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YOSSEL RAKOVER'S APPEAL TO GOD

A Story Written Especially for Di Yiddishe Tsaytung

This first English translation of the entire original text portrays Yossel Rakover's faith unto death as he suffers the monstrous evils permitted by the God he loves. A translators' afterword relates the curious history of Kolitz's fictional testament of a religious Jew caught in the Holocaust's horror.

I believe in the sun even when it is not shining, I believe in love even when feeling it not; I believe in God even when He is silent.

AN INSCRIPTION ON THE WALL OF A CELLAR IN COLOGNE ON THE RHINE, WHERE A NUMBER OF JEWS HID THEMSELVES FOR THE ENTIRE DURATION OF THE WAR.

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In one of the ruins of the ghetto of Warsaw, among piles of charred rubble and human bones, there was found, concealed and stuffed in a small bottle, the following testament, written during the Warsaw Ghetto's last hours by a Jew named Yossel Rakover.

Warsaw, April 28, 1943.

"I, Yossel, son of Dovid Rakover of Tarnopol, a Hasid of the Rebbe of Ger and a descendant of the righteous men, the great scholars, and the holy men of the families Rakover and Meisels, am writing these lines as the houses of the Warsaw Ghetto go up in flames, and the house where I find myself is one of

the last houses that are not yet burning. For several hours an unusually heavy artillery barrage has been directed at us, and the walls around me are crumbling and disintegrating under the concentrated fire. It will not be long before the house I am in is transformed, like almost all the other houses of the ghetto, into a grave for its defenders and residents. By the dagger-sharp, unusually crimson rays of the sun that penetrate through the small, half-walled-up window of my room, through which we have been shooting at the enemy day and night, I see that it must now be late afternoon, just before sundown, and the sun probably has no idea how little I will regret that I will not see it again. Something peculiar has happened to us: all of our notions and emotions have changed. Death, swift and abrupt, looks to us like a savior, like a liberator, like a shackle-breaker; beasts in the forest look to me so likable and dear that I feel a deep pain whenever I hear the evil fiends that dominate Europe compared to beasts. It is not true that Hitler has something beastly in himself. He is, I am deeply convinced, a typical child of modern humanity. Humanity as a whole has spawned him and reared him, and he is the frankest expression of its innermost, most deeply buried wishes.

"In a forest where I once hid myself, I encountered a dog one night, sick and starving; perhaps crazy as well, his tail between his legs. Both of us immediately felt the kinship, if not in fact the similarity, of our situations, because the situation of dogs is not, by and large, much better than ours. He cuddled up to me, buried his head in my lap, and licked my hands. I do not know if I have ever cried so much as that night. I threw my arms around his neck, bawling like a child. If I say that I envied the animals at that moment, it would be no wonder. But what I felt then was more than envy. It was shame. I felt ashamed in front of the dog to be, not a dog, but a man. That is how it is, and to such a spiritual state have we come. Life is a tragedy, death a savior; man a calamity, the beast an ideal; the day a horror, the night -- a relief.

"Millions of people in the great wide world, who love the day, the sun, and the light, do not know, do not have the slightest idea, how much darkness and unhappiness the sun has brought us. It has been turned into a tool in the hands of the evildoers, and they have used it as a searchlight, to track the footprints of those who are fleeing.

"When I with my wife and children -- six in all -- hid in the forest, it was the night and the night alone that concealed us in its bosom. The day turned us over to those that were seeking our souls. How will I ever forget the day when the Germans raked with a hail of fire the thousands of refugees on the highway from Grodno to Warsaw? As the sun rose, the airplanes zoomed over us. Throughout the day they murdered, ceaselessly. In this massacre from the

sky, my wife perished, together with a seven-month-old baby in her arms. And two more of my five remaining children disappeared that day without a trace. Their names were Dovid and Yehuda; one was four years old, the other six.

"At sunset, the handful of survivors continued their journey in the direction of Warsaw, and I, with my three remaining children, started out to comb the fields and woods at the site of the massacre in search of the children. `Dovid! `Yehuda!' -- so, throughout the night, our cries cut, as if with knives, the dead silence around us, and a forest echo, helpless, pitiful, and heart-rending, answered our cries, in tones of lamenting eulogy. I never saw my two children again, and in a dream I was told not to worry about them, because they were in the hands of Reboyne-shel-Oylem.^a

"My other three children died in the course of a year in the Warsaw Ghetto. Rokhele, my little daughter, ten years old, had heard that it was possible to find scraps of bread in the public dump outside the ghetto walls. The ghetto was starving at the time, and the people who had died of starvation lay about in the streets like rags. The people of the ghetto were prepared to face any death except death by starvation. This is probably because, at times when all spiritual desires of a person can, through systematic persecution, be killed, the will to eat is the only desire that remains, even if one should wish death on oneself. I have been told of a Jew, half-starved, who once said this to another one: `Ah, how happy I would be, if I could die after eating one more time like a human being!'

"Rokhele told me nothing of her plan to steal out of the ghetto, a crime which was punishable by death. She and a girl friend of the same age started out on the perilous journey. She left home under cover of darkness, and at sunrise she and her friend were caught outside the ghetto walls. Nazi ghetto guards, together with dozens of their Polish underlings, at once started to chase after the Jewish children who had dared to hunt for a piece of bread in a garbage can in order not to die of hunger. People witnessing the chase could not believe their eyes. Even in the ghetto this was something new. One could have thought they were chasing after dangerous criminals. Dozens of evildoers were running amok in pursuit of a pair of starved ten-year-old children, who did not last very long in the contest. One of them, my child, running with her last ounce of strength, fell exhausted to the ground, and the

Nazis then drove a bayonet through her head. The other child saved herself, but, driven out of her mind, died two weeks later.

"The fifth child, Yaynkev, a boy of thirteen, died on his Bar Mitzvah day of tuberculosis, and his death was a deliverance for him. The last child, my fifteen-year-old daughter, Khave, perished during a Kinderaktion^b that began at sunrise last Rosh Hashona and ended at sundown. That day, before sunset, hundreds of Jewish families lost their children.

"Now my time has come. And like Job, I can say of myself, nor am I the only one that can say it, that I return to the earth naked, as naked as on the day of my birth.

"I am forty-three years old, and when I look back on the past I can attest confidently, as confident as a man can be of himself, that I lived an honest life, and that my heart was full of love. I was at one time in my life blessed with a lot of success, but I did not pride myself on it. My possessions were extensive, and, as my rebbe used to put it, I very rarely had to make sacrifices. By Law and by faith, if I had ever been tempted to steal, it could only have meant I was taking pleasure in depravity. My house was open to the needy, and I was happy when I was able to do people a favor. I served God enthusiastically, and my one request of Him was that He should allow me to serve Him bikhol livovekho, bikhol nafshekho ubikhlo miodekho.^c

"I cannot say, after everything I have lived through, that my relationship to God has remained unchanged, but I can say with absolute certainty that my faith in Him has not changed a hair's breadth. Formerly, when I was well off, my relation to God was as to one who kept on granting me favors -- although I shall always be indebted to Him for this, now my relationship to Him is as to one who owes me something, owes me much. And since I feel that He owes me something too, therefore I believe that I have the right to demand it of Him. But I do not say, like Job, that God should point a finger at my sin, so that I might know why I deserve this; for bigger and better people than I are firmly convinced that what is happening now is not a question of punishment

^a "Almighty **God**" (Yiddish; literally, "Master of the World").

^b Literally, "children's action" (German): roundup of Jewish children.

^c "With all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5, Hebrew).

for transgressions; rather, something very particular is taking place in the world; namely, it is a time of histeres-ponim.^d

"God has veiled His countenance from the world, and has thus delivered people over to their savage impulses. Therefore I believe that it is unfortunately quite natural that, when the power of impulses dominates the world, those who represent in themselves the divine and the pure should be the first victims. Speaking personally, this is hardly a consolation, but since the destiny of our people is determined, not by earthly, material, and physical calculations, but by calculations not of this earth, spiritual and divine ones, the believer should see in such events a fragment of a great divine reckoning, against which human tragedies do not count for much. This, however, does not mean that the pious members of my people should justify the edict and say that God and His judgment are just -- I believe that to say that we deserve the blows we have received is to malign ourselves, to desecrate the Shem-hamforesh^e `Jew.' And as for those who desecrate the Shem-hamforesh -- God, God is maligned by their maligning themselves.

"In a situation like this, I naturally expect no miracles, nor do I ask Him, my Lord, to show me mercy. May He treat me with the same countenance-veiling indifference with which He has treated millions of His people. I am no exception, and I expect no special relationship for myself. I will no longer attempt to save myself, nor will I flee any more. I will facilitate the work of the fire by moistening my clothes with gasoline. I have three bottles of gasoline left, after emptying several dozen over the heads of the murderers. That was a great moment in my life, and I roared with laughter at it. I never dreamed that the death of people, even of enemies -- even of such enemies -- could delight me this much. Foolish humanists may say what they please. Vengeance was, and always will be, the last means of waging battle and the greatest spiritual gratification of the oppressed. Never until now have I precisely understood the expression in the Gemora^f which states: Vengeance is sacred because it appears between two of God's names, as it is written: El nikomes Hashem.^g Now I understand it. Now I know why my heart is so

^d "Veiling of [God's] countenance" (Hebrew).

^e "The ineffable Name" (Yiddish); the phrase, which usually refers to God's Holy Name, it is here applied to the name "Jew."

^f Yiddish for Gemara, i.e., the Aramaic commentary that is the major part of the Talmud. The passage is found in b. Ber. 33a.

^g "God of vengeance is the Name" (Hebrew; Psalm 94, 1). "The Name" here replaces the divine Name YHWH, which in Jewish practice is never

overjoyed when I recall that for thousands of years we have been calling our God: God of Vengeance, El nikomes Adonoy.

"And now that I am in a position to see life and the world from a particularly clear perspective, which is only in rare circumstances granted a person before death, it seems to me that the modern, characteristic difference between our God and the God in whom the nations of Europe believe is this: at the same time that our God is a God of vengeance, and our Torah is full of death penalties for the smallest sins, it is related in the Gemora that it was enough for the Sanhedrin, the highest tribunal of our people when it was free in its own land, to sentence a person to death just once in seventy years to have the judges considered murderers;^h the God of the nations, however, who is designated the God of Love, has commanded to love every nivro betseylemⁱ -- and they have now been murdering us without pity, day in day out, for almost two thousand years.

"Yes, I have spoken of vengeance. We have had only a few opportunities to see true vengeance. But when we saw it, it was so good and so worthwhile to see, that I felt deep satisfaction, such a tremendous pleasure, that it seemed to me that an entirely new life was springing up in me. A tank had suddenly broken into our street. It was bombarded with flaming bottles of gasoline from all the embattled houses. They failed to hit their target, however, and the tank continued on its path. I and my friends around me waited until the tank was literally passing under our noses. Then, through the half walled-up window, we all at once attacked. The tank soon burst into flames, and six blazing Nazis jumped out. Ah, how they burned! They burned like the Jews they had set on fire, but they screamed more than they did. The Jews do not scream. They accept death like a savior. The Warsaw Ghetto perishes in battle. It perishes shooting, struggling, blazing, but no, not screaming.

"I still have three bottles of gasoline in my possession, and they are as precious to me as wine to a drunkard. After pouring one over my clothes, I will place the paper on which I write these lines in the empty bottle and hide it among the bricks of the half walled-up window of this room. If anyone ever finds it and reads it, he will, perhaps, understand the emotions of a Jew, one of millions, who died forsaken by the God in whom he believed unshakably. I

pronounced. Further down, the divine Name is replaced by Adonoy --literally "My Lord."

^h Cf. m. Mak. 1, 20; b. Mak. 7a.

ⁱ "Creature made in the image [of God]" (Hebrew).

will let the two other bottles explode on the heads of the evildoers when my last moment comes.

"There were twelve of us in this room at the outbreak of the rebellion, and for nine days we have battled against the enemy. All eleven of my comrades have fallen, have died silently. Even the small boy, God only knows how he got here, about five years old, who is now lying dead near me, with his lovely little face wearing a smile of the sort that shines on children's faces when they are peacefully dreaming. Even the small boy died with the same epic calm as his older comrades. It happened early this morning. Most of us were no longer alive. The boy scaled the heap of corpses to catch a glimpse of the outside world through the half walled-up window. For several minutes he stood beside me like that, and suddenly he fell backward, rolled off the bodies of the fallen, and remained lying, like a stone. On his small, pale forehead, between two black locks, a spattering of blood had appeared: a bullet in the head. Up until yesterday morning, when, at sunrise, the enemy launched a concentrated barrage against our stronghold, one of the last in the ghetto, every one of us was still alive, although five were wounded and continued to fight nevertheless. In the course of yesterday and today, all of them fell, one after the other: one on top of the other they fell, standing guard and firing until shot to death.

"Apart from the three bottles of gasoline, I have no more ammunition. From the three highest floors above me there is still heavy shooting, but they cannot send any more help, for everything indicates that the stairs have been destroyed by artillery fire, and I think the house is about to collapse. I am lying on the floor as I write these lines, and around me -- dead comrades. I look into their faces, and it seems to me that a quiet but mocking irony animates them, as if they were saying to me, 'A little patience, you foolish man, another few minutes and everything will become clear to you, too.' This irony particularly cries out from the face of the small boy lying next to my right hand, as if he were asleep. His small mouth is drawn into a smile exactly as if he were laughing, and I, who still live and feel and think like one of flesh and blood -- it seems to me that he is laughing at me. He laughs at me with that quiet but eloquent, penetrating laughter so characteristic of people who know a lot when they speak about true knowledge with those who know nothing and think they know everything. He now knows everything, the boy. It is all clear to him now. He even knows why he was born, given that he had to die so quickly, and why he died only five years after he was born. And even if he does not know it, he knows at least that it is entirely unimportant and insignificant to know it or not to know it, in the light of the revelation of the divine glory in that better world where he now finds himself, perhaps in

the arms of his murdered parents to whom he has returned. In an hour or two I will also know it. Unless my face is eaten away by the flames, a similar smile may also rest on it after my death. Meanwhile, however, I am still alive, and before my death I would like to speak to my God, as a living person, as a simple, living person who has had the great but unfortunate honor to be a Jew.

"I am proud that I am a Jew not in spite of the world's treatment of us, but precisely because of this treatment. I would be ashamed to belong to those peoples who spawned and educated those evildoers who are responsible for the deeds that have been perpetrated against us.

"I am proud to be a Jew because it is an art to be a Jew, because it is hard to be a Jew. It is no art to be an Englishman, an American, or a Frenchman. It may be easier, more comfortable, to be one of them, but not more honorable. Yes, it is an honor to be a Jew.

"I believe that to be a Jew means to be a struggler, a perpetual swimmer against the turbulent, criminal human current. The Jew is a hero, a martyr, a holy one. You, our enemies, declare that we are bad. I believe we are better and finer than you, but even if we were worse than you --I would like to see how you would look in our place!

"I am happy to belong to the most unfortunate of all peoples of the world, whose Torah represents the loftiest and most beautiful of all laws and morals. This Torah of ours has now been made even holier and more immortal by the fact that it has been so degraded and insulted by the enemies of God.

"I believe that to be a Jew is an inborn trait. One is born a Jew exactly as one is born an artist. It is impossible to be released from being a Jew. It is a divine attribute in us, which has made us a chosen people. Those who do not understand this will never understand the higher meaning of our martyrdom. 'There is nothing more whole than a broken heart,' a great rebbe once said,^j and there is no people more chosen than a people permanently beaten. If I did not believe that God once picked us as a chosen people, then I would believe that our tribulations have made us chosen.

^j The reference is to Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1811); the saying is quoted in Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 148.

"I believe in Israel's God, even if He has done everything so that I should not believe in Him. I believe in His laws even if I cannot justify His actions. My relationship to Him is no longer the relationship of a slave to his master but rather that of a pupil to his rebbe. I bow my head before His greatness, but will not kiss the rod with which He strikes me. I love Him, but I love His Torah more, and even if I were disappointed in Him, I would observe His Torah. God means religion, but His Torah means a way of life, and the more we die for such a way of life, the more immortal it becomes.

"And therefore allow me, God, before death, being absolutely freed of every semblance of terror, finding myself in a state of absolute inner peace and assurance, to argue things out with You for the last time in my life:

"You say that we have sinned? -- Of course we have. That therefore we are being punished? I can understand that too. But I would like You to tell me, is there any sin in the world that is deserving of such punishment as the punishment we have received?

"You say You will yet repay our enemies? -- I am convinced that You will repay them without mercy, I have no doubt of that either. -- I would nevertheless like You to tell me, is there any punishment in the world capable of affording forgiveness for the crime that has been committed against us?

"You say, perhaps, that now it is not a question of sin and punishment, but rather a situation of *hester ponim*,^k in which You have abandoned humanity to its impulses? -- Then I would like to ask You, God, and this question burns in me like a consuming fire: What more, oh, what more must transpire in order for You to reveal Your face again to the world?

"I want to tell You openly and clearly that now, more than in any previous stage of our endless path of agony, do we have -- we the tortured, the humiliated, the strangled, the buried alive and burned alive, we the insulted, the mocked, the ridiculed, the murdered by the millions -- do we have the right to know where are the limits of Your patience?!

"I should like to tell You something else: Do not put the rope under too much strain, because it could yet, God forbid, snap. The test to which You have put us is so severe, so unbearably severe, that You should -- You must -- forgive

those of Your people who, in their misery and rage, have turned away from You.

"Forgive those who have turned away from You in their misery, but also those of Your people who have turned away from You in their happiness. You have transformed our life into such an endless, ugly struggle that the cowards among us have had to try to avoid it, this struggle, to run away from it any way they could. Do not strike them for it: one does not strike cowards, on cowards one has pity. And on them more than on us, have mercy, God!

"Forgive those who have desecrated Your name, who have gone over to the service of other gods, who have become indifferent to You. You have struck them so severely that they no longer believe that You are their Father, that they have any Father at all.

"And I am telling You this because I believe in You, because I believe in You more than ever, because now I know that You are my God because surely You are not, surely You cannot be, the God of those whose deeds are the most hideous demonstration of militant godlessness.

"If You are not my God -- whose God are You? The God of the murderers? If those that hate me and murder me are so sinister, so evil, what then am I if not the one who personally represents something of Your light, of Your goodness?

"I cannot praise You for the deeds that You tolerate. I bless and praise You, however, for Your very existence, for Your terrible greatness, which must be so immense that even what is happening now makes no particular impression on You! But precisely because You are so great and I so small, I pray You, I warn You in Your own Name: stop underscoring Your greatness by allowing the unfortunate to be beaten!

"Nor am I asking You to strike the guilty. It is in the dreadful logic of the unavoidable course of events that they will eventually strike themselves, since in our being killed the conscience of the world has been killed, since a world has been murdered in the murder of Israel.

"The world will devour itself in its own evil, it will be drowned in its own blood.

^k A variant of *histeres-ponim* (cf. n. 19).

"The murderers themselves have already passed sentence on themselves and will never escape it; but may You carry out a sentence, a doubly severe one, upon those who are covering the murder up.

"Those who condemn the murder with their mouths, but rejoice at it in their hearts.

"Those who figure in their foul hearts: It is fitting, of course, to say that he is evil, this tyrant, but he does carry out a bit of work for us for which we will always be grateful to him.

"It is written in Your Torah that a thief should be punished more severely than a brigand, despite the fact that a thief does not attack his victim physically and merely attempts to take his possessions by stealth.

"The reason is that the brigand attacks his victim in broad daylight, and has as much fear of people as he has fear of God.

"But the thief has fear of people, but not of God, and therefore his punishment is a greater one than the brigand's.

"It would not bother me if You dealt with the murderers as with brigands, for their attitude toward You and toward us is the same, and they make no secret of their murder and their crime.

"But those who are silent in the face of murder, those who have no fear of You, but fear what people might say (fools! they are unaware that people will say nothing!), those who express their sympathy with the drowning man but refuse to rescue him -- them, oh them, I implore You, God, them You should punish like thieves!

"Death can wait no longer, and I must finish my writing. From the floors above me, the firing is growing weaker by the minute. The last defenders of this stronghold are now falling, and with them falls and perishes great, beautiful, God-fearing Jewish Warsaw. The sun is about to set, and I thank God that I will never see it again. The red glow of conflagrations comes in through the little window, and the bit of sky that I can see is red and turbulent like a waterfall of blood. In about an hour at the most I will be with the rest of my family and with millions of other dead members of my people in that better world where there are no more doubts, and where God is the only tangible ruler.

"I die peacefully, but not complacently; persecuted, but not enslaved; embittered, but not disappointed; a believer, but not a supplicant; a lover of God, but no blind amen-sayer of His.

"I have followed Him even when He repulsed me. I have followed His commandment even when He has struck me for it; I have loved Him, I have been and remain in love with Him, even when He has hurled me to the ground, tortured me to death, made me an object of shame and ridicule.

"My rebbe would always tell a story about a Jew who fled with his wife and child from the Spanish Inquisition, striking out in a small boat across a stormy sea to a rocky island. There came a lightning bolt and killed his wife; there came a storm and hurled his son into the sea. Alone, lonely as a stone, naked and barefoot, beaten by the storm and terrified by the thunder and lightning, with disheveled hair and hands turned up to God, the Jew set out once again on his way on the desolate rocky island, and turned to God with the following words:

"`God of Israel, I have fled here in order to be able to serve You undisturbed, to follow Your commandments and make Your name holy; You, however, do everything to stop me from believing in You. Now lest it should occur to You that You will succeed by these temptations in driving me from the right path, I notify You, my God and the God of my parents; that it will not avail You in the least. You may insult me, You may strike me, You may take away from me all the dearest and best that I have in the world, You may torture me to death -- I will always believe in You. I will always love You, always -- just to spite You!"

"And these are my last words to You, my wrathful God: Nothing will avail You in the least! You have done everything to disappoint me in You, to make me not believe in You -- I die, however, exactly as I have lived, an unshakable believer in You.

"Praised be forever the God of the dead, the God of vengeance, of truth and of law, Who will soon show His face to the world again and shake its foundations with His almighty voice.

"Shmay Yisroeyl! Adoshem Elokeynu Adoshem Echod!^l "Biyodekho Adoshem afkid rukhi!"^m

Afterword

Zvi Kolitz, born in Lithuania in 1918, wrote Yossel Rakover's Appeal to God in a room in the City Hotel in Buenos Aires, in the late summer of 1946. It was completed in a matter of days (and nights), between the speaking engagements that were an important part of Kolitz's business in Argentina, where he had traveled in 1946, after attending the World Zionist Congress. Kolitz was acting as the representative of the Zionist Revisionist Movement founded by Vladimir (Zev) Jabotinsky, of which he had become a member in the middle thirties. His task was to find support in the large Jewish community of Buenos Aires for what was to become the State of Israel. Requested by Mordechai Stoliar, the editor of *Di Yiddishe Tsaytung* (also known locally as *El Diario Israelita*), the story was published in the Tuesday, September 25, 1946, issue of that little newspaper, with a view to the upcoming Yom Kippur observances.

The next year, in 1947, an English version appeared in New York City; it was part of a collection of Kolitz's essays and stories entitled *Tiger Beneath the Skin: Stories and Parables of the Years of Death*, published by Creative Age Press. The Jewish author Shmuel Katz, then living in London, had been the translator; but he had also taken the liberty of editing the text, not only by adopting many non-Jewish religious idioms more accessible to Christians, but also, far less pardonably, by omitting ten passages. Some of these are quite sizable; several of them are either potentially offensive to Christians or theologically unpalatable to non-Orthodox Jews (including, presumably, the translator himself). Interestingly, the majority of these editorial modifications and omissions did not come to the attention of Zvi Kolitz himself till well over forty years later, in 1989. By that time, Albert Friedlander had further edited the English version,⁽ⁿ¹⁾ and included it in his 1968 anthology *Out of*

the Whirlwind: A Reader in Holocaust Literature.⁽ⁿ²⁾ It is in this sharply attenuated form that the story has become famous in the United States.

Long before these developments, however, the original Yiddish text had traveled to Israel. In 1953, an unknown Argentinean Jew had sent it in typescript to *Di Goldene Keyt*, the Yiddish quarterly edited by the well-known Yiddish poet Avrum Sutzkever, without, however, including the epigraph at the head of the story or, for that matter, the author's name: the piece, now anonymous, was simply subtitled "A Will from the Warsaw Ghetto." Sutzkever accepted its historical authenticity without question and went on to publish it.⁽ⁿ³⁾ Three consequences attach to this publication.

First, when the piece first appeared in Buenos Aires, it had been clearly billed as "a story," and its author's name had prominently figured on the first page.⁽ⁿ⁴⁾ With the publication in *Di Goldene Keyt*, the link between Zvi Kolitz and the story was broken. As a result, its protagonist, Yossel Rakover, began to lead a life of his own, at least in Israel and the literary world connected with it. Thus, when Mordecai Eliav's anthology *Ani Mamin* ("I Believe")⁽ⁿ⁵⁾ was published a little over ten years after Yossel Rakover's first appearance in Israel, the modern Hebrew version it contained was simply listed, in the table of contents, anonymously, as "a will"⁽ⁿ⁶⁾ Interestingly, though, the French translation of the Yiddish text published in *Di Goldene Keyt*, prepared by Arnold Mandel and published in Paris on March 15, 1955, in the French Zionist newspaper *La Terre Retrouvée*, was preceded by an editorial note attributing the text to "an unknown author": Good literary judgment had obviously concluded that the piece, while anonymous, was not an authentic document from the Warsaw Ghetto uprising (which took place in April 1943), but a piece of fiction. This French version attracted the notice of the Lithuanian-French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who devoted a radio broadcast to it on April 19, 1955, under the title *To Love the Torah More than God*.⁽ⁿ⁷⁾ But a few months before, in January 1955, Radio Free Berlin had broadcast the text, in a German translation by Anna Maria Jokl, as an authentic document found in the rubble of the Warsaw Ghetto. It was hailed by no less a person than Thomas Mann as "a stunning human and religious document," and the German author Rudolf Kramer-Badoni was so moved that he wrote a poignant reply to Yossel Rakover (whose ashes, he suspected, were still among the ashes of Warsaw), which culminated in the words: "I have just read your letter. How great must your God be, given that He brings to birth such souls in human beings!" The broadcast was repeated nine months later, except that Zvi Kolitz was now acknowledged as the story's author. Jokl's German version was published in 1956;⁽ⁿ⁸⁾ many years later, it appeared in book form in a splendid edition containing three original linocuts

^l "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One" (Deuteronomy 6:4; Hebrew).

^m "Into Your hands, O Lord, I commit my spirit" (Hebrew; cf. Psalm 31:6). In the Gospel according to Luke, these are Jesus' last words on the cross (Luke 23:46).

by Jan Uhrynowics, as well as a colophon stating (incorrectly) that Zvi Kolitz had written the original version in 1945 and (correctly) that it had appeared in "a Jewish daily paper in Buenos Aires in 1946."([n9](#))

As early as the middle fifties Kolitz had begun to protest that he was the author;([n10](#)) his claim, however, was overlooked or ignored: by now, the appealing notion that the piece was authentic was obviously outrunning the news that it was a wonderful piece of fiction. Only in recent years has Kolitz's authorship become firmly established, to the disappointment, and even resentment, of some, or so it would seem. More than once, the author's motives have been called into question: there have been those who have accused Zvi Kolitz of a deliberate forgery --of passing off, right from the start, a text he knew to be fictitious as an authentic document from the Warsaw ghetto, thus adding to the credibility of recent neofascist claims that the Holocaust never happened, or at least that it did not happen in the form in which it is known to have happened. This explains why, as recently as June 3, 1993, the well-known Israeli writer Chaim Be'er, in an article in the Israeli newspaper Ha'Aretz, could deplore the fact that "the most shattering and terrifying piece to emerge from the Holocaust was a fake." Fortunately, the statement was retracted a few weeks later, at the insistence of the German journalist Paul Badde, who six weeks before had published, in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Magazin of April 23, 1993, a moving feature article on Zvi Kolitz, followed by an almost-complete German translation of the Yiddish version that had appeared in Buenos Aires in 1946, in Di Yiddishe Tsaytung, under Kolitz's name.

Secondly, the Yiddish version published in Di Goldene Keyt significantly differs from the original published in Di Yiddishe Tsaytung. It contains numerous changes, most of them lexical and stylistic. In the case of five passages, it introduces simplifications and omissions; none of these changes substantially alters the tenor of the piece. It is unclear whether these modifications were the work of the unknown person who first sent the text to Avrum Sutzkever, or of the Yiddishist Sutzkever himself; perhaps both had a hand in them.

In any case, since 1954, Zvi Kolitz's story has existed in two textual traditions, one in English, deriving from the version in Tiger Beneath the Skin, and one in German, French, and modern Hebrew, deriving from the Yiddish version in Di Goldene Keyt. In both traditions, however, the text has been incomplete, albeit in different ways.

The fullest English translation of the Yossel Rakover story available thus far is the reconstruction published in 1989 by F. J. van Beeck in his Loving the Torah More than God?([n11](#)) Van Beeck was unacquainted with the German edition published in 1985, and hence, with the claim that the story had first appeared in Buenos Aires in 1946. Accordingly, he had interpreted Zvi Kolitz's 1972 statement in Shdemot([n12](#)) as implying that the English version published in New York in 1947, in Tiger Beneath the Skin, was the original. This had led him to hypothesize, after careful comparisons between the English and the Yiddish and French versions, not only that the Yiddish text was a translation from the English, but also that it had "undergone a process of revision." And he had added:

This is understandable. A story like Kolitz's, appealing, as it does, to such a deeply neuralgic theme as the Holocaust, is likely to elicit passionate responses, and hence, it will invite commentary. That is to say, at the hands of an editor, it will invite editorializing, and at the hands of a translator, it will invite expansion. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Yiddish version shows both: the anonymous translator availed himself of his freedom in order to introduce seven major expansions as well as a large number of relatively small changes.([n13](#))

Not until 1993, the year in which Argentinean Jesuit Father Oscar Lateur succeeded, at the German journalist Paul Badde's direction, in locating the original version in Buenos Aires, did it become clear that the hypothesis proposed by van Beeck was false; what he took to be anonymous editorial expansions of a text originally written and published in English in New York City in 1947 have turned out to be, in fact, integral parts of a text originally written in Yiddish and published under Zvi Kolitz's own name in Buenos Aires, in Di Yiddishe Tsaytung, in 1946. Careful comparison shows that this Yiddish original not only fully accounts for all the discrepancies between the English version of 1947 and the anonymous Yiddish version of 1954, but also that it contains passages not found in either of the two textual traditions to which these two versions have given rise. The recovery of the original, therefore, has also brought to light that van Beeck's reconstruction is incomplete. But it has also made it possible, at long last, to prepare an English translation faithful to what Zvi Kolitz wrote in 1946, when he tried to imagine how a faithful Jew caught in the horror of the Holocaust (whose true dimensions were just then beginning to dawn upon the West) would have spoken to his God.

Notes

[\(n1.\)](#) *For the probable agenda implicit in the editorial changes, cf. F. J. van Beeck, Loving the Torah More than God?, 87-88.*

[\(n2.\)](#) *New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1968.*

[\(n3.\)](#) *Di Goldene Keyt 18 (1954): 102-10.*

[\(n4.\)](#) *The heading of the English translation published here reproduces in different format the contents of the original heading.*

[\(n5.\)](#) *Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1965.*

[\(n6.\)](#) *Pp. 213-18; p. 7.*

[\(n7.\)](#) *"Aimer la Thora plus que Dieu," published later on in Difficile liberte: Essais sur le judaisme (3rd ed., Paris: Albin Michel, 1976), 189-93; English translation and commentary in F. J. van Beeck, Loving the Torah More than God?, 31-53.*

[\(n8.\)](#) *Neue Deutsche Hefte 2 (1955-56): 756-64. Details about this German version borrowed from Paul Badde's article in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Magazin mentioned below.*

[\(n9.\)](#) *Zvi Kolitz, Jossel Rackower spricht zu Gott, unter Mithilfe von David Kohan ausdem Jiddischen tibersetzt von Anna Maria Jokl (Neu-Isenburg: Verlag Tiessen, 1985).*

[\(n10.\)](#) *For an example, cf. the English translation of a passage in Zvi Kolitz's letter to the editor of the Israeli periodical Shdemot, 1971-72, No. 45, 91ff., in F. J. van Beeck, Loving the Torah More than God?, 86-87. Note, however, that in this letter Kolitz calls Yossel Rakover "an original story which I wrote and published about twenty years ago in New York" -- an ambiguous phrase that may give rise to misunderstanding. For instance, it led F. J. van Beeck to conclude that the story was originally written in English.*

[\(n11.\)](#) *Pp. 13-26.*

[\(n12.\)](#) *Cf. n. 12.*

[\(n13.\)](#) *Loving the Torah More than God?, 10-11.*

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By Zvi Kolitz

A new Translation with Afterword by JEFFRY V. MALLOW and FRANS JOZEF VAN BEECK

ZVI KOLITZ, still writing stories, lives in New York City. The translation from the Yiddish and the afterword were prepared with his encouragement and are printed here with his permission. JEFFRY V. MALLOW, professor of physics at Loyola University, Chicago, chairs the Chicago Chapter of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. FRANS JOZEF VAN BEECK is Cardinal Cody Professor of Theology at Loyola and author of *Loving the Torah More than God? Toward a Catholic Appreciation of Judaism* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1989). This translation and its afterword are scheduled to appear in a book of essays and responses, to be published by KTAV.

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