

From the Outside Looking In: The Yiddish Poems of the Lithuanian South African Poet David Fram (1903-1988)

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Summary

The poetry of the Lithuanian Yiddish poet, David Fram, makes a significant contribution to the understanding of a single immigrant's relocation in a specific time and place. Drawing on a rich store of memories of the familiar old country, the poems encompass the nature of Jewish migration from Eastern Europe. However, as the effects of migration remain sadly contemporary, both in South Africa and in a broader, global arena, this article argues for the poems' continued relevance. Where the particular may be used to leverage far-reaching insights, going beyond a single poet's experience may also highlight some outcomes and insights of uprooting and displacement for members of an outsider and minority community.

Yiddish remained Fram's linguistic homeland, in which he could retain the richness of his culture, and record his responses to his new environment. With reference to my English translations of specific poems, the article reflects on the challenges of transition and acculturation, incorporating a cross-cultural dynamic, preserving a particular literary heritage in a new location.

Opsomming

Die digkuns van die Litouwe Jiddisse digter, David Fram, maak 'n belangrike bydrae tot die verstaan van 'n enkele immigrant se hervestiging in 'n spesifieke tyd en plek. Deur middel van 'n ryk versameling van herinneringe aan die bekende ou land, omvat die gedigte die aard van die Joodse migrasie uit Oos-Europa. Aangesien die uitwerking van migrasie egter ongelukkig kontemporêr bly, sowel in Suid-Afrika as in 'n breër wêreldwye arena, berus hierdie artikel op die gedigte se voortgesette relevansie, waar die spesifieke gebruik kan word om verreikende insigte, wat verder gaan as 'n enkele digter se ervaring, aan te wend, en beklemtoon ook sekere uitkomstige en insigte van ontworteling en verplasing vir lede van 'n buitestaander- en minderheidsgemeenskap.

Jiddis het Fram se taalkundige tuisland gebly, waarin hy die rykdom van sy kultuur kon behou en sy antwoorde op sy nuwe omgewing opteken. Met verwysing na my Engelse vertalings van spesifieke gedigte, besin die artikel oor die uitdagings van oorgang en akkulturasie, wat 'n kruiskulturele dinamika insluit, wat 'n spesifieke literêre erfenis op 'n nuwe plek behou.

From the Outside Looking In: The Yiddish Poetry of the Lithuanian South African Poet David Fram (1903-1988)

The poetry of the Lithuanian Yiddish poet, David Fram, makes a significant contribution to the understanding of a single immigrant's relocation in a specific time and place. In doing so, the poems encompass the nature of Jewish migration from Eastern Europe. Highlighting some outcomes of uprooting and displacement for a minority community in an alien space, they also extend our understanding of the impact of migration more generally. As these effects remain sadly contemporary, both in South Africa and globally, this article argues for the poems' continuing relevance, where they may offer leverage for far-reaching scholarly insights beyond a single poet's experience.

Fram's physical displacement notwithstanding, Yiddish remained his linguistic homeland; although far from his place of birth, this allowed him to retain the richness of his culture, recover and memorialise the world of the shtetl,¹ and also record his personal responses to his new environment. With reference to my English translations of specific poems, the article encapsulates the conflict between the culture of origin and acculturation, while also reflecting the challenges of transition. Incorporating a cross-cultural dynamic, the poems provide a valuable space for the preservation of a particular literary heritage, a record of a world left behind and of the challenges and enrichment of a new location. Fram's continuing commitment to his Jewish identity, and his responses to the people he subsequently encountered in South Africa are emphasised in "Nokh vos zol ikh forn?" ("Why should I leave?") (c), "Fun tatemames Yidishe" ("From Jewish parents") (b), "Ikh bin a Yid" ("I am a Jew") (g), "Tsu di shvartse" ("To the black man") (d), "Matutulu" ("Matatulu") (e), and "Dimantn" ("Diamonds") (f).

Fram was born in the shtetl of Ponevezh, Lithuania in 1903. Together with many other Jewish families who lived in the Pale of Settlement, his family was expelled to Samara, White Russia at the start of World War I by the Czar Nicholas II "for security reasons" (Sherman 2007: 2). There, Fram received a traditional Jewish *cheder* education. In addition, he studied with private tutors, unusual for a boy of his background. He matriculated at a Russian Soviet workers' school in 1921 and then attended the military academy in Ukmerge,² Lithuania, where he boarded with Yudl Mark, a linguist and educator who became his tutor and mentor. In 1926, Fram spent three months in Toulouse, France, at an agricultural college, before returning home. Thus, when he left Lithuania in 1927 to join an uncle in South Africa, it was not his first move away from his place of birth. His responses to the loss of his traditional way of life and his family, and his subsequent responses to aspects

1. Small market town.

2. Wilkomir.

of the new and unfamiliar environment in which he found himself influenced the content and attitudes expressed in his poems.

The poem “Nokh vos zol ikh forn?” (“For What Shall I Go?”) (*Lider* 24) (1930) (c), written soon after Fram’s arrival in South Africa, evokes feelings of unsettlement and dislocation, the “chronic homelessness” (Shreiber 1998: 274) of the new immigrant:

Nokh vos zol ikh forn, un vu zol ikh forn,
Az s’zaynen farkirtst mayne vegn gevorn,
Az s’zaynen gevorn farshnitn di vaytn,
Un kh’veys nisht oyf vos kh’veil mayn elnt tsebaytn.

Why should I leave and where shall I go
When my options are few,
And places are limited?
I don’t know what I’ll get in place of my loneliness.

(1-4)

Having recently arrived in a new country, the narrator feels lost and alone, even though he would have been part of an immigrant community consisting of other *landsleyt*, countrymen, from Ponevyzs and environs, with similar outlook and memories. As a result, he considers moving again, in the hope that this may bring with it the possibility that “s’vet nokh a shprits ton mit freyd a baginen” / “there’ll still be a spray of joy at dawn” (5), yet he cannot help but foresee that he would meet with the same obstacles as he now faces once more, “Un efsher vet merer un shtarker nokh vey ton / In fremde merkhokim un leydike breytzn?” / “And perhaps it’ll hurt more and ever more strongly in distant places and empty spaces?” (7-8). No matter the location, there would be the same difficulties for one who does not belong:

Ikh veys, ikh vel keyn zakh nisht kenen farmaydn,
Un umetum vartn di zelibike laydn.
Ikh veys es, avade, nishto vos tsu gloybn,
Un vandern vider mit trukene shtoybn.

I know there is nothing I’ll be able to prevent,
And everywhere there awaits the same suffering.
I know this for sure, there’s nothing to believe in,
But to carry on wandering with the dry dust.

(9-12)

Whereas, within his community at home he had support and comfort, hope and friendship, away from it there is no possibility of these. Instead, all he sees ahead is “trukene shtoybn” / “dry dust” (12), which differentiates the African environment from the wet and muddy ways of Eastern Europe. There is “nishto vos tsu gloybn” / “nothing to believe in” (11), as he wanders

“tunkele vegn” / “dark roads” (13), with “Nishto vu tsu geyn un bay vemen tsu fregn” / “Nowhere to go and no one to ask” (14). Fram’s descriptions emphasise outcomes of “rootlessness, nomadism and dispersal” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett & Karp 2008: 7), where moving away from the familiarity of home also involves the impact of loneliness and loss, often becoming unbearable. Relocation is thus as much a psychological as a geographical adjustment, where memories come to replace the physical comfort of place.

“Nokh vos zol ikh forn” is a cry of anguish that elicits no reply, in which the poet wrestles with the existential question of the meaning of life and mankind’s ultimate exile, encompassing not only his own personal travail, but the total destruction of Jewish life in *di alte heym*, its community, language and culture. This approach differs from that of the contemporaneous poems “Mayn mame hot mir tsugeshikt a kishn” (“My mother sent me a cushion”) and “Mayn opfor” (“My departure”), in which concrete objects are enlisted to represent the poet’s loss of place and family, in the first a cushion his mother sent him, and in the second a shirt his sister sewed on his departure, attempting to maintain the threads of connection.

The title of the poem “Fun tatemames Yidishe”³ (“From Jewish parents”) (*Lider* 77) (1939) (b), infers not only the immediate influence of mother and father, but also the broader cultural influence of forbears in general. The poem’s dedication to, “Di kinderlekh fun der ershter Yidisher folkshul in Yohanesburg, geheylikt,” that is, to the children who attended the first *Yidish Folkshul* (Yiddish Folk School) in Johannesburg, serves to link the past to the present and the future. Its subject matter is the importance of the continuing survival of tradition as well as the use of Yiddish so as to ensure their survival for future generations. There, the poet was delighted to find children singing in Yiddish and doing traditional dances, his own continued use of Yiddish indicating how he continues to fully embrace the language and culture even though those around him have discarded it. Although still preoccupied with the old ways, there can be no possibility of return.

Written thirteen years after Fram left his birthplace, it reflects on the importance of heritage for the community and expresses regret at its dissipation. As part of an extensive body of nostalgic literature in many cultures, the poem also offers specific details of a particular society’s reception and abandonment of customs and tradition. The first quatrain of the poem describes the parents as being ashamed or embarrassed by Yiddish and

3. The words *Yidishe* and *Yidishkayt* need to be understood in terms of the use of the Yiddish language as the “national” language of the Jewish people, of Jewish culture and socialism. *Yidishkayt* in the religious sense means “Jewish learning, observance, *mitsves*, *kashres*, *shul*, but in the worldly sense it means secular Jewish nationalism” (Ginsberg e-mail 23 Sept. 2011). Thus, for Fram, as for many immigrants, “*Yidishkayt* was a Yiddish-based, non-observant Jewishness – the treasure of European Jewish life ... [and] a product of the Diaspora” (Klepfisz qtd. in Shreiber 1998: 277).

their alienation from *Yidishkayt*. Notwithstanding their negative attitude, the “fayer heyliker” / “holy fire” (4) continues to burn for the next generation. The poem’s traditional form, regular metre and rhythm follow those of the conventional folk ballad, with four verses of four lines and a scheme of full and half rhyme:

Ir hot in Yidish poshetn tsezungn ayer freyd,
Zikh gleybike, tsefridene in karahod gedreyt,
Un s’hot geklungn kishfedik dos kindishe gezang,
Nokh vos ikh hob an elter gebenkt vi ir fun lang

(5-8)

You sang out your joy in simple Yiddish,
And faithfully in contentment twirled the circle dance,
And the childlike singing rang out enchantingly,
For which I had forlornly longed for ages

The traditional rhythm and language emphasise the theme of the poem, the importance of traditional Jewish values:

Ikh hob gebenkt an elter, un dokh hob ikh gevust,
Az s’tsaplt zikh a heylikayt bay yedern in Brust:
– Dos Yidish, vos es zaftikt zikh oyf lipelekh bakheynt –
Fun vos me hot aykh, kinderlekh, fun kindvayz on antveynt.

(9-12)

I have longed forlornly, and yet have I known,
That a holiness quivers in each and every breast:
– That Yiddish, so smooth on charming little lips –
From which they weaned you, children, away in infancy.

Fram adopted the opposite stance to those Jewish immigrants who had become estranged from the old ways, “Fun tatemames Yidishe, vos hobn zikh geshemt / Mit Yidish un mit Yidishkayt geven azoy farfremdt” / “From Jewish parents so embarrassed / By Yiddish and were so estranged from *Yidishkayt*” (1-2). Instead, he delights in seeing the children continue the old traditions: “Ir hot in Yidish poshetn tsezungn ayer freyd, Zikh gleybike, tsefridene in karahod gedreyt” / “You sang out your joy in simple Yiddish, / And faithfully in contentment twirled the circle dance” (5-6). This kindles a flame in them and the importance of continuity, “Un s’hot a fayer heyliker in hartsn zikh tsebrent” / “And a holy flame flared up in their hearts” (4), an image which is repeated in “Az s’tsaplt zikh a heylikayt bay yedern in Brust” / “That a holiness quivers in each and every breast” (10). The children’s innocent enjoyment echoes his own longing “Nokh vos ikh hob an elter gebenkt vi ir fun lang” / “For which I had forlornly longed for ages” (8), for *Yidishkayt* as it emerges “oyf lipelekh bakheynt” / “on charming little lips” (11), and how

it nurtures them, even though they had been deprived of it by their parents, because fortunately “Piyonern hobn oysgeleygt far aykh a heln veg” / “Pioneers have set out a clear path for you” (13).

The poet shares the children’s pleasure in the traditions; they enjoy the days of festivity and “Dan hot mayn simkhe oyfgebroyzt mit ayerer tsu glaykh” / “Then did my joy well up with yours together” (15) because “Az voyl iz mir, kinderlekh, tzu freyen zikh mit aykh!” / “How happy I am, children, to rejoice along with you!” (16). Fram had a religious education, and so uses language from that context in this secular poem. This adds an additional depth of reference to terms such as “fayer heyliker”, “gleybike”, “heylikayt” and “yomtovdiker”. Rather than referring to holiness, sanctity, religious belief or dogma, they suggest a different value system, but one no less significant. Fram here puts forward his view of the importance and value of the continued use of Yiddish – as the children joyfully sing songs, they give hope to the adults who want to keep the language alive.

Although the poem “Ikh bin a Yid” (“I am a Jew”) (*Dorem Afrike* 1971 23) (g), was written many years after Fram had moved to South Africa, it affirms the outlook expressed in “Nokh vos zol ikh forn” and “In tatemames Yidishe”. Although the poet creates a fictionalised “I”, the poem confirms the poet’s ongoing commitment to his traditions and culture. In addition, through references to the holy books, it also connects him to the biblical forefathers, Joseph and Moses, as well as to his own *zeyde*, his grandfather, whom he regards with equal reverence:

Ikh bin a Yid, a Yid fun khumesh un tanekh.
 Es rint in mir dos alte blut fun Yosefn un Moshe’n.
 Es rint in mir an eydelkayt fun mayn sprach,
 Un nokh a melekh Yidishn mayn zeyde hot geheysn.

I am a Jew, a Jew of *Chumash* and *Tanach*
 And in me flows the old blood of Joseph and Moses
 There flows in me the honour of my language,
 And another king of Yiddish was my grandfather.

(1-4)

The references to the *khumesh*⁴ and *tanekh*⁵ (1) imply Fram’s connection to and knowledge of these traditional religious tracts, but they do not necessarily indicate that he was religiously observant. Here, their meaning is derived from their context, which is purely secular. More important to the poet is the retention of Yiddish, even though this would have separated him from the local English and Afrikaans speakers, as well as the indigenous black peoples

4. Hebrew for the Pentateuch, the Bible.

5. Canonical Hebrew texts.

who spoke Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho inter alia. However, other immigrants did acculturate, and where “needs were not met by their own system, [they] borrow[ed] models, structures and options from the established, highly visible adjacent cultural and/or language systems” (Omer-Sherman 2002: 268). Thus, they acquired the language in order to function in their new country; many also changed their surnames to ones that blended in, and adapted to the surrounding cultures.

Fram’s use of the first person singular in “Tsu di shvartse” (“To the black man”) (d) focuses the poem on his own experiences as he addresses the other man directly, “Hot keyn moyre un antloyft nisht fun mir, shvartse” / “Don’t be afraid or run away from me, black man” (1-2) and “S’klemt a vey oykh vi bay aykh bay mir in hartsn” / “There is a choking in my heart as there is in yours” (3). Written soon after Fram arrived in Africa, the poem describes the futility of the black man’s wanderings, his hunger and loneliness, as well as his exotic physical difference and sculpted strength, “Ayer Brust azoy geshmidt, vi fun tshugon?” / “Your breast was smelted like cast iron?” (12). Although the poet hopes to befriend him, he recognises the other’s hesitation, “Nisht dershrekt zikh far dem bleykh fun mayn gezikht.” / “Do not be afraid of the paleness of my face” (2): despite their physical differences, they are also alike as they both bleed when stabbed or cut: “Un ven emetser zol ayer layb tsheshnaydn / Oykh fun shvartser hoyt a rizl ton fun blut!” / “And when someone cuts your body / Also from black skin red blood will trickle!” (19-20).

In addition, the two have a similar moral outlook: “Un oykh ir farshteyt, vos shlekht iz un vos gut” / “And you too understand, what bad is and what good” (18), and so the poet recognises the kinship between them, “Ikh farshtey aykh, un ikh trog mit aykh tsuzamen / Ayer freyd un ayer shvaygendike peyn” / “I understand you and I carry with me like you / Your happiness and silent pain” (5-6), a theme that is intensified between the first and final stanzas. Where the first verse states “Un ir trogt in zikh vi mir di zelbe laydn / Un ikh vart azoy vi ir oyf ayer likht” / “And you carry like me the same suffering / And I too am waiting for His light” (4), the lines appear in the last verse with one alteration, “unzer likht” (36), becomes “ayer likht”, that is, “His light” becomes “our light”. Thus, they are both hopeful that their difficult circumstances will change and relief will come for them both.

Fram’s humanism and empathy for the victim mirrors his own difficulties as a *smous*⁶ when he first arrived in Africa, Fram “identifying with the blacks as an oppressed people” (Davis 1988: 46) and his protagonist representing “humanity persevering through overwhelming hardships” (46). The poet’s outlook is also apparent in the long narrative “Matatulu” (1983) (89-92) (e). At the outset, Matatulu is described as a “mentsh” (1), literally “a man,” but, more importantly, also a Yiddish epithet that connotes decency. Repeated

6. Itinerant peddler; travelling salesman.

reference is made to his physical beauty: “Zayn kerper naketer iz glantsik, fet un shveys / Bashmirt mit reynem oyl fun shmekedike flantsn” / “His naked body shone with fat and sweat / Smearred with pure oil from aromatic plants” (10-11), and his sense of well-being is highlighted, “Ho, gezunter, yunger, shtarker Matatulu!” / “Ho, healthy, young and strong Matatulu!” (109).

Matatulu is hardworking with “dem koakh funem oks, di flinkayt fun zhiraf” / “the strength of an ox, the agility of a giraffe” (17), with the power of “der odler, di pantere” / “eagle and the panther” (45), comparisons that emphasise his animal innocence and lifestyle of freedom in the wild. Matatulu relishes the warmth of the sun, “vi gut, vi varem s’iz di groyse zun” / “how good, how warm is the great sun” (9), and because of his contentment, “Zayn ponim iz bagosn mit a breytn shmeykh” / “His face is filled with a broad smile” (20). Living there, “Er bedarf do gornisht inem bush; keyn shikh, keyn kleyd, / Zayn beged iz di fel fun a shakal. / Zayn hoyz – on dort der erdisher rondavel” / “In the bush, he needs nothing more, neither shoes or clothes; / He covers himself with the skin of a jackal. / His house is a mud *rondavel*” (23-25). In addition, he is also an assured hunter, which is considered manly in the tradition of his own culture: “Ven er yogt nokh mit ‘asegay’ un blankn shpiz / A tsiterdikn hirsh, vos falt farblutikt in di derner” / “When he chases with his *assegai* and shiny spear / A quivering deer falls bloody to the ground” (52-53). And then “Ho, s’iz groys di freyd – a shprung, a tsi, a ris, / Er heybt di khaye oyf bagaystert far di herner / Un shlept zi inem kral arayn dan vi a gvar” / “How great is the joy – a spring, a twist, a turn, / He grabs the animal by its horns / And drags it to his *kraal*, like a strong man” (53-55).

The use of the word “gvar” connects him with Fram’s grandfather in the poem, “Baym zeydn” (7). Like him, Matatulu is connected to, and an extension of, the land itself, “Er hot zikh oysgerut in bush-feld vi der boym” / “He rested in the *bushveld* like the tree” (71). And it is there that he has a complete sense of himself, “Ho, er ken zikh gut, der shtarker Matatulu” / “Ho, he knows himself well, the powerful Matatulu” (57). However, the scene of the hunt presages what is to come, when Matatulu, once the hunter himself becomes the hunted, the white man’s prey.

All is well for Matatulu until he longs for a wife; “Ayede khaye in dzhungl, veys er, hot zayn por, / Es hot di shlang afile zikh gefunen do a vayb” / “Every animal in the jungle has his pair. / Even the snake has his wife” (79-80). To fulfil this need, Matatulu must pay *lobola*, in this case, fourteen oxen, to his future father-in-law. To do so, “Er loyft bagaystert tzu yener groyser shtot / Fun vos er hot azoy fil vunder shoyn gehert” / “He runs enthusiastically to the big city / Where he heard there were many wondrous things” (100-101). He then decides “nisht lebn merer punkt vi der volf fun royb” / “to live like a wolf from prey no longer” (106) and so he abandons jackal skins and bare feet, and instead, “trogt shoyn hoyzn mit a hemd, mit zokn, / Un vestlekh hot er azoy fil, un shvere unbakveme shikh” / “wears trousers with a shirt, with socks, / And he also had many vests, and heavy uncomfortable shoes” (117-118). The

change in his attire intimate the changes that occur within himself, and what he loses as a result, “In shtot hot Matatulu, mit der tsayt, gebitn zikh ingantsn / Der bush, di vayte stepes oysgeleygte zunike un fraye, / Dort vet er shoyn far di levones merer zayne tents nisht tantsn” / “In the city, in time, Matatulu changed completely, / [Away from] the bush, the wild plains, spread out in sunny freedom, / There where he will never again dance under the moon” (110-112).

Whereas when he lived in the wild, Matatulu was the epitome of nobility, like the eagle and panther, ox and giraffe, now his white boss treats him like a mere “khaye,” a lowly “animal” (1, 12, 114, 216), a beast, a “hunt,” a “dog” (116). Once in the city, “Zayn modne arbet vaybershe gefalt im azoy shver” / “He has to do womanly work which he finds very hard” (121). Matatulu’s white employers “veysn zey den nisht, az s’iz zayn yikhus groys” / “remain unaware of his great honour” (133) amongst his own people, where he “kon zey zikher keynem nisht farshteyn” / “cannot understand anyone” (137). So he loses his identity and sense of himself: “Er ken aley n zikh poshet nit derkenen ver er iz” / “He himself does not know who he is” (122), and instead “dremelt ayn farbenkter nokh zayn kral” / “dreams with longing of his *kraal*” (155), and “tulyet zikh atsind tsu zikh aley n fun shrek vi a faryogte khaye” / “comforts himself alone in fear like a pursued animal” (113). Thus the poem makes use of animal imagery, first to show his power and self-sufficiency when he is in his own, known environment, respected by his community, and in touch with his natural surroundings, then later to indicate his fall from grace, as an outsider in an alien environment.

The description “Dervayl hot shoyn di zun zikh ayngetunkt in blut” / “In the meanwhile the sun is dipped in blood” (187) is a portent of what is to come, echoing the bloody death of the deer earlier in the poem. As “Matatulu shtelt zikh op nokh oyf a vayle in ‘lokeyshn” / “Matatulu spends time in the location”⁷(193), the police patrol for offenders. Matatulu hears a voice in the dark, “Vu flistu, tayvl eyner? ... shtey, dayn ‘speshl” / “Where are you going, you devil? ... wait, your ‘special”⁸ (209). As he makes a run for it, “Men nemt im vi a vilde khaye iber ale gasn yog n” / “They chase him through the streets as if he were a wild animal” (216). Whereas he used to hunt deer for his beloved near his *kraal*, now instead, “In finsternish a fayerdiker shos ... / S’iz Matatulu oyf der erd glaykh vi a leyb gefaln / Un bislekhvayz es gist zikh oys fun im zayn blutiker fardros ...” / “In the darkness a shot rings out. / Matatulu’s body falls to the ground / And slowly his bloody sorrow pours out ...” (218-220). Once healthy, strong and youthful, all that remains of Matatulu is “Der letster tsapl mit zayn toyter fus” / “The one last tap with his dead foot” (224). Having lost his innocence, the only way out for him is death. The poet’s

7. Official, separate black informal settlements, in this case probably either Alexandra or Soweto townships.

8. His special paper, i.e. his “pass” allowing him free movement.

empathy for and choice to place black men at the centre of these narratives was innovative. By using descriptors from Zulu, “lobola” “asegay”, Afrikaans, “mili-pap”, “kraal,” and English “missis”, “location,” and “pass” in the Yiddish narrative, the poet emphasises cultural and racial differences.

In the 1940s, Fram became a diamond dealer (Sherman a), and his personal involvement in the trade gave him a unique vantage point that is reflected in the poem “Dimantn”, (*Dorem Afrike* 1953: 17-18) (f).⁹ In addition, the poem highlights the effects of the official apartheid policy, introduced by the government in 1948, where blacks and whites were segregated and their roles in the workplace clearly defined. As an immigrant and outsider, the poet would have been well aware of the implications and impact of these.

A narrative ballad in the tradition of earlier Yiddish poetry written in Europe, “Dimantn” is similar in its yearning tone, with references to his family and in the use of the first personal singular to the shorter lyrics, “Mayn mame hot mit tsugeshikt a kishn” (“My mother sent me a cushion”) (1931) and “Mayn opfor” (“My departure”) (1931). It is a dramatic monologue in which the protagonist speaks to his daughter. He is referred to as “your dad” / “dayn tate” (187), the listener designated “my child” / “mayn kind” (1). The poem refers to the diamonds, as well as issues of corruption and envy in the industry, which the narrator describes to his daughter as he shows her the diamonds, the “brilyantn” / “brilliantn” (1) and tries to convince her of the solace they can bring “Far mide neshomes, – neshomes vi mayne” / “to old souls such as mine” (25), and to “Neshomes fartrakhte un yunge vi dayne” / “Young and thoughtful souls like yours” (26). He goes on to suggest how they may seem to offer a fulfilling life, “Vos zukhn un benkn, un filn, un lekhtstn / Neshomes farfulte mit veytog un krekhtstn, / Vos veynen in velt vi der elnter vint. / Neshomes fun mentshn, vos lebn vi hint” / “For those who seek, filled with longing and pain, and who cry out in the world like the lonely wind, living like dogs” (27-30). Yet, in spite of their bright beauty and the attraction the diamonds hold for him, he admits that they “frien / In eygenem fayer” / “freeze / in their own gleams” (20-21), indicating his own bitterness and disillusionment in what is in fact a soulless enterprise.

The poet describes how, “Brilyantn – far dir kh’hob, mayn kind, zey gezukht” / “Diamonds – for you my child I sought them” (30), so that “Du vest vi ale zey tsiterik libn” / “You would love their shimmering light as everyone else does” (34). The tone is coaxing as he tells her of the lengths to which he went in order to gather them for her, “Ikh hob nor in dimantn finster gegloybt, / Far zey hob ikh shtil vi a betler geknit / Un oftmol afile dem tayvl gelaybt” / “I believed in the power of the diamonds / For them I kneeled quietly like a beggar / And often even praised the devil” (36-38). Now,

9. The original was whittled down from 200 to 135 lines. Numerous versions and translations may be located in the Fram Archives, University of Austin, Texas, pp. 407-411. It also forms part of his collection, *A shvalb oyfn dakh*.

holding them “gevart in buzem” / “warm to my breast” (47), “gevisht un sortirt / In tsimer bay shverer, farshlosener tir, / Mit finger fartstiter” / “washed and sorted / In a room behind heavy closed doors / With shaking fingers” (48-50). Involved in the physical process of sorting and cleaning them, he has become obsessed with them, “Mayn lebn fun zey hob ikh bloyz nor getrakht, / Ikh hob fun di shteyner gekholmt baynakht” / “I cannot think of a life without them, / I dreamt about them at night” (52-54). The expression of these passionate emotions may be read as the poet’s personal response to and involvement with the stones, and also serves as a contrast to his lack of any meaningful relationship with his daughter.

He acknowledges how his nature has been changed by the diamonds and how he has become like them, “Flegt shtendik mayn harts vern harter un harter” / “My heart has hardened” (63), and “Biz ikh hob derfildt durkh tsendlinger yorn, / Az ikh bin gevorn ingantsn farshteynert” / “with the passing of the years / Has become like stone” (68-70); “Di dimantn hob ikh nor kalte geklibn / Un durkh zeyer fayer farfromn gevorn” / “I chose diamonds even though they are cold / And I have become frozen in their fire” (91-92). Despite his attraction to them, his “oytsres” / “treasure” (72), that became “heylik” / “holy” (73) in his eyes, he also now recognises the negative outcomes as he finds himself “elnt in velt kh’bin farblibn aleyn nor” / “alone in the world” (70).

That he has been degraded by the trade is shown by his description of the corrupt nature of the people he has encountered in the trade, “vayber fun tunkele zate haremen” / “women from dark harems” (166), “dames fun raykhe salonen” / “women from rich salons” (168), as well as “hurn in nakht oysgelasn” / “naked whores of the night” (169). With these qualities, the people are not unlike the stones, “Zey hobn gekoyft un farkoyft di brilyantn, / Gehandlt, geshvindelt, geyogt” / “As stones are sold and resold, they are / Handled, swindled, chased” (142-143). Impure themselves, the clients demean him too, as they “Gekukt zey farsklaft vi a hunt in di oygn” / “all look [him] in the eyes as if [he] were a dog” (173). None of them can see past the shimmer of the stones, “Far zey hot er hel vi a shtern geblitst, / Un azh fun der zun hot er heyser gebrent / In zeyere karge, farfroyrene hent” / “And for them they shine more brightly than stars / As if to hold the sun that burned so hot in their greedy, frozen hands” (102-104), so that “Bay alemen flegn di oygn tseflamen” / “Everyone’s eyes flamed” (122), and “Flegt blaybn farshteynert, farklemt un farglivert” / “They stood like stone, speechless and numb” (125). Devious and underhand, in a world where people cheat each other to get the best deal, he becomes their accomplice because, “In zeyere simches hob ikh zikh bateylikt, / Geven a farmitler fun ganeyve un mordn” / “I attend their festivities and take part in their thefts and murders” (174-175). He also recognises how the natural world mirrors his feelings: “Der vint oyf farlozene, elnte pleynen / Far mir flegt keseyder dan veynen un veynen” / “The elements too echo my pain, / and the wind too cries and cries” (79-81).

Knowing this from personal experience, he tries to communicate his sentiments and responses to his daughter as he proffers his gift, “Ikh hob vi a mentsh nisht gekont merer lakhen, / Ikh hob nisht gekont merer gloybn un libn / Di ale gefiln kh’hob lang sheyn farlorn” / “I could not laugh like everyone else / I could no longer believe or love. / I have lost all feeling” (88-90).

His daughter’s response is clear as she casts away the stones, “Un haynt, ven far dir kh’hob gebrakht mayn farmegn, / Hostu im tsheshmishn in harbstikn regn” / “Today, when I brought you the diamonds, / You threw them into the autumn rain” (178-179). Unlike him they hold know attraction for her, “Du vest mit di dimantn mayne zikh shemen, / Zikh shemen far mentshn, vos laydn un gloybn / In libe un sheynkayt” / “You are ashamed to have my diamonds / Ashamed for people who suffer, and believe / In love and beauty” (191-193). He becomes aware of the fact that, unlike himself, she has retained her purity and belief in moral values, and so “inem harbst bin ikh umetik eyner / Geblibn aleybn mit di tayere steiner” / “in autumn I am alone and empty / Remaining alone with the valuable stones” (186-187). This highlights the extreme contrast between the closeness and family warmth he experienced in his shtetl.

The description of the stones’ brightness provides a contrast with the blackness from which they are gathered, intimating their potential for corruption, “Zey zaynen far mir in a finsterer sho / Bashafn geven durkh hent umbavuste / Durkh leydike teg un durkh oventn puste” / “They were collected for me in a dark hour / Mined by unknown hands / Through empty days and hollow nights” (2-4). The description of the miners’ travail also resonates with the poet’s social conscience, “Un hobn keynmol nisht bamerkt vi gelitn / Arum hobn mentshn fun hunger geshvoln” / “And no one notices how to attain them, others suffer, swollen from hunger” (155-156), empathy arising from his own suffering in Lithuania.

The image of darkness also foreshadows that which besets those whom the diamonds hold in their thrall. While the poem reiterates descriptions of the beauty of the stones in “Un itst zeyer glants, zeyer kalter” / “And here their gleam, their purity” (8), and “Der glants fun brilyantn, di fayerelkhe grine, / Di fayerlekh royte, di gele, di bloye” / “The gleam of diamonds, the fiery green, / The fiery red, the yellow, the blue” (14-15), this also serves as a contrast to their coldness, “Mit kalkayt fun toyter, fargliverte kelt” / “With coldness of death, glazed cold” (11), and “Dan zestu di dimantn kalt, vi zey friren / In eygenem fayer” / “You see, the cold diamonds how they freeze / In their own fire” (20-21), building up to the seeming-contradiction where the diamonds become both “farsholtene” and “klore,” accursed and pure, and where the impact of his own greed for possession of their beauty destroys his humanity, but not his daughter’s,

JLS/TLW

Bist raykher avade, mayn kind, fun dayn tatn,
Fun yene farsholtene, klore karatn

(200-205)

You are nevertheless richer, my child, than your father,
From those accursed, clear stones.

Thus his relationship with his daughter is sacrificed in a land far off, where he is forced to earn a living in reprehensible ways, whereas his longing for and commitment to the old ways manifests in poems such as ‘Fun tatemames Yidishe’ and “Ikh bin a Yid”. The poem reflects a critique of the particular South African way of life of black miners working for their white overseers, with no hope of reaping any benefit other than their daily wages. This lifestyle, as is that of Matatulu, would have been unknown to the poet before he arrived in Africa.

Not wishing to negate his own ethnicity and the richness of his original culture, Fram worked to maintain its cohesion in a new environment with alien customs. The contradictions between the two, the inevitable outcome of migration as evoked in his poems, provide the focus of this article, encapsulating the conflicts of the outsider. From these twin sources, Fram produced poems that highlight the soft, flat landscape, pale blue and grey skies and whiteness of snow in Lithuania, and also those that focus on the South African plains lit by the heat of the sun. As he contended with the states of belonging and not belonging, with the tensions between the need for continuation of tradition and modernity, between identification with the community of origin and assimilation, between the preservation of original culture and adapting to the new, his poems affirmed a Jewish minority literature within that of a dominant culture. His Lithuanian Jewish identity played a major role in his work in a foreign environment as memories of home stirred his imagination, much like the abrasion caused by the nacre inside the oyster shell creating the pearl.

Rooted in his culture and rituals, Fram occupied a literary space, where as a Jewish writer he could tell Jewish stories to his own Yiddish reading *landsleyt*. In addition, given their references to immigration and relocation, they may also resonate for other communities. Fram never returned to Lithuania, but its memory played itself out in his poems written long after he had left. In so doing, they highlight the issues of “displacement and foreignness ... a tale of immigration, intercultural relationships, and searching for home ... with journeying, with travel ... with upheaval and uncertainty ... and ambivalence” (Zemel qtd. in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2008: 177). Ultimately, Fram’s poems incorporate “two worlds ... the world he brought with him and the new, wild and beautiful African world around him” (Ravitch 1932: 403), the paradoxes of old and new, Lithuania and South Africa.

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