**Kulbak Moyshe (1896-1937)**

Moyshe Kulbak was a leading Yiddish modernist poet, novelist and playwright. Born in Smorgon near Vilna, he received a traditional religious education. His youthful works were created in Hebrew, then he began writing in Yiddish. He made his Yiddish debut in 1916 and published his first book, *Shirim* (Poems) in 1920.

That same year he moved to Berlin, the ‘new metropolis’ for many East European writers, artists and intellectuals, where the Hebrew and Yiddish Modernism was in full bloom. During his three-year stay in Berlin, Kulbak became familiar with contemporary currents in European literature, particularly with expressionism, which had a significant influence on his later work. In his poems – for example in his long poem *Vilne* (1926) – he combines German expressionist techniques with Russian symbolism. His major novelas of the 1920s, deeply ironic prose works, *Meshiekh ben Efrayim* and *Montog,* are highly modernist, shot through with images of messianism, apocalypse and revolution. Among his major works it is worth mentioning his drama *Yankev Frank (*Jacob Frank; 1923*),* a play about the 18th-century messianic pretender.

After returning to Vilna in 1923, Kulbak became a famous figure in Yiddish cultural life, a renowned writer, lecturer and an inspiring teacher of Yiddish literature at the Jewish gymnasium and at the Jewish Teacher’s Seminary. He was active in Vilna’s Yiddish cultural institutions and served from 1927 as the chair of the Yiddish PEN Club.

In October 1928 Kulbak, with his wife and two children left Poland for the Soviet Union, where they settled in Minsk. During this Soviet period Kulbak wrote and published poetry in various literary journals as well as a hundred-page volume of his work. He focused on the novel *Zelmenyaner*, detailing the fate of a traditional Jewish family facing the new conditions of the Soviet Union, but also wrote dramas and the long poem *Disner Tshayld-Harold* (Childe Harold from Disna; 1933).

Soviet critics saw Kulbak as a non-conformist and an ideologically insecure character. During the Stalinist purges he was arrested and executed by shooting in 1937. For years it was considered that the poet died in the gulag in 1940, but the death sentence was carried on 29 October 1937. Moyshe Kulbak was posthumously rehabilitated in 1956.

**List of Works**

Kulbak, M. (1929) *Ale verk fun Moshe Kulbak* (Collected Works of Moshe Kulbak: Vol. 1. *Meskhieh ben Efrayim, Montog* ; Vol. 2. *Poemen un lider* ; Vol. 3. *Yankev Frank: drame in dray aktn* ; Vol. 4. *Zelmenyaner*), Vilna: Vilner Farlag fun B. Kletskin.

------ (1933) *Disner Tshayld-Harold*, Minsk: Melukhe-farlag fun Vaysrusland.

**Bibliographies, references and further reading**

Bronshteyn Y. (1934), ‘Kegn biologizm un folkizm: Vegn Moyshe Kulbaks veg fun *Shtot* biz *Zelmenyaner*’*,* *Farfestikte pozitsyes,* Moscow: Emes: 158–185.

Kac, D. (1993) *Na krawędzi życia: Mojsze Kulbak – żydowski poeta, prozaik, dramaturg, 1896-1937*, Warsaw: Agencja Wydawn.-Poligraf. Gimpo.

Niger S. (1958), *Yidishe shrayber in Sovet-Rusland,* New York: S. Niger Book Committee: 131–169.

Seelig R. (2012) ‘A Yiddish Bard in Berlin: Moyshe Kulbak and the Flourishing of Yiddish Poetry in Exile’, *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 102 (1): 19-49.

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