

Yossel Birstein's Melbourne Years by Andrew Firestone (revised, 2008).

I. The old country; and a tale of three Yossels.

Why Australia? Why Melbourne? According to Yossel the Israeli storyteller (in his 1989 story "A Ganef") it was a case of chain migration... and the first to come, from their little Polish town of Biala Podlaska, was a thief, who had to leave in a hurry.

Before *he* left for Australia, our Yossel Birstein (24.9.1920 – 28.12.2003), a leader in the Zionist scout organization Hashomer Hatzair, visited all his friends in the movement in the vicinity to say goodbye. It was winter, early 1937, and he was 16 years old. His family was too poor to send him to Palestine, and his mother's father **Chaim Jurberg** had sent the fifty pound boat ticket for Australia from Melbourne.¹

Chaim (1872 – 11.9.1949) was a restless wanderer, not religious like his wife Sarah (1875 – 1962). A master tailor, he could earn a living for his family anywhere. He would send money home, and his wife and family lived comfortably. He was a storyteller – as was his daughter Malke, (b.1900) Yossel's mother, (one of 9 children), as well. Though he spoke only Yiddish, and a little Russian, Chaim had been to England and France; twice from Poland to USA and back; and recently, to Australia and back – but this last time, he had told Sarah he was returning to Melbourne to stay. So in 1934 she left with him for Melbourne, together with their eldest daughter Gittel and her husband Yakov Friedman, and their children, Yossel Froyke (Frank) and Feyge.

Yossel Birstein was the eldest of four children. He left for Australia with his parents' blessing, and two years later, thanks to his and his grandfather's earnings, his sister Reyzl (Rose, eighteen months younger) followed in 1938. Their parents with the two younger children, Hana and Yankel, would perish, together with nearly 7,000 other Jews – almost the entire Jewish population of their town of Biala Podlaska. This town, known in Yiddish as *Biale d'Lite*, numbered then only 10,000 in total. Biala is situated between Bialystok and Lublin, 150km to the east of Warsaw. Though it is now close to the border of Byelorussia, at that time it was in the centre of Poland.

Rose says that it had been intended that each child in turn would come to Melbourne, followed at last by the parents. For work was scarce in Biala, especially for Jews. When Reyzl was 12 her mother hid her in a cupboard whilst farmers in a pogrom tore through the apartment below. Her mother wanted her to live where a woman could work in her own right, doing more

¹ see Y.B.'s own account, pp.166-7, in the (Hebrew language) book "A hundred Aliyah stories" ed. Eli Wolecki, Ministry of Defence, Israel (1987), from which come the first two photos in our "Picture Gallery"; and conversation with sister **Rose Stone**, Melbourne 16.10.2007. Quotation marks enclosing speech, throughout this article, refer to this interview.

than childbearing. The family saw emigration as primarily economic – but how much of life can that one word encompass!

Yossel's parents were "progressive" yet he had attended a conventional Cheder.² But in addition, from 5 to 7 years, he (and later Reyzl) attended a private Yiddish class, held on the floor of a man's home. "Our parents' gift was the learning of Yiddish – our culture" Rose told me. The Yiddish newspaper from Bialystok was in the Birstein home, and Biala's Yiddish lending library was an important part of the children's lives.

Then came Polish school - compulsory from 7 to 14 years. Boys and girls attended separate schools; Rose recalls that the Jewish children – about a third – sat to the back of the class. Every week a Jewish man would come and teach them religion.

In Biala Middle School, only membership of the Polish Scouts was allowed – but Jews couldn't join. Like Yossel, Reyzl belonged to Hashomer Hatzair, and she remembers crouching on the street once, in uniform, to avoid being seen by a passing teacher. The organization provided many of the excitements in her provincial life. There were camps for both sexes together!

Yossel had been a terrible Middle School student. He was "little Yossel", short and wiry with glasses. He and "**Big Yossel**" his Friedman cousin (Gittel's son, 18 months older) would compete for the lowest marks. Our Yossel won, and at 12, after failing at school, he departed, to work with his father Noakh Naftali (see Picture Gallery). In those days High School commenced at 14y in Poland. But it was out of reach of the Birstein children – another economic matter.

Noakh was a *kameshn-makher* and a *shteper*, a shoe-stitcher - a specialist among shoemakers. His workshop was in their home.

Now in 1937 came the big farewell, at the Biala railway station... and many weeks en route, until, boarding the liner "Commissaire Ramel" in Marseilles, our Yossel met another Yosl the same age, also travelling alone to family in Melbourne. **Yosl Bergner** quickly became and remained a firm friend, and he would project our Yossel into the centre of Yiddish Melbourne's creative, and bohemian, life³. Yosl Bergner was a budding painter, whose father was a

² On the other hand Yossel, in a speech given soon after coming to Israel, described his father as a keeper of the Sabbath. A Yidisher Shrayber in Kibutz, pp 162-7, Di Goldene Keyt (1952), speech given at inaugural meeting of the literary group of Yiddish writers "Yung Yisroel", 26-27 Oct. 1951.

(In this speech Birstein makes some interesting remarks about the experience of writing Yiddish in Melbourne. Now in the kibbutz he is similarly surrounded by non-Yiddish speakers. He himself in Australia, he says, found secular Yidishkayt, relying entirely on the language Yiddish as the basis for Jewish existence, to be an illusion. He notes that by the time he began writing, Yiddish literature (with *Di Khalyastre*) had already made the journey away from God and simultaneously, the journey back.)

³ (*added, 2008*): In fact the two first met at age 16y in Warsaw at the HIAS office, while their respective mothers arranged their migration to Australia. They travelled the whole way together: by train from Warsaw to the Baltic port Gdynia; ship to Le Havre via London; train to Paris, where 6 weeks passed, awaiting arrival in Marseilles of the "Commissaire Ramel";

famous Yiddish poet known by his pen name of Melekh Ravich.⁴ There were other “Yiddish nation” boys travelling unaccompanied as well, (Sruli Silman, Moyshe Lipman, Max Gotlieb) and their friendships endured for years after. When the boat reached Sydney in July 1937, Yossel Birstein was not yet 17 years old⁵.

Yossel wasn't writing before he left Poland.⁶ But Rose remembers his letters arriving while she was still in Biala. “Mother was very proud of his writing, she raved about his letters, from the journey and from Melbourne”.

II. Lonely in Carlton

Yossel came to live in Melbourne with his grandparents, in Pigdon Street, North Carlton. Chaim worked from home and Sarah did some hand sewing as well. Yossel worked in a clothing factory, sewing pockets into coats. When Rose arrived she stayed with the Freedmans in nearby Garton Street, sharing Fay's room, and found work in a boot factory.

Yosl Bergner in his memoir (p.93) remembers Birstein learning English from Shakespeare's Collected Works - and saying to him when they met "Come hither!"

then nearly 6 months on board ship to Sydney. They travelled through the Panama Canal and Tahiti and in Fiji changed to a cargo boat, the "Pierre Loti". In Sydney they were met by Begner's father's friend Hirsh Muntz. (see the delightful memoir, hereafter referred to as 'Bergner memoir', *What I Meant to Say* by Yosl Bergner, (Hed Arzi, Israel 1997). I am grateful to Dr June Factor for bringing it to my attention.)

⁴ Yosl Bergner belonged to Melbourne's most creative Yiddish-speaking family. He was born 13.10.1920, i.e., he was almost exactly the same age as our Yossel. Bergner too married in Melbourne, and the Bergners emigrated to Israel around the same time as the Birsteins, to live in Safed 1950 -1957; and then in Tel Aviv to this day. Bergner is a highly regarded painter, in Israel and Australia – here he is noted to have portrayed, in the 1930's and 40's, the Australian Aborigine and the Polish Jew as sharing in Christ-like suffering.

Yosl Bergner was born in Vienna but was raised as a young child in his paternal grandparents' comfortable home in Redim, Galicia. He then attended a CYSHO (secular Yiddish) school in Warsaw – a city where his father Melekh Ravich had some fame, as the secretary of the Yiddish Writers' Union at Tlomackie 13. By 1936 though, Ravich had been living in Melbourne for several years. He wrote for its weekly newspaper, helped establish the Kadimah Cultural Centre, and was the founding Principal of Melbourne's Yiddish Sunday School.

Soon after the boys reached Melbourne, Ravich departed. According to OYN, 30.7.37 p.7, Ravich was just then leaving Melbourne on a YIVO mission to Chile –perhaps he delayed his departure. Leaving behind his wife, daughter Ruth (a fine modern dancer) and son behind, Ravich was making his way to Canada via South America. (Ravich's *Leksikon*, his sketches of other writers and artists, while graceful and often generous, is unreliable. He gives his son's arrival in Australia as 1938!)

Ravich's brother, twelve years his junior, Herz Bergner arrived in Melbourne exactly a year after the boys. He soon established himself as Australia's own Yiddish novelist, with a reputation in English translation as well.

⁵ Encyclopedia Judaica 2nd ed., 2007, vol.3, p.720: *Yossel Birstein*, by Anat Feinberg is useful in other respects - but his age at arrival is incorrect.

⁶ According to Rose. His own bibliography for the *Leksikon fun der nayer Yid Lit, 1956*, states that he began writing in 1937 and his first publication was a poem in *Oystr Yid Naves 1939* - which however, careful search has failed to uncover.

Friday nights, the family would come together around Gittel's table. It was a jolly home and their leftwing friends were welcomed there. Later on both "little Yossel" and his "big Yossel" cousin would make aliyah to a Kibbutz.

According to his sister Rose, Yossel was not known for low spirits. He did live in the bosom of close family here, and he had close friends. Yet his poetic persona is invariably sad and forlorn, and in Birstein's unpublished novel "Don't Call Me Job", the narrator talks of writing poetry in Melbourne in order to vent feelings of depression.⁷

So far as we know, prior to the news of the Biala extermination⁸ Yossel's own chief losses were: the absence of his parents and younger siblings – and importantly, of "Yiddishland" itself. We may speculate that he missed his mother painfully, and saw his poetry as a link to her love of language.

Unlike many writers, Yossel read voraciously, much of the time in Yiddish. (His 1937 studio photo in the **Picture Gallery**, taken before leaving Biala, tells it all). From the outset he was a regular user of the Yiddish book library at the *Kadimah* and attended the cultural activities there, especially of the *Gezerd* youth movement led by Chaim Gurt, who was a kind of mentor for him. This was a pro-Soviet cultural group associated with local leftwing writers and artists, Jewish and non-Jewish: Judah Waten, John Morrison, Noel Counihan and others.

It was during these first years in Melbourne that Yossel decided to be a poet – as his first known poem relates: "*Der Poet*", published in 1940 in the *Oystralishe Yidishe Naves* before his 20th birthday.

Over the next months the *Yiddishe Naves* published several more of his poems. At the time the *OYN* often printed poetry with only the author's first name. The poems of "Yossel" drew the attention of I I Giligich, the new Principal of the Yiddish Sunday School, who advised Birstein to study the poetry of Leyb Naydus. Yossel began studying regularly with Giligich.⁹ According to Rose, Yossel loved Keats. He greatly respected Melbourne's Yiddish short story writer, Pinkhas Goldhar, an older man who must have inspired and encouraged him (see the two poems for Goldhar's untimely death at 46y, **Upon the Death of Pinkhas Goldhar** and **Your generation too lived out its years in longing**, pp.58,60).

III Marriage

In 1940 too Yossel met Margaret Waisberg. She had left Frankfurt after Krystallnacht. "She was beautiful"; and just seventeen, when she came to live

⁷ Margaret Birstein kindly provided the typescript.

⁸ The first transport of Jews from Biala was to Sobibor camp, after which most went to Treblinka. Only the last few hundred went to Majdanek, but at the time Yossel wrote **Christian Holiday (p.34)** he may not have known this.

⁹ confirmed by his sister; and described in the autobiographical story *Di Greys fun mayn Talant* in his book *Dayne Geslekh – Yerushalayim*. Birstein dramatizes the story, lowering his age to 17.

with Yossel at his grandparents. Margaret learned Yiddish being with him. He wasn't yet 21 and she was 18 when they married a year later.¹⁰ At once his writing flourished! She was with him for the rest of his life, and translated almost all of his work into English.

IV Wartime service

Once the Japanese entered the War late in 1941, the labour shortage in Australia became acute. Like other "refugee aliens", Birstein then joined the Australian Army and served in a Labour Corps – in his case, from 16.3.1942 to beyond the war's end. Few today are aware of that aspect of the War in Australia.

We are grateful that **Dr. June Factor**, who is writing a book on this subject, has let us publish a relevant section – see in "Other Writing" on this site.

In those days, the rail-line in Victoria was of a different width to that in New South Wales, necessitating loading and unloading of non-military and military freight at the border junctions of Tocumwal and Albury; in addition, Labour Corps soldiers were used to load up trucks, at Melbourne's wharves and warehouses, depots and dumps.

It was heavy work (and paid poorly, below the minimum wage). For one short bespectacled bookworm, the work was challenging. Yossel's army record indicates several medical leaves early in his service. Rose recalls that another soldier there taught him how to lift, and that Yossel did exercises to strengthen his body. She recalls too, that Margaret would visit and stay with him at Tocumwal, without a permit, "he was the only one so lucky".

In the Sixth Employment Company, Yossel Birstein and Yosl Bergner were in the same platoon and shared a tent. They were stationed within easy reach of Melbourne, at Tocumwal. To judge by his army poems, the camaraderie of military service pleased Yossel, assuaging his loneliness and relieving his sense of outsider-hood¹¹.

¹⁰ see story in (9): Birstein describes coming late to his own wedding, because he was embarrassed to cancel a poetry lesson – he didn't want to have to tell his poetry teacher Giligich that he, Birstein, supposedly a young bohemian, was being married in a synagogue under a Chupah by a Rabbi !

The stories in "Dayne Geslekh – Yerushalayim" were not translated but rewritten by him, from his Hebrew book previously issued. In the section "Australia" two stories concern Melbourne's great Yiddish actor Yankev Waisslitz. But the story comes first - literary licence has been taken. In A Ganef he describes meeting the man who started the chain migration from Biala to Melbourne – a thief who had to get away. In A Hitl in Vant (p.259) Birstein meets Bergner on the train from Warsaw to the port of Gdynia. In fact they had already met in Warsaw, as mentioned in footnote 3 above.

Here we may mention too that later, in his Hebrew novel "A Face in the Clouds", Birstein would base his hero on Melekh Ravich (Bergner memoir, p.171).

¹¹ For his part, Bergner too was a story-teller. He remembers (Memoir p.112) once spending the whole night between loading trains exchanging stories, with an aboriginal boy travelling the train with a circus - Bergner telling tales from I. L.Peretz.

V Kadimah Secretary

The first news of Biala at war's end was that every Jew there had been exterminated. Only much later did Yossel meet survivors, who had been in the USSR. Gone were his mother and father, his sister and his brother, almost certainly in the ovens of Treblinka. In 1944 his sister Hanele would have been 19, brother Yankel 15. In December 1945, in a magazine close to Yossel's heart, the leftwing *Oyfboy*, his memorial for Yankel, the poem *Mayn Bruderl*, first appeared. Steadily, as detailed on this site, Yossel brought forth poems honouring others of his family, and the town itself¹².

Yossel was discharged from the army after three and a half years of service on 22.11.1945. Back in Melbourne he became the first paid Secretary of Kadimah Cultural Organization. He was 25 years old, and tried to develop the Youth Organization, despite it being increasingly riven by Bund/Communist acrimony.

We have found two documents (**see “Other Writings”**) from his Kadimah work. The first, “*Call to the Jewish youth of Melbourne!*” of 8.2.1946 may pre-date his appointment as Kadimah Secretary since he has signed himself “committee member, K. Y. O.”. It precedes the aforementioned rift in the Kadimah; the following precis of his article conveys pretty clearly why the rift was to come:

Yossel calls on Yiddish speaking youth to follow the American example and help combat assimilation, fascism and anti-Semitism while moving towards progressive humanism; for Jews are a nation of the whole world, and Australian and American Jews are clearly not about to move to Palestine. A synthesis between our own being and Australian life must be found. (In passing he hints darkly at dirty deeds by “Yehudim” as distinct from “Yidn”). The Kadimah Youth Organization is organizing a huge concert in keeping with its goals, which are: the speaking and reading of Yiddish; getting to know Jewish/Yiddish art music and theatre; raising the standard in Australia of Yiddish/Jewish culture through constructive self-criticism; through holding concerts and popularizing books; and at every opportunity, educating assimilated youth about Jewish issues and literature. All youth who want to join this progressive organization, no matter what their politics, will be welcomed!

“*Yugnt-Shtime*” appeared nearly two years later (12.12.1947) in Melbourne's other Yiddish weekly, the Zionist *Yidishe Post*. By now Yossel is disillusioned and perhaps somewhat embittered - but it is written with irony. From naturalism to the surreal by tiny steps – the beginnings of his storytelling technique can be seen here. The context for this feuilleton, as it would have been seen then, was the 1947 pan-Australian Congress for Yiddish Culture – the absence of any young delegates must have been discussed. Today we

¹² Harry New has supplied the fate of the rest of Chaim Jurberg's 9 children as follows: two died perinatally; in 1918 Gedaliah and one of his cousins were executed as Bolshevik supporters by Russians; while the two youngest daughters, with their entire families, shared the fate of Yossel Birstein's parents.

would call this article a riff – it is a sustained *kvetch* by someone for whom literature is very, very important:

Young Jews in Australia, asked why they never read, answer “no time!” They don’t even read books in English! Yossel bemoans the total absence of literature at Jewish dances (!!) The Judean League only do sport, the “Jipo” only do dances. As for students – they are into Judaism, not Yidishkayt. Nor do the KYO “Open Forums” escape his criticism: youth there expect to be spoon-fed ideas. Yossel offers an approach to the problem that is “fantasy, but good nevertheless”: every youth organization should urge its members to do nothing but stay home and read, for one evening a week.

One imagines that youthful goodwill stood Yossel in good stead throughout this period. The naivete of the earlier article has notably disappeared¹³.

As secretary of the Kadimah, Birstein helped see through to publication the celebrated posthumous volume of Pinkhas Goldhar’s stories, probably to this day the best Yiddish fiction to come out of Australia. In the present writer’s opinion, this alone would have made his Kadimah work worthwhile.

But according to Rose, Yossel felt alienated here. In 1947 their first child Hana was born; Yossel and Margaret were learning Russian - preparing for emigration to the Yiddish homeland in Birobidjan¹⁴. But that all changed, once the State of Israel came into existence. Birstein has described how he shed tears, witnessing the visit to Melbourne of an Israeli vessel flying the new national flag, with sailors who spoke Hebrew. The Birsteins made *aliya* to a leftwing kibbutz in the Galilee, Kibbutz Gvat, leaving Melbourne in 1949, a few months after his book of poems *Unter Fremde Himlen* was published (see essay on his poetry on this site)... and not long after the death of his grandfather “Chaim der shvartser” (11.9.1949).

So it was that on October 22, 1949, “*bay gedekte tishn*”, (banquet style) the Kadimah farewelled its first secretary, honouring him with speeches, by Chaim Gurt, I Giligich and the celebrated (in pre-War Poland, at any rate) literary critic Joshua Rapoport¹⁵; while the great actor Rachel Holzer read his poetry. In addition, another Labour Corps lad, the composer Felix Werder who had come to Australia on the *Dunera*, had set several poems to music, and these were sung by Avrom Brayzblat.¹⁶

Birstein’s last Australian publication was a poem which at once memorialized his grandfather and bid a gracious farewell to the Melbourne Yiddish community – “With my grandfather’s walking stick in my hand”. It appeared

¹³ In 1938 Chaim Jurberg’s son Shmiele and family had been brought to Australia and, just before the outbreak of war, his third youngest daughter Shaine with her family. Her son Harry New recalls being sent to Yossel at the age of eight, to learn Yiddish reading – and being taught on Yiddish poetry.

¹⁴ as related by his sister Rose; and Bergner memoir, p.116.

¹⁵ in *Mehus fun Dichtung* by O Rapoport (T A 1963) at pp303 – 310 both the speech, and Rapoport’s book review in OYN can be found. Herz Bergner reviewed it in Y Post, 29.9.1949. In due course it was also reviewed in New York by Yankev Glatstein (Yid Kemfer, 3.3.1950.)

¹⁶ OYN 7.10.49 (p12) and 14.10.49 (p.12) – notices of meeting.

in *OYN 25.11.1949* , and the family sailed away five days later. Kadimah advertised the boat and time, for wellwishers to see them off.¹⁷

VI Postscript: shepherd and story writer

For nearly 10 years Yossel was a shepherd on the kibbutz - and in this period he wrote in Yiddish a novel about kibbutz life. Stories followed, first still in Yiddish but then in Hebrew... then a Hebrew novel, later rewritten in Yiddish. But apart from a single poem, which he wrote soon after arrival, poetry was over for him. Was it inextricably linked with melancholy for him? Certainly this single Israeli poem (on this site) breathes free air and speaks of a burden lifted. Late in life, in a conversation with Mordechai Dunitz,¹⁸ Yossel stated:

Coming here to Israel, I had no family... so I decided, like a woman adopts a child, to adopt Kibbutz Gvat. In fact I would say that in Kibbutz Gvat I was reborn. I grew up there and there my home remains.”

A second daughter was born in 1956. In 1960 the Birsteins left the kibbutz for Kiryat Tivon, a town of Upper Galilee, where Yossel worked in a bank. That furnished different material for his pen.

From 1970 onwards they lived in Jerusalem. He became wellknown for his regular radio program in this period, telling stories observed from real life. Some of them were published – see for example - *The Blood Bond*:

<http://library.osu.edu/sites/users/galron.1/00025.php>

In Jerusalem Yossel worked as an archivist, in the Department of Manuscripts and Special Collections in the Jewish National and University Library at the Hebrew University. There he set in order Melekh Ravich's papers, as well as the Itzik Manger archive.

** ** ** ** ** **

¹⁷ Thanks to the Melbourne Chevra Kadisha database of Ephraim Finch it was easy to ascertain that in Fawkner Cemetery lie Chaim (dates given above) and his wife “Sadie” - Sarah, 1875 – 1962.

¹⁸ published posthumously in Yiddish, in Forverts, 27.10. 2006.