

MRS. MAZA'S SALON

Miriam Waddington

IN THE FALL OF 1930 when I was twelve my family moved to Ottawa from Winnipeg. The reason was this: my father had lost his small sausage-making and meat-curing factory to a partner in a lawsuit. The world was then in the grip of the great depression, and the west had been especially hard hit. My father had the idea of starting a small sausage factory in Ottawa, and since there seemed nothing else to do, my parents rented out our Winnipeg house, sold the piano, packed us children into the car and set out.

The whole family was unhappy about the move. My parents were secular Jews who had emigrated from Russia in the early years of the century before the First World War. They had met and married in Winnipeg and were firmly integrated in the circle of secular Jews who had founded a Yiddish day school and named it after the famous Yiddish writer, Y. L. Peretz. In Winnipeg my father and mother had led a busy social life and had many close friends. They went to meetings and lectures almost every night and they had family-friend dinners on Friday nights in winter and went picnicking or camping with other families in summer.

In Ottawa it was a different story. There were very few non-observant Jews and even fewer Jews who had, like my parents, made Yiddish language and culture their home and community. It took them some months to find congenial friends, especially since their energies were absorbed by the task of finding a place to live and settling us four children — all under the age of fourteen — into a new school environment.

Their problems in adjusting to this strange and unfamiliar Ottawa community must have affected us children. I know that I mourned the loss of my two best friends until I found a new one with whom I could walk to school, go to the movies, and share my innermost thoughts and feelings. Also, Ottawa in 1930 was still a small city which (with its population of 80,000) seemed like a village compared to Winnipeg. There was some compensation in the fact that Montreal was so close — only 120 miles with frequent two-dollar weekend train excursions. After a year or so, my parents discovered the large Jewish community in Montreal, and we came to know a number of families whom we could visit.

AMONG THEM WAS A YIDDISH POET, Ida Maza. She had published several volumes of poetry and knew all the Yiddish writers and painters in Montreal and New York. Her husband was an agent who represented several manufacturers of men's haberdashery — mostly shirts and ties. His route took him through the small towns between Ottawa and Montreal, and also past Lachute up into the Laurentians. Whenever he was in Ottawa he stayed with us, and he often took me back with him at times when I had no school.

It is hard, if not impossible, to describe Mrs. Maza and what I have come to think of as her salon, without placing her in the social context that I remember from my childhood. For example, my parents and their friends spoke Yiddish among themselves and regularly addressed one another by their surnames. If it was a man, he would be addressed simply as "Maza," and if it was a woman, it would be Mrs. Maza. First names were rare and reserved for close relatives. Similarly, when speaking Yiddish — which is an inflected language — they used the polite form of "you," never the intimate "thou."

Mrs. Maza was what is called a *jolie laide*. She looked Japanese and emphasized her oriental exoticism with her hairdo, her carriage, and her way of walking and dressing. She had thick black hair which she piled up around her face in interesting twists and turns like doughnuts and buns. Her colouring was that of the native girls in Gauguin's paintings, and like theirs, her cheekbones were wide apart and prominent. Her eyes were large and dark and somehow Mongolian in feeling. She was small in stature and slight in build, and always wore long kimono-like dresses with sashes and wide sleeves into which she would often tuck her hands. Her shoes were simple low-heeled slipper affairs, and she walked with small shuffling steps, for all the world as if her feet had been bound. She had a beautiful low voice, full of dark rich tones, and a chanting trance-like way of talking. Most of the time she was serious and melancholy in mood, but every now and again she would break into short little bursts of soft chuckling laughter. This was usually when she was with her husband whom she always treated with tender affection. She sometimes liked to tease and jolly him because he took everything to heart with a childlike seriousness.

Looking back I realize she was a highly intelligent woman full of cleverness and wisdom. She had been born in a village in White Russia and had been brought to Montreal while she was still a child. Since she had lived most of her life in Montreal, she spoke English with only a slight accent.

I met Mrs. Maza when I was fourteen. I had been writing poetry for about four years and my mother must have mentioned it because Mrs. Maza at once offered to read my work. I showed it to her hesitatingly, and with fear, because she was not just a teacher but a real writer. She praised it and at once took charge of my reading, urging me to Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sara Teasdale,

Vachel Lindsay, Conrad Aiken, and Yeats. Occasionally she would read me one of her own Yiddish poems; I listened but I confess that I didn't give her poems my fullest attention. Most of them were children's poems, playful and tender; or else they dealt with the relationship between mothers and children, not a subject of great interest to a girl of fifteen. I have since gone back to read Ida Maza's poems with an adult eye, and find them full of warmth and a lyrical charm that manages to shine through even a rough translation. For example, here is her *Spring Secrets*:

Spring wears a yellow cap
and a green gown,
and spreads a fresh apron
on every lawn.

She leans on the wind,
inclines to his voice,
then bobs up and down,
and curtsies twice.

She looks at the sun,
and turns her head —
confides to her neighbor
*Winter is dead!*¹

Or, to take another, *Thieves*:

Tu whitt here,
tu whee there,
someone's in
the cherry tree,
is it one or
a pair?

Two little thieves
with fluttering wings,
who like to eat lots
of nourishing things,

So not a cherry
is left for me,
those mean little thieves!
tu whitt tu whee.²

In the next two or three years I often stayed with the Mazas during my Christmas and Easter holidays. They lived in a third floor walk-up on Esplanade. The building was old and resembled a tenement. It contained a buzzing hive of small apartments that you entered through an enclosed courtyard. It faced east and looked across a small park to the Jewish Old People's Home, and just down the street, also on Esplanade, was the Jewish People's Library which served as a lively community centre for lectures and educational programs.

The staircase leading up to the Maza apartment was narrow and dark. Once inside, however, the front room was bright and colourful, the walls covered with paintings and the furniture draped in East European embroideries and weavings. The furniture consisted of a small sofa and two mission oak chairs sternly upholstered in brown leather. There was a matching oak library table loaded with books, and more books were encased in glass on the shelves of an oak bookcase. A long skinny hallway led from the front room to the kitchen past two bedrooms that branched off to one side. On the way to the kitchen, and before you reached it, there was a dining room with a round table in the middle, surrounded by chairs. There was also a sideboard, and what was probably the most important and most used piece of furniture in the house, something called a Winnipeg couch — but by Mrs. Maza and her friends, it was referred to as a lounge, and pronounced *lontch*. On this couch her husband took his Sunday afternoon naps and in the evenings visiting poets and painters sat on it two or three abreast, listening to poetry being read out loud by one of them, or on occasion trying out new ideas for publishing a magazine or a manifesto. Or else they discussed new books and just gossiped. The reason they sat in the dining room instead of the front sitting room, I now realize as I write about it, was that it was close to the kitchen, that universal, non pareil source of food.

To these artists, most of them middle-aged and impecunious, and all of them immigrants, Mrs. Maza was the eternal mother — the foodgiver and nourisher, the listener and solacer, the mediator between them and the world. There she would sit with hands folded into her sleeves, her face brooding and meditative, listening intently with all her body. As she listened she rocked back and forth, back and forth, and, as it then seemed to me, she did so in time to the rhythm of the poem being read.

She gave herself entirely and attentively to the poem; she fed the spiritual hunger and yearning of these oddly assorted Yiddish writers whenever they needed her; but not only that. She also fed them real food; not just once a week, but every day. She served endless cups of tea with lemon, jam, and sugar lumps; plates of fresh fruit, Jewish egg cookies (*ayerkichel*), home-made walnut strudel, delicately veined marble cake, and for the really hungry there were bowls of barley soup, slices of rye bread thickly buttered, and eggs — countless eggs — boiled, omeletted, and scrambled. I never knew her to serve anyone, including her family, a conventional meal from beginning to end; but she was always making someone an egg or opening a can of salmon or slicing a tomato to go with a plate of pickled herring.

WHO WERE THESE YIDDISH WRITERS and painters? Some were occasional visitors brought from New York or Israel to give a lecture in Montreal. If I ever knew their names I have forgotten most of them, but there is

one writer I remember well. She was Kadja Molodowski, a Yiddish poet from Warsaw living in New York. She wrote many children's poems, and one poem, *Der Mantel* ("the coat") was a masterpiece, read and loved by Jewish children everywhere. She had a mild European face that shone with blessedness.

The occasion I remember is Louis Muhlstock's coming to Mrs. Maza's apartment to draw Kadja's portrait. He was very tall and thin with a mop of dark hair and an animated rosy face. He was a well-known painter even then, although he couldn't have been more than twenty-three or -four. He set up his easel in the front room, unrolled his paper, tacked it up, and in the most relaxed way he began to draw and talk, talk and draw. Kadja talked too, and laughed, and told funny stories — and neither of them minded the awkward fifteen-year-old girl who sat there watching.

Of the poets who lived in Montreal and frequented Mrs. Maza's salon, Y. Y. Segal was the most outstanding. He was a prolific writer, well known in the Yiddish literary world, and had already published many books. At the time I stayed with the Mazas, Segal was on the staff of the Yiddish newspaper *Der Kanader Adler* ("the Canadian Eagle") and was also giving Yiddish lessons to children.

A number of other poets also frequented Mrs. Maza's. Moshe Shaffir, Shabsi Perl, Esther Segal — the sister of Y. Y. Segal — Gottlieb, Yudika, and one or two other women poets. Some of the writers worked in factories and lived lonely lives in rooming houses. One of them wrote a poem with an image that has stayed with me to this day. He likened his heart to the empty untidiness of an unmade bed. At the time I thought the metaphor with its image of the unmade bed was so weird that I remembered it for its absurdity. But since it has stayed in my mind for more than fifty years it can't really have been so absurd. The more I think about it, the more it seems to epitomize and sum up the essence of poverty with all its disorder and loneliness.

The image must also have touched a sensitive spot in my own unconscious and that was my ambivalence about my parents' generation of immigrant Jews. At that time I bitterly resented my difference from my Canadian friends whose parents had been born in Canada of English background, and who spoke without an accent. How could it have been otherwise when Canadian society during the twenties and thirties brainwashed every school child with British Empire slogans, and promoted a negative stereotype of all East European immigrants, but especially of Jews. Moreover, during all my primary school years, the phrase "dirty Jew" had regularly been hurled at me from the street corners and back alleys of North Winnipeg. Later, when I attended Lisgar Collegiate in Ottawa, I also sensed a certain disdain directed towards Jews, a disdain equalled only by that felt for French Canadians in those days. Perhaps it was no accident that the girl who became my bosom friend was French. She was also from a minority within her social group because

her parents were that rare thing — French-speaking Protestants. Her mother came from an old clerical Huguenot family in France and her father was the son of a well-to-do converted Catholic who had quarrelled with the priest in his small Quebec village.

I was not very conscious in those adolescent years of the nature and source of my ambivalence and conflicts — but they manifested themselves in vague feelings of uneasiness and guilt and an awkward sense of always being a stranger in both worlds and not belonging fully to either. It was to take me many years to come to a positive and even joyous acceptance of my Russian Jewishness — in short of my differences, ones that I had inherited and had little choice in creating. Ambivalence, I now realize, also tinged my admiration and fondness for Mrs. Maza and her circle. I often felt uneasy at what I thought of as their exaggerated feelings, or at any rate, their exaggerated expression of those feelings.

I didn't see Mrs. Maza only when I visited Montreal on school holidays. For several years our families spent part of each summer together near St. Sauveur in the Laurentians. The Mazas would rent an old farmhouse, and my parents would camp somewhere not far away. Mrs. Maza loved the gentle contours of the mountains and the way the changing light continually moved up and down their slopes. And there was always a little river — hardly more than a creek — in the neighbourhood of her house. It was good for wading in the shallows, but we children wanted to be near a lake where we could swim. Failing that, we had to amuse ourselves by hunting for mushroom puffballs in the farmer's pasture or climbing up the mountain to pick raspberries.

Sometimes I would wander over to the Maza's house at four o'clock when the humming heat hung over the afternoon, and would find Mrs. Maza sitting alone on the veranda, her hands folded into her sleeves — she always wore long sleeves even in summer — rocking back and forth and looking very sad. I remember asking her once why she was so sad and she answered in her slow musical voice, making every word count, that today was the anniversary of Jacob Wasserman's death. Thanks to her I already knew who he was, and under her tutelage had read *The Maurizius Case*, *The Goose Girl*, and *Dr Kerkhoven's Third Existence*. There wasn't much I could say, so I sat there dumb as a stone, watching the bees alight on the blue chicory flowers beside the veranda, listening to her as she dramatized Wasserman's unhappy life and mourned for him in sad funereal tones.

And he wasn't the only writer whose anniversary of death she observed; there was Edna St. Vincent Millay, Elinor Wylie, Sara Teasdale, and a long roll call of dead Yiddish writers. She mourned them all, and recounted their tragic lives as well as their artistic triumphs in spite of adversity. She would often read me passages from their work, and sometimes she would ask to see my poems and read them back to me, analyzing and praising and prophesying a good future.

WHEN I THINK BACK TO THOSE SUMMER AFTERNOONS ON her veranda — actually it was a low open balcony in the French-Canadian style — I can still picture her rocking and keening. She radiated a sibylline and mystical quality, and possibly that was the secret of the magnetism that drew so many artists to her Esplanade apartment.

I have still another good memory of those Ottawa years when my parents felt so exiled from their beloved Winnipeg. When it came time for the high holidays, *Rosh Hashonah* and *Yom Kippur*, my parents, the Mazas, and two or three other families all converged to a farmer's house near St. Sauveur — the Lamoureux place. There we stayed for a week or ten days enjoying continual harvest pleasures. Mme. Lamoureux set a long table with huge bowls of food: soup, chicken, beef, vegetables — raw and cooked — apple and blueberry pies, and homegrown Lamoureux pears, apples, and plums. Everyone heaped his or her own plate at these country feasts, and I have no doubt that the grownups, as they strolled along the gravel roads, gave thought in their own way to the year past and the year still to come.

The Lamoureux are long dead and their farm is no longer a landmark; it was long ago absorbed by modernism and the autoroute to the Laurentians. And Mrs. Maza is no longer alive to mark and mourn the anniversaries of the deaths of her favourite writers or the loss of the Lamoureux farm with its harvest bounties that were so happily shared by a group of friends.

But they are all still alive and present in my mind and they keep me company whenever I watch the light change on mountains or pick wild raspberries in some overgrown ditch. Somewhere Mrs. Maza is still urging hungry poets to have a bite to eat, and turning on the light in her dining room to illuminate a crowd of displaced Yiddish writers. And behind them stretches a larger crowd, the long procession of every writer who ever wrote in whatever language.

No matter. Each one paid his individual tribute to the love of language and to its inexhaustible resources: and their traces still linger, marking out the path for all writers still to come.

NOTES

¹ "Spring Secrets," *Wachsen Meine Kinderlach*. Montreal, 1954, p. 80, translated from the Yiddish by Miriam Waddington.

² "Thieves," *Wachsen Meine Kinderlach*. Montreal, 1954, p. 83, translated from the Yiddish by Miriam Waddington.

Biographical note

Ida Maza was born Ida Jukovsky, July 9, 1893, in a small town in White Russia. In 1907 when she was 14, her family emigrated to Canada and settled in Montreal. There she married and had three sons, one of whom died in childhood. During her lifetime

she published three books of poetry, *A Mother, My Children are Growing*, and *New Poems*. In 1954 she was working on three books — *Stories for Children*, *Selected Poems*, and a historical novel about Jewish settlements in White Russia, *Diena*. She died in 1962 and her novel *Diena* was published in 1970, largely through the efforts of the Montreal Yiddish poet, Moshe Shaffir.

THE FIREBIRD

Yar Slavutych

My mother sang to me about the firebird,
The sovereign of heights and magic deeds,
That did not know of grain, or wellspring water,
But in the nighttide pecked at Pleiades.
 At dusk, when tired of playing in the meadow,
 I on my pillow laid me down to rest,
 My mother mellowly her tales narrated,
 And with her gentle hand my head caressed.
“In distant lands, far in a golden kingdom,
In place remote that no man dares to see,
Where ’round about exists no tree, or dwelling,
There stony coffers happiness conceal.
 And at the time when stars bloom in the highest,
 And when the moon suspends its curvéd sword,
 To seek and to unlock the stony coffers
 Through clouds, with golden keys, the firebird soars . . .”
Into the small boy’s soul these words had fallen
As on the dismal hills a spray of sun,
I thought: “This happiness is mine to conquer,
That not to all contrariwise be done.”
 “At night,” I reasoned, “I will fetch the firearm
 Off granddad’s tapestry upon the wall,
 I will espy and I will seize that firebird,
 I will unlock the stony coffers all.”

*Translated from the Ukrainian
by Orysia Ferbey*