The Project of Resuscitating Women Yiddish Writers

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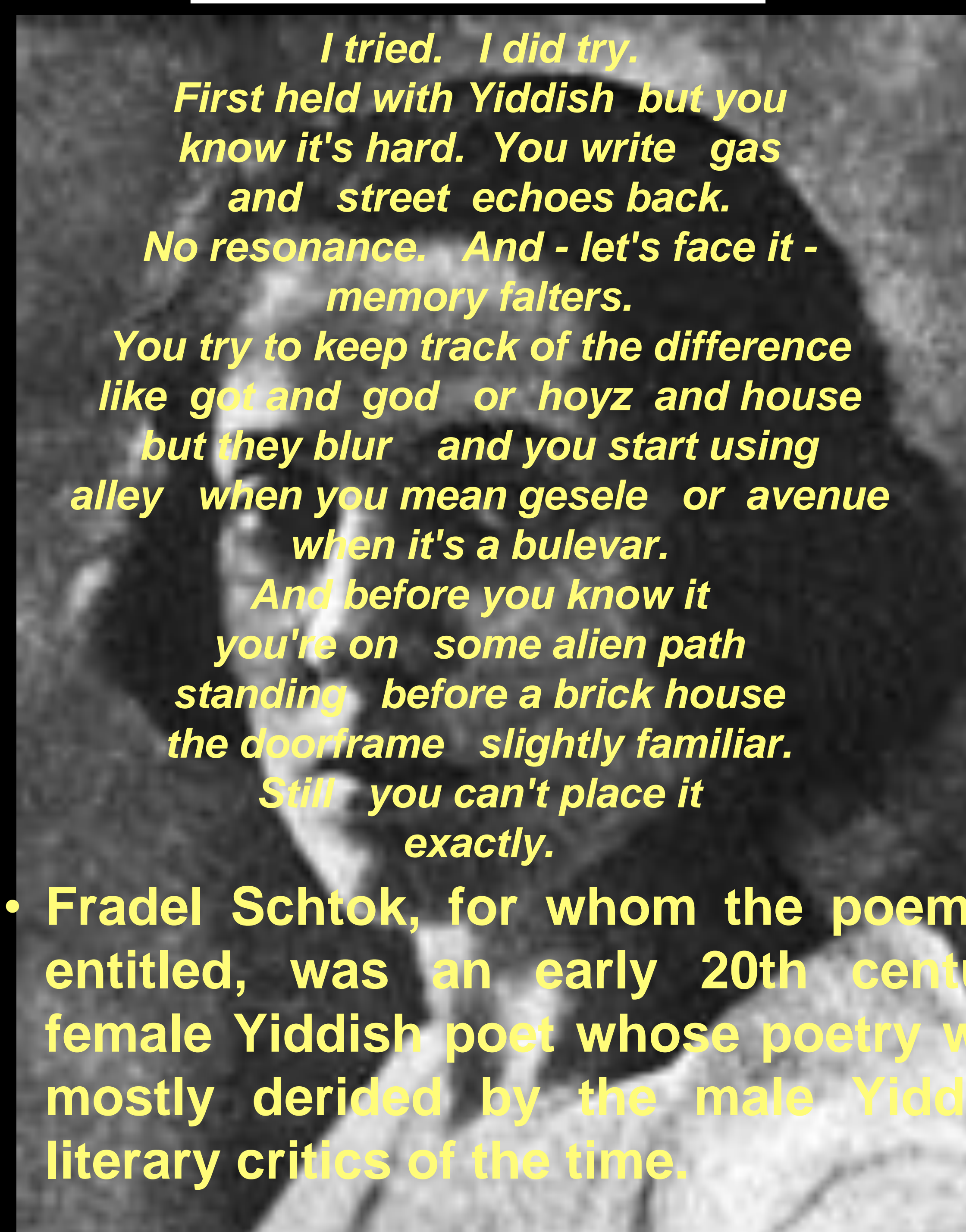
What is Yiddish?

- A trope that is invariably attached to the Yiddish language is that it is "dead."

- Before the founding of the state of Israel, Yiddish functioned as a kind of 'home' for Jews who had no place to call their own (5).

- Following the onslaught of the Holocaust and the murder of the majority of its speakers, however, the state of Israel itself became hostile to Yiddish (5).

"I like to write ghost stories and nothing fits a ghost better than a dying language. The deader the language the more alive is the ghost. Ghosts love Yiddish and as far as I know, they all speak it"-Isaac Bashevis Singer (1).

- Yiddish was considered lowly, a jargon language; and yet it is the 'lowliness' of the language which accounted for its presence within the messiness of every day affairs as opposed to rare, sacred occasions (5).

- The Yiddish language was later on resentfully considered "the language of the uneducated and the language of women" by the state of Israel (5).

Women Writers

- "After World War II, many Jewish women simply did not have the support—culturally, socially, or personally—that would have enabled them to become artists"(2).

- Translating the work of Yiddish women writers into English comprises an act of revival, of resuscitation; most of the work of Yiddish women writers was not translated and was derided by the male critics of its time (2).

- "The fictional characters [within the women's work] represent the lost Yiddish women writers of past generations; they are mirror images of lost women artists of other ethnic back—grounds and religious communities" (2).

- Yiddish women writers constitute the most marginal group within the already marginal culture of Yiddish literature; if Yiddish literature celebrates those existences on the "edge" of history, then these women are the language's most legitimate representatives (2).

"Fradel Schtok" by Irena Klepfisz (excerpt)

I tried. I did try.
First held with Yiddish but you
know it's hard. You write gas
and street echoes back.
No resonance. And - let's face it -
memory falters.
You try to keep track of the difference
like got and god or hoyz and house
but they blur and you start using
alley when you mean gesele or avenue
when it's a bulevar.
And before you know it
you're on some alien path
standing before a brick house
the doorframe slightly familiar.
Still you can't place it
exactly.

- Fradel Schtok, for whom the poem is entitled, was an early 20th century female Yiddish poet whose poetry was mostly derided by the male Yiddish literary critics of the time.

- In 1927, she published a novel in English, *Musicians Only*, which received no attention from critics. She was subsequently institutionalized and died in a sanatorium, though the year and cause of her death is unknown.

- Schtok's withdrawal from the Yiddish literary scene and her move to writing in English points to the conception of an artist expressing herself in an adopted tongue as opposed to her mother tongue and the psychological displacement that occurs as a result of such a move.

- The erasure of Schtock's work is a microcosm of the erasure of the work of female Yiddish writers.

Acknowledgements

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Bibliography

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