The Correspondence Between Kadya Molodowsky and Rokhl Korn

Zelda Kahn Newman, Lehman College, New York

Kadya Molodowsky and Rokhl Korn, two eminent Yiddish writers and poets of the twentieth century, shared similar life events. Their age difference was four years — Molodowsky was born in 1894, while Korn was born in 1898. Both women had resourceful mothers and “enlightened” fathers who were versed in Hebrew. Both women were initially taught at home and later received formal schooling. Their first works were published only two years apart. Korn’s first poem was published in 1918, while Molodowsky’s first work was published in 1920. Both women were attracted in their youth to socialism, as well as Zionism. Korn got married in 1920, while Molodowsky got married in 1921. Like many European Jews, they were displaced during World War I and like many Yiddish writers they gravitated towards Warsaw in the interim war years. For a short time, they were involved with a Communist Yiddish newspaper, but eventually became disillusioned with Communism.

The rise of Nazism in Europe sent the two women in different directions. Molodowsky immigrated to the US in 1935, while Korn remained in Belarus. When the Germans invaded her town, Korn was in Lvov, visiting her daughter. Korn spent the war years on the run, and in a D.P. camp when the war was over. The friends reunited after the war, and their lively correspondence lives on. The Molodowsky archive is housed at the YIVO archive in New York, while Korn’s archive is located at the Jewish library in Montreal.

Their correspondence evokes great curiosity as the following questions come to mind: What was the earliest post-war correspondence like? Did Molodowsky write to Korn while the latter was in a D.P. camp? If she did, what did they talk about? Did they discuss the war years? Did Korn describe her life in the camp?

In 1948, when Korn settled in Montreal, the state of Israel declared its independence. Molodowsky left for Israel that year, seemingly to settle for good. She and her husband returned to the US at least once in the next four years. In 1952, they left Israel permanently. Since no one knows for sure why they did, one wonders if the Korn-Molodowsky correspondence might shed light on this clouded issue.

For the last twenty-two years of her life, Molodowsky lived in New York, while Korn lived in Montreal. The heavy folders in the YIVO archive attest to the fact that the two maintained a dynamic correspondence. Did the women-friends write to each other about the poetry they were composing? Did they share details of their emotional lives? Did they discuss
The political upheavals that surrounded them? — These are some of the questions this investigation is set out to answer. But do the YIVO and Montreal archives hold the keys to these questions and add to the understanding of the relationship between these two women?

The YIVO Archive

The Molodowsky-Korn correspondence found in the YIVO archive spans fifteen years. The letters, written between 1954 and 1969, are found in folders 49-51 of the Molodowsky YIVO archive.

Remarkably, no letters were found that predate 1954. Therefore, if the two women corresponded while Korn was in the D.P. camp in Stockholm, Molodowsky did not preserve these letters. Furthermore, if the two women corresponded during the four years that Molodowsky was in Israel (from 1948-1952), this archive does not hold any letters from these years. Molodowsky was careful to make carbon copies of the letters that she sent out. She obviously had posterity in mind. It is possible that the two women did in fact correspond while Korn was in the D.P. camp and did correspond while Molodowsky was in Israel. The only way to examine this gap was to examine Korn’s collection at the Montreal archive.

As for the letters that Molodowsky did preserve, the YIVO archive has another unexplained gap of four years. There is no correspondence between the women between the years 1955-1958. Essentially, the existing correspondence consists of 160 letters.

One could assume that these two extraordinary women writers would reveal to each other parts of their inner lives, which were concealed from the outside world. However, this assumption turned out to be only partially correct: while Korn had no problem revealing her feelings, Molodowsky rarely made her feelings known. When she did, these tended to be about superficial day-to-day worries. While she hinted at deeper issues, she carefully steered away from being explicit. In the correspondence between these two women writers, an outsider’s view of the Jewish society in Canada (from Korn) and in the US (from Molodowsky) is revealed as well as writer-talk on poetry in general. Interestingly, they rarely discussed their writing in detail. Instead, they simply informed one another when they have finished working on a book, or when they have received an award. They discussed their worries and their illnesses in detail, which in a sense, is evident of their true friendship.

Topics Discussed

I. Women Writers

Both Korn and Molodowsky arrived in the New World as accomplished, known writers. Neither had to fight for recognition; both had an established publishing record. And yet, their
letters reveal a reality, in which women writers were held to a different standard by their (male) fellow writers. An excerpt from a letter written by Korn, (April 7, 1957) addresses this topic: “Even Bashevis, who sharpened his teeth, could find no place to bite. When it comes to women-writers, he depends on special methods to criticize them, as though he wanted to hold them responsible for his personal failures in other phases of [his] life. We forgive the critics their cunning. It means nothing, says nothing. And in general it is akin to the cheek-pinching grown ups do to children.”

II. Svive – The Yiddish Literary Journal

A. Inception of the Journal

The letters dealing with the journal demonstrate Korn’s influence had on the inception of Svive, the literary journal that Molodowsky edited from 1960-1974. In a letter dated October 28, 1958, Korn bemoans the fact that there seems to be no central drive that will encourage and sustain Yiddish literary efforts: “Everything is conspiring against us. We are not even allowed to sink. Over time we are being eaten up by a parasite that stealthily invaded us while we were despairing, and it disturbs the organism like a worm that lies under the bark of a tree.” In Korn’s view, Yiddish writers, no longer subjected to external persecution, were now suffering from a self-inflicted lassitude. This was the “worm under the bark” of the Yiddish tree of life. She saw the need for change and urged Molodowsky to take action. In the aforementioned letter she says: “And that is why we need a periodical and a press that will be run by a group of responsible and non-affiliated people to whom the [Yiddish] word is dear...After all, someone has to do something. ‘It’s burning, Jews, it’s burning.’”

It is impossible to measure the influence of Korn’s exhortations (and encouragement) on Molodowsky. However, nearly a decade later, (July 21, 1969), Molodowsky recalled that Korn’s encouragement was indeed a factor in her decision to take upon herself the editorship of Svive: “Don’t forget that you belong to the small group of co-founders. If not [for your encouragement], how could I have taken upon myself to lift such a mountain?”

Whatever the weight of Korn’s encouragement, in the end, Molodowsky did agree to take on the editorship of Svive. Korn was thrilled. She was effusive in her praise, not just for the literary quality of the journal, but also in her praise of Molodowsky’s personal effort. In a letter dated January 1, 1960, she says about Svive: “It is healthy, the healthiest plan in our sick times. May it have good fortune and blessing.” In addition, she sends the name and address of a subscriber from Montreal, and urges Molodowsky to “send them the first issue right away.” Over the years, Korn was constantly on the lookout for potential readers of and subscribers to Svive. She encountered them while traveling on planes and trains, and sometimes even in conversation
at social events. Each time she carefully noted the addresses and forwarded them to Molodowsky.

Two months later, in a letter dated March 22, 1960, Korn showered Molodowsky with praise: “I’m amazed at you, Kadya. In addition to your wonderful talent and extraordinary wisdom, you have courage and energy.” And again, when Molodowsky complained of the difficulties involved with getting the journal out, Korn remarked (November 8, 1960): “Do you remember how I urged you to put out the journal no matter what? I do not regret it, and probably you yourself don’t regret it, despite the difficulties.”

Molodowsky was surprised and delighted with the response to the new journal. Apparently, its success exceeded her expectations. In September of that year she writes to Korn: “We should be congratulated. Svive has elicited a very good response in our sleepy, dejected literature-world. It’s simply a miracle. In the book business of New York, it is considered a “best seller”…People are buying Svive. They come, but not in the hundreds. No one stands in line, no one is banging down the door, but a few tens of copies are already on their way.”

For all its popular success, the Yiddish establishment did not immediately herald Svive, or so Molodowsky maintained. It is impossible to know which “cultural organizations” Molodowsky was referring to in the following passage. Nevertheless, it is clear that in her estimation, the “establishment” was more interested in dwelling on the past than in recognizing and encouraging contemporary creativity. She wrote to Korn: “It is interesting to note that our culture-institutions did not even raise an eyebrow over Svive. As long as they discuss “treasures” [of the past]…”

Molodowsky mentioned in a letter to Korn later that year that a social event even netted twenty-two more subscribers. By now, she felt she had every reason to be optimistic: “In general, it’s a good beginning,” she said. Molodowsky also wanted an engaged reading public. She was hurt when one subscriber put a check in an envelope and made no comment. About the incident Molodowsky said to Korn: “Emmanuel Nayman sent a naked check - without a good morning.” Evidently, Masha Roskies did so too, and Molodowsky relates: “I will write to her and demand a letter.”

Two years later, on January 5, 1962, Molodowsky told Korn that getting people to renew their subscription to Svive was a tedious business. Using the format of the tkhines, the Yiddish prayers for women, Molodowsky fashioned a mock-prayer for the welfare of the journal, playfully suggesting that Korn say the prayer using the following words: “Oh, Lord of the Universe, look around at your world, at those who pray in prose and also in poetry, at those who fly around among the stars and those who flutter between flowers and grasses, and those who have gathered around [the journal] Svive. Help them in your great kindness.”
Both women were well aware of the mockery that traditional *tkhines* had suffered under the withering satire of male critics. Molodowsky herself had used the *tkhines* format to fashion serious poetry. Here she willingly adopted the format but adapted its content to fashion a heartfelt wish for the continuing success of *Svive*.

The last dated letter from Korn to Molodowsky is from 1969; there were no letters from 1970 in the archives. In folder 51, there are eleven letters from Korn that follow this one, but none is dated. These occasionally note the day of the week, e.g., “Wednesday” or “erev shabes”, but there is no specific date. In one of these, at a time when *Svive* had been out for nearly a decade, Korn gives Molodowsky her estimation of the journal: “It is a fine journal, the best on the American continent, as *Di Goldene Keyt* is in Israel.” Considering the superior quality of writing that found its way to *Di Goldene Keyt*, the Yiddish-language journal edited by Avrohom Sutzkever, the Yiddish literary giant of the 20th century, Korn’s compliment is impressive.

B. The Power Invested in “Editorial Pants”

Melech Ravitch said about Molodowsky that she was “one of the first and perhaps even the very first [woman] in Yiddish literature to wear editorial pants…” This editorial power that Molodowsky wielded, this time as editor of *Svive*, nearly wrecked her friendship with Rokhl Korn.

Korn and Molodowsky had been colleagues and mutual admirers of each other’s work back in Europe. When Molodowsky published “*Khesvendike Nekht*” her first volume of poetry, Korn reviewed it favorably. When, for a brief time, Molodowsky was one of the editors of *Fraynd*, the Yiddish language communist newspaper, Korn contributed to it. However, once Molodowsky assumed the editorial post of *Svive* in New York, there was a definite shift in the balance of power.

On January 7, 1961, Molodowsky wrote to Korn that she especially liked Korn’s poem “*Tsfas*”: “‘Tsfas’, she told Korn, ‘is an exceptionally fine poem.” Five weeks later, she explained to Korn that since she (Molodowsky) and Oyerbach and Korn had all written poems about Israel, she had “gathered them all under the *khupe* (canopy) of the old song of the lovers of Zion: “There where the Cedar…” which was once sung by all of Israel everywhere.” This way, she explained, “it takes on a particular unity.”

In grouping the poems together, Molodowsky changed a numeral that Korn had designated for the poem. The letter Korn sent to Molodowsky accusing her of this tampering is not in this collection. But Molodowsky’s reaction to the letter can be found here. Because parts of Molodowsky’s response were written and re-written, it is impossible to know for sure which response was sent off. Here is a response, dated Feb. 25, 1961: “Every mistake in a poem is very
painful, but the main thing, Rokhl, is the lines, not the numerals…But “Tsfas”, I mean the actual poem “Tsfas” and not the city, remains “Tsfas.” Then, she lists six different consolations/excuses for what happened: 1) It was not intentional; it was a mistake. 2) The poem can be re-printed along with the intended numeral. 3) The omission of the numeral had nothing to do with the grouping of the three poems under one canopy. 4) On the contrary, a canopy likes the dowry [Yiddish: nadan] of numbers, even for the most beautiful bride. 5) The issue was trivial, and not worthy of Korn’s energy. 6) It was not at all a bad thing to be situated under the canopy of a song of the Bilu ‘im.x

After these reasoned attempts at reconciliation, Molodowsky let her feelings show: “I was truly heartsick when I received your letter, one that showed such a fury [mit aza “va-yirgozun]”. Korn’s unhappiness was not easily assuaged. The issue lived on in her mind, and she continued to rehash it. She felt the need to explain her reaction in a letter dated March 13 of that same year: “The line in Svive hurts me because I truly know who Kadya is, what a deep commitment she has to the written word. Not for no reason did I pair you with the first poem of my book “Bashertkayt” (Destiny), and especially with the one poem which tries to plumb the essence of poetry. This was not a trivial dedication, but the deepest, most open expression of my inner relationship to you and the highest praise of poetic quality. I have the highest regard for your opinion of a line, and it seldom happens that I don’t agree with your position. That is exactly why I was so upset. But if I caused you aggravation - forgive and forget. You will understand me more than others because you yourself are a poet of the highest order.”

As often happens with intense arguments between close friends, hidden feelings rise to the surface. This outburst revealed Korn’s genuine admiration of and attachment to Molodowsky. It was Korn’s high evaluation of Molodowsky (she claims) that made her feel all the more betrayed by Molodowsky’s error.

Molodowsky apparently forgave Korn, but she did not forget. On March 29, she reassured Korn that she had no problem re-printing “Tsfas,” as Korn had requested. She then urged Korn not to think of the journal as hers: “It is ours,” she said. And then she continued: “It is hard for me to drag the “crown” of editorship. If only others would help me with it.” To show that she had in fact put the issue behind them, she told Korn in the same letter that she was printing Korn’s article on Pasternak’s poems in the next issue of Svive and she urged Korn to continue to contribute to Svive.

In a way, the issue of mistakes and typos continued to haunt Korn. In a letter dated October 30, 1961, she complained that a resh was printed instead of a dalet, so that the word deformirn [to deform] came out as reformirn [to reform]. She pointed out that this led to nonsense. Two months later, when she discusses sending Molodowsky a poem for the upcoming
issue of the journal, she makes it clear that she would like to have a preprint before the poem goes to press: “Send me the corrected copy…Do we have an agreement?” And yet as late as 1968, Korn complained that in one of her poems the phrase “vayte dermonung” [distant remembrance] had, by mistake, become “vayse dermonung” [white remembrance]. She then complained: “I am fated never to creep out of the error-bog.”

III. World Issues

A. The Hippie Movement

The late 1960s was the era of the hippies in the Western world. There is a fascinating exchange on this issue in the correspondence.

In a letter dated August 27, 1968, Korn tells Molodowsky: “If I were a bit younger, I would belong to the “hippies.” They are the only ones who try in an odd fashion to tear themselves away from the nails of civilization.” It would seem that disdain for convention is why Korn was attracted to the hippie movement. Two months later, (in a letter dated September 10, 1968), Molodowsky reports to Korn that she had told Oyerbach what Korn had said about becoming a hippie. His response to that was: “If she’ll become a hippie, so will I.” It is not clear if there is an element of mockery in this reaction. It would seem that Oyerbach found Korn’s declaration amusing and unrealistic.

Perhaps because Molodowsky and her husband Simkhe lived in a city that had a larger, more vociferous number of student protesters, both were more aware of the anarchistic, self-destructive nature of the hippie “revolution.” Molodowsky told Korn: “About this Simkhe categorically declared that under no circumstances would he ever become a hippie.”

B. The Prague Spring

1968 was also the year of the aborted Czech revolt against the communist regime. Molodowsky and Korn watched and listened, and quite naturally, thought about Israel. In a letter dated August 15, 1968, Korn wrote to Molodowsky: “If the Czechs were to manage (even for the interim) to tear themselves out of Russia’s paws, that would have a good effect on Israel’s stand.” At the time the Soviet regime was supporting Israel’s Arab neighbors militarily and diplomatically. Any setback for Soviet Russia, therefore, was seen as a positive development for Israel.

Ultimately, Soviet tanks rolled onto the streets of Prague and crushed the revolution. Korn, who had hoped that the Soviets might back down, even temporarily, was shocked at the world’s acceptance of Soviet power. In a letter to Molodowsky she asked: “Where is decency, justice, humanity?” Oddly, Korn who had personally watched Hitler conquer first Poland and
then the rest of Europe was still shocked at indifference to injustice. But the fact remains; the experience of World War II did not inure her.

IV. The Jewish World

A. Israel and Hebrew Literature

Even before the Six Days War in 1967, Korn and Molodowsky paid careful attention to the news from Israel. In a letter dated December 16, 1966, Korn told Molodowsky: “It was with a pounding heart that I followed the news about Israel’s trouble.” It is therefore surprising that although the two women wrote to each other in 1967, at the time of Israel’s war against its neighbors, no mention is made of Israel’s danger or of its military victory in the letters that are preserved in the archives. During this time, the two women wrote about health issues and poetry, but not about Israel. It was not until 1968, in the wake of the discussion of which territory, if any, should be ceded to Israel’s neighbors, that the issue of Israel and its safety found its way into their correspondence. In a letter dated March 4, 1968, Molodowsky told Korn: “The issues of Israel do not leave my mind. We are faced once more with an exodus from Egypt [in Yiddish: *yetsias mitsrayim*] – and all this in our generation.”

For both women the question of Israel inevitably brought up the position of Yiddish and Yiddish writers in Israel. Both women had wandered a good deal, Korn during World War II, and Molodowsky before World War II. Yet, both felt alienated in Israel; it was not the home they longed for. In a letter dated April 16, 1966, Korn wrote: “While in Israel I heard that Chaim Grade was lying in the hospital. [He’d had] a heart attack. Manger is once again seriously ill. Now all becomes difficult and inhospitable [in Yiddish: *umheymlekh*].”

Molodowsky understood that Korn was connecting her discomfort in Israel with the position of Yiddish in Israel. In a letter written as a response two months later (August 15, 1966), she commented: “This is not a simple matter. On top of our packs of trouble falls the wall [or divide, in Yiddish *mekhitse*] that divides the languages of Yiddish and Hebrew. One can’t reconcile this [conflict]. In short, it’s a world containing smaller worlds. The larger world is not OK, and neither are the smaller worlds…”

The well being of Israel and of their friends in Israel continued to worry both Korn and Molodowsky. In a letter dated March 5, 1969, Molodowsky told Korn: “Apart from these small matters, I have great deal of aggravation over what is happening in Israel. I know people there, I know how very many years they have suffered, and now they are surrounded by danger.”

Just because the two women were cognizant of the conflicts within and between the Hebrew writers’ world and the Yiddish writers’ world, they were shocked (and somewhat
insulted) to find that the non-Jewish world recognized a German-speaking poet as a representative of the vanished world of European Jewry. When the Nobel Prize committee awarded its literature prize to Nelly Saks, a Jewish writer, who wrote neither in Hebrew nor in Yiddish, but in German, Molodowsky, in a letter dated September 25, 1966, wrote: “At a time when the Hebrew and the Yiddish literatures were taken up with who would get the first Nobel prize, just then they chose a German-writing poet as a representative of the Jews. It looks to me as though an imp hid himself under the laps of the male jurors and stuck out a red tongue [at the Jews facing him].”

As the years went by and the Hebrew-reading public in Israel grew, while the Yiddish-reading public declined worldwide, both women realized that translation from the Yiddish into Hebrew could do wonders for a writer’s reputation. In this vein, Molodowsky told Korn, in the last of her letters in this collection (dated August 16, 1969): “I am truly glad that Ravitch’s book has appeared in Hebrew. That will pick up his spirits. I believe he has been down lately.”

B. The Jewish Diaspora - Canada and the US

Both Molodowsky and Korn were adult immigrants in their respective homes. They learned to “fit in”, more or less, but they felt as outsiders. They needed an audience for their work, and so perforce, they attended evening events and luncheons, where their work was read and sometimes sold. However, privately they confessed their true feelings.

In a letter dated January 27, 1967, Korn told Molodowsky that she was invited to a luncheon at which she was supposed to be the guest of honor. She was scheduled to read from her book, but after the meal, she noted “some women were sitting as though on pins, hurrying to get home to prepare supper for their husbands, and others were so deeply in conversation that they had forgotten their surroundings. So I forewent the reading…May the good deeds of former readers remain with us.” Clearly, Korn was hurt.

And yet, Korn continued to attend these affairs; there was simply no other way to get publicity for her work. In a letter dated November 13 of the same year, she told Molodowsky how she felt about the talk of “society ladies: “We are very familiar with the speech of “society ladies.” Simply empty hackneyed talk, it eats away at my heart. Now I have altogether no patience for their talk.” Similarly, in a letter dated February 7, 1969, Molodowsky complained to Korn that an evening supposedly devoted to a celebration of literature placed too much emphasis on entertainment: “I don’t put too much stock in these events. We’ve become a folk of events. The content of the issue becomes a side thing…and they never address the main thing.”

The younger generation of Canadian and American Jews rarely spoke Yiddish and were only tangentially connected to what European Jews called “Yiddishkayt.” The two women
writers each on her own noted these changes and confessed their frustration to each other. In a letter dated April 16, 1966, Korn told Molodowsky how she felt about the younger generation’s abandonment of Yiddish: “We are cut off from the younger generations. Children do not understand one Yiddish word. They will speak Hebrew, French, English, just as long as it’s not Yiddish.”

Apart from the language issue, the two women wondered just what constituted Jewish roots for the younger generation. In 1968, the grandson of Molodowsky’s sister celebrated his Bar Mitzvah. In a letter dated January 7 of that year she told Korn: “I suppose there will be a big party as usual. So let us ask God to grant the younger generation a bit of Yiddishkayt.” She then turned to Korn and asked about her grandchildren: “And how are your two bar mitzvah boys doing? Are they still learning a bit of the Yiddish sider?”

Everywhere they looked these writers saw an attenuation of the rich cultural life they remembered from Europe. In a letter dated August 16, 1969, Molodowsky offered Korn her analysis of the situation: “Books are published with almost no publishing houses, but that’s not the worst part. Much worse is the fact that readers are passive, and in addition, the number of readers is very limited. In short, it’s the hard times of a cultural decline. We need strength to overcome it.”

As they and other European-born people aged, the two women realized an era was drawing to a close. In one of Korn’s last, undated, letters she tells Molodowsky: “Our generation is collapsing and there is no one around to prop it up like a shred of a wall.” In the following excerpt from a letter sent in 1965, Molodowsky noted that YIVO, the Yiddish research institute and the Bund archives have not upheld academic standards: “Today I received two pieces of communication, one from YIVO, which was half-Yiddish and half-English (and this from a Yiddish research institute) [underlined in the original], and the second from the Bund archive, where there was not one Yiddish letter (And this from the Jewish workers’ party, one with a nationalist stance): “Idish”, that’s how it looks.”

V. Inner Feelings and Perceptions

A. On Writing

Of the two writers, Korn saw herself as the least disciplined. As early as 1955, she wrote to Molodowsky: “It’s good that you can work and that Simkhe understands you so well. I wish I could just sit down at my desk and not let my days run off as they have done my whole life.” Korn always felt uncertain if the unfinished work she had would ever form itself into something she could feel proud of. It was, she felt, out of her control, as she told Molodowsky on a letter dated December 12, 1960: “With poems it’s a matter of divine intervention [In Yiddish: mit lider
Iz es shoyn a got zakh.] I have a few unfinished poems. We will have to see what will become of them.” Korn considered Molodowsky as a spur to her creativity. She herself, she said, was a procrastinator. But Molodowsky could get her to write: “Ordinarily, it’s not in my nature [to write]. Most probably it’s your magic that works from afar.” (March 10, 1965)

Korn often told Molodowsky that she had been spurred into creativity by Molodowsky’s expectations of her. In the following passage, she once again complains that she feels drained and incapable of writing, and at the same time admitting that she has in fact written a poem at Molodowsky’s urging: “I have become drained of everything, as though some one had drawn out all my strength. The only poem that wandered somewhere off to the side of my bitter attitude I have only now put to paper, and that is just because of you.”

Korn also felt that her home was sometimes too crowded. When there were too many guests or visitors, she could not write. In a letter dated August 12, 1962, she tells Molodowsky that she has not been creative enough because “I could never know from which corner a new face would show itself.” Despite the distractions, Korn managed to publish a book in 1962. Molodowsky congratulated her and made sure Korn knew that she realized how difficult it was to publish a book of Yiddish poetry in that post WWII reality. In a letter dated March 14, 1962, Molodowsky wrote: “To publish a book of poetry is, after all, like building the Empire State building, considering the state of our publishing houses. So, Le-khayim [a toast] at least from afar…”

Later that year, in a letter dated December 12, Korn explained that in order to write, a writer needs stimulation: “Poems need a bath to grow [in] and fresh air to breathe in so they can nourish their roots.” She never specified what the real-life equivalents of water, air, and nourishment are. She used a similar analogy (one of nourishing water) in a letter dated April 25, 1966. She made it clear that the reduced number of Yiddish writers definitely hampered the overall productivity of the Yiddish writing community: “The larger the river is, the purer the water. In a teeny stagnant puddle, all sorts of vermin abound.”

Like Korn, Molodowsky felt that poems were written out of a poet’s feeling of dire necessity. In a letter dated November 27, 1967, she first asks Korn whether she has written anything lately. She then treats her own question as a rhetorical one: “Almost certainly you have written [something]. How can it be otherwise? Because one writes a poem not for a “party”, but only when the heavens are about to fall to the earth. Oy, how well I know that.” Molodowsky knew how to encourage Korn. In a letter dated March 13, 1968, after she has been told by Korn that only one new poem is ready to be sent off, she responds: “One poem is also no small thing. Poems don’t walk in battalions; they are by their nature only children.” In another letter, written
approximately a month later (April 22, 1968) she again urges Korn to seize the opportunity to write: “The world, after all, flies by. We need to grab it by its feathers.”

Molodowsky never hesitates to give her opinion of Korn’s work, even of work that has appeared elsewhere. Of Korn’s poems that she has read in other publications, she says (in a letter dated July 17, 1968): “Such sad [poems]. It would seem they are a result of your experience in the last few months. The poems are good, but it is very hard to bear up under the burden they bring with them.”

In Molodowsky’s opinion, many writers of her generation could not help but write about the Holocaust [called der khurbn in their parlance]. In a letter she wrote to Korn on August 24, 1968, she said: “All that we write now has a Holocaust motif. It is expressed in different ways, but it is the same melody.” In a letter that she sent to Korn on October 21, 1968, Molodowsky tells Korn she has finally had a chance to really read her new book. She then gives Korn her honest assessment: “It is the Holocaust soul of our generation. Ours is a clipped past and a sunken present.” Coincidentally, she mentions Korn’s 70th birthday, and she comments: “That’s why I am glad that your book appeared now. Because this [the book] is the important thing, and as for aging—well, I am willing to forego that…so let us make a le-khayim [a toast] and hope all will go well.”

In response to the letter mentioned above, (the one in which Molodowsky says she sees Korn’s book as a reflection of their times), Korn responded (October 25, 1968): “It is good that you found in my poems a reflection of our condition. When I write the poems, I don’t think about their effect. I write this way because I can not do otherwise.” Interestingly, Molodowsky said something very similar about her own writing in a letter written nearly a year later (March 5, 1969). But in Molodowsky’s case, the topic was letter writing, not poetry writing. About her letters she says: “I very much wanted them to be happier, but they do not obey me. As soon as I take pen to hand, and I want them to dance, they begin to lament [in Yiddish zogn eykho]. I can not control them.”

At no time in this correspondence does Molodowsky discuss a specific line of Korn’s poetry. While she mentions a review she wrote of one of Korn’s books, she does not repeat her assessment of Korn’s poetry in general in these letters. However, she does tell Korn about Ephraim Oyerbach’s impression of the poems. The two women apparently held Oyerbach in great esteem. Accordingly, Molodowsky wanted Korn to know how her poetry struck him. In a letter dated December 4, 1960, she tells Korn: “Ephraim Oyerbach read a few of your poems and he paused at your very lyrical tone and your closeness to nature. He was very enthusiastic about your poems.”
Molodowsky must have told Korn why she liked her poems. Alternatively, she either wrote a review or spoke somewhere in praise of Korn’s work. In response to this praise, Korn wrote to Molodowsky in a letter dated December 17, 1967: “I am very proud of your good opinion of my poetry. For me these are the best “hormones” and at the same time the best consolation. When I feel struck down and depressed, good words from a true poet and a good friend are the one salve for my wounded spirit.” In attempting to comfort Korn, who had suffered personal setbacks as well as family setbacks, Molodowsky said in a letter dated August 16, 1969: “A book is a thing that lasts [Yiddish: dover shel kayome]. A good line lasts, while the upheaval and the noise pass on.”

Just as Molodowsky never hesitated to tell Korn what she thought, so Korn did not hesitate to tell Molodowsky what she found most impressive in Molodowsky’s oeuvre. During the time they corresponded Molodowsky was the editor of Svive. Molodowsky was busy writing her serialized memoir, one that she called “Fun Mayn Elterzyde’s Yerushe” (From My Great-Grandfather’s Inheritance). Korn truly enjoyed reading this memoir and told Molodowsky why she liked it. In a letter dated April 20, 1965, she notes: “Your story about your great-grandfather’s inheritance is exquisite. I truly enjoyed reading it and at the same time, I was upset that it ended so soon. I could have read on and on.”

A few months later, in a letter dated July 20, 1965, Korn continued her praise of the memoir: “Your story about the great-grandfather’s inheritance has in it the lightness and warmth of a wonder-tale. All the aunts and uncles have become familiar to my eyes because they are described with such a highly artistic pen that they seem to have been caught in flagrante with their destiny.” Molodowsky viewed her memoir as a form of private consolation (February 19, 1968): “When things go hard with me and thousands of teeny things disturb me– then I resume writing a chapter of “My Great-grandfather’s Inheritance.” I run away for a short time to a greener world, when the surroundings were purer… and I was younger. But about youth and old age we must not speak because it just won’t do.”

Like Korn, many Hebrew translators agree that Molodowsky’s children’s poetry are the finest that Yiddish literature has produced. Korn states (December 5, 1967): “I hold that this [Molodowsky’s] book [of children’s poems] is a great feat. Your children’s poems are the most beautiful, the best in our literature.”

B. Personal Revelations

Apparently, Korn was not loath to speak about herself and her feelings. She spoke of her inability to motivate herself to write, as well as of her dreams and fears. In a letter dated May 31, 1966, she elaborated on a dream that she had. Both Kadya and Simkhe appear in this dream and the plot of the dream is truly convoluted. Korn conveyed the plot as she remembered it and then
said: “You see, I am with you even in my dreams.” Korn could make no sense of this dream. But approximately a month later, in a letter dated June 24, 1966, she comments: “All we are missing is [the Biblical character] Yoysef. He would have been able to make good sense of the dream.”

Korn is quite revealing about her own quirks. In a letter dated May 22, 1968, she confesses to an obsession with cleanliness. She tells Kadya and Simkhe about her experiences with cleaning her childhood home: “My greatest dream as a child was to be allowed to clean the floors. But they didn’t let me do it.” She confesses that when no one was home, she would lock herself into the bathroom, and she would wash the floorboards, “till they were as yellow as saffron.” Only then was she at peace. She admits that her obsession with cleanliness has interrupted her creativity. When she sits down to write, if her desk were even a bit untidy, she would neglect her writing and go into a frenzy of cleaning.

In this correspondence, Korn combines an analysis of her own character traits with an analysis of the behavior of her friend, Kadya. Yet, Molodowsky never responded to this analysis (at least not in the collection in this archive).

In a letter dated June 15, 1969, Korn tries to figure out why Molodowsky has not come to visit her in Montreal, despite her many sincere invitations. Korn’s scrutiny is a combination of a personal confession and resentment. She starts off admitting her fear of being on the road and then she gets personal: “Since my childhood, the whistle of a locomotive electrified me. I bound up all possibilities and impossibilities with this whistle. And even when I was here, after so much involuntary wandering about, I had no problem whatsoever with hopping over to Chicago, Detroit or New York. The older I got, though, the more upset I got with injustice. It may be [the same with you]… In order to cover your fear of allowing yourself out “into the wide world” beyond your own four walls, which are a fortress, you surround yourselves with a variety of excuses.” There is no evidence of how this resonated with Molodowsky. She never reacted.

Molodowsky never spoke about Simkhe and their relationship. There is no way of knowing from these letters what their relationship was like. One thing seems feasible. Simkhe had a way of making other women feel liked. Or at least, that is how Korn felt. In a letter dated August 4, 1955, Korn writes: “Give Simkhe a kiss from me…At least once I want to feel like a Czarina [Yiddish: vi a keysarine]. Till now no one made me feel this way.” And then later she says: “If Simkhe can take his vacation [when Kadya does], that will be truly wonderful.”

Although Molodowsky was not conventionally beautiful, she was most definitely charming. In an essay on Molodowsky (see section II B.), Ravitch says: “While still in Warsaw, and then later in New York, I saw healthy young men run over to Kadya, as though they were [her] sons.”Self-aware as she was, Molodowsky felt that she was not considered good looking. But, she felt she could charm people. Korn mentions this charm in a letter dated March 24,
1969: “I am willing to bet with anyone… that you, yes, I mean you, would be able to handle a kingdom no worse than King Solomon, and also with a harem of 1,000 men.” But then, Korn adds: “But you would make do with your Simkhe.”

In quite a few instances, Molodowsky admits to an overwhelming sadness. But rarely does she get specific. In a letter dated April 22, 1968, Molodowsky writes: “I am trying as best I can not to fall into despair. There’s a golden loneliness in our circle and I feel it in my bones. I don’t know exactly why such sadness has befallen me, but I’ve become tired from it.”

Just as Korn was able to tease Molodowsky about her capacity to manage a harem of 1,000 men, so Molodowsky was able to tease Korn about alleged love affairs when Korn was in her late middle age. In a letter written December 14, 1969, Molodowsky points out that it has been a while since Korn has written. She (Molodowsky) has no idea exactly where Korn is, since it is December. Has Korn gone to Miami? Molodowsky wonders. And then she teases: “And perhaps you have begun a love affair with someone and you’ve forgotten the [rest of the] world?”

Without doubt, not all of Molodowsky’s letters to Korn have been preserved here. For example, there is no letter here in which Molodowsky offers Korn money to help pay for hospital bills. But in an undated letter from Korn to Molodowsky, the former remarks: “It is fine and kind of you to ask me about the “green bits of paper” that one must have at such times. My daughter is covering all of the expenses.”

The initial investigation of this correspondence expected to find letters from Korn’s stay in the Stockholm D.P. camp through the early 1950s. But this endeavor was unsuccessful. Perhaps the investigation at the Montreal archive would shed some light of that period.

The Molodowsky-Korn Correspondence at the Montreal Archive

The Korn archive at the Montreal Jewish library contains twenty-two letters from Kadya Molodowsky, written 1947–1972. This ostensibly twenty-five year span is less than it might seem. The collection is unevenly weighted in favor of the earlier years. 16 out of 22 were written in the 5-year span 1947–1952. While this presents a problem in following what the two said to each other in their later years, it definitely fills in the gap found at the YIVO archive. The YIVO archive preserved no letters at all from those years. However, here there is a chance to find out what Molodowsky chose not to preserve. Comparing the holdings in each archive further demonstrates these poets’ different personalities and priorities.

An Overview
Some of the topics covered in these letters are variations on themes found in the correspondence at the YIVO archive. Some of the material here corroborates the findings from the YIVO archive. The YIVO archive does not hold any correspondence sent by Molodowsky to Korn from Israel. The Montreal archive, where Korn’s letters are housed, contains one letter from Molodowsky, written in 1949, when the latter was a tourist in Israel staying at Giv’at Brenner, and three letters written between 1950 and 1952, when Molodowsky and her husband were living in Tel Aviv. In between the two periods, Molodowsky lived in New York. She reflected on her stay in Israel and discussed her plans for a return trip. These shed some light on Molodowsky’s feelings and opinions about the newly founded state. They do not, however, solve the mystery of why she suddenly left Israel and returned to New York.

I. Variations on Previous Themes

A. Concern for Israel

Whatever Molodowsky may have felt about her personal suitability for life in Israel, she never lost her concern for the welfare of Israel and her friends there. In a letter dated December 8, 1966, she tells Korn: “And in addition, the news from Israel. Every day when I open the newspaper, my eyes cloud over, and my heart lurches. [These are] hard times.”

B. Genuine Friendship

The friendship between these two women was multi-faceted. They had mutual professional admiration; they valued each other’s work. But beyond this, there was a human bond, a true friendship. In the YIVO archive letters, Korn shows admiration not only for Molodowsky’s writing, but also for her energy and editorial judgment. In the Montreal collection, Molodowsky shows her admiration for Korn’s work and her delight that Korn is getting the recognition she deserves. In a letter written on October 27, 1948, after Molodowsky attended an evening event that honored Korn and her work, she wrote: “It was a wonderful evening, truly something unusual, and it will long remain in our memory, It was one of those rare moments when writers like each other, that is they love writers other than themselves, and a kind of light hung over that entire gathering. You earned this, Rokhl, and you deserved it.”

But Molodowsky’s feelings for Korn went beyond admiration for Korn’s craft. On August 1st, 1948, approximately three months before the aforementioned evening in Korn’s honor, she received in the mail photographs of Korn and their mutual friend, Ida Maze. Molodowsky responded: “I was very happy to receive the photographs of you and Ida. The two of you are like beautiful shining stars, and you both look good to me, and naturally, to Simkhe.”
There is no doubt that Molodowsky and Korn enjoyed each other’s company. In a letter written on December 21, 1949, Molodowsky explains that she was unable to visit Korn because she was not feeling well: “But since the world is not all that big, we will, please God, yet see each other - there or here, and we will yet whoop it up [mir veln nokh hulyen].”

In a letter dated September 3, 1948, Molodowsky tells Korn that she received regards from a galitsyaner [a person who does not speak Yiddish] “in our camp.” What this common “camp” refers to remains unclear.

C. Contempt for Philistinism

Both Molodowsky and Korn were writers for whom words and the craft of writing were of paramount concern. But harsh reality forced them to market and sell their work. In the YIVO letters, Korn is hurt when, at a luncheon for society women, she was forced to forego her talk so that the women could continue to gossip and chatter. Molodowsky voiced a similar concern: “Boaz says that folks will not come unless there is coffee. If poems must depend on a cup [sic] of coffee, then perhaps it would be worthwhile to spill out the coffee just once to see if the poems can manage on their own...All other matters that are of paramount importance in the world are totally insignificant when the urgent question arises: ‘with coffee or without coffee’.”

II. Suppositions Corroborated

A. Simkhe Lev – The Enabler

In the YIVO correspondence, it is suggested that Simkhe Lev, Molodowsky’s husband, helped publish (most) of her work. In a letter dated December 8, 1966, Molodowsky writes: “Tomorrow we will go to type-set [the next issue of] Svive.” While it is true that she does not specifically say “Simkhe and I,” nevertheless, the collective “we” means Kadya Molodowsky and Simkhe Lev. In this same letter, Molodowsky explicitly bemoans the sad plight of Yiddish publishing: “If our publishing events were to fizzle like our banquet events, perhaps we would not need banquets.” It would be wrong to suppose that the state of Yiddish publishing had been better before the 1960s and had simply deteriorated over time. A letter written by Molodowsky seventeen years before the aforementioned letter proves this is not the case.

In a letter dated January 3, 1949, Molodowsky told Korn that she had just finished writing a serialized novel in the [NYC] newspaper Morgn Jurnal. She said that she would gather the chapters and look for a publisher. She told Korn she was not at all certain she would find a publisher. She might, she told Korn, be forced to use the printing press: “Paper Bridges.” The fact that she names the publishing company is given in quotation marks as a hint to the fact that it was self-published by her own husband. Simkhe Lev was a typesetter, not a publisher.
Apparently, the printing machines where he worked were made available to him, perhaps after-hours. He set the type for and printed (some of) Molodowsky’s books. These then appeared under the name of the “Paper Bridges Publishing Company” (In Yiddish “Papirene Brik Farlag”).

It is no accident that Molodowsky and her husband chose this name for “their” publishing company. Three of Molodowsky’s poems, published over three decades, involved the theme of the “paper bridge,” and had the words “paper bridge” in their title. The first of these, written in the 1930s, entitled “My Paper Bridge,” speaks of the bridge Molodowsky built when “the sun was a golden wheel” and she dreamed of a husband and child. Even then, things had not worked out as planned. In Poland during the 1930s, Molodowsky suffered severe poverty. Like the old woman she meets on the bridge, she feels she has “nowhere to go.” More than a decade later, Molodowsky wrote a poem entitled “A Poem to the Paper Bridge.” By this time, war was raging, and the Jews of Europe were being systematically murdered. In this poem, Molodowsky rhymes “Sedom,” the Biblical city of inhumanity, with “tehom,” abyss, and begs the paper bridge to lead her to a place where “no person is tortured, no child shamed.”

The Paper Bridges publishing company published this last poem, which appeared in the collection entitled “Der Meylekh Dovid Aleyn iz Geblibn.” Only King David Remained. The colophon of that book, Katherine Hellerstein notes “acknowledges Simkhe Lev, Molodowsky’s husband, as the typesetter and arranger of the print columns.”

In 1949, when Molodowsky wrote the letter to Korn, she had already written two (of the eventual three) poems featuring “Paper Bridge” in their titles, and published by the “Paper Bridge Publishing Company.” Obviously, Korn knew what Molodowsky was referring to when she suggested that she might once again resort to publishing with the “Paper Bridge Publishing Company.”

Approximately two decades later, in a poem entitled “On the Paper Bridge,” Molodowsky speaks of walking on the paper bridge, and in the end, being sent off to weep with the Matriarch Rachel. This Matriarch, according to the Midrash, is said to cry for her children from her grave near Bethlehem, determined to comfort them on their way back to their homeland.

Hellerstein points out that a legend in Jewish folklore describes the coming of the Messiah as “cross[ing] into Paradise over a paper bridge.” The bridge to paradise does indeed seem to be what Molodowsky was dreaming about when she first used this metaphor. But by the time she used this metaphor for the third time, in the 1960s, it had taken on another meaning. Molodowsky and her generation, who had known the Jewish world in Europe before it was
shattered, considered themselves as a bridge to the post-Holocaust world. As writers, they made their bridges of paper, but they were aware that like bridges made of paper, these bridges could not sustain much weight. They kept writing, realizing their writings might not reach the next generation.

The concept of the paper bridge illustrates the full arc of Molodowsky’s life, from her youth, when she dreamt of personal happiness and motherhood, to her middle-aged years, when she identified with Rachel, the Matriarch, comforting the Children of Israel. The name she chose for “her” printing press was a symbol of her personal aspirations as well as her aspiration as a poet. And she could not have written and published without the help of Simkhe Lev.

B. Personality Differences

In the YIVO correspondence, Korn is confessing, somewhat apologetically, that she derived a sense of satisfaction from house cleaning. The sight of a sparkling clean surface, she said, made her feel wonderful, especially if she had worked on it and watched it change colors under her very eyes. In this correspondence, Molodowsky is examining the subject. For her, house cleaning was sheer drudgery; it had no redeeming features. In the following passage, written on November 20, 1950, she advises Korn to escape housework: “That you must tear yourself away from housework and from dragging yourself around doing housework is so without a doubt. Run away from it. It makes the cleaning rag dirty and the soul sad. In my opinion, if all the mayors of every city would invite all women to their offices at least four times a week, life would be much easier.”

C. Hints of Marital Tension

From the circumspect letters written to Korn, it is difficult to assess the marital relationship between Molodowsky and her husband. Nevertheless, hints of marital tension are quite visible. In the YIVO correspondence, Korn admits that only in Simkhe’s presence did she “feel like a Czarina.” Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that Simkhe knew how to make women feel good. In a letter dated July 11, 1948, written from Rockaway Park, known as a summer resort, Molodowsky tells Korn that she is on a vacation: “That I had to observe, as though it were a summer-time commandment” [mitsve]. The word “mitsve” has a connotation for something that is forced on an individual from above. Although she does not say so outright in the passage quoted above, Molodowsky makes it quite clear that she traveled to Rockaway Park because her husband has commanded/demanded it. Molodowsky does not hesitate to tell Korn that she cannot wait to leave: “We traveled here for a week’s stay at the seashore; Tuesday we return to New York. Thank God.”
It is important to note where Molodowsky has put the period in the above passage. The two words “Thank God” occupy an entire sentence. Clearly, she was relieved that the end of this weeklong stay was in sight. And she expressed her distaste quite plainly: “I have always detested “summer cabins” [“dachas” in the original], and I don’t know why people thought up such things, because in truth reality is the same everywhere. Oh well, as long as we left the busy city [in the original: abi arop fun mark].”

This letter, which begins with Molodowsky’s outright admission that she is not where she wants to be, ends rather strangely. The last thing she writes to Korn is about a man named “Segal”. She tells Korn: “If he declares his love, do not become alarmed, for he will retract it without having been asked. Send him my warm greetings.”

Immediately underneath these lines, on the very same page, and only fractions of a millimeter below, Simkhe writes a few polite lines to Korn. Obviously, Molodowsky handed the page to her husband and asked him to ‘add a few lines.’ It was impossible for Simkhe not to see what his wife had just written. Yet, despite her unhappiness at Rockaway Park, she still flirted.

III. Molodowsky’s Letters from and About Israel

Very little is known about Molodowsky’s reasons for leaving Israel. Four letters preserved in the Montreal archive could shed some light on this issue.

Letter No. 1 from Israel, May 19, 1949

In this letter, written from the guesthouse of kibbutz Giv’at Brenner, Molodowsky is elated. She tells Korn that being in Israel is like having a dream come true: “…as though in a dream, in truth “we are as dreaming [“hoyinu ke-kholmim”, a quote from Psalms].” This sense of wonder is the result of participating in the excitement of the establishment of the state of Israel immediately after the Holocaust: “They want to rebuild the Jewish people! No small thing!”

From this moment on, Molodowsky urges Korn to immigrate to Israel. Molodowsky was well aware that Korn’s life centered on her daughter and her daughter’s family in Montreal. And yet, she was convinced that moving to Israel could be beneficial for Korn: “It occurred to me that in the land of Israel you would find a bit of genuine comfort, maybe even a healing of the bruising you suffered, if it possible to heal from such a thing in one generation.”

In this letter, Molodowsky also talks about the relationships between Yiddish writers in Israel and Yiddish writers in the Diaspora. It appears that there were Yiddish writers who assumed that anyone who went to Israel and considered staying there was antagonistic to Yiddish. Memories of the language wars in Israel were still fresh, even though by this time the pro-Yiddish group dwindled in number and lost the battle to Modern Hebrew. Nevertheless, it is
apparent from the letter that for some writers the choice was either Yiddish in the Diaspora or Hebrew in Israel. But this sort of dichotomy was foreign to Molodowsky. While in Europe, she taught in a Yiddish-language school by day and a Hebrew-language school by night. For her, there was no contradiction in being a Yiddish writer in Israel. She explains herself to Korn: “In New York… they’ve already accused me of having sold out Yiddish here. Where they get that, I don’t know, but there they like a bit of Culture-Congress, as long as they make noise.”

In the next paragraph, Molodowsky counters the prejudices of the anti-Israel Yiddishists living in the Diaspora. One can find Yiddish creativity in Israel, she insists: “There are indeed publishing companies and there are indeed readers. [Yiddish] books on all sorts of subjects are published and read. Yiddish is beloved, even though the country is grounded in Hebrew.” Before she speaks sorrowfully of the price in human life that the war of independence has exacted, Molodowsky once again finds herself carried away in a near-mystical statement: “And sometimes things seem nearly mystical. It’s as though angels took charge and enacted the prophecies of bygone days.”

The YIVO archive does not have any holdings from Molodowsky’s euphoric period in Israel. Molodowsky was clearly not interested in preserving it. This is not surprising. Such euphoria could not be sustained for long. Over time, the harsh realities of life in Israel had to make their mark. The older Molodowsky might not have wanted to preserve evidence of this euphoria, but Korn evidently felt it was of historical importance.

In the Montreal archive, four letters that Molodowsky sent to Korn from her home in New York between her 1949 trip to Israel and her 1950-1952 stay in Israel exist.

Interim letter No. 1

On July 24, two months later when she returned to New York, she wrote: “Being in the land of Israel was a great experience for me. There they are building a land and a life.” She goes on to suggest that in Israel there is an audience for Yiddish poetry. She may be saying this to counter the naysayers she alluded to in her letter in May of that year. There is a suggestion in her comments that in Israel the audience for Yiddish poetry is larger than in the Diaspora: “You will probably not believe me. There a good poem is still an important thing. One reads it and loves it.” It is difficult to decipher this contention. In fact, during the post-war era, Yiddish poetry was widely written and published in both the Diaspora and Israel. Molodowsky might be referring to the contemporary cultural differences between writing Yiddish literature in the Diaspora as opposed to writing Yiddish literature in Israel: “But it is not this [the audience for Yiddish poetry] that is crucial. What is crucial is that in Israel there is an open door for Jews. One does not have to ask any one for favors, one just comes home.”
At a distance of two months, Molodowsky was able to bring herself to speak (albeit somewhat lightly) of the physical difficulties of life in Israel: “Life [in Israel] is hard. I lost another seven pounds of my meager weight, but I feel stronger in spirit.”

Interim Letter No. 2

In a letter dated September 24, 1949, Molodowsky reassessed her stay in Israel: “We’re sad in New York after our stay in the land of Israel, where life is so intense. Here everything is on paper; there is no genuine Jewish life…As you, of course, know, youth [here] have long ago forgotten who the Patriarch Abraham was, and one doesn’t bother one’s self [men badert zikh nisht] with this.”

Molodowsky chose the New World neologism “badern” deliberately. For Molodowsky, the Biblical Patriarch Abraham is a living Jewish model, as he certainly was for Israeli youth who were able to read the Bible in its original Hebrew. But to Diaspora Jewish youth, cut off from the language of the Bible, the figure of Abraham meant nothing. For Molodowsky and for Korn, this was a cause for worry.

Interim Letter No. 3

The third letter Molodowsky wrote to Korn after her trip to Israel was dated December 3, 1949. In this letter, after she compliments Korn on the publication of (Korn’s new book) Bashertkayt, destiny, she speaks of her upcoming trip to Israel: “Now I am preparing for the long trip to the Land of Israel. I travel there with a peculiar kind of happiness - to the land of miracle and destiny, as you say. Now I have to recite some Psalms so that my strength should last…”

Interestingly, this letter ends with a newly coined word: “Write me a little letter [a mikhtavl], as we say in Tel Aviv [vi men zogt bay unts in tel aviv].” The word “mikhtavl,” is a blend of a Hebrew noun, mikhtav, and [l] the Yiddish diminutive suffix.

Interim Letter No. 4

The fourth letter Molodowsky wrote from New York before she returned to Israel is dated December 21, 1949. Quite surprisingly, Molodowsky sounds as though she plans to stay in New York for the near future. She tells Korn that their mutual friend Ida Maze visited her in New York and the two had a wonderful time. She then apologizes for not being able to visit Korn in Montreal. She was too weak to take the trip: “But since the world is not so very big, we will, if God wills it, yet see each other there or here.”

Letter No. 2 from Israel, May 30, 1950 (the first letter from the 1950-52 period)
In this letter, Molodowsky tells Korn that Oyerbach had showed her a letter from Korn in which there was a discussion about Korn moving to Israel. Accordingly, Korn wanted to make the move, but her children were opposed to it: “I understand that this is no easy decision for you. Coming to [live in] Israel is always a good thing, and for my part, I’d be delighted if you were to come, that I don’t have to tell you. About settling down, we have to think things over. I believe you will find the opportunity [Here in square brackets Molodowsky had written “to get”, but then didn’t continue with that thought.] to do something among Jews. And so, let me hear from you.”

Letter No. 3 from Israel, November 20, 1950 (second letter from the 1950-52 period)

This letter was written on the stationary of Moetset Ha-Po’a lot, the Women’s Labor organization that Molodowsky joined. At the time Molodowsky was the editor of the Yiddish language journal Heym, Home, published by this organization. Molodowsky made sure to congratulate Korn on the prize that she won for her book. It would seem that Korn complained about something in Montreal (the issue is not exactly clear from Molodowsky’s response). But Molodowsky assures Korn that Montreal is truly a beautiful city: “Look only at the beauty [in your surroundings]. Believe me, it helps.”

When Molodowsky was the editor of Svive, she always made sure to ask Korn to contribute material for “her” journal. In keeping with this tradition, she again asks Korn to submit to Heym.

Letter No. 4 from Israel, February 12, 1952 (third letter from the 1950-52 period)

In this letter, Molodowsky tells Korn she is busy correcting the typos that she has found in the pre-edited version of the latest issue of Heym. She encourages Korn to submit to Heym and jokes that an honorarium is waiting for Korn should she decide to come to Israel.

Molodowsky then tells Korn she has completed a book of poems while she has been in Israel and the book will be published in New York. The tentative title of this book, she says, is “Angels Come to Jerusalem.” It would appear that this book later appeared as “Lider fun Mayn Gebeyn,” Poems of my Bones. Despite this new creative spur, Molodowsky complained of a new weariness: “I do not feel an ease of heart because I would like to have free time and I have none! None, and none of the bit of spirit of a free bird. It’s such an important thing; I believe you would support me on that.”

It would seem that in Israel Molodowsky supported herself financially. (The YIVO archive has copies of the receipts/payments she accrued while she was in Israel.) In addition to editing the journal Heym, she traveled around the country, visiting and encouraging working women. This apparently exhausted her. If in fact Simkhe did not work in Israel, and it was
Molodowsky who had to support them both, that might explain Molodowsky’s exhaustion and the return of the couple to New York where they could live on his earnings.

Molodowsky’s next letter was written in 1962 after a ten-year hiatus, for which this study found no reasonable explanation.

Conclusions

It appears that the friendship between Molodowsky and Korn was sincere and genuine. On many occasions, Molodowsky shows compassion for Korn and takes extreme measures to help her and offer to go to HIAS in person. This is evident in the letter she wrote to Korn while the latter was still in the Displaced Persons Camp in Stockholm.

The YIVO archive contains evidence of a verbal “tiff” that the two friends had, one almost certainly rooted in the fact that for many of the post-war years, Molodowsky was an editor, while Korn was a “mere” contributor to Svive, the major literary journal of the period. The fact that Molodowsky preserved three different drafts of the letter she wrote to Korn attempting to assuage the latter’s fury over a misplaced numeral demonstrates that Molodowsky wanted posterity to appreciate their friendship. On the other hand, Korn’s attempt to expunge all records of this “tiff” from her own archive shows that the memory of this event discomfited her.

The most conspicuous omission in the YIVO archives are the letters Molodowsky sent to Korn during her first trip to Israel, the letters about Israel after this trip, and the letters sent to Korn from her Tel Aviv apartment between the years 1950–1952. The letters that Korn preserved show the transformation of Molodowsky from an enthusiastic Zionist to an exhausted, probably overworked woman who had “no ease of heart.”

The first clue to Molodowsky’s disenchantment with Israel is most probably the “unnatural” enthusiasm that Molodowsky showed upon her arrival. That degree of enthusiasm simply could not be sustained over time. A second clue emerges from a letter sent to Korn in the interim period between 1949 and 1950. In this interim period, Molodowsky shows some ambivalence about staying in Israel permanently. She speaks of regular visits she would make to Montreal and visits Korn would make to New York in the coming years, neglecting to mention her earlier desire to immigrate to Israel for good. The third clue is derived from Molodowsky’s admission to Korn in 1952 that she has “no ease of heart.” Whether the cause of this malaise was emotional or physical (or perhaps both) is difficult to verify.

Korn obviously felt that Molodowsky’s initial enthusiasm merited reservation. For her, and perhaps for the readers who observe the waning of Molodowsky’s excitement, even a withered passion is a thing worth remembering.
For Kadya Molodowsky’s biography, see: http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/molodowsky-kadya. For Rokhl Korn’s biography, see http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/korn-rokhl-haring.

ii See N. Kohen, footnote viii below.

iii It is my impression that Simkhe, Molodowsky’s husband, supplied the press. He himself was a typesetter and so knew the technical end of the business. In this way, he functioned much as Leonard Woolf, Virginia Woolf’s husband. In an era that pre-dated desktop publishing, the availability of a printing press was no small thing.

iv This is a quote from and a reference to the famous song that Jews sang right before the Holocaust.

v In Yiddish: “zol zayn mit mazel un brokho.” Korn’s use of the phrase used for a business venture is very much in place. This was a serious financial undertaking.

vi The first Yiddish treatment of tkhines as a particularly women’s brand of literature was that of Sh. Niger in his “Di Yidishe literatur un di lezerin”, first published in Vilna, 1913, and then re-issued in 1959. Kathryn Hellerstein discusses Niger’s treatment of tkhines in her article “A Question of Tradition”: Women Poets in Yiddish”, in Handbook of American Jewish Literature, pp. 216-219. In Paper Bridges, the dual-language, Yiddish-English book of Molodowsky’s poems translated by Hellerstein, one can find Molodowsky’s pseudo-tkhine “Eyl khaman”, Merciful God, on pages 352-355. Hellerstein discusses this poem on p.43 of her introduction, and points out that David Roskies, in his book Against the Apocalypse, called this poem a “sacred parody” of a prayer. See D. Roskies, p. 30. In Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature, Hellerstein claims that this access to tkhines spared women “the great leap from sacred to secular language” that contemporary men went through, as well as the transition from “the congregational text to that of an individual”. See K. Hellerstein there, p. 115.

vii M. Ravitch, Mayn Leksikon: Yidishe dikhter dertseyler, dramaturgn in Poyln tsvishn di tsvet velt milkhomes Montreal, 1945, p. 124

viii R. Korn, “Dzshike gas un ir dikehnern”, Dzshike Street and its Poetess, in Literarishe Bleter, 10, no. 506 (3), Warsaw, January 19, 1934: 36-37. This must have been especially comforting in light of the lukewarm reception given to this book by the influential writer A. Zeitlin. See: Mekoma U-fa’ala shel Kadya Molodowsky Be-sviiva Ha-sifrutti Ha-yehudit Be-Varsha”, Molodowsky’s Work and Place in the Jewish Literary Milieu of Warsaw, N. Kohen, in Bikoret U-farshanut, volume 40, Tel Aviv, 2009, pp.167-68.


x This group (whose name is an acronym based on the Biblical verse: “Beyt Ya’akov Le-khu Ve-nelkha”) is the “Lovers of Zion” to which Molodowsky referred in her first letter to Korn.

xi It is interesting to speculate just what Molodowsky was referring to. From other references in her letters, it is clear that she did not think that Orthodox Judaism was a tenable position for most modern Jews. Especially noteworthy is the fact that Korn never openly answers this question, at least not in the letters of this collection.

xii For a discussion of “Yiddish” versus “ish” and the ideological battles which surrounded these names, see Dovid Katz’s article in the Algemeiner Jurnal: http://www.algemeiner.com/generic.asp?id=987

xiii See fn. IV.


xv The collection of poems in which this poem appeared, was entitled “Dzshike Gas,“ (Dzshike Street). It was published in 1933, and then again in 1936.

xvi. This poem can be found in Katherine Hellerstein’s book. The Yiddish is on p.236; Hellerstein’s English translation is on p.237.

xvii. Ibid.

xviii. Ibid.

xix. This poem can be found in Hellerstein’s book. The Yiddish is on p. 414; Hellerstein’s English translation is on p.415.

xx. Ibid.

xxi. Hellerstein, fn. 80, p. 58.

xxii The poem does not appear to be dated. It is found in the collection Likht fun Dornboym, Light of the Thorn-bush, published in 1965.
xxiii. This poem can be found in Hellerstein’s book. The Yiddish is on p. 468; Hellerstein’s English translation is on p. 469.

xxiv. This Yiddish version of this last line can be found in Hellerstein’s book on p. 470; Hellerstein’s English translation is on p. 471.

xxv. See Jeremiah, 31/14-16. For the Midrash, see Genesis Rabbah 10:2 and Pesikta Eicha Rabbati 24.

xxvi. Hellerstein, p. 32

xxvii. This explains why Hellerstein so aptly named her own book of English translations “Paper Bridges.”