

Ms.
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00694

Grade, Chaim
Papers, 1970s-1980s

Chaim Grade papers

Gift of Annette Robicsek (daughter of Morris Gruda)

Extent: 1 box (12.5 centimetres)

Includes correspondence (mostly copies) of Yiddish writers Chaim Grade (1910-1982), Morris Gruda (1919-) and Leon Eisner, 1960s-1980s. Also includes print material about Chaim Grade and some unidentified black and white photographs of Grade and others. Most material is in Yiddish.

Biographical note from www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Grade_Chaim :

Chaim Grade (1910-1982), Yiddish poet and novelist ranks among the most important Yiddish writers of the post-Holocaust period. His unsentimental depictions of rabbinic high culture and life on the Jewish streets of Vilna both describe memorable characters drawn from different strata of society, and dramatize the contest of ideas and moral impulses that defined his community in the interwar period. Though today Grade is best remembered for the richness of his prose, he is also the author of nine volumes of poetry.

Grade was born in Vilna, where his father, an outspoken *maskil* (enlightener) and Hebraist who clashed with the rabbinic authorities, died when Chaim was a young boy. The writer's mother, Vella, who is the heroine of many of his poems and stories, sold apples in the city's alleys to eke out a living; she and Grade lived in poverty in a blacksmith's cellar. Beginning at the age of 13, Grade was shuffled between various outposts of the Novaredok Musar yeshiva, receiving a particularly extreme form of religious education that strove to educate the moral personality through self-abnegation and intense self-analysis. Though Grade excelled as a student, he was denounced for secretly reading secular literature and for trying his hand at poetry. He was also deeply influenced by his experience as a student of Avraham Yesha'yahu Karelits, better known as Hazon Ish, the outstanding Talmudic scholar who was beloved in Vilna due to his scholarship, modesty and compassion. Much of Grade's later writing negotiates his conflicted allegiances to the models of his maskilic father and orthodox teachers.

At age 22, Grade abandoned his studies to embark on a career as a secular poet. This sudden shift away from the extreme moral education of the Musa movement provoked constant introspection. He wrote in one lyric, "I see in my weakness the pain of my generation and its shame." Grade soon found companionship and inspiration within the ranks of Yung-Vilne (Young Vilna), a Yiddish literary group that sought to synthesize secular Jewish culture, progressive politics, and influences from world literature. His breakthrough came with the publication of *Yo* (*Yes*; 1936), a volume that included intimate lyrics about his family (his mother is held up as a model of pious devotion), leftist political lyrics, metapoetic works that explore his poetic calling, and the cycle *Ezekiel* that attracted attention for its apocalyptic prophetic voices. The volume's title poem was an act of defiance designed to proclaim the poet's creative independence from clerical coercion by his adoption of an entirely new affirmative vocabulary: "Yes! That is the answer of my youth when it needs to escape from its own skin ... "

The epic narrative poem *Musernikes* (*Musarists*; 1939) explored the education of students in the Novaredok yeshiva through the semiautobiographical figure of Khayim Vilner. Its melancholy,

sometimes terrifying, portrait of the struggle for moral perfection was composed in the language of the study house, a rich pastiche of Yiddish and Hebrew-Aramaic. The students' confrontations with their teachers and the outside world, and the intensity of their wrestling with their individual lusts and spiritual self-doubt, provide one of the finest windows into this corner of Jewish spiritual life in all of Yiddish literature. The Yidisher Kultur Farband (Yiddish Culture Association; YKUF) in New York acknowledged the volume with a prestigious award, immediately propelling Grade into the leading ranks of young Yiddish writers.

The Soviet occupation of Vilna was a particularly precarious time for Grade and his young wife, Frumelibe, who was the daughter of Zionists. Local Jewish communists were eager to denounce the couple to punish Grade for his rejection of the radical cause in his lyrics and personal politics. However, when the Nazis marched on Vilna in June 1941, Grade fled to the Soviet interior, believing that the Germans would not harm women. Both his wife and mother were killed. In 1945, he published *Doyres (Generations)*, an anthology that included the poems previously published in *Yo* and *Musernikes*, and also more recent poems of rage and raw memorialization of lost family and friends. Grade remained in Soviet Central Asia until 1946, then lived briefly in Poland and Paris, where he helped revive Yiddish cultural life. In 1947, he published *Farvoksene vegn (Overgrown Paths)*, whose title underscores the poet's desire to recover those people and places that the forces of history had already begun to cover over. That same year he published a volume of poems composed in the Soviet Union *Pleytim (Refugees)*, that included the section "Mit dayn guf oyf mayne hent" (With Your Body in My Hands), dedicated to his murdered wife. Through the expression of personal loss, he gave voice to national tragedy and collective mourning, emerging as one of the defining Yiddish voices of a postwar canon of writing that would later come to be known as Holocaust literature.

Grade married his second wife, Inna Hecker, and immigrated to the United States in 1948. His major collections of postwar poems about Vilna and Polish Jewry include *Der mames tsavoe (My Mother's Will; 1949)* and *Shayn fun farloshene shtern (The Glow of Extinguished Stars; 1950)*, the latter of which offered lyrics about former shtetls in Poland, Ezekiel in Auschwitz, the pogrom in Kielce in 1946, and a metaphysical exploration of memory in "Der gilgl fun ruinen" ("The Gilgul of the Ruins"). *Der mentsh fun fayer (The Man of Fire; 1962)* includes a moving elegy for the murdered Soviet Yiddish writers, lyrics about the American landscape, and the haunting voice of the dead who impress upon him the obligation to keep their memory alive. The volume *Af mayn veg tsu dir (On My Way to You; 1969)* offers redemptive impressions of the Israeli landscape.

Grade's turn to prose after his arrival in America carved out the creative space he needed to portray the lost world of his youth and young adulthood in more expansive detail. His novels and stories capture the moral pitch and material condition of Lithuanian Jewry, dramatize ideas, probe spiritual struggles, and explore simple acts of piety and charity among ordinary Jews.

Grade took up the theme of his break with Musar twice after the war as a way to continue his exploration of the tension between religious faith and skepticism. In the philosophical essay "Mayn krig mit Hersh Raseyner" (1951; translated as "My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseyner"), an accidental meeting between two survivors provides the setting for one of the most pitched debates about the nature of identity in all of Jewish fiction. The Holocaust has only reinforced the humanism of the secular Yiddish writer, Khayim Vilner, and the strict religious observance of his former Musar teacher, Hersh Rasseyner.

Hersh contends that in light of the destruction of European Jewry the question should not be how people of faith can continue to believe in God but rather how secularists can continue to believe in human beings. His attacks are countered by Khayim's criticism of the Musar movement's demand that its adherents withdraw from the world, and its contention that independent of the Torah all human beings will eventually be led down a path of degeneracy. The monumental, two-volume novel *Tsemach Atlas* (1967-1968; translated as *The Yeshiva*) is Grade's richest work about the Musar world and its attempt to shape the ethical personality. Through the memorable character of Tsemakh Atlas, a tortured teacher of Musar who is trapped between its self-abnegating demands, the enticements of the secular world, and his own elemental desires, readers enter a universe of high religious ideals, intellectual and moral debate, and intense spiritual struggle.

The memoir *Der mames shabosim* (1955; translated as *My Mother's Sabbath Days*) uses personal experience as the basis for collective history and memorialization. Its three sections include vivid details about the material and political life of Vilna Jewry in the late 1930s as filtered through the life of his mother, the story of Grade's own experiences as a war refugee in the Soviet Union, and a haunting description of his return to a landscape of destruction after the war. Though Grade's other prose works also explore the traditional world of Lithuanian Jewry, they are more focused on capturing the day-to-day experience of ordinary Jews. The three novellas of *Der Shulhoyf* (*The Synagogue Courtyard*; 1958) contrast the dire material condition of Vilna's working poor against the beauty of their simple piety. *Di agune* (1961; translated as *The Agunah*) and the stories of *Di Kloytz und di gas* (*The Study House and the Street*; 1974; translated as *Rabbis and Wives*, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize) and *Der stumer minyen* (*The Mute Prayer Quorum*; 1976) explore the coexistence of the sacred and the profane in everyday prewar Jewish life. Through depictions of religious scholars caught up in their own vanities and ambitions, folk superstition, earthy, practical women, eager merchants, and fiery revolutionaries, Grade emerged as the most important prose elegist of Vilna Jewry, one who reveled in mining its social complexities. At the time of his sudden death in 1982 he was at work on an unfinished novel about his hometown on the precipice of its destruction.

Morris (Moishe) Gruda (1919-)

Morris Gruda is a well-known Yiddish poet and essayist, whose work appeared frequently in *The Algemeiner Journal*. Author of the autobiographical Holocaust memoir *Tricks of Fate: Escape, Survival and Rescue, 1939-1945*, third volume in a series of Holocaust histories and memoirs launched last year by the Holocaust Centre of Toronto, his voice and experience add an important chapter to this history.

Gruda was born in Rozhan, Poland, a small shtetl near Warsaw. His father was a shoe-maker and his mother ran a successful bakery from home. He was trained as a ladies tailor, completing his apprenticeships by 1939. Almost immediately the Nazis began bombing Poland. During the Nazi invasion of Poland, the family fled to Russia, moving to different towns seeking work. Morris eventually served in the Russian military corps building rail lines for the war. While serving in the corps, he managed to acquire a sewing machine and made extra money with private tailoring for the officers. This allowed him to buy food and survive. Gruda lost his mother and two sisters to starvation and illness. He was able to locate his father, youngest sister and niece. They returned to Poland after the war, but finding life difficult managed to emigrate to Canada.

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Box 1 17 folders	Correspondence, photographs and print
Folder 1	7 unidentified black and white photographs of Chaim Grade and others
Folder 2	Chaim Grade correspondence with Morris Gruda 1970s-1980s
Folders 3-5	Correspondence with Chaim Grade, Morris Gruda and Leon Eisner, 1970s
Folders 6-8	Chaim Grade correspondence, 1970s-1980s
Folders 9-13	Correspondence, 1970s
Folder 14	Copy of clipping from <i>The Forward</i> January 4, 1970
Folders 15-16	Chaim Grade – articles and print about
Folder 17	Donation acknowledgement to Ms. Eisner from YIVO, 2007