

Jacob Glatshyteyn
“In Smoke” and “Smoke”

Translated from Yiddish by Dror Abend-David

Jacob Glatshyteyn (in Yiddish: Yankev Glatshyteyn; 1896-1971) was a Polish-born modern American Yiddish poet, editor, literary critic and Journalist. He belonged to a milieu of young American Jews who spoke English well, were well-versed in American culture, and were well-educated in comparison with other Jewish immigrants. Glatshyteyn himself studied law at New York University. Together with poets Nokhem Barukh Minkoff and Arn Glanz-Leyeles, he created in 1920 a literary group and literary journal titled *In Zikh* (“introspective”). This group, heavily influenced by high modernist poets such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, hoped to be considered a bona fide chapter of modern American poetry, albeit writing in Yiddish.

Despite their (almost) similar titles, the two poems below address very different themes. The more famous of the two is “Smoke” from 1946. “Smoke” evokes the image of the crematoriums that were used for the genocide of European Jews during the Second World War, and is a part of Glatshyteyn’s later work which is dedicated to the trauma of the Holocaust. Alvin H. Rosenfeld (2004) contrasts Glatshyteyn’s “Smoke” with Henry David Thoreau poem with the same title—commenting on the lack of metaphorical language in Holocaust poetry.¹ Indeed, Glatshyteyn’s short poem, made out of two stanzas that are divided into rhyming couplets, betrays sharp cynicism and understandable anger. However, “Smoke” retains little of the pioneering, creative, and original voice of Glatshyteyn’s earlier introspective poetry.

“Smoke” also demonstrates the extent to which certain post-war trigger words such as “smoke,” “train,” “gas,” “chimney,” “ghetto” etc. gained a particular meaning that ties them (at least in Jewish Literature) with the memory of the Holocaust. Glatshyteyn’s “In Smoke,” published in 1920 in *In Zikh* magazine, is disturbing to the contemporary reader for a number of reasons, chief of which is the post-war association of smoke with the atrocities of the Holocaust. The poem, however, is a fantasy about a smoking man and a young woman who may or may not be sitting in front of his eyes. The poem is a striking testimony, not only

1 Alvin H. Rosenfeld, “The Problematics of Holocaust Literature,” in *Literature of the Holocaust*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), 21-47.

to the extent to which images such as “smoke” have changed (at least in Jewish literature) since the middle of the twentieth century, but also to less ominous cultural changes, including the positive image of smoking as a relaxing, dream-like activity, and the politically incorrect language that the poet uses to describe the young woman (literally referring to her in the original as a child).
D. A-D.

In Roykh (1920)

Kinder-shpil.
S'zshmurn zikh mayne oygn.
Halb-driml.
Un du—
Afn groysn Morris shtul,
A kleyn meydele,
A pitseles,
Kenst fartrogn mayn tsigarn-roykh? —
A royt tsingl.
Lakh fun mir,
bald vet di shtub shvarts vern fun roykh
un mir velen mir lozen valtsiren in roykh
un flien mit im. —
Hunderte royte tsinglekh
shtreken zikh tsu mir dem groysn nar
mit di halb-farzshmurete oygn.
Fun vaysn heldzel
tsit zikh arop dayn rozeve kleyd. —
A yam mit blendende vayskayt.
Plutslung—
In groysn Morris-shtul,
verst a kleyntshik pintele,
verst in roykh farshlungen.
Farshvindst
farn groysn nar,
mit di gants farzshmurete oygn.

אין רויך

קינדער-שפיל.
ס'זשמורען זיך מיינע אויגן.
האלב-דרימל.
און דו —
אפן גרויסן מאריס שטול,
א קליין מיידעלע,
א פיצעלעס,
קענסט פארטראגן מיין ציגארן-רויך? —
א רויט צינגל.
לאך פון מיר,
באלד וועט די שטוב שווארץ ווערן פון רויך
און מיר וועלן מיר לאזן וואלצירן אין רויך
און פליען מיט אים. —
הודערטע רויטע צינגלעך
שטרעקן זיך צו מיר דעם גרויסן נאר
מיט די האלב-פארזשמורעטע אויגן.
פון ווייסן העלדזל
ציט זיך אראפ דיין ראזעווע קלייד. —
א ים מיט בלענדנדע ווייסקייט.
פלוצלונג —
אין גרויסן מאריס-שטול,
ווערסט א קליינטשיק פינטעלע,
ווערסט אין רויך פארשלונגען.
פארשווינדסט
פארן גרויסן נאר,
מיט די גאנץ פארזשמורעטע אויגן.

In Smoke

A child's game.
 My eyes are squinting.
 Half-dreaming.
 And you—
 on a large Morris-chair,
 a little woman,
 tiny,
 Can you put up with my cigar-smoke? —
 You stick out a red tongue.
 Make fun of me;
 soon the house will be black with smoke
 and we will waltz in the haze
 and fly with it. —
 A hundred red tongues
 are extended towards me, the big fool,
 with half-squinting eyes.
 Under a little
 white neck
 your ruddy dress if pulled off. —
 A sea of dazzling white.
 Suddenly—
 in a large Morris chair,
 you become a small dot,
 consumed in smoke.
 You disappear,
 invisible to the big fool,
 now squinting, with eyes completely shut.

Roykh (1946)

Dorkhn krematorye-koymen
kertzit aroyf a yid zum otik-yomen.
Un vi nor der roykh farshvindt,
knoyln aroyf zayn vayb un kind.

Un oyven in di himlishe heykhen
veynen, benken heylike roykhen.
Got, dort vu du bist do,
Dortn zaynen mir ale oykh nishto.

רויך

דורכן קרעמאָטאָריע-קוימען
קרטיזט אַרויף אַ ייִד צום עתיק-יומין.
און ווי נאָר דער רויך פֿאַרשווינדט,
קנױלן אַרויף זײַן ווייב און קינד.

און אויבן אין די הימלישע הייכן
וויינען, בענקען הייליקע רויכן.
גאָט, דאָרט וואו דו ביסט דאָ,
דאָרטן זײַנען מיר אַלע אויך נישטאָ.

Smoke

Through the chimney of the crematorium
a Jew is soaring ad infinitum.
And when his smoke is scattered wide,
up spiral both his wife and child.

And up above, a hallowed dwelling,
there holy smokes are crying, yearning:
God, even in heaven, where your glories abound,
Our spirits still cannot be found.

Further reading:

Berlin, Gail Ivy, "Constructing the Literal: An Experiment in Using Holocaust Art to Illuminate Holocaust Poetry." A lecture at the Fourth International Conference of the International School for Holocaust Studies at *Yad VaShem* institute, Jerusalem. 2004. Available at <http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/conference/2004/22.pdf>