

Samuel Rollansky's Fiction: Preliminary Observations<sup>1</sup>by Alan Astro ([aaastro@trinity.edu](mailto:aaastro@trinity.edu))

*Vayokom meylekh khodosh al mitsroyim asher loy yoda es Yoysef.* This verse from Exodus chapter 1, verse 8, is translated, "And there arose a king over Egypt who did not know Joseph," but can be used just to mean there are younger people who might not have heard of someone or something from an earlier time. And for them I shall say a few words, unnecessary for most of us I am sure, about Samuel Rollansky, who in his day *was* Yiddish in Argentina.

Samuel, or Shmuel, Rozhanski, was born April 14, 1902, into a Litvish (i.e. Litvak) family residing in Warsaw. He had a traditional Jewish as well as a secular gymnasium education, something slightly unusual for immigrants to Argentina, where he arrived in 1922. From 1934 to 1973 he wrote a daily column for *Di Yidische Tsaytung* of Buenos Aires. Rollansky directed the Argentinean branch of the YIVO or IWO, as it was transcribed in Spanish (and pronounced IVÓ). In addition, he authored theater sketches, short stories, essays and histories of Yiddish literature and press in Argentina and elsewhere. He is best remembered as the editor of *Musterverk fun der yidisher literatur*, a 100-volume series of the classics of Yiddish literary classics. Often contested for their sloppy editing and incomplete, tendentious critical apparatus, these books nonetheless had great merit as constituting the grandest post-Shoah pedagogical endeavor to spread Yiddish literature in Yiddish—at least until the founding of the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst. Rollansky, aged 92 at the time of the 1994 AMIA bombing, poignantly said he had just attended his own funeral; he died a few months later, on February 19, 1995.

*Musterverk*—and the Argentinean YIVO journal, *Argentiner YIVO-Shriftn*—were not the only multi-volume publication efforts that Rollansky oversaw (or hands-on directed—he legendarily thought little of most of collaborators and even proofreaders, alas for him). Far less remembered are his *Gezamlte shriftn* or *Collected Writings*, a projected ten volumes of his own works that started coming out in 1940—when he was only 38. Just five books appeared, in that year and the next. I know nothing about the circumstances of the publication, but I can surmise one fact, judging from what Rollansky himself wrote in one of the volumes, a rather useful history of the Yiddish writing and theater in Argentina.

We can assume that these "collected writings" were largely a vanity enterprise, but that is less negative than it sounds. As Rollansky tells us, at the time there were no Yiddish publishing-houses in Argentina, just printers<sup>2</sup>; and authors essentially paid to have their books published and went around hawking them—with the result that, at least anecdotally, Yiddish volumes could be found even in non-Jewish homes, since the writers would prevail upon Christian friends to help them out by purchasing books written in an alphabet they could not even read.<sup>3</sup> It is not until after World War II, with the virtual wiping-out of European Yiddish publication, that the formerly peripheral Argentina became a major Yiddish book center. Indeed, along with Rollansky's

---

<sup>1</sup> Paper read 2 May 2014 at the Latin American Jewish Studies Association Regional Conference, CUNY Graduate Center, New York.

<sup>2</sup> Shmuel Rozhanski, *Dos yidische gedrukte vort un teater in Argentine, Gezamlte shriftn*, vol. 1 (Buenos Aires 1941) 126.

<sup>3</sup> Rozhanski, *Dos yidische gedrukte vort* 128.

*Musterverk*, the other great post-war Yiddish series, *Dos Poylishe Yidntum*, appeared in Buenos Aires, published by Rollansky's archrival, Marc Turkow. But that's a whole other story...<sup>4</sup>

Rollansky's five volumes of collected writings include the book I have just mentioned on Yiddish literary and theater history in Argentina. There is another, more tendentious volume, *Undzere ideen, svive, eltern un kinder* [Our ideas, environment, parents and children], on perpetuating Jewish culture in Argentina, which in his view could only be done through the Yiddish language (religion was something best left to Sephardim).<sup>5</sup> Besides those two just mentioned books, Rollansky's precocious collected writings included three volumes of vignettes, most of which probably appeared in a column in publications such as *Di yidishe tsaytung* and even the communist-oriented *Di prese*, whose politics were far from those of Rollansky's. (I shall look for the sources of these vignettes the next few months in Argentina).<sup>6</sup>

These short pieces, tableaux or genre scenes, are reminiscent of Maupassant, an author whose works in translation were favorites among a popular Yiddish readership, probably because his somewhat paradoxical tales may seem to have reflected for them the incongruencies of modern Jewish life.

I translated one of these pieces in my *Yiddish South of the Border*. Entitled "In Honor of Yom Kippur," it portrays two anticlerical, leftist factory workers, who dine Yom Kippur in order to observe the fast by transgressing it. The main course is brought out: a quite treyf suckling pig. One friend declines to partake, claiming he is a vegetarian. His host insists:

"C'mon! Cut it out!" said Yosl, unyieldingly. "Any other day of the year you can do as you wish, but not today, not on Yom Kippur."

Mendel bent to his plate, took a knife and fork, and felt as though he were offering a sacrifice in honor of Yom Kippur.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Here are the three reasons for the pique against Turkow, as recounted by Rollansky in his memoirs (*Iberlebungen*, vol. 1 [vol. 2 never appeared] [Buenos Aires: Ateneo Literario en el IWO, 1982] 265-278):

1. Rollansky wrote his memoirs in segments for *Di prese* (at a time when *Di yidishe tsaytung* no longer existed). In a new installment, he spoke of a cantor whom he had met in his first days in Buenos Aires and who could not forgive his son for having married a Christian. Turkow objected to the piece, claiming that it could cause *Di prese* legal problems.
2. Turkow attempt to block the appearance of the volume of the *Musterverk* featuring Moyshe Broderzon's works, since he too had obtained the family's permission to publish them.
3. Turkow wanted the IWO to give to the *kehillah* (I don't know which institution) its paintings by Minkowski, to complete the collection he had denoted with Hanukkah menorahs, kiddush cups, etc.

Eliezer Nowodvorski, Rollansky's grandson residing in Israel, assured me that his grandfather had published his memoirs in book form, partly in order to include the pages critical of Turkow. [Note added 6 July 2014.]

<sup>5</sup> Shmuel Rozhanski, *Undzere ideen, svive, eltern un kinder, Gezamlte shriftn*, vol. 3 (Buenos Aires, 1943) 82-83.

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, I discovered in a box of Rollansky's newspaper clippings held at the IWO that at least some of these texts had first appeared in *Di yidishe tsaytung*, under the pseudonym Abo Shayn, in a periodical column entitled "Tog-shtrikn fun B. Ayres" [Features of Daily Life in Buenos Aires].

<sup>7</sup> Rollansky, "In Honor of Yom Kippur" in *Yiddish South of the Border: An Anthology of Latin American Yiddish Writing*, ed. Alan Astro (University of New Mexico Press 2003) 72.

It is hard to imagine a more incisive portrayal of the double bind of modern Jewish secular culture—and this, from the convinced secularist Rollansky was.

I will not lie to you; “In Honor of Yom Kippur” is so far the best of Rollansky’s tales I have read. I am trying to evaluate whether his fiction deserves a better fate than the oblivion to which it has been consigned. For that reason, I shall submit to you two pieces from the volume entitled *Hunger tsu der zet*, which may be translated as “Fed up with Hunger.” A more literal translation would be “Sated with Hunger,” but it doesn’t convey the double-edged meaning. Perhaps better would be the Spanish translation offered on the Yiddish volume: “Hambre hasta el hartazgo,” with its series of words starting with *h-a*.

As I have mentioned, the secularist Rollansky did not recoil from depicting impasses of secularism. Likewise, *Hunger tsu der zet* he seems to question the portrayal of the Buenos Aires Jewish poor that led Boedo writers to appreciate the translations of the early texts José Rabinovich had penned in Yiddish before switching to Spanish. Rollansky’s slight mocking of his characters in “One Yom Kippur” already allows us to see that he was not a pious follower of the left, something that could not have endeared him to a large proportion of Yiddish cultural activists. Indeed, Rollansky’s leftism probably did not go much further than opposing the tendencies of Argentine government and society to repress distinctive Jewish language and culture.

The two pieces I shall present to you are at least somewhat at odds with the dogmatic trade-unionism that was most certainly the majority sentiment among the non-religious Yiddish readership anywhere on the globe at the time.<sup>8</sup> Rollansky places these two texts one after the other; they form a diptych, because they recount a similar story occurring first in a Gentile, and then in a Jewish environment. Not surprisingly, the non-Jews come to fisticuffs, whereas the Jews spend their time at political meetings...

\* \* \*

### Workers’ Struggle<sup>9</sup>

by Samuel Rollansky

Ignacio didn’t want to strike along with the other masons. His excuse was that he had a wife and five children, with so many of them ill that their apartment was practically a doctor’s waiting-room. Should he cease working for even one day, they wouldn’t survive. So rather than depending on friends no better off than he was, he’d keep on working.

Try talking him out of that!

---

<sup>8</sup> I am rather certain that in Poland, the U.S., France Israel/Palestine (and all the more so in Russia), the non-religious Yiddish press was aimed most of all at a left-wing readership. However, Iván Cherjovsky has me that *Di yidische tsaytung* was in large part read by a liberal (in the European and Latin American sense), petit-bourgeois and bourgeois audience. That the wealthier sectors of the Jewish community continued to consume Yiddish newspapers reinforces the similarity, with respect to Yiddish, between Canada and Argentina and the difference between the two countries and the U.S. See my paper “La persistencia del idish en Argentina.”

<sup>9</sup> Rozhanski, “Kamf” in *Hunger tsu der zet, Gezamlte shriftn*, vol. 2 (Buenos Aires, 1941) 156-58. These and others are preliminary translations by me.

Moreover, he argued, others labored on. Not everyone was striking. So he, too, stayed on the job.

His neighbors, also masons, cajoled and threatened him. They were about to assault him physically, when his wife came to the rescue.

"Leave him alone," she cried. "Why are you picking on him? I am up to my ears in debt with the grocer, the landlord... All the money's gone for medicine and doctors. There's no one left to borrow from. And now is when you decide to strike."

As he listened to her, Alonso's eyes clouded over like those of a drunkard. He tugged at his hat cocked to a side, spat on the ground, and shrugged his shoulders. "Is that any way for a worker's wife to talk?!"

"Don't spit on the floor," said Mercedes, pretending not to hear. "I work myself to the bone washing, and there he goes and spits on my floor..."

"The floor! What a hag," Alonso wheezed out in a rusty, hoarse voice. "We're talking about survival, a strike, not letting our kids starve. We want to be treated like human beings, not mangy dogs. And all your care about is your floor. As for you, Ignacio, you're no better than a... Listen, you're not going to get away with this. If you want to be a strikebreaker, go ahead. You want us to do what we have to do? You can count on it. Dead or bread! Either you come along, or we'll knock your teeth out and shove them back into your face. Then you'll get the picture and stop arguing like that grandma of yours."

Apparently, the last words frightened Ignacio. His attitude softened. "I'll see," he answered. "I'll go out on the street and try to borrow. If I get some money, I'll go out on strike, like you want."

"What do you mean, *like you want*?" Hefty, short Lucio lumbered in out of nowhere, as though he had just gotten up from a big meal and had difficulty moving. "You hear that? *Like you want*. Like *who* wants? Who are we fighting for? For me? For Alonso? Not for you? We're not doing this for your sake? Don't you think *I* also need to buy medicine for my kids? You think you're the only one with a family? But why stand here and argue? If you want to come along, fine. If we don't make it through, you'll also end up dead in the street with your wife and kids. But if we're successful and get what we're fighting for, then all our lives will be worth living. So why should things be any different for you? Aren't you suffering just like us?"

Ignacio grabbed onto the last question. "That's just what I'm trying to say. I'm suffering just like you are. So why should I do what you're doing? Why don't *you* do what I'm doing? That's what Mercedes says, and she's right..."

"Mercedes, Mercedes... That Mercedes of yours, that witch, has no more sense in her head than a child."

"Hey, watch it," said Ignacio. He threw a glance at his wife and hopped to as though following an order. "Better not insult my wife."

Lucio was at no loss for an answer. "Shut your mouth and don't get all worked up. You can keep that bargain of yours. Who cares about her? Better-looking ones are easy enough to find."

"*iDesgraciado!*," thundered Ignacio. "You're gonna insult my wife, in my home? Get out right now. All of you, out! Don't you have any decency?"

He began thrashing at Lucio. Alonso tried to hold him back, but little Ignacio showed mettle and pushed him aside. Finally, Alonso managed to separate them: "Okay, Lucio, get out. Leave him and his wife alone."

But crossing the threshold, he added, as though he were bidding farewell: "*Adiós*, Mercedes. You think you've gotten your way? Listen up. I'm telling you, if that Ignacio of yours just tries to go to work tomorrow, they'll bring him back home dead. So show how good a wife you are, what sense you have. Teach him what the workers' struggle means."

Man and wife looked at each other grimly.

\* \* \*

Yes and No<sup>10</sup>

Beyle no longer makes light of Natán's political party. She has stopped ridiculing his friends. She has resigned herself to his devotion to them, to his hours spent away from home, and to his total exhaustion when he finally comes in.

"So be it!" she says. "If that's the way he wants things to be, it's okay by me."

Natán expects a revolution? So be it! He lavishes his health, his life, on the party? So be it! He spends his one day off a week with them? So be it! He fails to provide for his children and shows no concern for his wife? So be it!

"Fine, a revolution," she says. "But isn't bread also necessary? What kind of behavior is this, coming home at four in the morning, not getting up in time for work, arriving late at the factory several days a week?"

Natán's eyes fill with anger and scorn. She already knows what he is going to reply, even though he hardly moves his lips. She senses venom in his words. They stab her like pins. She recalls already having heard them, all too well.

"Foolish wife that you are," he hisses at her almost inaudibly. "You old hag. The only things you know about are food and work, just like an animal standing in a stall."

She looks at him with large, watery eyes, choking back tears. She doesn't want to give him the pleasure of thinking his words affect her in the least. So she answers in feigned self-confidence: "You've really studied up. Is this way Karl Marx says you are supposed to treat a wife and children? Or did some other rabbi teach you such fine ideas?"

He remains silent, glad she hasn't taken him to task over his last two weeks' meager earnings, insufficient to cover their latest debts. Neither does Beyle say anything for several moments. She just wipes her nose, as though nose-blowing were a kind of speech. Natán finally reacts: "You've got to understand. I'm just one man, but the movement... You got to crack a few eggs to make an omelet. Suffering is part of it. We're workers, so we have to suffer. It's a struggle, but we have hope. The revolution demands sacrifices; we can't think of ourselves."

Beyle hears him out and begins stirring the pot on the small leaden stove.

---

<sup>10</sup> Rozhanski, "Yo un neyn," *Hunger tsu der zet* 159-61.

“Don’t I let you do what you want?” she finally answers. Her words are mixed with tears. “Who’s reproaching you? You give your energy to the movement, the struggle, the revolution. Fine by me! Do I stop you? On the contrary, if you enjoy yourself, be my guest! But what about food? Or rent? Or getting to work on time? Don’t you have a wife? Two children? Don’t we need to eat? A place to sleep?”

Natán opens his eyes wide, as though she had revealed to him something entirely new requiring intense thought. He then said mildly, “My dear Beyle, Beylitshke! Always the same story. What if I told you that you’re the wife of a proletarian whose consciousness has been raised. As such, you shouldn’t talk the way you do. It’s demeaning to you—and what does it say about me? Why can’t you understand? There are women who have sacrificed their freedom, a peaceful family life. They’ve been sentenced to jail, or even to Siberia. They’ve gone hungry. They’ve been wounded, tortured. Nothing frightened them because...”

“Because, *shmecause...*” His wife interrupts him. “You’re mixing apples and oranges. You want a revolution? You care about the movement, the party? Do as you like. But what about food? Why neglect your job? Why go to bed at five in the morning and not be able to stand on your feet? What does one thing have to do with the other?”

The two children in the same room stop playing and listen attentively to the conversation between man and wife.

\* \* \*

*I add here translations of three more texts by Rollansky, in order for you to judge the quality (of lack thereof) of his literary work.*

\* \* \*

At Work<sup>11</sup>

This isn’t the first time that Fayvl wants to go work in a big factory. At the meetings where he hears them talk about class struggle, he realizes his helplessness. He senses that between him and his boss the class lines aren’t drawn as the party says they should be. What class struggle has Fayvl experienced? On the contrary, he has a friendly relationship with the small-time boss at his factory. When he goes to pick up his paycheck, the boss starts apologizing. He says he himself hasn’t received the money he was supposed to get—and Fayvl feels bad for him. The young man seems to him more helpless than he is, poorer, weaker. He believes him, is convinced that he isn’t hiding anything from him. The boss shows him the bills that are to be paid but have not been paid. He opens the ledgers and proves to Fayvl that for the whole week he hasn’t brought a penny home. He turns his pockets inside out and demonstrates he hasn’t even twenty cents on him. Fayvil feels such pity for that boss of his that he forgets everything he’s heard about class struggle. He thinks that if he had a few dollars, he’d lend them to his boss, so *he* could bring some bread home to his family.

“There’s nothing to be done,” Fayvl concedes when he doesn’t get a cent of his pay. “But you yourself know that it’s not so good to come home without a cent. I see you don’t have anything now, but maybe on Monday...”

---

<sup>11</sup> Rozhanski, “Bay der arbet,” *Eygene fremde, Gezamlte shriftn*, vol. 4 (1941) 109-10.

"What do you mean?" says the boss agitatedly, trying to justify himself. "It's not necessary even to say such things. You yourself see that I was supposed to get money today... Just take a look!"

And he starts rummaging through the papers again.

Fayvl stands by the door of the little factory where he's the only worker, and feels no hatred for the boss exploiting him.

"Go on strike!" he murmurs to himself. "Against whom? Join together! With whom? Who is there to join forces with?"

Now he feels sorry for himself. A thought starts eating at him. The worst thing of all is to be a worker in a small factory, where the boss is always on site and there's no one to fight against or with. He'd like to get a job in a larger factory, where he could join together with hundreds or thousands like himself. Then he wouldn't have to feel sorry for his boss and hear all the excuses.

But when a few days have passed and he gets what is owed him, or a part of it, the wish to leave the little factory disappears.

"Where would I feel as free as I do here?" he asks himself. "Where else would I be so much at home? After all, he's a decent fellow."

Lost in his musings, Fayvl knows it's wrong to have such a friendly attitude toward a boss. But he can't stop feeling things that run counter to his will, in him, through him, around him.

\* \* \*

#### Not for His Own Sake<sup>12</sup>

"You think I went to shul on Yom Kippur for my own sake?" Grodshinsky asks, somewhat apologetically. "God forbid. I don't believe in such things. I've gotten far away from all that. I just wanted to see..."

Due to this curiosity of his, Grodshinsky spent the whole day in shul. And when an acquaintance of his saw him there with a prayerbook in hand, Grodshinsky felt he had to explain.

"It's just not right, while everyone is praying, to stand and stare at the ceiling. So I'm holding a prayerbook. The sexton came over and gave it to me."

Grodshinsky assures his friend that he isn't old-world. As far as he's concerned, synagogues shouldn't exist at all; likewise, there's no need for Jewish schools or libraries.

"The only thing necessary," he says, "is to make a living. You also need your health. But when so many people go to pray on the Holy Days, I go too, to take a look, to see what it's going on. In fact, it's quite interesting."

Every few sentences, he makes it clear that he doesn't do any of these things for his own sake.

\* \* \*

#### The World to Come<sup>13</sup>

The Krukovietskys' radio has grown hot from having played so long. The young people are flush and out of breath from dancing. They drop into the wooden chairs, splaying themselves as though they had fallen into armchairs. They fan their faces with their hands and gasp for air, exhausted from dancing and laughing.

<sup>12</sup> Rozhanski, "Nisht far zikh," *In Buenos Ayres, Gezamlte shriftn*, vol. 6 (1941) 32.

<sup>13</sup> Rozhanski, "Oylem-habe," *In Buenos Ayres* 26.

Sitting in the corner, the Krukovietskys proudly watch as their daughter's fiancé follows her around. Tired of watching though they are, they feel refreshed when guests gather about their only son and egg him on. "Say something, Cachito. Or sing a song."

Smug Cachito is not about to give in quickly. He waddles back and forth like a duck and his face reddens.

"*iNo! iNo!*" he says, shaking his head. "I won't<sup>14</sup>."

The guests insist, but the boy refuses. So they turn to his parents. "Tell him to say something. After all, he's been going to Hebrew school."

"That's true," concedes *señora* Krukovietsky. Whereupon she calls out to the boy and promises him a peso, if he would just recite something he has learned from his Hebrew school teacher.

Clearing his throat, Cachito straightens up like a little soldier and starts speaking in a thin, sharp voice: "*Yisgedal ve-yiskedash...*"<sup>15</sup>

The Krukovietskys' eyes gleam and moisten with pride.

---

<sup>14</sup> "Ikh nisht ken." All the Argentinean-born children in Rollansky's vignettes speak broken Yiddish, reflecting despite himself lucidity about the future of the language in the country.

<sup>15</sup> Obviously, the first words of the mourner's kaddish.