My Father’s Hands Spoke in Yiddish
by Karen Shenfeld

Reviewed by Michael Greenstein

In a previous collection of poetry, *The Fertile Crescent*, Karen Shenfeld writes of exotic settings from the Sahara to Aztec civilization. She also travels back to biblical times to recreate her Hebraic ancestors, convincingly impersonating Sarah, giving modern voice to these ancient matriarchs – a palimpsest of perpetuity.

With her more recent collection, *My Father’s Hands Spoke in Yiddish*, Shenfeld returns to her own more personal history in Toronto’s Jewish suburbs. “Bathurst Manor” maps her locale: “The streets of our childhood / carried names of English towns” – Searle, Brighton, Acton, Combe, Wilmington. And that immigrant milieu differs dramatically from a previous generation’s roots in Polish shtetls. Her childhood innocence rejoices in ordinary, playful pastimes, which conclude with an image of fireflies at night – “their green luminescence / flashing coded signals of their secret selves.” Herein lies the difference between poet and ordinary child, for the poet flashes coded signals of her secret self in contrast to the mundane surroundings. The reader searches for these epiphanies by the end of each poem.

Or, in “Land of Milk and Honey” Shenfeld plays off that same suburban terrain against the Promised Land, and concludes:

No groves, here,
but herds of cars,
row upon row
of promised bungalows.

Sprinkled lawns greener than
the Galilee.
Shenfeld favours precise and precious monosyllables to capture her ancient heritage in a more contemporary setting.

She combines the feminine sensibility of her poet-cousin, Malca Litowitz, with the masculine irony of her teacher, Irving Layton. The very first poem, “Brief Note to an Engineer,” sounds the notes of irony and feminism in four two-line stanzas:

Against protocol
I’m wearing your ring:
cold circle of iron
forged from the tender ruins
of a fallen bridge;
its green residue
tattoos the curled middle finger
of my writing hand.

The hard “c”s in *protocol, cold, circle,* and *curled* stand out against oxymoronic “tender ruins.” Furthermore, the contrast between the male world of engineering and the feminine writing hand points to the “fallen” residual nature of the relationship between animus and anima. The poet captures this yin/yang sensibility in her brief note – brevity that constitutes both the strength and weakness of *My Father’s Hands Spoke in Yiddish.*

The first poem comes full circle towards the end of the volume in “The Ring,” where the poet traces the ancestry of a Maria Theresa silver ring purchased in Addis Ababa. This ring has been passed down from daughters to daughters. Shenfeld muses on fate and history as she circles this ring dropped through a crack between baseboard and sub-floor. A struggle between circular and linear history, metaphysical meaning and subterranean physicality permeates this poem and many others in the book. Invoking Bathsheba and the Empress, the poet wonders “What had broken / their long descending line?” On the one hand, Shenfeld is to be praised for her clarity of vision, sharp detail, and sound precision; on the other hand, she risks clichés with “sunken treasure” and prosaic intrusion with the parenthetic “(when, / for no good reason, / I’d vowed to visit / every country on earth, / and almost did).”
Microcosm and macrosom, Shenfeld’s writing ring belongs within the realm of “infinite, daily things.” She quotes her friend Baila: “Divine reality / plays itself out in / the domestic sphere, / and nowhere else.” This divine-domestic dichotomy lies at the heart of these poems, which forge rings together in an infinite loop. Her rings also adorn her father’s fingers, which speak in Yiddish – a bilingual, synesthetic sleight of hand. Some of the Yiddishisms recall Phyllis Gotlieb’s witty poems, while this “mamaloshen” in the hands of her father reiterates the wholeness of her masculine-feminine ring.

“The Golem of Bathurst Manor” once again juxtaposes the exotic and the local, the double vision of the Canadian-Jewish Diaspora. In addition to lyrical poems of childhood figure skating, Shenfeld portrays Molly Picon (“Sweetheart of Second Avenue”), Fanny Brice (“Fanny and Nick”), and Sophie Tucker (“The Last of the Red Hot Mamas”). That trilogy is rounded out with feminist fusion in “Billie Holiday Sings My Yiddish Momma.” Shenfeld’s voice jazzes up Jewish elements at one end of the spectrum and moves to quieter tones in “Canoeing Song” at the other end. The daughter’s hands speak in multiple tongues.

This volume is slim, but if combined with the two earlier collections, it demonstrates Shenfeld’s talents in the vein of Phyllis Gotlieb and Miriam Waddington – a tribute not only to her father, but also to a wider heritage.

Michael Greenstein has taught at several universities in Canada and abroad. He is the author of Third Solitudes: Tradition and Discontinuity in Jewish-Canadian Literature and the editor of Contemporary Jewish writing in Canada: An Anthology.

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