

## Menke

Menke is a wonderfully unique figure in both Yiddish and American literature. I say “wonderful” because he always shouted “Wonderful!” in spontaneous celebration of life. Since I have little patience with conventional criticism, I leave aside literary labels to assess his remarkable achievements in both realms in favor of telling the story of his work and its development as I witnessed it.

After *Land of Manna*, his first book of poetry in English, which was at press when we met, I published his four later poetry collections in English, *Rockrose*, *Burning Village*, *A Chair for Elijah* and *Nearby Eden*, all substantial volumes, also *Forever and Ever and a Wednesday*, a book of folk tales which he called “true legends.” We wrote two books together, *Two Friends* and *Two Friends II*, exploring the same themes responsively, often debating such subjects as God, vegetarianism and utopia.

The Menke I met in 1964 was in his prime, a generation older than I, yet youthful in his exuberance and energy. He had only rather recently dedicated himself to writing in English. As he explained it, he had been feeling lonely for America while teaching in Safad, Israel, and also had felt isolated in a shrinking and partisan Yiddish literary world. The Atlantic and other leading magazines promptly accepted his poems in English.

We met through our little magazines. His *Bitterroot* was relatively new. He usually published one of his own poems, and I had read his poetry in other magazines, always enjoying it. He was one of the few writers whose poetry I solicited for the first issue of *The Smith*, and I also found John Tagliabue and Emilie Glen through his magazine.

Menke was an antidote to fashionable Modern malaise, the doctrine that poets could never again see the world whole, because of Darwinian night, Quantum Uncertainty and Relativity Theory. I was resolved to see the world whole, and Menke did. His work spanned the alleys of Michaleshik and the streets of New York — folklore and factories, the Hill of Svir and skyscrapers, the Kabbalah’s mysticism and Talmud’s teaching, against the horrors and wonders of the 20th century. Moreover, I related to his freethinking, his kindred adventures in bohemian Greenwich Village and on the road, and his natural non-conformism. An outsider, he had an avowed troubadour aspect. His English “A Yiddish Poet” begins, “I am a Yiddish poet — a doomed troubadour.” He also had a utopian bent, enabling him to savor my memberless Anti-Civilization League.

When we met soon after my first issue was published, we quickly became close friends. He enjoyed the iconoclastic stance of my magazine, featuring “How to Evade the Army” and “Eros Underground,” which I published under pseudonyms. Even the early Village Voice rejected my advertising because of the magazine’s strong sexual content, but Menke felt at home with writers such as Henry Miller’s friend Richard Thoma, who also appeared under the name Sinzer James. After all, Menke’s first published Yiddish poem was about prostitutes, and he told me of the scandal stirred by his first Yiddish book, *Three Sisters*. His English poem, “Rockrose,” title poem of the first collection I published, began: “The loveliest harlots are in New York.”

Working with literal translations that he gave me in conversation, I did English versions of fourteen Yiddish poems, which appeared in *Poet Lore* and other magazines. Thus, from the beginning, without knowing more Yiddish than the typical New Yorker who knows a nudnik when he sees one, I was involved in his Yiddish poems. Knowing that he considered *Burning Village* his greatest achievement in Yiddish, I attempted for a long time to persuade him to translate it. When he finally acted, he embarked on something entirely new. The English *Burning Village* is a counterpart but in no sense a repetition of his previous work. Created roughly three decades later, it is more an artistic distillation and more mythic. In the Yiddish books, he invokes his three villages, Michaleshik, Svir, Svintsyon. In English, Michaleshik becomes, like Picasso’s *Guernica*, the microcosm for all the horrors of war.

In his starved childhood, he experienced those horrors. When he got off the boat in New York City with his family after the war at the age of fourteen, he overheard someone say of him, “How can a stick like that walk?”

As *Burning Village* was readied for press, Menke wanted to change the title to *Bread of Famine* to avoid any future confusion. Right or wrong, I persuaded him that *Burning Village* was the perfect title.

While his Yiddish poetry was the firm foundation of his later achievements, his artistic development continued as he wrote in English. He was fond of recalling that he won the English prize at DeWitt Clinton High School and wrote his first poem in English. The transition to English was probably no more difficult for Menke than for Nabokov.

He had studied English poetry at Columbia and was an expert on metrics, frequently citing perfect passages in Byron and other poets, and he read widely in contemporary American poetry.

Through our magazines, he met many writers, from the unknown to the renowned. When he resided in Brooklyn's Boro Park, we met in Manhattan for an all-afternoon session almost every week, first in a Bickford's cafeteria on Fifth Avenue near the main public library, later in cafeterias at Times Square. A changing cast of other poets joined us. He probably influenced more than he was influenced; yet, clearly he appreciated the contact with younger American poets such as Lloyd Van Brunt, Will Inman, Stanley Nelson and Sanford Sternlicht. After he began writing with me — first the suite of translations, later our dialogs in verse, we met most often by ourselves, regulars at old Suerken's near City Hall.

We began with his later Yiddish poems, which were collected in *Safad*. I compared his simple mysticism to William Blake's, for instance, "The tiniest path is endless as God."

We soon turned to his early poems in *Three Sisters* and worked first on "Her Three Unborn Boys." I saw how daring his subjects were. Who else had written a poem about abortion? And in 1932! Here are the opening stanzas, as translated by the Harshavs:

#### Her Three Unborn Boys

They gaze, hollow, out of the smallest shoes  
 In glimmering windows of full stores,  
 They write unwritten poems  
 On untouched pages of black albums.

In sunsets, they peep out gray  
 As dots of awe facing God,  
 Graying in the echoes  
 Of every metropolis.

They would have been little boys,  
 Each prettier than the prettiest bum.  
 Through blind dangers, they would have seen  
 A barefoot girl at a simple well.

They would all have been — You,  
 Homeless lords of backyards,  
 With disheveled chestnut hair

They would have fled from the day.  
 They would all have been — You,  
 The singing blades of street and wind,  
 Their sins would be played  
 By an angel on a harp.

But I cajoled them to a gravedigger,  
 And of my little boys remained  
 Only my cleaned-up womb,  
 And of my little boys remained  
 Only an eternally aborted night.

He was always proud of that first book, where dramatic impact was heightened by stylistic experimentation. He believed he had reached his full artistic maturity in the universal themes of the later Yiddish poems in *Midday* and the Safad series, yet considered the *Burning Village* books to be his greatest work.

Menke and I abandoned our surprisingly laborious translation efforts soon after we worked on a small section of *Burning Village*, which seemed to defy satisfactory translation. He went on to write the new English *Burning Village* instead, and our joint efforts turned to our poetic dialogues. Simple as the *Two Friends* idea is, he was fond of observing that there was nothing literary like it, except for *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge, who published together because of a shared esthetic but had not written directly in response to each other.

Benjamin and Barbara Harshav, the preeminent translators, created renditions very similar to Menke's and mine in that small selection we finished, convincing me that they have fully succeeded in being faithful to Menke's craft and spirit. Furthermore, they have amazingly succeeded with *Burning Village*.

Menke rarely talked about the politically radical poems of *Dawning Man*, except to affirm his commitment to a just and peaceful world. Despite his years among the Yiddishist Communists, he was at heart a utopian, a believer in Isaiah, not Marx. He argued: If all the riches of the world were divided equally, people would be almost equally unhappy. It was a question of how to live and what the goals of society should be.

Yet is easy to see how the political radicals seduced him in his youth. First, he was literally seduced. Invited to a youth organization picnic, he

said that, to his astonishment, “Everyone wanted to meet me, to talk to me!” An amazing night of free love climaxed the event. He married an ardent Communist, and the Yiddish literary Left gave him opportunities to publish.

I heard of his recurrent conflicts with the Communists, and those tales are told well by his son Dovid in the introduction. He always remained an idealist. He seriously encouraged me to start a utopian community on the Drisko Island wilderness in Maine, which he called “God’s refuge from good and evil” (“The World of Old Abe”). The possibility of utopia was one of our debates in *Two Friends*.

In his English, he often mined and refined the same veins that run through his mature Yiddish poems. *Land of Manna* and *Rockrose* are direct continuations of his mature style in Yiddish, although certain formal tendencies are heightened and elaborated. In his later Yiddish poetry, he had declared himself “Against Lock and Rhyme” and had begun to experiment with pattern poems, inventing his own sonnet form. In English, his unique variations on such traditional forms, including villanelle and chant royal or poems with tanka or haiku stanzas, became typical of his work. It had a psychic connection to what William Carlos Williams called “the importance of the syllables.” For Menke, it became an important ordering principle, a preferred discipline, which I suspected was somehow kabbalistic, magical. At the same time, the real kabbalistic current of his poetry became stronger. He evolved a larger mystical approach, which is unclassifiable. One seemingly simple example appeared in the first issue of *The Smith*:

#### Reunion

I am old fashioned as your wine,  
my love of a thousand years hence,  
verse-made as your dew, tears, sunrise.

I have been riding to you ten  
longing centuries, no wonder  
I am as old-fashioned as your wine.

O the slow circling moments O  
the dragging vehicle of time,  
modern as your dew, tears, sunrise.

Mine, the hands of the eternal  
clock, yours the wreath of a thousand  
summers, old fashioned as your wine.

I yearn in stone an unsung ode,  
mine, the glory of the unknown,  
faithful as your dew, tears, sunrise.

God is old, only moments grin,  
ages forever weep, my love;  
I am old-fashioned as your wine,  
modern as your dew, tears, sunrise.

It may seem strange that I devote so much attention to Menke's English poetry in a preface to the definitive collection of his Yiddish poetry, but I am convinced that his poetry in English is equally important to world literature, and the Yiddish poetry is fundamental to understanding it. Also, of course, it was his work in English that led me back to his Yiddish books.

In admiring what the translators have wrought and in trying to appraise the individual books, I find myself agreeing with Menke. *Three Sisters* is an incomparably original first book, as fresh now as the moment it was published in 1932. His second book, *Dawning Man*, contains some of his better poems about workers and politics, although he took more satisfaction in its imaginative poems such as "Watches," based on his work as a watchmaker, a craft he learned from his uncle Avremke in Michaleshik. (This skill served him well when he hitchhiked through the South during the Depression, earning his meals by offering to fix public clocks that had stopped.) He also took a wry delight in the satiric polemics of "Song of the Former Menke Katz," where in the guise of recanting he surreptitiously proclaims his loyalty to his roots.

*Grandmother Mona Takes the Floor* (1939) goes beyond the political battles of the period to affirm his most cherished values in his heritage and his art. At the same time, it shows his subtle, barbed humor at its sharpest.

*The Burning Village* books are indeed his magnum opus. There were two in Yiddish. This volume contains a third, *Burning Village III: Michaleshik in America*, which we thought should be placed with the others to present the trilogy as a whole. It first appeared as part of his 1941

collection, *May We Tell It in a Happy Time*, preceded by propagandistic poems written for the daily press, understandably presenting the Soviets as saviors from the Nazis. It was this politically accommodating first section that enabled *Burning Village III* to be published.

The Harshavs, over a period covering most of the 1990s, carefully translated all of Menke's books, omitting a very small amount of material, including some prose. Thus, this selection comprises the virtually complete Yiddish poems.

Dovid Katz and I reviewed every line together. We changed relatively little. Some small changes were occasioned by knowledge of Menke's preferences in English style as well as my own poetic sensibility, guided by the thirteen poems Menke and I had worked on together. If anything was ambivalent or obscure in English, the main question was whether it was clear in Yiddish. Another consideration was how to make specific references to traditional Jewish sources or local custom comprehensible to the general reader. Likewise, since Menke wrote of many of the same persons and places in English, it seemed important that the spellings of the names be at least recognizable, if not the same.

The more we worked, the more we appreciated the Harshavs' labor. No equivalently comprehensive translation project has heretofore been accomplished for any Yiddish poet, nor could any surpass its quality.

Menke is the only Yiddish poet who also wrote major works in English. *Unique* is really too weak a word to describe his personality or his place. No one else has created a comparable synthesis of the ancient and the modern, the world of Abraham and the Kabbalists infusing 20th century life from shtetl to skyscrapers.

Devoted to his poetry, he led a poetic life and never had a headache in his life, nor a hospitalization. He heeded the Kabbalah's advice on bores, considering it his sacred duty to avoid them. With *l'chaims* at Suerken's, where we always felt like "honored guests" (his words), he sometimes remarked on the dapper lawyers, politicians and businessmen around us: "They think they're the practical people. Poets are the most practical people." He laughed exuberantly. He always celebrated life.

Three months before his death, his mother Badonna appeared to him in a dream and told him to write Yiddish again. He wrote his last poems in Yiddish. He died peacefully at home with his wife and son in Spring Glen, New York, at the age of eighty-five when he took an afternoon nap and never woke up.

— Harry Smith

# *Menke*

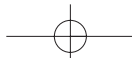
## **The Complete Yiddish Poems of Menke Katz**

Translated by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav  
*Edited by Dovid Katz and Harry Smith*

***The Smith***



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## Contents

<i>Preface: "Menke" by Harry Smith</i> . . . . .	
<i>Introduction: "Yiddish Poet Menke Katz"</i> <i>by Dovid Katz</i> . . . . .	iii
<i>Bowery – 1925</i> . . . . .	1
<i>Three Sisters – 1932</i> . . . . .	3
<i>Dawning Man – 1935</i> . . . . .	57
<i>Burning Village – Book I – 1938</i> . . . . .	151
<i>Burning Village – Book II – 1938</i> . . . . .	243
<i>Burning Village – Book III – 1941</i> . . . . .	339
<i>The Brave Coward – 1938</i> . . . . .	393
<i>Grandmother Mona Takes the Floor – 1939</i> . . . . .	399
<i>The Simple Dream – 1947</i> . . . . .	453
<i>Midday – 1954</i> . . . . .	543
<i>Safad – 1979</i> . . . . .	695
<i>The Last Menke Sonnets</i> . . . . .	765