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PART FIVE

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Anastasiya Lyubas
Toronto, June 2020

Figure 1. Debora Vogel.

Debora Vogel's *Blooming Spaces*: An Introduction

1

An artwork consists of a few basic elements. Lines, colors, and surfaces are the elements of the visual arts. Notes, meter, and tone belong to music. Artists also make use of space and time. Architects, visual artists, and musicians arrange these elements into combinations and forms, creating freshness and novelty out of that which is shared and seemingly unremarkable. Words, too, are the material which we use to construct reality and represent the world.

> Modern plastic arts grasped the fact that the surface, line, and color are simply the elements of a distinct reality constructed in a composition. In poetry, the word acquires the role of line and color. … The role of the word in poetry is simply that of an element in the construction of a specific reality.[1]

Debora Vogel (1900–1942), the author of these words, was a poet, philosopher, and art critic who lived in Poland between the two world wars. She created her own "laboratory of language" and a literary expression unlike any other. Vogel used words as if they were building blocks—similar to lines, colors, and surfaces in painting—in order to shape her sparse constructions in Yiddish. Stripped of any trace of *homeliness* or stereotypical associations of the content of literary works in this language, these constructions, as in the poem below, are unmistakably recognizable as Vogel's style.

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1 See the English translation of the preface to *Day Figures* in this volume, p. 123.

A gray rectangle.
A second. A third.
Seven times the tin rectangle opens.

Yellow sun. Red sun.
On one side, on another:
the day-rectangle has closed.[2]

Debora Vogel lived far from the major centers of literary Modernism and the artistic avant-garde, and yet the author studied and followed these contemporary cultural trends and integrated them into her multimodal and singular poetics. Vogel was immensely erudite and intimately familiar with the works of the Anglo-American Modernists: she read and greatly admired Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and wrote about the American writer John Dos Passos and his experimental novel, *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), which she read in Polish translation and in which she saw parallels to her own work.

Vogel also considered herself an ambassador of Modernism in Poland. She took it upon herself to translate the works of Yiddish Modernists into Polish in order to educate her fellow Poles and Jews about this important movement in Yiddish literature with its center in New York.

2

Blooming Spaces: The Collected Poetry, Prose, Critical Writing, and Letters of Debora Vogel spans the entirety of Vogel's career and showcases the full stylistic range of this gifted yet overlooked writer. My aim in introducing this lost Modernist voice to a modern audience is to underline a profoundly contemporary experience that the twenty-first century reader of Vogel's work will enjoy. One of the sentiments that you may share with Vogel is the sense of the value of the quotidian—the banal and tedious in life—which she rehabilitates. Simply put, everything is life, everything is art, and everything matters. The author restores the everydayness often denigrated as secondary in the hierarchy of events to the flow of life. Vogel demonstrates what such recovery of seemingly unremarkable events—and the simultaneous abolition of the privilege accorded to allegedly significant happenings—might mean. The central line of her collection of philosophical prose *Acacias Bloom* (1935/1936) juxtaposes phenomena that

2 See the English translation of "Day Figure" from *Rectangles* (1924), in *Day Figures*, p. 125.

usually go unnoticed: spring blossoms which are part of the cycle of nature and occurrences which are typically foregrounded within consciousness and reported by the media as important world events, such as soldiers marching to the front, the unemployed roaming the streets or workers on a strike: "the unemployed pass by blooming acacias; and the acacias bloom while revolutions are in the making."[3]

The title, *Blooming Spaces*, encapsulates the multiplicity contained in Vogel's artistic method. "Blooming" suggests becoming and process, and, thus, by implication, temporality and finitude. In short, the contingency of the blooming acacias—the organic, or the biological principle of life, as Vogel calls it, might become life's necessity. Through the cyclical recurrence and seasonal change which happens every year, this contingency is also reiterated as stable. The "event" of blooming acacias is combined with those occurrences which are more topical and dynamic, even though transitory in their own way: military parades on the streets; signs of momentous political shifts, be it revolutions or wars; or the lines of those who are out of work and have nowhere to go. Thus, there is not only a *temporal synchronicity* of unfolding events, but a *simultaneity of space* in which things and bodies find themselves—as reflected in the second part of the title. *Blooming Spaces* underscores the *dialectical tension* between stasis and dynamism—the lasting and transient, the polyphonic and colorful versus the monochrome and monotonous. Finally, the title epitomizes how art folds life into itself, and how life unfolds in art.

3

Debora Vogel was born in the town of Bursztyn in Eastern Galicia (present-day Burshtyn, Western Ukraine) on January 4, 1900. Hers was a family of *maskilim,* proponents of the Jewish Enlightenment, the Haskalah, who also instilled Zionist convictions in their daughter. Debora's father, Anselm, was a teacher and a school principal. Vogel's mother, Lea, was a teacher in the school for girls in Burshtyn and belonged to the prominent Ehrenpreis family. Vogel's grandfather, Jacob, was a publisher of Kabbalistic works and translations of German classics into Hebrew, a writer of religious treatises, and an author of popular works about the political events that shaped the Jewish world, such as the

3 See the English translation of the essay "Montage as a Literary Genre" (1937) in the present volume, pp. 32–33.

Dreyfus affair and the Beilis case.[4] Debora's maternal uncle, Marcus Ehrenpreis, was the chief rabbi of Stockholm and a writer in Swedish, Hebrew, and Yiddish. The family spoke Polish and German. Vogel also spoke Hebrew with her father.

From Burshtyn the family moved to Lviv (Lwów at the time), a multiethnic and culturally hybrid city in interwar Poland (known also as Lemberg in German, Lviv in Ukrainian, Lvov in Russian, and Lemberik in Yiddish)—a city at the crossroads of empires, states, and identities, all of which shaped Vogel's polyglot sensibility. There, Vogel studied in a Polish-language school. Her father was the principal of the orphanage for Jewish children on 8 Zborowska street, where Vogel's family lived. Debora and her mother Lea worked in the orphanage as educators. During the First World War, the family moved to Vienna where Vogel first studied in a Polish, and then in a German high school. After her school graduation in 1918, Vogel moved back to Lviv where she was active in the Socialist-Zionist secular Jewish youth organization Hashomer Hatsair (The Young Guard).

Vogel's training and background primed her for the innovative creative and theoretical work that she would later undertake. In 1919 she began her studies in philosophy, psychology, and Polish language and literature at Jan Kazimierz University in Lviv. She was active in the Society of Jewish Students at the university, where she met Rachel Auerbach, a fellow student of philosophy and history, as well as a journalist, historian, and a writer. Auerbach convinced Vogel to write in Yiddish. This event deserves special attention and will be discussed further.

In 1924, after her studies in Lviv, Debora Vogel transferred to Jagiellonian University in Cracow, where in 1926 she received a doctorate in philosophy for her dissertation on the cognitive value of art in Hegel's thought and its modification in the work of the Polish thinker Józef Kremer. Vogel examined whether Hegel had indeed proclaimed the "death of art," and concluded that Hegel posited, in fact, that art had an epistemological relation to the world—a novel idea, since at the time only philosophy was believed to offer systematic cognition of the world. Vogel's work on the history of aesthetics was at odds with the philosophical trends in vogue in Poland—logic and empirio-criticism. Trained in the analytical philosophy of the Lviv–Warsaw School by Kazimierz Twardowski

4 The Beilis case—legal proceedings organized in Kyiv in 1913 against Menahem Mendel Beilis, a Jewish shop assistant in the brick plant on charges of the ritual murder of a young Ukrainian boy, Andriy Yushchinsky. Beilis was acquitted, but his trial provoked antisemitic rhetoric and violence. This case in the Russian Empire is comparable to the Dreyfus Affair.

(an influence on the German philosophers Franz Brentano and Edmund Husserl), Vogel departed from philosophy of mental phenomena while retaining an interest in the psychology central to her mentor's method.

After completing her PhD, Vogel travelled extensively in Paris, Berlin, and Stockholm which she amply documented in her work. In her poem "Shoddy Ballad Paris," Vogel contrasted the provincial landscape of Poland with the excitement offered by world's large cities:

> And one can forget the velvet
> of sidewalks and pavements
> Paris Berlin Stockholm
> and cities I haven't seen—
>
> when you live in a country
> which is covered with fields
> where cities are like fields
> of yellow boredom and purple potatoes.[5]

In the fall and winter of 1926/1927, Vogel visited Berlin which was then the center of the avant-garde movements in art and culture. Berlin Dadaists experimented with collage and photomontage; Franz Roh theorized the new artistic movement which he called Magical Realism and which later became known as New Objectivity; and Walter Ruttmann used the technique of montage in his film *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927). The time of Vogel's sojourn in Berlin also coincided with the world premiere of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. Vogel went to see movies in Berlin's so-called "picture palaces." Many of the films that were shown there were produced by Germany's famous UFA film company and starred world-renowned actors like Marlene Dietrich. Vogel wrote about the new medium in her poem "City Grotesque Berlin," which includes mention of Mauritz Stiller's *Hotel Imperial* (known in Germany and in Austria under the title *Hotel Stadt Lemberg*), starring Pola Negri and James Hall:

> in purple orange-red citrus-yellow letters
> entangled fates are written:
> UFA-FILM

5 See the English translation of "Shoddy Ballad Paris," in the cycle *Shoddy Ballads* (1931–1932) from *Mannequins* (1934), p. 207.

Hotel Stadt Lemberg
=UFA=[6]

After her stay in Berlin from mid-October 1926 until January 1927, Vogel travelled to Stockholm to visit her uncle Marcus Ehrenpreis and his family. The budding writer penned a travelogue about her trip in 1929 in which Stockholm appears to the reader through the author's impressions of the city's architecture and through a kaleidoscope of paintings by the Swedish artists Carl Larsson, Carl Wilhelmson, Nils Edvard Kreuger, Bruno Andreas Liljefors, Gustaf Fröding, and Olof Sager-Nelson.[7] A bit later, in the 1930s, Vogel would write essays about Polish Jewish artists in German and publish them in Swedish translations in *Judisk Tidskrift*, a Stockholm journal of Jewish literature, art, news, research, and criticism.

Paris was also a special place for Debora Vogel and she visited the city multiple times. In a letter to Moshe Starkman, a writer, journalist, and editor from Galicia who lived in New York, Vogel reflected on one of her stays in Paris. She described visiting art exhibitions, mingling with artists (Marc Chagall, for example) and art critics like Chil Aronson (author of a study of the Jewish artists of Montparnasse), and giving readings:

> Paris is indeed a symbol of always-triumphant life; it allows for no stagnation, no "shrinking to one point." … For the second time—after my travels to Berlin and Stockholm—I felt how wonderful a big city can be and how it draws me to itself and how it excites me. I have already decided that I want to test New York in this respect. In a year or two, you will probably meet me on the streets of New York … if I'm able to save some money for the trip.[8]

Like Paris, New York powerfully attracted Vogel. She attempted to organize a lecture in the city in order to visit it. Her writing reached New York and circulated in reputable Yiddish Modernist periodicals, but she never made the journey herself. Writing to Aaron Glantz-Leyeles, a Yiddish Introspectivist poet in

6 See the English translation of "City Grotesque Berlin," from the cycle *Mannequins* (1930–1931) in (1934), pp. 188–189.

7 See Vogel's essay in Polish "Miasto bez trosk," in *Chwila*, no. 3696 (1929): 2.

8 See the English translation of Debora Vogel's letter to Moshe Starkman, January 10, 1932, pp. 292–293. See the original in the Starkman collection, RG 279, Archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York.

New York, Vogel remarked that New York was "the essence of all cities" for her and expressed her regret at not living there "during her longing for urbanism":

> Will I feel the wonder of the mobile city which never grows tired when I come for a visit? The wonder of a grandiose machine soul, the soul of the city? I think that I have still retained some reserves of urban longings which await realization.[9]

After returning to Lviv from her tour of European capitals, Vogel taught at Jakob Rotman's Hebrew Teacher's Seminary as a professor of literature and psychology until the outbreak of the Second World War in Poland. Chone Shmeruk, an Israeli-Polish Yiddish literary scholar, fondly remembered Debora Vogel's lectures which were special because of his professor's ability to place "Yiddish literature into a wider European literary context."[10]

Around the same time, Vogel became active in the literary and artistic communities in Lviv. In 1929 she joined the board of the Jewish Literature and Arts Society which was founded in 1925 to promote artistic expression across media—literature, music, drama, and the visual arts—and to connect Jewish artists with the public. Vogel also became a mentor and active promoter of the work of Artes, a group of Polish, Jewish, and Ukrainian painters, photographers, and architects. Influenced by Fernand Léger's work—as well the aesthetics of Braques, Marcussi, and Picasso—the group navigated the currents of Surrealism, Constructivism, and a form of Superrealism, with its emphasis on facticity and the documentation of reality, a program similar to that of the New Objectivity movement in Germany. The members of Artes were inspired by the avant-garde, especially by Primitivism, as well as the everyday—advertising posters, the neon of film theaters, and the tackiness of commercial products. Lviv's suburban squares, with their *shund*, or trash—reminiscent of Berlin's Alexanderplatz—were as intriguing as Parisian art galleries to the artists. One of the painters who incorporated these disparate elements into his visual idiom was Henryk Streng, a friend of Vogel's and an illustrator of her books.

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9 See the English translation of Debora Vogel's letter to Aaron Glantz-Leyeles, October 30, 1936, p. 312. See the original in the Leyeles Collection, RG 556, Box 4, Folder 5, Archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York.

10 See the conversation with Chone Shmeruk, "Zapomniana, nieznana. … O Deborze Vogel i literaturze jidysz z profesorem Chone Shmerukiem, wykładowcą na Uniwersytecie Hebrajskim w Jerozolimie, rozmawia Agnieszka Grzybek, *Ogród* 1 (1994): 198.

In addition to her active work as an art critic, Debora Vogel also launched her literary and journalistic career in this period. From 1928–1930, she published Polish-language essays on psychology and pedagogy, with a special focus on childhood education. At the same time, she also wrote, for the Yiddish press, reviews of art exhibitions, artistic groups, individual painters, and film. From 1929 until 1931, she was the key contributor to the Yiddish literary journal *Tshushtayer*, where she published her in-depth essays about art—such as her substantive study "Theme and Form in Chagall's Art," which is included in this volume.

Vogel also began to publish her Yiddish poetry in *Tsushtayer*. Her poem "Du bist laykht un beygevdik" (You are light and supple) appeared in the inaugural issue of the journal in 1929. This poem was reprinted under the title, "Ferd I" (Horse I) as part of the diptych in the author's debut poetry collection *Tog figurn* (Day figures) published in 1930 by *Tsushtayer* publishing house in Lviv.

4

Vogel turned to Yiddish as an adult under the influence of her university friend, the writer, journalist, and historian Rachel Auerbach. Auerbach reflects upon this in her memoir "Nisht oysgeshpunene feder" (Unspun threads).[11] She discusses not only Vogel's linguistic choice, but also the agenda of the intellectual Yiddish-speaking milieu in Galicia. A strong proponent of the "turn to Yiddish," Auerbach tirelessly worked to convince her fellow Jewish intellectuals to embrace and cultivate Yiddish, the *mame-loshn*, rather than the more readily available and prestigious Polish. The latter was regarded as the language of what Auerbach called the "assimilation" of Polish Jewry, its acculturation, a negative development in Auerbach's view.

Several writers, most notably women, who chose to write in Yiddish in interwar Poland—Vogel, Auerbach, and Rokhl Korn, for example—were also fluent in other languages, and many of them simultaneously participated in non-Jewish cultural milieus. For some of them, Yiddish became their sole creative language, while others continued to work in Polish. The reasons and circumstances of these decisions varied. Rokhl Korn, for instance, wrote in Polish before she began to compose exclusively in Yiddish, which she continued to do until the end of her life. Korn discovered Yiddish culture for herself and

11 See Rokhl Oyerbakh, "Nisht oysgeshpunene feder," *Di goldene keyt* 50 (1964): 131–143.

decided to contribute to it. Scholars have also maintained that Rokhl Korn's decisive break with Polish came after the horrifying Polish pogroms in the wake of the First World War. When Auerbach solicited her work for *Tsushtayer* in the late 1920s—a journal of literature and culture which Auerbach envisioned as a platform in which Yiddish culture in Galicia could flourish—Korn had already been writing in Yiddish for some time and was a published author with one poetry collection to her name.[12]

For Debora Vogel, who made her poetic debut in *Tsushtayer*, Yiddish was not a mother tongue, *mame-loshn,* but a "language mother," an adopted language. In 1924, Vogel wrote a letter to her uncle Marcus Ehrenpreis soliciting advice regarding the publication of her avant-garde German-language poetry for which she could not find venues in Poland. Vogel's uncle was the chief rabbi of Stockholm at the time and an author in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Swedish—and considered "one of the finest stylists of Swedish literature," a rare case of near-absolute bilingualism in Hebrew and Yiddish, according to Shmuel Niger, an important critic of Yiddish literature.[13] Vogel could have no better adviser on linguistic and publication matters. Inspired by Nietzsche's conception of the power of the individual, on the one hand, and by Georg Brandes' ideal of Europeanism,[14] on the other, Ehrenpreis believed in a synthesis of cultural and spiritual Jewish thought with the non-Jewish world through the power of language and literature.[15] These ideas must have also influenced his niece.

While Ehrenpreis chose the European, non-Jewish language of Swedish to bring about the spiritual renewal of Jewish religion and culture, Vogel utilized the medium of one of the Jewish languages, Yiddish, for some of the most advanced writing to come out of European Modernism. 1928 marked the year in which Marcus Ehrenpreis founded *Judisk Tidskrift*, a journal of Jewish literature, art, news, and research published in Swedish in order to reach both Jewish and Gentile readers and fulfil his wish to unite Jewishness and Europeanness.

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12 To learn more about Rokhl Korn's linguistic choices and the Galician milieu that she, Rokhl Oyerbakh, and Vogel shared, see Karen Underhill, "Bruno Schulz's Galician Diasporism: On the 1937 Essay 'E. M. Lilian' and Rokhl Korn's Review of *Cinnamon Shops*," *Jewish Social Studies* 24, no. 1 (Fall 2018): 1–33.

13 Shmuel Niger, *Tsveyshprakhikayt fun undzer literature* [Bilingualism in Jewish literature] (Detroit: Louis Lamed Foundation for the Advancement of Hebrew and Yiddish Literature, 1941), 53.

14 See more on Marcus Ehrenpreis in Stephen Fruitman's book *Creating a New Heart: Marcus Ehrenpreis on Jewry and Judaism* (Umea: Universitet Umea, 2001), 131.

15 See Göran Rosenberg, "Philo of Stockholm: The Ecumenical Heresies of Rabbi Marcus Ehrenpreis," *Nordisk judaistik* 30, no. 2 (2017): 8–20.

In the same year, Vogel started experimenting with Cubist and Constructivist influences in her Yiddish poetry.

Vogel published two poetry collections in this language—*Tog Figurn* (Day Figures) in 1930 and *Manekinen* (Mannequins) in 1934. The first collection draws upon the geometrical tendencies of Modernist art. It is an example of Cubist-Constructivist verse in Yiddish. Her second collection engages with *shund*, or "lowbrow" popular culture and its possibilities for high Modernism.

In her poetry, Vogel sought to capture the sensibility of the inhabitants of cities and provincial towns alike in the age of rapid urbanization, mechanization, and technological progress. For Vogel, to evolve the creative process—and thereby maintain contact with broader dialectical societal developments—meant proceeding with formal experiments in her first poetry collection *Day Figures* (1930), only to diverge from them later. This collection paid tribute to modern painting and philosophy by tracing the process of the formation of abstract notions in terms of geometrical shapes, lines, and colors shaped by boredom, happiness, and melancholy. Her next phase, and subsequent book *Mannequins* (1934), commented on the phenomena of mass culture and modern society by reworking tacky visual features like shop signs and advertisements, and included linguistic manifestations of *shund*—lines from potboilers, popular tango songs, and graffiti in the back alleys of the city, for example. The songs one sings in a bar somewhere in a port city, or the campy fashions one flaunts on Montmartre are reconciled with the "high art" produced in Montparnasse. People walking the streets simultaneously look like mannequins in barber shop windows, the statues of gods in antiquity, and the figures of "seers" in Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical paintings. Moreover, these "living" paper dolls seem to be little different from furniture, houses, and objects.

Vogel's choice to write her innovative poetry in Yiddish was profoundly contrarian. Her own family and intellectual milieu was acculturated—they functioned in Polish. Yiddish was the language of the masses and was perceived derogatorily as *zhargon*, jargon, by Debora's father and many other Jews of similar social standing and intellectual background. "For whom does one write in Yiddish?" Vogel asked in a 1938 letter to Bruno Schulz, a Polish Jewish writer with whom she is often associated.[16] This question emerged out of pondering

16 See the translations of Vogel's surviving letters to Schulz in Jerzy Ficowski, ed., *Regions of the Great Heresy: Bruno Schulz: A Biographical Portrait*, trans. Theodosia S. Robertson