basins of sour milk, lifted the heavy stone slabs on to the cheeses, churned the butter – all unaided. She even sewed the cheese-bags herself.

Her daughters merely grazed the cattle in the meadows, seeking out the deepest and the lushest grasses. As a consequence, when the cows came home in the evening, their udders were fit to burst with milk. And it was with a sense of deep satisfaction that Rachel would seat herself upon the three-legged milking-stool and nimbly finger the rosy and brownish nipples, until the udders became as flabby and elongated as they had been in the early hours of the afternoon.

Gratefully the relieved animals would lick her hands with their moist, heavy tongues. The warm milk in the pails, the odor of manure in the barn, would infuse Rachel with even greater vigor than usual. At such times she felt herself capable of moving mountains.

As for her daughters, spending the livelong summer day in the meadows, under the untrammelled sky, caressed and tanned by the bright sunshine, they shot up tall and erect as the pines on the fringe of the neighboring forest.

Visiting Jews from the surrounding villages, who drove up in dilapidated little carts drawn by decrepit old horses, for supplies of milk and butter and immense cheeses, could not but notice how remarkably carefree was this “wild” life led by the Gliskers. And it pained them. These callers, who never even ventured near the cowshed, for fear of being tossed by the animals, could not endure the thought of Glisker’s three daughters growing up robust and simple as peasant wenches, with the mother herself looking and behaving like a sturdy peasant woman, and with Yudel, the head of the family, wholly engrossed in earthly matters, without a thought for the eternal life to come.

Thus it was that whenever Rachel was adamant in refusing to reduce her prices, these excitable little fellows would turn their attention to Yudel and point out the error of his ways.

“Think of your daughters, Reb Yudel! Where is this sort of life

going to lead them? Here you are, a man of standing, and you allow your daughters to graze cattle in the company of peasant lasses and lads. Fine morals they'll learn in the fields, we don't think! You won't find it too easy to marry them off afterwards, when the time comes, Reb Yudel, and you such a fine man and all!"

Yudel was not a bit impressed, except that on occasion he felt greatly tempted to take hold of the speakers by the scruff of their scraggy necks and give them such a shaking, that never again would they make bold to poke their noses in other people's business. He saw through their harangues as so much empty, spiteful talk. Now, themselves without the slightest scruple about charging the poor of the nearby villages fantastic prices for a pint of milk or a few ounces of butter, they expected Rachel to part with her wares for a song and were sorely grieved at her firmness. Their torrent of words was but an expression of personal sorrow not a little inspired by the flourishing condition of his affairs, for which praise be to God!

Yudel, patient man though he was, would surely have ended up by throwing these irascible little fellows out neck and crop. And he might have finished his life peacefully in the cottage where his forefathers had lived before him, had he not one evening chanced upon his eldest daughter, Rosa, locked in embrace with the district chief's son out in the open fields – "for all the world like an animal," as Yudel afterwards told his wife. Thenceforth, Yudel no longer treated the dairymen and their unasked-for advice with the same contempt as of old. Indeed he listened attentively to all their prattle, pondering and brooding over every chance remark that slipped their tongues.

And one fine day towards the end of summer, instead of going to town as mere visitors for the High Festivals, the Gliskers parted with their lonesome cottage, stowed all their belongings into roomy carts with latticed frameworks, and, the cattle roped up behind them, plodded into close-by Bojonitz, to make their home there for good.

Only when his old homestead was out of sight, and the procession of carts was passing through the cone-strewn pine forest, did the last lingering regrets pass from Yudel's heart, and stories he had