

FROM STEPPE TO VELD: THE LANDSCAPE POEMS OF THE YIDDISH POET DAVID FRAM¹

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ABSTRACT

This article offers detailed readings of specific poems that reflect, and reflect on, Fram's responses to the differing landscapes in which he found himself, focusing on his lyric mode and romantic inclinations. While those about Lithuania indicate his strong feelings of attachment to the icy steppes, the poems he wrote later in South Africa provide a contrast, as his changed imagery evokes the heat of the veld and the exotic luxuriance of its flora. Through their translation and transliteration, the poems provide a valuable space for the preservation of a particular literary and cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

The Yiddish poems of the immigrant poet David (Dovid) Fram frequently reflect, and reflect on, aspects of the landscapes of Lithuania and South Africa. This article offers readings of specific poems written in response to these vistas, focusing on Fram's traditional, lyric mode and romantic inclinations. Throughout his life, he remained committed to the preservation of his mother tongue, creating a rich body of Yiddish poetry in South Africa. My hope is that by making the poems accessible to a wider reading public through my own English translations and transliterations,² they may contribute to an enriched understanding of these concerns.

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² This refers to Yiddish written in Latin characters from left to right.

Born in Ponevezh, Lithuania, in 1903, Fram received a traditional Jewish education. At the start of World War I, he and his family were relocated from the Pale of Settlement³ to Samara in Russia, as were many other Jewish families. This was the first of many times that Fram experienced the vicissitudes of migration and displacement. Before returning to his home *shtetl* in 1921, he matriculated at a Russian Soviet workers' school. He then attended a Yiddish gymnasium in Ukmerge,⁴ where he was tutored privately by Yudl Marks and came into contact with other Yiddishists. Fram left Lithuania in 1927 to join an uncle in South Africa, part of the "chain of immigration" (Simon 2009:114) to the golden country, *di goldene medine*.⁵ Fram thus escaped the Second World War and the Holocaust, which decimated the community he left behind, including his parents and sisters.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Fram's first published poem, "Zima" ("Winter"), describes the landscape of the steppe, and exhibited the poet's "abiding emotional concern" (Sherman 2006:7) with nature. It is his only poem written in Russian and was published in a Russian journal; thereafter, Fram only wrote in Yiddish. However, the publications in which Fram's poems appeared represent the full gamut of literary leanings, and therefore offer no indications as to his particular political or cultural inclination. His poems were first published in *Kveytn* (Blossoms) (Ponevezh), *Yidishe shtime* (Yiddish Voice) and *Folksblat* (People's Paper) (Kovno). Later poems written between 1924 and 1931 were published in *Der Velt* (The World) (Lite), *Literarische bleter* (Literary Pages)⁶

³ For Russian Jews in czarist times their home was the Pale of Settlement, the frontier area between the German and Russian Empires where they endured hardships and pogroms, as well as forced removals at the hands of both the Russians and the Germans.

⁴ Ukmerge is the town's Lithuanian name. It was known as Vilkomir in Yiddish and Vilkmerge in Russian.

⁵ After the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1882, and again after the Russian Revolution and First World War, thousands of Jews left to escape persecution, following family and friends in the hope of better economic opportunities elsewhere.

⁶ "*Literarische Bleter* was the leading Yiddish literary journal in interwar Poland" (Cohen 2010).

and *Haynt* (Today) (Warsaw), *Nayes* (News), *Mir Aleyn* (Ourselves Alone) and *Kovner Tog* (Kovno Day) (Kovno), *Der Shtral* (The Ray) (Libau, Latvia), *Di Vokh* (The Week) (Riga, Latvia), as well as *Zuntog* (Sunday) and *Oyfkum* (Arrival) (New York). In South Africa, Fram's poems appeared in *Dorem Afrike* (South Africa) *Yidische Tribune* (Yiddish Tribune), *Foroys* (Forward) and *Ekspres* (Express) (Johannesburg), and *Fri-Stayter Baginen* (Free State Dawn) (Bloemfontein). His first collection *Lider un poemes* (*Songs and poems*) was published in Vilna (1931). A *shvalb oyfn dakh* (*A swallow on the roof*) appeared in Johannesburg in 1983.

At the time Fram began writing, there was an upsurge of Neo-Romanticism in Eastern Europe, and Yiddish poetry was filled “with lyric and the love of cultural heritage” (Liptzin 1970:150). Although there is little definite information about Fram's literary education, by the 1920s one may speculate that “a Yiddish reader in Lithuania would have been able to find some Romanticism (German, Russian, English) ... original, translated and in Yiddish” (Cammy 2010).⁷ It is therefore very likely that “a person of Fram's education would have been well-read in these areas” (Estraiikh 2010).

Once in South Africa, native Yiddish speakers like Fram continued to “speak, read and write in their mother tongue” (Sherman 1987:6). Prior to 1933, the Yiddish newspaper *Der Afrikaner* appeared with regularity. Thereafter, it amalgamated with another paper as *Afrikaner Yidische Tsaytung*. The journal *Dorem Afrike* was published intermittently in the 1920s and regularly after 1948. These publications attest to the commitment to the continuation of the Yiddish language and Lithuanian culture far from its original locus, and in the 1930s Yiddish was the third largest European language in the Transvaal after English.

On the other hand, “the rejection of Yiddish amongst Jewish immigrants particularly in the English speaking world was a function of acculturation” (Ginsberg 2011; Frankel 2013:8) and many of the new arrivals jettisoned the language of *di alte*

⁷ “Almost no poet learned Yiddish literature in school (most Yiddish schools were founded after World War I — after the major writers and poets appeared, using their authority for validation). Naturally they imbibed a vivid Yiddish language spoken in their homes and environment, but only in rare cases did they acquire knowledge of Yiddish literature from their parents” (Harshav and Harshav 1986:21).

heym as they became part of the dominant culture. There was a shortage of writers and only a very small intelligentsia; few poets saw their poetry in print because of a lack of readership, and even when work did appear, it was given little space, unlike journals of Eastern Europe and America, such as *Literarische Bleter* and *Forverts*, that actively promoted all Yiddish literature, including that of South Africa. Other poets writing at the time and against the tide included Morris Hoffmann, a scholar who became a shopkeeper in De Aar in the Karoo, who published an anthology of Yiddish poetry, *Voglungs-klangn* (*Songs of a wanderer*) (Warsaw 1935).

Significantly, after World War II, and the destruction of 90% of Eastern Europe's Yiddish speakers, many writers including Fram felt it to be "the most sacred and crushing of obligations" (Aaron 1990:6) to save the language. Hence, these years brought a "renewal of Yiddish in South Africa" (Wolpe 1956:21; Frankel 2013:9). Sarah Eisen included both memories of *di alte heim* and depictions of life in South Africa in her poetry collection *Geklibene lider un poemes* (*Selected lyrics and poems*) (1965); and David Wolpe, a well-recognised South African poet, published *A volkn un a veg* (*A cloud and a way*) (1978).

In using Yiddish as a living and vibrant language and amalgamating their personal experiences and understanding with that of the historical past, these writers amalgamated Eastern European Jewish secular culture with the literary culture in the far-flung diaspora of South Africa, transposing their history and background onto new soil. It was in this context, and despite the pressures of acculturation, that Fram perpetuated his cultural and linguistic heritage through his landscape poems.

THE LANDSCAPE OF LITHUANIA

The early poem "Shney" ("Snow") (Fram 1931:43) (1925)⁸ is one of a series of "traditional landscape poems" (Brinman 1938:6), lyric poems that include "Shkiye" ("Sunset"), "Harbstik" ("Autumnal"), "Shotns" ("Shadows") and "Shtilkayt"

⁸ Where dates that the poems were written are known, these are given in brackets after the publication date.

(“Silence”). Written between 1924 and 1928, they illustrate the poet’s ongoing affinity for nature and close bond with the land, and exemplify his “romantic choice of subject matter” (Brinman 1938:5). They also confirm Liptzin’s comment that poets with these leanings wrote “simple, melodious quatrains and traditional stanza forms about ... timid longings, ... [of] romantic nature far removed from urban abodes” (Liptzin 1970:132).

“Shney” combines the reality of the icy vista with the poet’s imaginative flights of fancy, providing an example of what the critic Y. R. Brinman describes as Fram’s “romanticism and realism” (Brinman 1938:6). The title immediately locates the poem, as the poet looks out on a frozen, whitened landscape, whose details are implied rather than directly described. Rather, it is the poet’s choice of imagery that evokes the cold silence of a vast blanketed expanse of snow. The opening lines set the scene where the poet finds himself amid the “... bloye vaytn / In bazilbert-vayse hiles” / “... the blue distance / In silvery-white slipcovers” (1–2). In addition, the image of “slipcovers” would seem to refer not only to the way the snow conceals the landscape, but suggest the presence of protective coverings in his comfortable home. This first stanza evokes the mood, the sense of peace that the poet feels within the familiar landscape.

Surrounded by the snowy fields, the poet sees, or imagines he sees, other specific images, the “umshuld-vayse toybn” / “white doves of innocence” (3), and “Blonken elnt vayse shifn” / “White ships [that] stray forlornly” (12). While the poet remains fixed in place, they are on the move, the birds flying purposefully, the ships less directed. He may also have experienced a sense of affinity with them, as they represent a presage of his own future journey — the doves as they fly away from the cold, the ships less certain of their destination. These images contextualise the poem within traditional Yiddish poetry, where extensive “use of metaphoric language” (Aaron 1990:57) is made. Like the Romantics who regarded “nature as ... a responsive mirror of the soul” (Birch 2009:n.p.), the natural world that Fram describes here reflects his own state of being, with its “emotional intensity ... taken to extremes of rapture” (Birch 2009:n.p.).

At one with the universe, the poet prays, while sensing at the same time the “vaytn

vayse tefiles” / “distant white prayers” (4) that seem to emanate from the very quietude of the vista itself:

Zingt di shtilkayt halleluye,
Shotns vayse zingn halel. (5–6)
 The silence sings halleluya,
 White shadows sing hallel.

These lines offer an example of what Ravitch refers to as Fram’s romantic phraseology (Ravitch 1931:403) — the examples Ravitch gives being the title of Fram’s poem “Es hot a blaykhe hant getsundn di ikone” / “A pale hand touched the icon” (Fram 1931:28) (1926)⁹ and also the line “blaser blaykher shayn” / “pale, pale glow”.

With the line “Kh’bin in nakht aleyn mispalel” / “I am in the night alone praying” (8), “Shney” indicates that the poet feels in tune with nature and nature is attuned to him; so much so, that when the ice falls, the melting drops seems to mingle with, perhaps even become, one with his prayers:

Bloye tropns zilber trifn.
In der nakht, vi mayne tfiles. (10–11)
 Blue drops of silver drip.
 In the night, like my prayers.

To heighten the atmosphere of the vast, icy vista, the repetition of the word “vayse” / “white” (3, 4, 12) and “vaysn” / “white” (16) creates an eerie echo, the pervasive emptiness further emphasized through its sound relationship with “vaytn” / “distant” (1, 12). The quietude is also enhanced by drawing attention to the action of praying, which is also repeated in “tfiles” / “prayers” (4), “halleluye” / “halleluya” (5) “hallel” / “hallel” (6), and “mispalel” / “prayer” (8).

Within the silence, the poet is overcome with emotion:

⁹ Where the poem appeared elsewhere before it was published as part of Fram’s collections, the original publication date follows the collection date.

Vil ikh zingn mit der shtilkayt
In mayn soydes-fuln heykhl.
Efsher vet di nakht mir shenkn
Far mayn lid a vaysn shmeykhl ... (13–16)
 I want to sing with the stillness
 In my secret-full palace.
 Perhaps the night will grant me
 For my song a white smile ...¹⁰

Absorbed in and by the silence, the poet's hope is that his poem, his prayer, will bring him some degree of happiness. Like many of Fram's poems, "Shney" uses the standard iambic foot of traditional Yiddish verse, and a regular rhyme scheme, abcb, enhancing the lyricism through the "regular musical rhythm and traditional form" (Brinman cited in Niger 1934:615). This poem was written while Fram still lived in Lithuania, which continued to shape his literary identity long after he had left his *shtetl*.

In his review of Fram's collection *Lider un poemes*, Niger drew attention to how Fram's romantic longing manifests itself in descriptions of nature and the countryside (Niger 1934:615). In the poem "Ikh hob shoynt dem vinter, dem vinter dem tsveytn" (1931) (Fram 1931:11) (1928), which was written in South Africa, the poet describes his perpetual longing for home:

Ikh hob shoynt dem vinter, dem vinter dem tsveytn
Mit atsves un elnt in hartsn fartseykhnt —
On shtile, farshleferte, shneyike breytn,
— mit tife un bloye un zunike heykhn ... (1–4)
 This winter, this second winter, I have already written,
 With sadness and loneliness in my heart

¹⁰ An alternative version has been published previously:
 I will sing alone with silence
 In my deep and hidden temple,
 In the hope the night might grant me
 For my song a smile of favour (Sherman 2006:11).

About the quiet, dreamy, snowy expanses
 — with deep and blue and sunny heights ...

As is clear from this excerpt, even though the poet is aware of the gifts of clear air and bright sunshine bestowed on him by his new country, these nevertheless feel burdensome to him:

*Ikh hob shoyt dem vinter dem tsveytn farshribn
 Mit flisikn zilber fun klore fartogn,
 Un gold hob ikh reynem in oytsres geklibn,
 Az shver iz mir, shver itst dos gold shoyt tsu trogn. (5–8)*

This winter, the second, I have already written
 With the flowing silver of clear dawns,
 And pure gold treasures have I gathered
 So that now it is heavy for me to bear.

The poem evokes a yearning for what has passed, characteristic of romantic poetry, in this case for the winters that he once knew, the loss of which has placed a heavy emotional burden on him. Fram's romantic subject matter is also enhanced by lyricism and song-like qualities, here enhanced by repetition, the anaphora of line one in line five. The poem also provides an example of his use of traditional poetic forms, to which Brinman had drawn attention (Brinman 1938:5), the regular rhyme schemes, abab, and the stanzas of equal length, that is, of four lines each, reminiscent of a folk ballad.

Although he also recognises the benefits that have accrued to him, the poet imagines tossing them aside, instead looking with longing and pain into the distance, where he hopes to catch a glimmer of the places he once knew:

*Iz hefkerdik vel ikh di oytsres tsevarfn
 Un vern in leydike vayt gelaytert,
 Kdey mit a veytog a topltn-sharfn
 Nokh gilderne vintern benkn shoyt vayter. (9–12)*

So freely I will scatter the treasures
 And become purified in the empty distances,
 So that with a pain doubly-sharp
 Long once more for gilded winters.

Here, it becomes clear to the poet that he is overcome by loneliness in spite of the sunshine around him, and that it brings him no solace; instead, he ignites the memory of what he left behind in his imagination:

Un dan vel ikh vider mayn elnt farbindn
Mit tife un klore un zunike breytn,
Un benkendik vider in dimyen tsetsindn
Di fayerlekh kalte fun steps bashneyte. (13–16)
 And then I will once again link my loneliness
 With deep and clear and sunny expanses,
 And in longing once again in fantasy kindles
 The cold little flames of the snowy steppes.

Thus, for Fram, the memories of his homeland remain full of “sweet melancholy” (Liptzin 1970:134), an emotion highlighted by references to “benkn” / “to long for” (12) and to “elnt” / “loneliness” (13). The description of the landscape affirms his romantic inclination, where “dimyen tsetsindn / Di fayerlekh kalte fun steps bashneyte” / “fantasy kindles / The cold little flames of the snowy steppes” (15–16), confirming Brinman’s designation of Fram as “a poet of nature, of Lithuanian sadness and sorrow” (Brinman 1938:5).

THE LANDSCAPE OF SOUTH AFRICA

Many immigrants continued to refer to Eastern Europe as home, *di heym*, and Melekh Ravitch commented on how Fram’s poems describe “the old home in beautiful pictures because the young sentimental Fram found it difficult to part with his home, with his Lite” (Ravitch 1931:403), but, as Fram began to “notice Africa [and] Africa

began to dominate his poems ... [and] he was inspired and determined to go along that path” (Ravitch 1931:403), Fram became the “progenitor of the Yiddish lyric in a new centre, South Africa” (Ravitch 1931:403). However, his romantic leanings remained in place, which may be observed in his lyrics “In an afrikaner baginen” (“In an African dawn”) (Fram 1931:74) (1927) and “Oyf transvaler erd” (“On Transvaal Earth”) (Rollansky 1971:29–38; Fram 1931:263–274)¹¹ (1930). Focusing on his natural surroundings, these poems too celebrate nature’s bounty, evoking Africa’s “pulsating vibrancy” (Sherman 2004:41), and its “stony soil and scorching skies” (7). While “In an afrikaner baginen” and “Oyf transvaler erd” abandon the regular quatrains and traditional rhyme schemes of “Shney” and “Ikh hob shoyndem vinter, dem vinter dem tsveytn”, these descriptive poems continue to make use of traditional and regular rhyme schemes.

The ballad “In an afrikaner baginen” (“In an African dawn”) visually evokes the landscape and people in a joyful song of praise:

S’iz zunik un s’iz loyter der frimorgn.

Ekh, vos hele, shtralndike zun!

Un azoy bafrayt fun dayges un fun zorgn —

Kvatshket ergets-vu a leygedike hun. (1–4)

It’s a sunny and clear morning.

And oh, what a radiant, full-rayed sun!

And so, free of worries and cares

A laying hen clucks nearby.

Unlike the poems of the Lithuanian landscape such as “Shney” and “Ikh hob shoyndem vinter, dem vinter dem tsveytn”, which are melancholic and introspective, “In an afrikaner baginen” is an expression of nature’s richness as it engenders intense joy in the poet. This manifests in the references to the sun, where brightness and light are directly described and repeated for emphasis further on, for example, “zunik” (19), “zunen” (27), in “A shmir, a shot, a glants fun toyzent zunen” / “A smudge, a shadow,

¹¹ The poem was published in two different versions, which are slightly different. The line references are to Rollansky (1971).

a radiance of a thousand suns” (28), and indirectly as in “Tsegisht zikh klarer shayn oyf felder gantse emers” / “Full buckets glow and pour out on the fields” (28). The intensity of the experience is heightened by the variety of sensory images, the tactile “Fun tsarte flaterlekh, fun babelekh, fun flign” / “From soft butterflies, from beetles, from flies” (11), the aromatic “stoygn shmekedikn hey” / “fragrant haystacks” (13), and those referring to the sense of taste, “Oy, s’iz gut! S’iz zunik-hel. S’shmekt in vayse epel” / “Oh, it’s good! It’s sunnily bright. It tastes of white apples” (19). Together, the “bloyen himl-shayn” / “blue heaven-splendour” (45), the glowing sunshine, the clucking hen, the white doves in flight, the wind blowing and the songs spreading widely amidst the smell of the sweet hay, the green grass and the yawning fields, fill the earth with nature’s abundance, with the result that “s’kvelt a hele freyd in tsapldike Brustn” / “bright joy and delight well up in quivering breasts” (31).

Repeated references to fruits and vegetables affirm the land’s fertility, in “s’gist zikh on der vayn in grine troybn” / “wine pours from green grapes ripe” (7), as the “royte kavones in feld dergeyen” / “red watermelons ripen across the field” (8), and this is also emphasised in “korn baykhikn” / “potbellied rye” (15), and “kupes hey, oyf shmekedikne felder” / “heaps of hay, over sweet smelling fields” (48), so that, “shiker iz di luft fun tsaytikdike peyres” / “the air is drunk with ripening fruits” (9) in “di zunike, di loytere fartogn” / “the sunny, the clear dawns” (50), incorporating “the new, wild and beautiful African world around him” (Ravitch 1931:403).

Man’s connection to the surrounding terrain is also suggested in recurrent images, for example in the phrase “a freyd an erdishe” / “an earthy joy” (25), and in “a fal ton tsu der mame-erd anider” / “falls down to mother earth” (41), where the “mame-erd” implies man’s feeding off the food offered by Mother Nature. The sensuality of this closeness is also contained in the physical image of man “zikh durkhmishn mit erd, mit leym, mit royte gruntn” / “wallowing in the earth, with clay, with red soil” (43), to the extent that it “breklt zikh fun oybn” / “crumbles from above” (45). The result of all this is that he becomes “A tsetumelter, farshikert begilufn” / “Confused, intoxicated with joy” (43), as if he, like the land, is drunk with delight in its bounty.

The lyricism of the poem is enhanced where the visual is linked to the aural in

“klingt zikh op in gold mit kishefdikn zemer” / “ring[s] out in gold, in enchanted melody” (30). The vision of the sun’s beams becomes part of nature’s song, as sense is matched by sound and rhythm in “shtiklekh shtraln brekln zikh un zipn zikh un zipn” / “bits of sun-ray shred and screen and sift” (18), as well as in the phrase “A klung, a shprung, a tants oyf feste gruntn” / “A ring, a jump, a dance on firm ground” (23). The springing rhythm also endorses the high spirits of the action as man “aroysshrayen mit ale dayne glider” / “shouts out with all his limbs” (39), which is emphasised through the increment of the reverberation that “zikh aleyn mit eygenem geshray fartoybn!” / “deafens with one’s own cry!” (46). There are also references to other sounds, for example “Kvoktshet ergets-vu a leygedike hun” / “A laying hen clucks nearby” (4) and “A fokh, a patshera, un fligl shotndike veyen” / “A flap, a beating, and shadowy wings fanning the air” (6). The intensity of the tumult is also underscored by the use of alliteration, for example in “Trikenen zikh shtil oyf grine lonke-lipn” / “Drying lightly on green lips of the fields” (17), where “s’shpreyt zikh oyset vayt a nign” / “a melody spreads far and wide” (12) contrasts with the “shvaygenish fun velder” / “silence of the forests” (49).

Through its use of imagery, lyricism and rhythm, the poem becomes, like the earth itself, “A lid, a brumeray, a shire farn boyre” / “A poem, a hum, a song of praise for the Creator” (10), the words themselves like the “regn un toy batrifte tfiles” / “rain and dew spattered prayers” (16). Thus the land, as well as the poem, serves as “A shire, a geveyn, a loybezang dem boyre” / “A song of praise, a lament, a hymn for the Creator” (32), in “di oysgehelte vayles” / “the sunny brightened moments” (38).

Similarly, in the long poem “Oyf transvaler erd”, the poet also describes his response to the strange and foreign landscape in which he finds himself with an accretion of sensory detail. The contrast between the icy steppes and the sunny veld impacted on the newly arrived poet, where “es varent zikh teg azoy shtile in Transvaal” / “the days are quietly warm in the Transvaal” (89). There, the spanned oxen trudge across the field, “trot bay trot” / “step by step” (3), dragging their ploughs over the hard, dry earth where there is no easy fodder, and he becomes aware of how the sun,

... *mit a fuler hant tseshit es un tseshpreyt,*
*farshmirt dem gantsn step mit flisedike shtraln,*¹²
un aza bloye vayt iz durkhzikhtik un breyt. (97–99)

Shoots and spreads with full hands,
 Smearing the whole steppe with flowing rays
 And blue distance is transparent and broad.

The poet also notices and notes the qualities of the soil, the clarity and fragrance of the air and the trees and plants, and the bright colours of the abundant fruit:

... *s'zetikt zikh in zun zayn leymik royter boden.*
di luft iz trunk heys. Es shmekt in ekaliptus.
in zislekhn gerukh fun frayikn baginen.
a yam mit klorn likht — glaykh emetser tsezipt es
mit gilderdiker farb fun rayfe apelsinen. (92–96)

... the red ground saturates itself with sun.
 The air drinks heat. It tastes of eucalyptus.
 In the sweet smell of the fresh dawn
 a sea of clear light — as if someone has sieved it
 with the golden colour of ripe apples.

In addition to the encompassing images that refer to the sense of taste and smell in the clear brightness of the veld, repeated references to fruit, flowers and water affirm the land's fertility:

*un s'dakht*¹³ *zikh, az se fleytst di zun fun toyznt kvaln,*
fun toyznt mit amol tserint zi un tsekvelt,
vi s'rint-arop a taykh fun berg iz oyf harte gruntn.
un ot azoy mit shayn bagosn a velt ... (100–103)
 and it seems that the sun surges from a thousand springs,
 From a thousand that at once dissolves and revels,

¹² This line is not included in the version of the poem in *Lider un poemes*.

¹³ This appears as *s'dukht* (90) in the version in *Lider un poemes*.

As if a river gushes over from the mountain onto hard ground,
And pours onto the world like this ...

Amidst the sweet smells the sun brings forth the natural abundance that fills the countryside, where he is aware of the ripe apples, as well as bananas, with which he would have been unfamiliar, close to the manmade structures,

*un do tsvishn feld un shtot, in bleter fun bananas,
in shtiler, oysgeshpreyter ru un fleytsendiker tekheyles —
tseleygn zikh vu a shtetl nokh mit shtiblekh un parkanes.* (161–163)

And here between veld and town, in leaves of bananas
In quiet, spread out peace and surging skyblue
A town lies, set out with little houses and palisades.

Nature's richness also manifests in the list of plants and flowers, with their exotic blooms:

*baflokhtn un bahangen zikh mit 'haybiskes' un 'daylis,'
un s'blit zikh shoyt der 'krismas-blum,' di tunkele 'fintsetas,'
mit groyse, royte kvaytenkep, vi bekhers fule ofn,
az s'vert dos oyg tsetumelte farkishuft, ven es zet es.* (164–167)

Stained and hung with hibiscus and dahlias,
And the Christmas flowers flash, the dipped poinsettias,
With huge, red bloom heads, fully open like chalices,
So the eye is confusedly bewitched, when it sees this.

The poet states his reaction clearly, that he is “farkishuft” / “bewitched” by what he sees, and this feeling is heightened by the exotic, bright images of flowers in full bloom.

The introduction of bright local plants whose names are transcribed in English,¹⁴ for example, “watermelon” (36), “cactus” (64), “peaches” (76), “dahlias” and “hibiscus” (164), “eucalyptus” (93), “Christmas flowers” and “poinsettias” (165), is indicative of the poet's adaptation to his surroundings, how he welcomes the newness

¹⁴ The English terms have been placed in scare quotes by the poet.

and freshness of his surroundings, and the impact the blooming flora made on him. The inclusion of these terms describing flora that would have been foreign to him, makes the poems site specific, heightening the atmosphere of the poem in a process of adaptation and fusion.

However, in that the “veld” is designated as “steppes” (84), the use of this descriptor provides a reminder of and also a contrast to the grasslands of Russia with which the poet was more familiar. In juxtaposing the Yiddish word “mokhn” (9) with the Afrikaans word “burijan” (9), to denote the dry grass, the poem encapsulates the poet’s conflict. Even in the heat of the veld, evoked in “In an Afrikaner baginen”, and the localising of the landscape in “Oyf transvaler erd”, the poet still returned to other spaces in his imagination and memory.

The two early poems, “Shney” written while he was still in Lithuania, and “Ikh hob shoyndem vinter” written soon after his arrival in the veld, staked out Fram’s poetic terrain, and “Oyf mayn dakh hot gesvitshert a shvalb” (“A swallow twittered on my roof”) (Fram 1983:67) expresses a similar inclination. The poet’s longing for the idyllic landscape of home remains unaltered,

*Umetum, yeder trot, yeder eyntsiker shpan
Hot gekvoln mit zun un geotemt mit freyd.
Oyfn taykh iz gefaln farnakht a tuman,
Un mit varemer erd hot fun felder gevayt... (5–9)*
All around every step each and every stride
Enjoyed the sun and breathed in happiness.
At dusk a mist fell on the river
And from the warm earth withdrew ...

Here, even long afterwards, the poet remembers how “Oyf mayn dakh hot amol gesvitshert a shvalb” / “On my roof once a swallow twittered” (20), where the central image is not the snow, but the swallow, which carries with it a sense of possibility and hope.

Fram’s poems remained traditional in form and content as he never “forsook rhyme, regular metric lines and stanzas, [and did not connect with] the Expressionist

tide in subject matter” (Liptzin 1970:144); having left Eastern Europe when he did, Fram was not part of the modernist thrust of the *Yung Vilne* and *Di Khalyastre* groups or that of Jacob Glatstein’s American modernist group *In Zikh* (Fram 2002:8). Nevertheless, by including indigenous South African words, his poetry does show the influence of “the Expressionist and Modernist trends [which] encouraged ... the opening up of the poetic language to all possibilities and intonations of the spoken idiom, including dialects ...” (Harshav and Harshav 1986:15).

As Fram began to react positively to the new landscape, as indicated in the later poems discussed above, the Yiddish language itself adapted and expanded in the new exotic environment with the inclusion of images of local flowers and fruit, the ever-bright sunshine, the stark African sky, the mine dumps and the ochre veld. Through their recurrence, Fram developed a personal iconography, fulfilling his expressed wish to enrich Yiddish “with an entire continent” (cited in Sherman 1988:41). As he responded through all his senses and gave his emotions free rein, Fram’s poems became filled “like an African pineapple with juicy Lithuanian Yiddish speech; his Yiddish language as rich as a pomegranate” (Ravitch 1932:403).

CONCLUSION

Heightened by his visual acuity and his choice of sensual imagery, the poems incorporate the joy the poet felt within the South African veld as illuminated in “In an afrikaner baginen”. This provides a strong contrast to his melancholy response to the icy plains of Eastern Europe in “Shney” and “Ikh hob shoynt dem vinter, dem vinter dem tsveytn”. In both instances, the surroundings inflect Fram’s mood and state of being, albeit in different ways, euphoric and filled with wonder as opposed to reflective and sombre. Far from the hub of Yiddishism, Fram’s landscape poems expressed both his contentment in his new circumstances and his yearning for Lithuania. In doing so, they exemplify Fram’s romantic inclinations, encapsulating Liptzin’s definition of romantic poetry as “idyllic, referring to an innocent past and an idealised future” (Liptzin 1970:134).

Fram's poems, with reference to the landscape of Lithuania and South Africa as seen through the lens of Yiddish, offer an important vehicle for its preservation. In so doing, they also contribute to a deeper understanding of a particular immigrant's experience. Yiddish remained a linguistic homeland for Fram where he could recover and reconstruct the world of the steppes, maintaining the connection between his lost past and new reality of the South African veld.

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¹⁵ This is how the title is written. Correctly, it should be *Zakhor*.

¹⁶ Also known as Krejnes.

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