

The Dybbukast

Season 2, Episode 5: "The New World"

Transcription

An actor reads from "The New World:"

From the start, I didn't like lying in my mother's belly. Enough! When it got warm, I twisted around, curled up and lay still... But, five months later, when I felt alive, I was really very unhappy, fed up with the whole thing! It was especially tiresome, lying in the dark all the time and I protested. But who heard me? I didn't know how to shout. One day, I wondered if perhaps that wasn't how to do it and I started looking for a way out.

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Host Aaron Henne: Welcome to *The Dybbukast*, the show in which we ask: What do poems, plays, and other creative texts from throughout history tell us about the times in which they were written, and what do they reveal about the forces still at play in our contemporary societies? I'm Aaron Henne, artistic director of theatre dybbuk.

In this episode, presented in collaboration with *Lilith magazine*, we'll be hearing excerpts from an English translation of a Yiddish short story published in *Lilith* in March of 1991. It's titled, "The New World," and it was written by Esther Singer Kreitman, translated by Barbara Harshav. Dr. Anita Norich, Professor Emerita of English and Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan, takes us through the story while also discussing the author's life and work, illuminating the ways in which that work speaks to the themes and complexities present in much of Yiddish literature.

And now, Season Two, Episode Five: "The New World."

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Dr. Anita Norich: "The New World" is a short, short story, which has as its narrator, an embryo. And it describes, in a kind of postmodern fashion, the thoughts of the embryo

in utero, and its birth and how it's received at birth. And probably not surprisingly, it is not well-received. Girls are not wanted. This is the parents' first child, and they were hoping for a boy.

Actor 1: *I just wanted to get out. After pondering a long time, it occurred to me that the best idea would be to start fighting with my Mama. I began throwing myself around, turning cartwheels, often jabbing her in the side; I didn't let up, but it didn't do any good. I simply gave myself a bad name.*

Anita: There's a scene that is not very funny, although perhaps it may strike some as such, that the bed in which her mother gives birth to her is also the bed in which the family cat gives birth to kittens. The baby is given to a wet nurse because her mother can't nurse her, which is both a sign of physical inability and also a sign of class or at least class pretensions. And she is put under the table of this wet nurse's home. It's a crowded home. They're already six children and a workshop. And all she sees is dust and cobwebs, and she exclaims about this being the new world into which she has been born.

It's interesting to kind of think about what time period this takes place in, because it's not specified. We are in a Jewish area. We're clearly in Poland, but precise dates are simply not there. And it's almost as if this is a kind of mythic tale, right? Mythic tales don't have a particular historical moment. Kreitman is mostly writing about particular historical moments but this I think really does take on mythic proportions. Myth is a story of origins. This is a story of origins.

Actor 1: *I had to lie there the whole nine months — understand? — the whole period.*

Anita: My initial training was in English literature. And whenever I read this story, I think of Laurence Sterne and *Tristram Shandy*. It traces, from the moment of conception, the experiences of an embryo; something that Sterne calls a homunculus; that is, a little human. And there's something very similar that's going on here. I'm not suggesting influence here, but it's important to know also that Kreitman knew English, knew

English literature, knew it well, and that most of the English novels of the 18th and 19th century were in fact translated into Yiddish.

Actor 1: *Well, not having any other choice, I consoled myself: I'll simply start later! Just as soon as they let me out into God's world, I'll know what I have to do. Of course, I'll be an honored guest, I have a lot of reasons to think so.*

Anita: Esther Singer Kreitman, who was known in the family as “Hinde” — “Hinde Ester”— but who wrote under the name Esther Kreitman, was born in 1891 and died in 1954. And her stories really take place in that time period, mostly around the First World War and her own experiences and her own movements afterwards.

Actor 1: *Grandma comes in and smiles at Mama. She looks happy — probably because her daughter has come through it alright. She doesn't even look at me.*

Actor 2: *Mazel Tov, dear daughter! Mazel Tov! May we enjoy good fortune.*

Actor 1: *Mama smiles too, but not at me.*

Actor 3: *Of course, I would've been happier if it were a boy.*

Actor 1: —says Mama. *Grandmother winks roguishly, with a half-closed eye, and consoles her.*

Actor 2: *No problem, boys will also come.*

Anita: She was born in Bilgoraj, which is near Lublin, lived in Warsaw with her family for many years, and left Warsaw before the First World War when she was married — some would say married off — to a diamond cutter in Antwerp; lived in Belgium for a while, and then lived in London actually for 40 years and wrote about both Eastern Europe, that is Poland, and Antwerp, Belgium and London, England as well. She published two novels, two translations from English, and a collection of short stories.

Actor 1: *I am jolted out of my thoughts; I feel myself clamped in two big, plump hands, which pick me up. I shake all over. Could it be — a dreadful idea occurs to me — is she going to stuff me back in for another nine months? Brrr. I shudder at the very thought.*

Anita: She translated two books that were not likely to endear her to her Yiddish readers. The first one she translated in 1929 was Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. And the second one that she translated a year later was George Bernard Shaw's *Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*, which had only appeared two years earlier.

Actor 1: *But my head spins, everything is whirling before my eyes. I feel completely wet, tiny as I am. Am I in a stream? But a stream is cool, pleasant, even nice. But this doesn't interest me as much as the idea of what the two big, clumsy hands want to do with me. I am completely at their mercy.*

Anita: She was quite active in the '30s and '40s, both with a journal in London called *Loshn un lebn* — *Language and Life* — and in socialist politics.

Actor 3: *It does hurt a little, but I almost don't feel it.*

Actor 1: — *Mama would say.*

Actor 3: *I'm glad. I was so scared I was barren. A trifle? It's already two years since the wedding and you don't see or hear anything. Minka the barren woman also said she would yet have children. And why should I be surer of it?*

Actor 2: *Well, praised be the one who survives. With God's help, it will come out all right; and, God forbid, with no evil eye.*

Actor 1: — *Grandma would always answer. From such conversations, I assumed I would be a welcome guest.*

Anita: And then in 1936, she published the novel *Der sheydim tants* — *The Dance of the Demons* — which her son actually translated as *Deborah*, initially. I guess *Dance of the Demons* was a little too much for the English reader, I'm not sure what happened there. But that's the name of the main character. It took another 12 years — 1944 — that she published her next novel *Brilyantn* — *Diamonds* — which sort of takes off where *The Dance of the Demons* ends. And then, five years later, she published a collection of short stories, which in Yiddish is called *Yikhes*, which means “inheritance” or “family prestige”.

Actor 1: *I knew that here, in the other world, where I lived ever since I became a soul, when an important person came, he was supposed to be greeted with great fanfare. First of all, a bright light was to be spread over the whole sky. Angels, waiting for him, were to fly around; merry, beautiful cherubs who spread such holy joy that the person only regretted he hadn't died sooner. It was quite a novelty that I, an honored, long-awaited guest, expected to be born into a big, light home with open windows, where the sun would illuminate everything with a bright light.*

Anita: Both “The New World” and *The Dance of the Demons* are generally considered, in the critical literature, to be autobiographical, and they are indeed semi-autobiographical in that they follow the same geographical movements that Esther Kreitman herself followed. I don't know what it means to call a first-person, embryo narrative autobiographical but the claim has been made both by her son and her granddaughter and others that both of these stories are autobiographical, that she had bad eyesight because she was kept under a table, that her parents did not treat her as they treated the sons. But I think there's a danger in reading this as — I don't want to say simply autobiographical, but I will say that nonetheless. In the same way that women's literature and ethnic or subaltern literatures are considered to be memoiristic, we have to put a bit of a pause on that because what that often does is to take away the imaginative power of writing fiction. So I take all of this autobiographical “factuality” — that's large quotation marks — with a grain of salt.

Actor 1: *Every morning, I waited for birds who were supposed to come greet me, sing me a song. And I was to be born on the first of Adar — a month of joy.*

Actor 2: *When Adar begins, people are merry.*

Actor 1: *But right here, it comes — the first disappointment.*

Anita: Kreitman's marriage was, by all accounts, not what one would call happy. She left her husband several times. She always came back. She had a son that she was, by all accounts, very attached to, and who was her translator.

Actor 1: *Mama lay in a tiny room, an alcove. The bed was hung with dark draperies, which completely screened out the light. The windows were shut tight so no tiny bit of air could get in, God forbid; you shouldn't catch cold. The birds obviously don't like screened-out light and closed windows. They looked for a better, freer place to sing. Meanwhile, no happiness appears either; because I was a girl, everybody in the house, even Mama, was disappointed.*

Anita: It's very difficult to talk about Esther Kreitman without also invoking her brothers, although the same is not always true of the opposite. That is, they're often mentioned on their own, without the sister, but the sister is almost always mentioned in connection with her more famous brothers. And they were indeed more famous.

Actor 1: *In short, it isn't very happy! I am barely a half-hour old, but except for a slap by some woman as I came into the world, nobody looks at me. It is so dreary.*

Anita: There's a two-year gap between her and Israel Joshua Singer, and a 13-year gap between her and Isaac Bashevis Singer. And whatever one may say in praise of Antwerp and London — of which she says plenty in praise of both — they were not Yiddish centers of the significance of New York and Warsaw, which is where the brothers had their careers.

Actor 1: *Thank God, I am soon taken out of the wet. I am brought back to the alcove, already violated, sad. I am carried around the alcove: everybody looks at me, says something. At last, I am put back to bed. Mama does put a sweet, liquid thing in my mouth: I am really hungry for what is in the world.*

Anita: Isaac Bashevis Singer all but worshiped his brother. They apparently had a very, very close relationship. Israel Joshua Singer brought Isaac Bashevis Singer to New York in 1935, and none of them ever saw the sister again. Bashevis — he's called Bashevis in Yiddish — Bashevis wrote a few times about his sister, and you can judge for yourself the relationship by just hearing some of the things that he wrote. So, in his memoirs, he referred to her as "quite a talented authoress who wrote several books that were not at all bad."

Actor 1: *Mama looks at me with her nice, soft eyes, and my heart warms. A sweet fatigue puts me to sleep, and I am blessed with good dreams. But my happiness didn't last long, a dreadful shout wakes me with a start. I look around. Where did it come from? It's Mama!*

Anita: Bashevis has a chapter of his memoirs that's devoted to his sister. And, in that chapter, he says that she had issues, as we say nowadays. And he attributed these issues to her being either a hysteric or an epileptic. And there is some evidence that she had a mild form of epilepsy. She would have what were described by the family as fits of some sort. So either she was a hysteric or she was an epileptic or she was mad, insane, or — my favorite one — according to Bashevis — or maybe she was possessed by a dybbuk, by the soul of a man that speaks through the body of a woman.

Actor 1: *People gather around.*

Actor 4: *What happened? Where did that shout come from?*

Actor 1: *Mama gestures, tries to point, her lips tremble, wants to say something and can't. She falls back onto the pillow, almost in a faint. Seeing they won't get anything out of Mama, they start looking for the reason in the closet, under the bed, in the bed.*

All of the sudden, a shout is heard from the nurse, who keeps repeating in a strange voice —

Actor 5: *Cats. Oh, dear God, cats!*

Actor 1: *The people look up, can't understand what she's saying, but except for the word —*

Actor 5: *Cats!*

Actor 1: *They can't get anything out of her — so upset is she.*

Anita: Israel Joshua Singer was a realist, wrote novels — epic novels, stories about the situation of Jews in Eastern Europe and in America — in a storytelling mode. And Bashevis is more of a mythicist, right? He has very unrealistic scenes of dybbuks and phantoms and who knows what. Esther Kreitman wrote modernist, realistic fiction, which is to say the novel, for example — not so much “The New World,” which is a short story and therefore tighter and in some ways more constrained, but also tighter — *The Dance of the Demons* tends to be more fragmented. The narrative doesn't necessarily flow. You're sometimes caught off guard, not knowing who's thinking what or who's saying what. And I think that the narrative for her — for Esther Kreitman — mirrors the kind of psychological uncertainty that is at the core of that novel. She and I.J. Singer wrote a lot about what was happening in the world at the time that they were writing, and what was happening in the world — remember she was in Europe and he was in the United States — what was happening in the world was not some kind of story that you could necessarily tell in a straightforward, narrative mode.

It was disruptive, and her prose is disruptive.

Actor 1: *Grandma is also very upset. But she takes heart, makes a thorough search in the bed, and, laughing to hide her fear, she calls out —*

Actor 2: *Mazel Tov, the cat had kittens! A good sign!*

Actor 1: *But apparently this isn't a good sign. The people are upset.*

Actor 4: *On the same day, in the same bed as a cat?*

Actor 6: *Hmmmm, a person and a cat are born the same way.*

Actor 1: — *Says one brave soul. They calm Mama. But again, nobody looks at me. Mama falls asleep. And with that, my first day comes to an end. I am, thank God, a whole day old and I have survived quite a bit.*

Anita: There are some critics who say — although I don't think that Bashevis, and certainly not Esther Kreitman, ever acknowledged this or said this — that Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Yentl* was based off of his sister's experiences. That is, here is a young woman who wants to study, who wants to learn, and cannot because she is a woman, a girl. I don't think that he needed his sister as an example of that in order to write *Yentl* but, nonetheless, that's one of the things that's said.

Actor 1: *The third day after my birth was the Sabbath. This time, a big, red Gentile woman puts me in the bath. I wasn't so scared anymore, already familiar with the way it smells.*

Anita: It may be worth saying a word or two about the relationship between the parents, and the way in which all three of the writers regarded their parents.

Actor 1: *Once again, I lie in bed with Mama. Mama looks at me more affectionately than yesterday. I open my eyes. I would like to look around a bit at the new world. I'm already used to the darkness.*

All of a sudden — it grows even darker for me than before.

Anita: All three of them use the Yiddish word *batlan* for the father. And what that means is somebody who is impractical, naive, and just not capable of functioning in the real world. And they all described their mother as a stronger figure, a much less motherly figure. Israel Joshua Singer summed it up best, I think, when he wrote in his

own autobiographical memoir, "My parents would have been a well-matched pair if my mother had been my father and my father, my mother." That is, if the emotional strength of the father had belonged to the mother and the rationalist, intellectual mind of the mother had belonged to the father.

Actor 1: *A gang of women burst into the alcove. I look at them. They are talking, gesturing, picking me up, passing me from one to another like a precious object. They look at me, they look at Mama, they smile. Meanwhile, Grandma comes with a tray of treats. The women make her plead with them, pretend they don't want to try any of the cookies, whiskey, preserves, cherry brandy, berry juice or wine; but Grandma doesn't give up, so they open their beaks and finally consent to do her a favor.*

Anita: Her mother was incredibly well-educated, including in Talmud and Torah and religious subjects. She came from a *misnagdic* — a rationalist, religious — family, and her father educated her.

Esther's own father thought that this had ruined his wife, and he was not going to make the same mistake with his daughter.

Actor 1: *Males also stuck their heads into the female alcove. They talked with strange grimaces, gestured, shook their beards, went into a fit of coughing. With them, Papa succeeded, not Grandma. And I am named Sara Rivka, after some relative of his.*

Anita: Misnaged, by the way, means "opponent." And what they're opposed to is Hasidism — the kind of fervor of Hasidic religious practice or expression. And, in fact, Esther's father was a Hasid. So, another myth that we have is that the two didn't mix, right? That the Hasidim and the so-called rationalists, the Misnagdim, didn't mix, but they did.

It is true that Kreitman had a complicated relationship to Judaism, and, particularly, well, her relationship to the Judaism in which she had been raised was not complicated. It was negative. Almost as soon as she got to Antwerp, she threw off the wig that she had been forced to wear and left religiously observant Jewish life, at that

point. But she never left a kind of emotional and psychic attachment to that life. That is, her works and, by all accounts, her life were very much rooted in that world.

Actor 1: *Now they need a wet nurse. Mama is weak, pale, with such transparent, narrow hands without sinews, she can hardly pick me up. A middle-class woman, she cannot breastfeed me. I am the opposite: a healthy, hearty gal, greedy, I restrain myself from shouting all I want is to eat.*

Actor 2: *Not a goyish wet nurse.*

Actor 1: — *says Grandma. Not for all the tea in China. And she can't find a Jewish one.*

Anita: For a long time, there was some nostalgia for that Warsaw environment. Although not for the particular circumstances in which she had been raised.

Actor 1: *The pharmacist says I should get used to formula, which is better than mother's milk. But I say I don't want to get used to it and I throw up all the time. This is bitter. Grandma is upset. Mama even more. But Papa consoles them, saying —*

Actor 7: *The Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He will help.*

Actor 1: *And he does. Our neighbor remembers a wet nurse named Reyzl.*

Anita: One of the really, I think, remarkable things about her in relation to Yiddish literature more generally is that there were always rebellions in Yiddish literature, right? A rebellion against the old ways, rebellion against the constraints of religion, and the literature of this period of the first half of the 20th century is filled with boys, men, who go out and discover the world. What was unusual or what was considered unusual was that Kreitman was doing this from the perspective of a woman, and the rebellion was not against the world of her father's. It was against the world of her mother. What is the mother responsible for, in either family dynamics or in raising a girl?

Actor 1: *Reyzl picks me up out of the cradle, takes out a big, white breast, which looks like a piece of puffed up dough and gives it to me to suck, as a test. Well, what should I say? I didn't drown. Even my eyes fill with a taste of a good wet nurse.*

Anita: One of the things that interests me about her writing is the way in which she links issues of class and of gender; the insistence that there has to be a more equitable social order, not just for women, but for those who are poor or uneducated or in some way oppressed.

Actor 1: *Reyzl looks happily from one to the other.*

Actor 4: *Well, what do you say?*

Actor 1: *Mama and Grandma glance at each other furtively and are silent. I have the good fortune to be a tenant at Reyzl's, not that she needs another tenant 'cause she lives in a flat not much bigger than a large carton.*

Anita: It's also important to remember that her novels were written before the end of the Second World War. Her short stories were published after. And Yiddish literature is often read through the distorting prism of the Holocaust, right? How can you say negative things about this world after 1945? But, in fact, much of Yiddish literature is incredibly critical — both critical and nostalgic, ironically, at the same time — of much of that world, and she was certainly in keeping with that.

Actor 1: *When Reyzl brings me home, her husband comes to greet me carrying their smallest one in his arms and the other five heirs swarming around him. He seems pleased with my arrival.*

Actor 4: *Well, what do you say about this, eh? Ten gulden a week, my word of honor! Along with old clothes and shoes. Along with the fact that, from now on, they'll give all the repairs only to you! You hear, Berish?*

Actor 1: *Berish is silent. He turns around so his breadwinner won't see his joy.*

Actor 8: *You're more of a man than me, I swear. You can earn a gulden faster.*

Anita: There is increasing interest in Yiddish writing of women, and, to some extent, Kreitman is at the forefront of that, right? There were reissuings of her translations. I'm thinking now of English and how it affects the translational world. The translation that her son did in '46 was picked up in the early '80s by Virago Press in England, which specialized in women's literature. That is, she was reclaimed in a way by feminist readers and scholars. Then, it was still called *Deborah*, right? And then the feminist press picked it up in New York years later and changed the title back to what it had been, *The Dance of the Demons*. So there's a greater willingness to — in translations of Yiddish in general, and in translations of women's literature also — to go back to what they were actually saying. That is, we no longer need to have that protective stance. Women, and men, were very critical of what was going on in Jewish life. And women objected to being kept out of what was considered most important in Jewish life, which was learning, but they were not admitted into much of that or not willingly admitted into much of that. And they wrote about that. And now we're able to understand that in a different way. We're removed from the experience. We're increasingly removed from the protectionism that understandably accompanied the Second World War. And we're going back to what they actually said.

Actor 8: *Where will we put the cradle?*

Actor 1: *They ponder a long time. But Reyzl's husband, who is an artist at arranging things in his tiny flat, smacks his low, wrinkled forehead with his hard hand and calls out joyously —*

Actor 8: *Reyzl! I've got it! Under the table!*

Actor 1: *So in a tiny cradle, I am shoved under the table.*

Anita: There has long been in Yiddish criticism, both written in Yiddish and written in English, a belief that women didn't write, or didn't write prose in particular. They wrote poetry or they wrote diaries or they wrote memoirs. But Kreitman is one of a significant

number of women writers who wrote novels and short stories. All of these works are hiding in plain sight. But if you think you know what's there — that is, women only wrote poetry or women didn't write much — if you think you know what's there, you don't go looking for what you think isn't there. And more and more scholars, readers, are looking for what's there, and they're finding it.



Aaron: Thank you for listening to this episode of *The Dybbukast*. Selections from Esther Singer Kreitman's "The New World," as translated by Barbara Harshav, were primarily read by Diana Tanaka, with support from Rachel Leah Cohen, Perry Daniel, Joe Jordan, Julie Lockhart, Rebecca Rasmussen, Rena Strober and Mark McClain Wilson. Thank you to Dr. Anita Norich for sharing her insights. Our theme music is composed by Michael Skloff and produced by Sam K.S. Story editing is led by Julie Lockhart with support from me, Aaron Henne. The series is edited by Mark McClain Wilson.

Please visit us at theatredybbuk.org, where you will find links to a wide variety of materials which expand upon the episode's explorations. And if you want to know more about theatre dybbuk's work in general, please sign up for our mailing list on that same website on the contact page. In addition, please go to lilith.org to read not only the story which we featured, but other pieces of writing from throughout the magazine's history. On the website, you can also learn about upcoming events and choose to subscribe.

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Actor 1: With open, astonished eyes, I look at the filthy wood of the table, covered with a host of spiderwebs, and think sadly: This is the new world I have come into? And this is its heaven? And I weep bitter tears.