‘To Write? What’s This Torture For?’ Bronia Baum’s Manuscripts as Testimony to the Formation of a Writer, Activist, and Journalist

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Abstract Bronia (Breyndl) Baum (1896–1947) was an Orthodox Jewish writer, activist, and journalist. She was born into a Hasidic family in Tomaszów Mazowiecki, moved to Piotrków Trybunalski in 1918, and then to Łódź. In 1925, she left Poland for the Land of Israel. Among poems and articles that she published in Yiddish papers were “Der Yud,” “Dos Yidishe Tog-blatt,” and “Beys Yankev.” She also wrote in Hebrew—“Bat Israel” and “Baderekh” are two examples—with her Hebrew writing collected in *Ketavim le-bat Yisra’el*, published in Tel Aviv in 1954. Baum energetically promoted women’s education, an active role for religious Jewish women, and a number of charities. This article analyzes Bronia Baum’s unpublished manuscripts from the years 1912 to 1921. They include a diary in Russian and poems in Polish and Yiddish, and together constitute a unique literary and historical document. Baum’s work is considered from five perspectives: (1) the critical importance of education; (2) the role of World War I in shaping and determining her opinions and worldview, and of antisemitism in developing her Zionist stance; (3) her position on tradition and religion; (4) feminist motifs in her manuscripts, along with her attitude toward men and her relations with women; and (5) her approach toward her own writing, her compulsion to write and its source.

Keywords World War I · a Hasidic woman · Jewish ego-documents · Jews in Tomaszów Mazowiecki · education of Jewish women · Jewish female poets

The early twentieth century brought a flourishing of Jewish literature, in particular of poetry written by Jewish women. The anthology *Yiddishe Dikhterins* (Yiddish Female Poets), edited by Ezra Korman and published in 1928, showcases the works of over sixty women writers who contributed to a modern Yiddish literature that—earlier than its Hebrew counterpart—opened itself to the clearly audible voice of women. The phenomenon of so many women reaching for pens was not always met with interest and understanding akin to Korman’s. Many saw it as a plague to be lamented, criticized, or laughed at rather than a development to be celebrated. What were the reasons behind this extraordinary activity among female Jewish poets? No doubt they were numerous and complex, including the emancipation of women in the United States and Europe and the growing activity of religious and secular organizations founded by Jewish women. In the 1880s, the *froyen-frage* (women’s question) and the issue of women’s emancipation began to

occupy an important position in both revolutionary and nationalistic Jewish discourse, and this led naturally to women becoming increasingly active in multiple arenas. Another contributing factor was the expansion and growing popularity of the press—by nature egalitarian even if most periodicals were edited by men. The most important factor, however, was the transformation of women's education and the accompanying fascination with literature in various languages: German, Russian, Polish, Hebrew, and of course Yiddish. Newly awoken aspirations were often frustrated by lack of opportunities, but old hierarchies were gradually undermined. More and more women had the courage to rebel against the existing gendered order.

Much of this found expression in poetry, regarded as an area of creativity particularly conducive to redefining subjectivity. The writings of Bronia (Breyndl) Baum (Boym)¹ provide an opportunity to analyze these developments in detail. In Baum's preserved manuscripts, written in Yiddish, Polish, and Russian, her poetry can be studied in tandem with her diary entries, making it possible to trace connections between the entry topics, styles, literary motifs, personal considerations, and experiences.

Breyndl (Bronia) Baum—A Life²

Bronia Baum was born in 1896 in Tomaszów Mazowiecki.³ In the early 1890s, the town had a population of 11,974 of which 34 percent were Jews. Tomaszów was a dynamically developing center of textile industry. By 1913, its population tripled and reached 36,888 inhabitants, 11,000 of them Jewish.⁴ Baum was born into a family with very strong Hasidic traditions. Her father, Tzvi Mordechai Baum, was a great-grandson of Simcha Bunin of Przysucha (1765–1827) and the family had connections with the court of Israel Icchak Kalisz (1779–1848) of Warka. Bronia's grandmother—Rukhl Bernhardt Baum born in 1837⁵—was born in Przysucha, a daughter of Hersh Mordka and Tziporah Breyndl after whom, doubtlessly, our protagonist was named.

¹In available publications Baum is known as Breyndl. In the manuscripts I have studied, the form Bronia is used. In his biographical sketch, Breyndl Boym's son used both forms: Breyndl (Bronia) Boym-Baum.

²I thank Professor Tomasz Krzysztof Witczak for his help in establishing details of Baum's biography in the State Archives in Piotrków and Tomaszów.

³Baum was born in Tomaszów Mazowiecki, but like most of her family, her official home address was in Żyrardów.

⁴See Kazimierz Rędziński, "Szkolnictwo żydowskie w Tomaszowie Mazowieckim (1869–1914)," in *Prace naukowe Akademii im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie*, XVIII (Częstochowa, 2009), 189.

⁵The tombstone of Baum's grandmother, Rukhl Baum (no. 44.170), was preserved at the Jewish cemetery in Tomaszów Mazowiecki. She died in 1937. See *The Jewish Cemetery Tomaszów Mazowiecki*, ed. Benjamin Yaari-Wald (Tel Aviv 1996), 32.

Baum’s mother, Beyla Rudel, daughter of Leibush Melshpays,⁶ ran a small store in Tomaszów and her father worked in a factory.⁷ According to Baum’s son—Yehuda Menachem Baum, who died in Israel in 2016—his grandparents’ home was very *hareydish* (strictly religious). Although it was Baum’s father who could boast of having prominent Hasidic leaders among his forebears, it was her mother whom the poet would describe as a *tsaddik* (extremely righteous Jew):

My mother was a *tsaddik*,
 And I—who am I?
 She fulfilled *mitzvot* all her days,
 And I—full of shame and humiliation.
 Fear of God and fear of sin
 Filled her all the time, in every moment,
 Full of trust and faith,
 She did not know how to ask: “Why?”
 And if she knew, she did not want to
 Because she trusted her God with all her heart
 And I—who am I?
 When I ask: “How long and why?”⁸

From 1906 to 1909, Baum attended a Jewish primary school for girls. She graduated with excellent grades and received a special award for her achievements. The curriculum included Russian, German, Polish, arithmetic, calligraphy, drawing, handcrafts, and singing. Later, Baum took individual classes with a teacher in Tomaszów, free of charge. She also continued to educate herself in various areas.

In 1913, she began to learn Hebrew while still working on improving her German. The outbreak of World War I found her in Tomaszów, where she engaged in charitable work as well as Zionist activities. (Between 1916 and 1919, Baum served as secretary to the local Zionist organization.) In 1917, she left for Kielce for a temporary teaching position. Simultaneously, she was

⁶Baum’s mother was related to the Melshpays family, who had long resided in Tomaszów.

⁷In one of her Hebrew poems, written most likely during or right after the Holocaust, we find Baum’s depiction of her grandfather—Mendel Baum, husband of Rukhl—a simple but deeply religious Hasid: Did you know our grandfather, Brother-friend Holy *tsaddik* A simple man? / Did you see his steps / Between the profane and the holy, / At the market, between people, / At prayer, at study? (...) / His gold-embroidered kippah, / Wide *gartel* / Snow-white knee socks? / White beard, / Face of an angel, / Lips blessing / Us, children? / My grandfather, your grandfather / Broken in his grave / Like many Jews / And his suffering soul / Wanders among tombstones / And asks in despair: / Do you remember, grandchildren? Brendl Baum, *Ketuvim le-Bat Yisrael* (Tel Aviv, 1954), 94–95.

⁸Baum, *Ketuvim*, 102.

learning book-keeping, letter-writing, stenography, and violin. Her earliest preserved poems were written in that year. In 1918, Baum lived with her family in Piotrków. She left to work at an office and then returned to Tomaszów for a few months and turned to Hebrew study again. In April 1919, she took a teacher's position, but was forced to quit due to serious health problems. When her health permitted, Baum began working as a director of a summer educational camp in Piotrków, and two months later she moved to Lodz with her family. In the introduction to the posthumous edition of her works, we read: "Lodz was then a city full of affluent and distinguished Hasidim, men of action."⁹ In 1920, Baum's family started making arrangements for her marriage with her cousin Avrom Moyshe Baum.¹⁰ The wedding took place in 1921.¹¹ Baum's husband proved to be a successful businessman, and she became involved in the work of the women's section of Agudas Isroel and the Bais Yaakov movement. Baum combined religious feminism and Zionism, delivering public lectures addressed primarily to Orthodox girls and women, and remained involved in charitable work. She also started to publish poetry in Polish, which she later abandoned for Yiddish. Apart from poetry, Baum published also various materials in Yiddish in "Der Yud," "Dos Yidishe Togblat," and "Beys Yankev." She used many pennames—the two known today are Bas/Bat Bela or Bas/Bat Tovim.

In 1925, Baum left Poland with her husband, and on June 25 of that year they arrived in Eretz Israel, where she soon started publishing in Hebrew Orthodox periodicals, such as "Bat Israel" and "Baderech." Her writing from that period was published posthumously by her husband under the title *Ke-tuvim le-Bat Yisrael* in Tel Aviv in 1954. The volume includes journalistic pieces, poetry, and stage plays written in Hebrew. In Eretz Israel, Baum continued her involvement in charity, serving as an honorary secretary of an organization that helped penurious young women collect dowries, and participating in various educational projects for women. She also gave birth to her son, whose education became the goal of her life. Her will is devoted primarily to him. She addressed her husband as follows:

All thoughts of the sick mother are about her son. The mother feels him, flesh of her flesh, as if he were the most important part of her body, always vibrant with life. That is why no other moment

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Avrom Moyshe Baum, born in Łęczyca, official home address in Żyrardów, son of Simcha Bunim and Freida Raca, came from the family of Simcha Bunim of Przysucha, after whom his father was named.

¹¹The wedding took place in 1921. The couple legalized their relationship shortly before leaving for Eretz Israel, on October 6, 1924. Chuna Lerner, writer, and Shmul Gasman, unemployed, served as witnesses.

can match the one of their separation. For this reason, I beg you to treat this matter as a holy obligation. So that our son, Yehuda Menachem, will become a great teacher one day, a scholar of the Torah in awe of Heaven, and that he acquire general education under a distinguished teacher, a righteous and God-fearing Jew.¹²

Bronia Baum—writer, poet, activist—died of a heart attack at the relatively young age of fifty. Her health, never very strong, was supposedly adversely affected by anxiety about the fate of the Jews in Europe, where her closest relatives still lived. In 1944, near the end of her life, she addressed Hebrew writers in Israel with a dramatic appeal regarding the destruction of European Jewry. In a commentary to her open letter, she noted:

During Hanukkah 5704, in the year of martyrdom, conflagration, murder, oppression, in the year of destruction, persecution, and divine wrath, there was an assembly of writers of Israel in Eretz Israel, and the name of the God of Israel was not mentioned, not to be heard among them. One could hear the voices of the scholars and intelligentsia. They debated over the dead and the living, the monuments, budgets, reconciliation of nations, appeals to nations. They discussed awards, loans and every other small matter. And there was no one to stand up and express his anger, and no one to testify to the great ‘sin’ in the words of truth. “Sirs, please, let us search our souls. Perhaps this is not a trivial matter. Perhaps it is not by chance that our people is being destroyed. Are we not men of the spirit?” And it was me, the least important of them all, who had the courage to send this letter to the congress.¹³

Baum died three years later, in 1947. Until the end of her life she continued to write in Yiddish, Polish, German, Russian, and Hebrew.

Bronia Baum’s Literary Works

Baum’s papers, preserved in the family archive, contain manuscripts from the years 1912–1921 (the first document is from May 4, 1912, and the last from June 1921), and include a diary written in Russian as well as numerous poems in Polish and Yiddish.¹⁴ They can be considered together, as the

¹²Baum, *Ketuvim*, 8.

¹³*Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁴I hoped to thank Yehuda Menachem Baum for granting me access to his mother’s manuscripts. Unfortunately, Mr. Baum did not live to see the publication of the materials. I am glad, however, that his will was fulfilled. I thank Darek Dekiert for allowing me to access the materials, as well as Prof. Tomasz Witczak and Zbigniew Milczarek for their help.

poems supplement the diary notes. Most poems are written under the day's date and constitute a poetic reaction to daily occurrences. First and foremost, they express the author's emotional state. In their formal aspects, Baum's poems differ greatly. There are many accentual-syllabic poems as well as free verse. In most cases, there is rhyme, but its consistency and accuracy vary. In manuscripts, the poems are usually continuous, without strophes. It appears, however, that Baum tended to introduce strophes later as exemplified in several of the poems that were typed. Most of her poems are untitled. Interestingly, this is a characteristic of many Yiddish poems written by women at the time.¹⁵

In the diary, most entries are dated, but sometimes only with the month. Baum did not write her diary on a regular basis. Some entries describe events extending over several months, and the first, from May 4, 1912, is actually a memoir describing the author's earlier life. For this reason, it is difficult to determine the manuscript's precise genre. Both the content and form of the entries suggest a combination of intimate diary and memoir. Philippe Lejeune, in his study of young women's diaries, noted that in the years 1880–1914 they were characterized by “introspection, active contemplation of the fate prescribed for women, and the satisfaction of the act of writing.” This is exactly what we discover in Baum's diary.¹⁶

Baum's manuscripts have never been published, and represent both a very interesting literary and, even more so, historical source. (Her notes from the World War I period, when she lived in Tomaszów, are the only surviving record of personal experience from that time, not only with respect to the Jewish community but the entire population of the town). Their value is enhanced by the fact that Baum's unpublished writings have never undergone

¹⁵For example, most of Sara (Sore) Reyzen's poems are untitled. Sara (Sore) Reyzen (1885–1974) was born in Kojdanowo, Belarus to a family with literary traditions. She wrote both poetry and prose. Later in her career, she aspired to be “*di mame fun yidisher literatur*” (the mother of Yiddish literature). She lived in Minsk from 1899, and Warsaw in 1908–1914. During World War I, she returned to Minsk. In 1921, Reyzen moved to Vilnius and emigrated to the U.S. in 1933. Her literary debut took place in 1902. Like many Jewish women who managed to enter the artistic or literary world, Reyzen initially worked as a seamstress and later became a teacher. In 1911, she published a volume entitled *Kholem un vor* (Dreaming and Awake), a collection of short stories which, as the title suggests, vacillate between realism and Onirism permeated with Midrashic fantasy. Her first volume of poetry, *Lider*, was published in 1924 by Fareyn fun Yidishe Literatn un Zhurnalistsn in Vilne (Association of Jewish Writers and Journalists in Vilnius). Her works are not innovative. She left for the U.S. at the age of forty-eight and hence her style was already formed, which resulted in an increase in literary traditionalism. Her poems, often cloaked in folk sentimentalism, employ simple rhymes. Some contain imagery of traditional religiosity in Jewish women, firmly rooted in the reality of the latter half of the nineteenth century.

¹⁶Philippe Lejeune, *Dziewczęce “ja” (O dziennikach panien z XIX wieku)*, *Teksty Drugie* 2–3, nos. 80–81 (2003), 203.

editing,¹⁷ which might have increased their artistic value but could have compromised the immediacy of expression and encourage self-censorship on the author’s part. There are very few corrections or deletions made by Baum herself in her poems, which gives an impression that she wrote them on the spot without further editions. The poems themselves can thus be seen as a poetic diary supplementing the more traditional one written in Russian and bereft of traces of editing. Poems in Yiddish and Polish were written simultaneously and in similar quantity. Only the diary was written in Russian, and Baum often mentioned that, with time, that language was becoming increasingly difficult for her. She had learned it at school, where her lack of proficiency at the beginning of her education brought difficulties. “How could I learn without knowing Russian at all? She [the teacher] often spoke to me in Yiddish which made my classmates laugh at me even more. I turned red and pale but there was nothing I could do.”¹⁸

From Baum’s notes, one can conclude that she decided to write her diary in Russian primarily because she was worried that it might be discovered by other family members, who spoke mostly Yiddish. Writing in Russian was also a way to improve her facility. At school, she studied Polish as well, and was probably somewhat familiar with it as the dominant language of the external culture. She knew it well enough to use it as a vehicle for her poetry just as she used Yiddish.¹⁹

Priority: Education

One of the fundamental topics recurring in Baum’s notes is the question of acquiring education against all odds by taking advantage of any possibilities, ranging from school instruction, private lessons, to self-education. She saw education as a way to endow her otherwise empty and meaningless life with meaning. She described her need to learn as innate: “Later, I was developing

¹⁷ As we know from various editorial materials, the poems of young writers, women especially, often underwent very extensive revisions (e.g., the correspondence between Roza Yakubovitch and Yitskhok Leybush Peretz in *Briv un redes fun Y. L. Peretz*, ed. Nachman Meisel (New York, 1944), 274–75; see Joanna Lisek, “Peretz on the Froyen-frage,” in *Trilingual Literature of Polish Jews from Different Perspectives: I. L. Peretz in Memoriam*, ed. Shoshana Ronen and Alina Molisak (forthcoming).

¹⁸ Baum, *Diary*, May 4, 1912.

¹⁹ About Bronia Baum, see *Encyclopedia of the Founders and Builders of Israel*, ed. David Tidhar, IV (Tel Aviv, 1950), 1869–1870, (as Baum Brendl); <http://www.tidhar.tourolib.org/tidhar/view/4/1869> (as Brendl Boym); *Ketuvim* (Tel Aviv 1956), 258 (as Baum Breyndl); Krzysztof Tomasz Witczak, *Słownik biograficzny. Żydów tomaszowskich* (Łódź-Tomaszów Mazowiecki, 2010), 61 (as Boym Brayndla).

and growing. With me grew my needs, my weaknesses, hopes, and dreams about education. The last one was the strongest, so I asked my mother to send me to any kind of school.”²⁰

After a short period of schooling, however, Baum’s mother decided to put an end to her daughter’s educational pursuits. The family did not have enough money, Baum explained in her diary, and the education of her brother was a priority. Such an attitude toward the education of girls was common in traditional Jewish families.²¹ Ester Kreitman, sister of the famous writers, the Singer brothers, only five years older than Baum, captured it aptly in her novel-memoir which begins with Ester’s father saying about his eldest son: “Michl, thank God, is growing to become a Torah scholar.”²² Who was she to become? asked Ester; and in reply she heard that, as a girl, she did not have to become anyone. This attitude was shared by Baum’s parents, who saw her desire to learn as a whim. Her mother envisioned her daughter’s education in a very traditional way: she was to learn how to write various types of letter by following ready formulas. Jewish girls in the nineteenth century learned from the so-called *Brivshetler*, a collection of letter templates. This was most likely what Baum’s mother had in mind in conversations with her daughter, who wanted to study like her friends:

Oftentimes I was having fun with my friends and suddenly I would see children on their way home from school. I envied them. I wanted to study too, to talk with them about learning and not about playing. I sobbed on my way home and would ask mother to send me to that school. But mother convinced me [to stay where I was], promising that I would still learn how to write an official letter.²³

Baum’s parents relented at some point and allowed her to take private lessons from a woman who had an outstanding account in their store. It soon turned out, however, that the woman’s own knowledge did not extend much beyond the ability to read and write, and the lessons were soon terminated.

Baum felt compelled to resort to various stratagems to induce her parents to send her to school—the three-year Jewish Public Elementary School in

²⁰Baum, *Diary*, May 4, 1912.

²¹Traditionally Jewish girls’ education included reading and writing in Yiddish, and often basic Hebrew to enable the reading of certain prayers. It was also recommended that girls know arithmetic and the language of the external culture. Educating girls in Torah study was not recommended, which obviously does not mean there were no Jewish women in history who did possess deep Talmudic knowledge. Such exceptions were usually only in rabbinic and affluent families.

²²Ester Kreitman, *Der sheydim tants* (Warsaw, 1936), 3.

²³Baum, *Diary*, May 4, 1912.

Tomaszów Mazowiecki. She refused food, she cried, she got sick. Her parents' dislike of secular, public, Jewish education was not unusual. In 1869, a group of Orthodox and Hasidic Jews protested, unsuccessfully, against the establishment of the first public Jewish school in town.²⁴ They saw these schools as a gateway to secularization and Russification—and for good reason: the tsarist authorities forbade Yiddish instruction and treated these schools as tools in the process of integrating Polish Jews with Russia. There was no alternative educational system for girls from religious families, and for this reason it was easier for a girl than a boy to be admitted. In Tomaszów, in 1904, 356 boys studied in registered cheders and 108 in the public school. There are no data for the girls' school for that year, but in 1905, 187 girls studied at the Jewish public school for girls. The school which Baum desired so strongly to attend was established in 1895. Its student body had increased from 187 in 1905 to 254 in 1908.²⁵ Baum entered the school in 1906, exactly when the number of students was growing, clearly not alone in her educational quest. Her longing for education reflected broader tendencies in the Jewish community. The school's popularity led to overcrowding and many girls could not be admitted. The problem was significant enough to attract the notice of an education official from Lodz, who, in 1908, asked the mayor of Tomaszów to open another school. Another school was opened in 1912.²⁶ There is no doubt that the public education system for Jewish girls in Tomaszów was developing quickly when Baum went to school. Despite high admission levels, however, the school struggled with the problem of students leaving before graduation. In 1909, the school principal wrote to the Lodz school district director that "penury and the lack of appreciation of education of parents lead to a situation when, in the spring, parents send their children to work in factories or workshops and get a profession."²⁷ In 1909, after the festival of Passover, only 166 of 240 girls returned to school.²⁸

Baum studied at the Jewish Public Elementary School in Tomaszów Mazowiecki thanks to the support she received not from her parents but from her aunts, who tried to get her admitted to the school. The teachers, however, did not believe it was a good idea. There were too many children at school already. In addition—and this was probably the decisive factor from the staff's perspective—Baum did not know Russian. She was finally admitted after an intense, two-month, preparatory course, and very quickly became one of the best students. She graduated with honors and received a special award for her

²⁴See Rędziński, "Szkolnictwo żydowskie w Tomaszowie Mazowieckim (1869–1914)," 190.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 209.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 194.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 202.

²⁸*Ibid.*

achievements. The curriculum included God's Covenant (Zakon Boży), Russian, German, Polish, arithmetic, calligraphy, history, geography, drawing, and singing.²⁹

Graduation was not a happy event, however. Baum described it as a true tragedy because, with her education completed, her life was about to become meaningless again:

Yes, I bid goodbye to the teachers very cordially, I kissed them, wished [them] all the best, but I could not shed even one tear, because all I could think was, What will I do now? Where will I go? Where will I study? And what will I learn? (...) Having completed that school I knew that my hope for studying was lost and with it my talents. My parents did not have the means for my studies and did not even want to acquire them. I became useless and all this time was wasted.³⁰

Apathy claimed Baum and isolated her from her surroundings. Finally, encouraged by her friends, she began to take private lessons with a teacher she had met at school.³¹ She was reluctant to visit the teacher because her clothes were shabby and she lacked books. Her friends, however, helped her get everything she needed to study. One would think it was Baum's dream come true, and she would immerse herself in learning with gratitude. Her personality, however, as one can deduce from her diary and poetry, was rather complex. She was highly sensitive and prone to depression, which was compounded by her poor general health. Having to rely on the teacher's charity placed her in a very uncomfortable position. The main problem, however, was the lack of any definitive goal for the educational process. The teacher expected Baum to take the state exams, while Baum knew very well that her parents would never permit her to do so.

In time I began to work very hard and then the teacher asked: "Will you go to the guberniya to take the exams?" I got upset because I knew I did not have my parents' permission for that. How pointless my learning could be! Without any goal, how sad

²⁹The list comes from Baum's annual school report preserved in the Baum family archive.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹It is, unfortunately, impossible to ascertain the name of the woman who was so supportive of girls' education. It may have been Ewa Ita Schönberg *née* Klekot, a known town activist. In 1910, Schönberg asked the school inspector to support her efforts to convince the Jewish community to build separate showers for school children who lived without proper hygiene, together with the new ritual bath then under construction. She later reported that about 10–12% of children were able to bathe on a regular basis. She also lobbied for a sports field.

is that! Yes, I knew that even if I worked tirelessly I would not make any career. The world of education is sealed off for me.³²

Because of this, Baum described herself as a victim of her own ambitions: "I knew already then that I will forever remain a martyr, that I will never quit studying, and that I will never reach the goal I dreamed of."³³

Having quit the lessons, Baum became indifferent: "From then on, I became apathetic to everything that surrounded me, and hence my learning is dying this quiet, slow death (...) Without thoughts and words, I look sometimes into that bottomless future and I do not see anything new."³⁴ After a while, she took up self-education with a friend. They paid a visit to their former teacher, who did not conceal her displeasure at seeing them. Baum began to give lessons to younger girls, believing that, by teaching others, she would be able to master her knowledge better than before. She also started to study Hebrew, which would prove important later in her life, given her Zionist sympathies. As well as Hebrew, she studied German with a teacher who agreed to help her without remuneration. It was the study of Hebrew, however, that she describes as a dream come true.

Her educational efforts were interrupted—though not terminated—by the outbreak of World War I. She did not give up on further studies. In 1916, she picked up the violin and began to learn the basics of bookkeeping, letter-writing, and stenography. She noted in her diary that she was the only one to consider those efforts to be of some practical value. Baum's family still did not provide her with any support, and her educational quest remained a lonely endeavor. It did prove useful, however, as during the war she was able to contribute to the family's modest budget by giving private lessons. After the war, she found an office job where she wrote letters, and later she assumed the position of educational summer camp director, which she considered a major achievement. On a photograph she sent to a friend, Baum wrote:

Dear Cela, I am sending you one of my recent pictures. This is the distinguished professoriate multiplied by cousins. I—the first director, third from the left—my best friend, second director, and the last man in the row—third director, a student of law. I am making progress, am I not?

Having her qualifications recognized and appreciated (the Piotrków inspector himself offered Baum a job) immediately gave her a sense of fulfillment and inner peace. "The Piotrków inspector charged me with the task of organizing

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

an educational summer camp for schoolchildren, where I was receiving quite a good salary and where I found a measure of spiritual peace.”³⁵ From her son’s testimony, one can conclude that the period when she ran a large educational summer camp remained an important memory until the end of her life—a photograph of the campers hung on the wall of her apartment in Israel.³⁶ It can be seen as the pinnacle of her struggle to be counted among the educated elites, commensurate with her talents and the efforts she invested in her education. After her *aliyah* (immigration) Baum decided to study English and French, bringing her mastery of languages to seven.

A description of her educational path would be incomplete without reference to the books she read. Given her limited access to formal schooling, reading was an important part of her self-education, as well as a significant element of her literary inspiration. In her manuscripts, Baum refers to Ivan Krylov, Anton Chekhov, and Mikhail Lermontov, the primary representatives of Russian literature. She also quoted, from memory it appears, a poet called Daniil Rathaus (1868–1931). It is interesting to note the lack of any reference to Polish literature. Her preferences in the realm of Yiddish literature can be intuited from Bas Tovim, the pen name she adopted.³⁷ It may have been a reference to the famous author of women’s prayers (*tkhines*), Sarah, daughter of Mordekhai of Satanow, born in Podolia in the seventeenth century. It is plausible that, like most Orthodox Jewish women, Baum accepted first and foremost the heritage of Yiddish religious literature exemplified primarily by the so-called women’s Bible, *Tsene-rene* and collections of *tkhines*.

From Baum’s son, we know what books were in her library in Israel: works by Heinrich Heine, Friedrich Schiller, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Lev Tolstoy, and Chaim Nachman Bialik. Her literary tastes thus oscillated between Russian, German, and Hebrew classics. The traditional education she shared with most Orthodox Jewish women of her time also gave her some familiarity with Yiddish literature. This appears significant when considering the tradition and roots of women’s Yiddish poetry at the beginning of the twentieth century. Many of them were doubtless deeply immersed in Yiddishkeit. The literary patterns that inspired them, however, came primarily from world literature, and it is the tradition of Russian or German literature that should be seen as an important background for analyzing women’s Yiddish poetry.

³⁵Baum, *Diary*, December 1919.

³⁶Baum’s son, probably because of the importance of the memory for his mother, was convinced that she served as the principal of a large school in Piotrków. It is important to remember, however, that in the interwar period, heading a summer camp was a far more prestigious position than it is now.

³⁷Bas Tovim (“daughter of good people”) in the sense of having distinguished ancestry. Baum had a very distinguished lineage, and her pen name may be a reference to her family tree.

The question of Jewish girls’ education, something Baum experienced in her own life, represented the most important aspect of her involvement in Jewish religious feminism and the Bais Yaakov movement.³⁸

The Role of World War I and Its Consequences in the Formation of Bronia Baum’s Worldview and Attitudes

World War I was a generational experience for poets who started writing, like Baum, around 1918.³⁹ The military mobilization in Tomaszów, as in all the tsarist empire, began on July 30, 1914. Between August 1 and 10, all official agencies were evacuated. Their competencies were taken over by Civilian Committees from early 1915. German troops appeared in Tomaszów on August 24, 1914; but from August 27 to September 1 the town was again under Russian control. Then, for less than a month, it was occupied by German forces, from October 20 by the Russians, and then from December 14 by the German army again. One of the largest and bloodiest battles of World War I, the battle of Lodz, took place not far from Tomaszów at the end of 1914. Jewish soldiers killed in the region in 1914–1915 and buried at

³⁸Bais Yaakov, a movement initiated by Sarah Schenirer (1883–1935) who was born into a Cracow Hasidic family. It is sometimes described as Jewish religious feminism. The goal of the movement was to counteract the acculturation of Jewish girls and women by establishing schools where they were taught tradition, religion, history, and Jewish languages. The network of schools was additionally designed to assist women in their active participation in life based on Yiddishkeit. The first Bais Yaakov school was established in 1917, and by the end of 1930s there were over 250 of them. Lodz, where the journal “Beys Yankev” was published, was an important center of the movement. See Deborah R. Weissman, “Bais Yaakov as an Innovation in Jewish Women’s Education: A Contribution to the Study of Education and Social Change,” *Studies in Jewish Education* 7 (1995): 278–99; Agnieszka Oleszak, “The Beit Ya’akov School in Kraków as an Encounter between East and West,” *Polin* 23 (2011): 277–90; Anna Łagodzińska, “Powstanie i rozwój ruchu Beis Yakov na przykładzie wybranych ośrodków w latach 1917–1939,” *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów* 241 (2012): 39–51; Joanna Lisek, “Dos loshn fun jidishkayt”—ortodoksyjny jidyszizm na łamach “Beys Yankev,” *Studia z dziejów trójjęzycznej prasy żydowskiej na ziemiach polskich (XIX–XX w.)*, ed. Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikov (Warsaw, 2012).

³⁹On the crucial role of World War I experiences for Jewish youth, see Kamil Kijek, “‘Naród słabych i skrzywdzonych.’ Wojny i rewolucje lat 1914–1921 w pamięci młodzieży żydowskiej okresu międzywojennego,” *Studia Judaica* 18, no. 1 (134), (2015): 85–104. In reference to categories used in Polish literary studies, Baum does not belong formally to the so-called generation 1910 (often broadened to 1907–1913). She did not start publishing before the war. She was not independent by that time and the war years were the time of her emotional formation. Given that, it appears she should indeed be seen in the context of that generational group. See *Formacja 1910. Świadkowie nowoczesności*, ed. Dorota Kozicka and Tomasz Cieślak-Sokołowski (Crakow, 2011).

the Tomaszów cemetery served in all three armies—Russian, German, and Austro-Hungarian.⁴⁰

Baum was eighteen years old when the war began, causing a spiritual earthquake that influenced her views about life. In her diary, she describes the war primarily in two ways. One is the increasing hunger, difficulties obtaining food and supplies, and the worsening situation of her family. The other—and the more important for how her life was to unfold—was the growing divide between Jewish and non-Jewish inhabitants of the area, a divide that was to lead, ultimately, to persecutions and pogroms.

Three months after the outbreak of the war, on October 20, 1914, following a longer break in writing, Baum noted in her diary:

The entire land trembles under the terrible turn of Earth: a “world war” is here. Unspeakable terror engulfs me when I think about it because it is waged with the blood of our fathers and brothers. And us? Full three months we suffer this awful hunger that so mercilessly tears at our hearts, and all we want is some black bread. Whatever else happens, our life is approaching its twilight. The war takes place not only everywhere in the world, not only in the open fields and forest, but in the home of every Jew. This war, I think, is about destroying the Jews. We are beaten by friend and foe alike. Our people are being hanged in the homeland and beyond it. We are slaves of both the masters and the slaves.⁴¹

In the new political reality, Baum appeared to be concerned first and foremost with the isolation of the Jews, who during the conflict could be victimized by all sides. Moreover, the only “victories” of the army ready to defend its homeland that Baum saw were victories against the Jews. “Had there been no Jews, those famous soldiers would have known no victories (we are the primary object of their victories because they triumph over us and not over the enemy).”⁴² She also ironically cited rumors that Jews were responsible for the outbreak of the war.

And indeed, with the tsarist administration gone, chaos reigned and acts of anti-Jewish violence occurred. There are no descriptions of such events from Tomaszów itself, but from nearby Piotrków. The mechanism was similar.

⁴⁰See Marian Franczkowski, *Rok 1914—działania wojenne w rejonie Tomaszowa Mazowieckiego, Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Tomaszowa Mazowieckiego*, http://tptm.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=268:rok-1914-dzialania-wojenne-w-rejonie-tomaszowa-mazowieckiego&catid=97&Itemid=521, retrieved March 31, 2016.

⁴¹Baum, *Diary*, October, 20, 1914.

⁴²*Ibid.*

Right after the Tsar's administration left Piotrków, the mob started harassing the Jews. Next, the Russian army returning to Piotrków was incited against the Jews and staged a pogrom. It took place on September 27, 1914. Russian troops together with the mob robbed Jewish stores and beat Jews on the streets and in their houses.⁴³

The author of this report listed other forms of harassment, such as desecration of Torah scrolls during searches in synagogues.⁴⁴ These were not isolated incidents but rather parts of broader persecution of the Jews by both sides of the conflict. Current research confirms what Baum writes in her diary: Jews were accused of espionage, aiding the enemy, transmitting sexual disease among soldiers and poisoning wells. They were also blamed for military defeats.⁴⁵ In Tomaszów, "Jewish treason" propaganda led in 1914 to an accusation against the local rabbi, "Kantorovitsh who pointed to the weakest parts of Russian defenses to make it easier to break them. The commander of Russia's Second Army promised a reward for the rabbi's capture."⁴⁶

In April 1916, after a half-year hiatus from writing, Baum describes anti-Jewish violence in detail. Accusations of espionage and treason brought hangings and beatings, which she laments. "O, how numerous the graves of these innocent victims! How can I not cry and not pray for revenge in such terrible time? The best of our people disappear without trace and our lives as well are on the brink. Such is our fate!"⁴⁷ A desire for revenge was accompanied by anger, revealed in such expressions as "wild barbarians"⁴⁸ for the perpetrators. The sense of individual martyrdom during her struggle for education gave way to a definite feeling of solidarity with her people, defined in religious terms (Baum refers to other Jews as co-religionists), and linked to a belief that the Jewish fate was a path of suffering. "We are meant for martyrdom, but why, I do not know."⁴⁹ It merits attention that for Orthodox Jews the war had an additional layer of cruelty: it was they who were victimized the soonest, and wartime chaos made it difficult to fulfill their religious obligations, which undermined the moral foundations of life. World War I affected Hasidic Jews in particular, as many *tsaddikim* were killed, many

⁴³Moses Feinkind, *Dzieje Żydów w Piotrkowie i okolicy od najdawniejszych czasów do chwili obecnej* (Piotrków, 1930), 57.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 57.

⁴⁵See Konrad Zieliński, *Stosunki polsko-żydowskie na ziemiach Królestwa Polskiego w czasie pierwszej wojny światowej* (Lublin, 2005). Zieliński describes the policies of the Russian authorities as "scapegoating" to explain the defeats (113–36).

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 116.

⁴⁷Baum, *Diary*, April 15, 1915.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

Hasidic courts were ruined, and links between Hasidic leaders and their followers were often weakened or even severed. Additionally, strict adherence to the dietary rules of *kashrut* often made it impossible for religious Jews to take advantage of food assistance, which was extremely challenging given the prevalent hunger.⁵⁰

Tomaszów's passing from one army to the other is reflected in Baum's diary. She refers to the Russian army as "our forces," and describes a certain level of stabilization once the German forces leave Tomaszów. The first few months of the war are presented as particularly difficult: the family is ready to die, writes Baum, they even await death as salvation because there is not a piece of bread left in the house. After a while, Baum's father is able to return to his factory work and the family situation improves.

In Baum's words, the period of Russian control of Tomaszów is a "beautiful dream"⁵¹ followed by the "horrible reality"⁵² of the German occupation.⁵³ She recalls soldiers who barge into the family house demanding food and drink. The Baums do not have any food so they offer coffee borrowed from their neighbor. On this occasion, Baum mentions a difficulty that must have been encountered not only by her family. The commander of the Russian forces forbade any commercial exchange with the Germans, immediately before the latter occupied Tomaszów. Even allowing German soldiers into one's home was prohibited. Many Jews were hanged for such relations with the enemy, recalls Baum. ("How many of our brethren were hanged for showing such hospitality!"⁵⁴) Her family, struggling with hunger, decided to engage in commerce with the occupiers:

We closed our house for one, two days, but how long could one wait when there was no bread for the children? Is there a greater

⁵⁰See Marcin Wodziński, "War and Religion, or How the First World War Changed Hasidism," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 106, no. 3 (2016).

⁵¹Baum, *Diary*, May 11, 1915.

⁵²*Ibid.*

⁵³Baum's description of the Russian forces as "ours" contradicts a common perception that Jews supported and enthusiastically greeted German and Austrian troops. As Baum relates, following the arrival of the German army the relationships between Poles and Jews significantly deteriorated. Konrad Zieliński also mentions this, but in the context of pro-German attitudes of the Jewish population and it appears that it was a result of Russian propaganda: "Jews were very friendly disposed toward Germans and Austrians. This dissonance—hostility or mistrust of the majority of Poles toward the new regime, and open enthusiasm of at least some Jews after the Russian evacuation—contributed to mutual animosities and grievances. It is not impossible that only limited numbers of Jews happily welcomed the new authorities. However, as a whole, they were seen by the Poles as pro-German and pro-Austrian." Zieliński, *Stosunki*, 190–91.

⁵⁴Baum, *Diary*, May 11, 1915.

suffering than this? I can vividly see that day in my memory. I still see the panic that overwhelmed us because not everyone agreed to deal with the enemy. But need made us forget about everything. About prison, death, and treason.⁵⁵

The family did not have anything to sell, however, and here Baum showed her resourcefulness. She borrowed 50 *kopieyek* and bought postcards, which her brother sold at considerable profit and then invested in shoe polish. Starting from such small deals, the Baums were eventually able to supply the army with wine, which brought considerable income. It did not last long, however, as all army supplies, including wine, were soon brought to Tomaszów by rail.⁵⁶ Describing the efforts of her family, Baum does not forget to mention their high emotional price:

My God, how can I write about all this, how do I have the nerve! I can still see myself weeping because of the humiliation God sent us. Yes, until recently I thought that there is nothing worse than letting people see your poverty. I could not look anyone in the eye back then!⁵⁷

Fear was always present because local people would often remind them that doing business with the Germans was prohibited. Baum complains that such comments betrayed a lack of empathy, all the more painful because, in her opinion, at this critical juncture in both Jewish and Polish history, the age-old prejudices might have disappeared.

Friends threaten them [Baum’s father and brother—JL]: “Do not sell! It’s not allowed!” Did these saints know that they sin additionally when they remind us that “it’s not allowed?” Did they know that for us to make money in this way was worse than death? And did they know that we deeply valued every penny? Had they only known, I think, all this centuries-old enmity would have fallen into pieces. But evidently they did not want to learn more about our lives, they did not try to understand us. On the contrary, always and everywhere they thought us guilty. Nothing to be done about it!⁵⁸

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶On German-Jewish relations in Tomaszów during World War I, see Beate Kosmala, “Tomaszów Mazowiecki im Ersten Weltkrieg und in der Zweiten Polnischen Republik bis zum Jahr 1933,” in Beate Kosmala, *Juden und Deutsche im polnischen Haus. Tomaszów Mazowiecki 1914–1939* (Berlin 2001), 53–73.

⁵⁷Baum, *Diary*, May 11, 1915.

⁵⁸Ibid.

Hunger intensified midway through 1915. Baum writes that it had become their worst enemy, that the real war was being fought against hunger: "It is only now that I begin to understand what a 'merciless' life is. Only now I understand what these words mean: not one on the battlefield but one who struggles with hunger is a true fighter."⁵⁹ Ruthless struggle for survival took away one's self-respect: "For us hunger is our local enemy. It attacks us more fiercely every day and forces us to lose whatever respect we have left for ourselves."⁶⁰ In her diary, Baum intimates that she had to borrow (or maybe take?) bread from someone, and that she cannot stop thinking about it. The deed weighs on her conscience, and she feels that, first and foremost, she must reconcile with God. In desperation, she asks whether she should give her own body for bread:

Now everything is waning, becomes less and less clear in my memory. Only one thing is clear: borrowed or maybe received bread. How? Should I lament with tears or repay with my body? How can I repay this debt I owe to God alone? It is tragic that there is nothing, nothing I can give back. Maybe...⁶¹

Baum notices how the war is changing her. She discovers in herself instincts she has not known before. "This war has produced in me an entirely new feeling of an instinct unknown to me before. It seems to me that everything is waking up and growing inside me."⁶² The worsening situation at home prompts her to move out and try to live on her own. With a few friends ("children forgotten by God like myself"⁶³) she begins to work at a local hospital as a nurse. Leaving her parental home produces mixed feelings. On the one hand, Baum tearfully declares that she did so out of desperation. On the other, she recalled her hope "to live more freely."⁶⁴ The change proves to be temporary, however, and she returns home. She does not want to devote all her time and effort to caring for her own family, and in 1916, with two friends, she engages in a project aimed at assisting the poorest inhabitants of Tomaszów, her new goal in life. The more affluent citizens of the town promise to deliver bread and potatoes to those who need them most. Unfortunately, it soon turns out that the prospective donors do not keep their word and thus expose the girls to disgrace. Against all odds, Baum continues her charitable work, but her faith in human goodness is gone and she begins to hate people.

⁵⁹Ibid., June 15, 1915.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid.

The goodness that the philanthropists of our town showed makes me deny any philanthropy. I think true mercy does not exist. If someone does good (I also do not believe in real sympathy), it is only for the sake of his own good name. I am afraid! I have completely lost the faith in people, but I have to live with them. I should, truth be told, get closer to them, but how to do that if I hate them!⁶⁵

Bronia ceases to trust the purity of her own intentions, as well, as she admits in a poem written two years later:

If in a day of hunger I will give you bread,
Do not believe that mercy led me there.
If I quench your thirst,
Be sure that I did not feel your pain.
If on a bitterly cold day
I see your face frozen and your poor coat
And will say: Come with me,
I will warm you up, cover you,
Know that my heart is made of stone.
If in need you ask for advice
And will hear firm:
“Do this and not that,”
Do not thank me for my time,
My mind is selfish
Did not devote even a moment for you.⁶⁶

In addition to her charity work, in 1916 Baum returned to her educational efforts. Early in 1917 she suffered a serious mental breakdown. She wrote:

What’s the use of my knowledge, if I can’t restrain hunger? When every piece of bread tells me about the terrifying nothingness of my mind, my talents, of the many years of my hard work? I, a woman in her prime, with healthy muscles, must eat bread gifted to me!⁶⁷

She considered herself a burden to her family. “What am I here in our exhausted, burdened poor family?”⁶⁸ As a result, in April 1917 she attempted to change her life once again, moved to Kielce and started teaching in a Jewish

⁶⁵Ibid, March 1916.

⁶⁶Bronia Baum, Collected poems in Polish, Manuscript, October 14, 1918.

⁶⁷Baum, *Diary*, March 1917.

⁶⁸Ibid.

school. Her salary did not allow her to become entirely independent, however, and she had to rely on help from her aunt. In September, Baum returned to Tomaszów. She wrote a poem to her mother, filled with longing, admiration, and attachment, in which she confessed, *inter alia*:

The world is hostile without you,
No friendly soul is there.
No friendly face I know.
Oh, by your side, Mom!⁶⁹

In February 1918, the Baum family was living in Piotrków, where freedom of commerce was greater under the Austro-Hungarian army. In her diary, Baum records that poverty and negative experiences forced the family to leave Tomaszów. She left her hometown without any regrets. In 1917–1918, Piotrków was economically strong, “because Jews from Lodz and other cities were arriving in large numbers and opening numerous factories” there.⁷⁰ The Baums did not feel at home in Piotrków, but their financial situation improved since the father found ways to earn money. Baum herself, however, remained unemployed, and worried that she had no money to buy shoes and clothes, but in a poem written three months after the family arrived in Piotrków, she says that at least the hunger has gone: “After the long hunger I ate black bread / And how great my appetite was.”⁷¹

This poem, surprisingly, is an ode to poverty. In hindsight, Baum valued the experience with which she was “bonded in friendship”:

Destitution which enlightens reason
Souls abandoned by people
It is you that I bless (...) ⁷²

The experience of utter penury allowed the poet to appreciate the bare minimum needed for survival and to derive pleasure from something as simple as the abundance of bread.

Without emotion and in very few words, she notes in her diary on March 3, 1918, the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (“These days, they say, peace came between Petersburg and the Central Powers”⁷³), hinting that this event did not spell the end of the tribulations. Indeed, as soon as June 1918, there was no food once again. Both in her diary and her poems from that period, Baum describes how difficult it was to obtain bread. On the margins

⁶⁹Baum, *Collected poems in Polish*, manuscript, September 19, 1917.

⁷⁰Feinkind, *Dzieje Żydów w Piotrkowie i okolicy*, 64–65.

⁷¹Baum, *Collected poems in Polish*, manuscript, May 10, 1918.

⁷²*Ibid.*

⁷³Baum, *Diary*, February 1918.

of her notebook she notes "struggle for bread." People gather at night in front of the bakery waiting for bread like hunters stalking prey. She cannot bear it. "I can't take it anymore! Where are we really? What century do we live in? What wild murders! When will it be over, O God? Our brothers are dying in battle and here we perish from hunger."⁷⁴ In another poem, she describes a child begging for bread. She has nothing to give:

Leave me
 My heart is breaking
 You're asking in vain
 My hand is empty
 I don't have bread
 Poor darling you
 You're begging? Oh heavens
 Who will show mercy
 To a poor child?
 In this destitution
 I am not the reason
 It's dying from desire!
 Bread, oh bread
 Give Your children, Lord
 May the word of Your will
 Become flesh!⁷⁵

In her diary, Baum refers neither to the end of World War I nor to the restoration of Poland's independence on November 11, 1918. Around that date (sometime between September 14 and December 10, 1918), however, she writes a poem to which, uncharacteristically, she gives a title, "The Days of Pogroms." It begins:

Slaughter, oh blood everywhere!
 Who will show me with a pure hand
 A shelter for my soul?
 O eternal defeat! Eternal torment!⁷⁶

Anti-Jewish incidents that took place immediately after Poland was restored to the map of Europe had, it appears, a decisive impact on Baum's ideological and life choices.⁷⁷ At the end of 1918, in her poems she clearly expresses

⁷⁴Ibid., June 1918.

⁷⁵Baum, Collected poems in Polish, manuscript, June 30, 1918.

⁷⁶Ibid., no date.

⁷⁷The most serious pogroms took place in Lwów, Warsaw, Pińsk, Lida, Poznań, and Crakow. Spring 1919 brought another wave of anti-Jewish violence. See Alexander V. Prusin, "'The

her belief that leaving her homeland—the land, as she calls it, “of tears and blood”⁷⁸—is unavoidable. She writes of her tremendous disappointment, and about a change that took place within her which she compares to a veil being removed from her eyes.⁷⁹ Her only homeland, she decides, is Eretz Israel. It pains her that people she believed to be her friends turned out to be enemies:

The veil dropped from before my eyes
 I saw myself amongst friends
 Digging a hole beneath me... (...)
 And since then fear
 Torments my soul in this land.
 They do not trust us, us they do not like
 There is no homeland for us here.
 Out far away the home of Jacob,
 Gaze longingly toward the sea! (...)
 Leave the land of tears and blood,
 You will not find peace here,
 For you there is in this land
 No rest after tremendous toil.⁸⁰

In January 1919, Baum again writes about pogroms. She is bitter and deeply shaken. Anger and rebellion stir within her, but the only expression her feelings find is through words committed to paper. She notes: “I write all the time.”⁸¹ The end of the war does not end hatred and violence and this leads her to a catastrophic view of human nature and the future of humanity:

What a terrible pogrom against the Jews, how much blood spilled
 and all that in Your presence, with Your permission. O, time!
 How many human groans have you heard? How many innocent
 tears have fallen before You? And nothing moved You. What can
 change Your hard nature, what can turn You into a tender body?
 Oh how pitiful this world is! The war does not end for ages. People
 hate one another deeply and truly. For their fellow men, people

Stimulus Qualities’ of a Scapegoat: The Etiology of Anti-Jewish Violence in Eastern Poland, 1918–1920,” *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 4 (2005): 243–51; Piotr Wróbel, “The ‘Kaddish’ Years: Anti-Jewish Violence in East Central Europe, 1918–1921,” *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 4 (2005): 211–36.

⁷⁸Baum, Collected poems in Polish, manuscript, December 30, 1918.

⁷⁹The disappointment of Jewish youth with the attitudes of the Polish population during World War I and its aftermath, as well as with the Polish army as the first institution representing the future Polish state, was widespread and often crucial in the process of the political formation of the young Jewish generation. See Kijek, “Naród słabych i skrzywdzonych.”

⁸⁰*Ibid.*

⁸¹Baum, *Diary*, late January 1919.

bring dangers, misfortunes, and death. Looking at our daily needs, we see one big lie, one big deception, one devastating dream—the destruction of the world. One wants to cry, to show the depravities, to help, but one has to keep silent, not to utter a word as if it were a curse so as to avoid misfortune.⁸²

Moses Feinkind noted that, in those days, “posters appeared on the walls in town calling for pogroms against the Jews. They were manually printed and written, and had demagogic slogans such as ‘Down with the Jews’ or ‘Jews to Palestine.’”⁸³

Soon Baum registered to vote in the elections to Polish Parliament that took place on January 26, 1919. Even though a number of Jewish delegates won mandates, she viewed the future of the Jews in Poland in dark colors. Interestingly, when writing about this, she uses the plural “we,” a clear sign of her growing identification with her people: “We voted for new delegates to the new Polish parliament. My brothers remained dissatisfied as ever. Only a small percent of Jewish candidates made it to parliament to defend their interests.⁸⁴ We understand what is coming and we mourn it.”⁸⁵

Baum witnessed another wave of anti-Jewish violence in Piotrków Trybunalski in June 1919. New recruits for the Polish army, drafted for the Polish-Soviet war (1919–1921), went through the town and their presence contributed to anti-Jewish violence. The outbreaks were drastic enough to prompt the city council to adopt the following resolution: “The city council condemns incidents against the Jewish population perpetrated by recruits and youth and calls for the city executive to see to it that the military patrols maintain order when recruits are passing through the city and on the market days.”⁸⁶

According to Feinkind, the situation of the Piotrków Jews was extraordinarily difficult at this time. It was not long before Jews were boycotted in various areas of life (ghetto benches at schools and boycotts of Jewish merchants). The difficult circumstances drove many Jews out of Piotrków:

⁸²Ibid., January 1919.

⁸³Feinkind, *Dzieje Żydów w Piotrkowie i okolicy*, 67.

⁸⁴Jewish parties won eleven mandates in the election, a representation that did not match demographic facts. See Jolanta Żyndul, “Nadzieje i rozczarowania,” in *Historia Żydów. Dzieje narodu od Abrahama do Państwa Izrael. Żydzi w Polsce. 1000 lat wspólnych losów* (Warsaw, 2014), 296. Not a single Jewish candidate from the Piotrków region won a mandate. Most votes there were gathered by the Orthodox list—3,944. In the entire district, 9,047 Jews voted (the total number of voters was 84,732). Feinkind, *Dzieje Żydów w Piotrkowie i okolicy*, 67–68.

⁸⁵Baum, *Diary*, late January 1919.

⁸⁶“*Dziennik Narodowy*,” 2, June 7, 1919, 2.

“Jewish industrialists left Piotrków *en masse* and moved to different towns where antisemitism was not as terrifyingly widespread.”⁸⁷

Between June 15 and 22, 1919, Baum composed her pogrom poems. One is titled “Hunt for a Jew” and describes an assault on a religious Jew walking down a street. The attackers start by humiliating him, shaving off his beard, and end by taking away his bags. The looting does not bring them much satisfaction, however, as the bags contain only *tefillin*:

Look, a Jew walks home there,
 Leaning on a stick.
 Don't let him pass, it's pogrom.
 He takes our income from us.
 Are we children
 Going to let him pass?
 “Hey, you Jew, stop” they shout
 (Alright: a beard he's got and packs)
 “Where do you wander
 You bearded . . . at this bloody hour?
 You know, let's start from the beard,
 And the packs will make us rich!
 What are you hiding there?
 Ha, you're cursing us for sure!
 Give me a knife, brother, we will see.
 What's all this noise?
 Don't touch here, there it hurts,
 Who pampered you so?
 Away with these clumps! Why so wet?
 It's blood! I dirtied my hands.

.....

Didn't I tell you friend
 He would leave the packs?
 Bah, no good deal, damn it,
 Only *tefillin* bags. . . ⁸⁸

The poem contrasts a stereotypical image of the Jew—wealthy beyond imagining and constantly plotting—that fed the pogroms with a picture of a man whose primary concerns focus on religious life, symbolized in the poem by *tefillin*. The image created by the poet is deeply moving not least because traditionally *tefillin* were seen as an amulet protecting the Jew who publicly

⁸⁷Feinkind, *Dzieje Żydów w Piotrkowie i okolicy*, 69.

⁸⁸Baum, Collected poems in Polish, manuscript, June 15–22, 1919.

professes his fidelity to Yiddishkeit by wearing it. The poem thus contradicts a literary tradition replete with stories of miraculous survival thanks to the protection of *tefillin*.⁸⁹

In the following poem, the author again refers to accusations against Jews that were often voiced during pogroms—that they were Bolsheviks and controlled the world through their untold, mythical riches. Again, the poetess shows the absurdity of this image in juxtaposition to a pogrom victim, a poor, hungry, and terrified man:

Stop, don’t touch, what owes you
 This pale Jew, Jan?
 He did not give birth to a Trotsky
 He does not know the Rothschilds at all—
 His power doesn’t reach further
 Than slapping flies,
 And that (if I’m not mistaken)
 Makes his spirit tremble.
 He’s got plenty millions
 Worries and plagues,
 Sick wife, frail children
 No daily bread. (...)
 Let go, Jan, let him
 Put face safely on the pavement.
 May the night not threaten him
 With an ambush by your hand
 And may the day cease to be
 For him a source of torture.
 Please accept forever
 That he did not wrong you,
 That he was born a Jew,
 That he did not harm you!⁹⁰

The experiences of World War I and the events that followed it haunted Baum. On Tisha beAv 1919 (August 23), when the situation was markedly calmer, she could not stop remembering the bloodied images, and instead of pondering, as tradition demands, the destruction of the Temple, she immersed herself in the imagery of destruction she had witnessed:

⁸⁹ See, for example, a story about Elisha Baal Knafajm’s *tefillin* transformed into dove’s wings. Yakov ben Avraham, *Eyn shoyne mayseh bukh*, story 18 (11 in the original numbering) (Basel, 1602), 25, e-rara.ch, die Plattform für digitalisierte Drucke aus Schweizer Bibliotheken http://www.e-rara.ch/bau_1/content/pageview/10299085, retrieved June 17, 2017.

⁹⁰ Baum, Collected poems in Polish, manuscript, June 15, 1919.

It is quiet. The world fell asleep for a moment,
 Daily worries as if dead.
 Only in her soul, painful, dark,
 Alive, still alive are the snakes of suffering
 Slaughter, fire, foe's terrible sword,
 Killed mothers, defiled daughters,
 All defeats of that memorable day
 Search for haven in her heart.
 In God's name, O child
 Why are you awake,
 When the whole world enjoys its sleep?
 Why your heart keeps searching for "yesterday,"
 And your soul longs for tomorrow?⁹¹

From Baum's son we know that a certain dislike of the world and a sense of its corrupted nature remained with her to the end of her life: "She could not stand this world because it was filled with lies and deceit,"⁹² he wrote of her in the introduction to her writings.

There can be little doubt that the events of late 1918 and early 1919 contributed to her decision that Eretz Israel was her homeland, and gave her the determination and strength for *aliyah*. In one of her poems, Baum commented on Poland's restored independence:

(...) A great moment for Poland came.
 With a smile on his face too
 A Jew from the community appeared,
 The road is opened, the road to Palestine.
 He shares in the joy of all:
 "Let's leave Poland to the Poles, let's go to Jerusalem!"⁹³

In 1920, the poet clearly declared where her homeland was and unambiguously expressed her conviction that she would live there. "For some time, I've suffered a terrible affliction—longing. I'm longing intensely, unspeakably, for my homeland. Nothing can calm my fretful heart, my soul crushed by bitterness. Only my homeland, the holy land of my fathers will probably give me the peace I desire so strongly."⁹⁴ Especially after 1919, the number of songs of Zion in Baum's writings increased.

⁹¹Baum, Collected poems in Polish, manuscript, Tyshe bav 1919.

⁹²Baum, *Ketuvim*, 2.

⁹³Baum, Collected poems in Polish, manuscript, September 8, 1918.

⁹⁴Baum, *Diary*, October 1920.

Religion and Tradition

The foundation of Baum's Zionism, apart from the experience of the pogroms that alienated her from the place of her birth, was doubtlessly the Jewish religion, with its spiritual center in Jerusalem. She remained Orthodox to the end of her life. Even if she was critical of her parents, these sentiments never turned into a rebellion against their Hasidic tradition. In a photo taken in Israel, she is wearing the traditional head-covering for Hasidic wives, from under which not a single strand of hair can be seen.⁹⁵ Even though twentieth century Zionism is usually perceived predominantly as a secular ideology among Eastern European Jewish youth, it was common to connect the idea of returning to the land of the forefathers to religiosity. Baum was not unique in this respect.⁹⁶ Her own views were somewhere between Bnos Agudas Isroel and the religious Zionism of the Mizrahi, even with the two competing against each other. The motto of the latter was: "The land of Israel for the people of Israel according to the Torah of Israel."⁹⁷

Although in her diary Baum does not devote much space to worship and faith, her perception of reality is deeply permeated by religiosity. It can be seen sometimes in her remarks addressed to God. For example, shortly after moving to Piotrków, she writes: "Do not abandon us, God, in this new field of action. We are alien to [other] people, but not to You."⁹⁸ In addition, her life was structured according to the sacred calendar even though the references to holidays and observations appeared in her diary only marginally. The element of the sacred is much more prominent in Baum's poems. There we find

⁹⁵In the introduction to Baum's writing, the matter of her adhering to the traditional rules regarding clothing is also touched on: "During her travels in Europe, especially in German and Czech sanatoria, she knew how to protect the holiness of Israel and her tradition. Many times, people expressed their admiration for the figure of a religious woman, modest and beautiful despite the wig. In those circles during her public speeches, she often praised the name of God. She was a shining example of how to fight God's war with His warriors for all educated and religious Jewish girls." "A change of clothing dictated by a wish to make oneself more likeable to non-Jews," she writes in *Like non-Jews*, "in no way affects the opposite side. On the contrary, secularization gives rise to intense hatred from my enemy who listens closely to my teachings," Baum, *Ketivim*, 3.

⁹⁶See Kamil Kijek, *Dzieci modernizmu. Świadomość, kultura i socjalizacja polityczna młodzieży żydowskiej w II Rzeczypospolitej* (Wrocław 2017) *Indywidualne aspiracje młodzieży religijnej*, 72–90, and *Ortodoksyjny Żyd: liberalny obywatel? Proces kształtowania się nowego typu żydowskiej ortodoksji religijnej w Polsce międzywojennej*, 90–100; Ehud Luz, *Parallels Meet: Religion and Nationalism in the Early Zionist Movement (1882–1904)*, trans. Lenn J. Schramm (Philadelphia-New York-Jerusalem, 1988).

⁹⁷After Jerzy Ochman, "Religia w służbie polityki. Mistyka syjonizmu religijnego," *Studia Europaea Gnesnensia* 13 (2016): 131.

⁹⁸Baum, *Diary*, February 1919.

expressions of her struggle with sin and doubt, out of which a clear sense of her mission in life arose. She felt called upon to serve as a guide for young Jewish women. On her birthday, she wrote:

And be a worthy child of your forebears
 May truth be your hallmark.
 Be a guiding light
 For your younger, weaker sisters. (...)
 May "What for?" and "Why?" disappear from your heart
 May your faith in God's eternal justice
 Flourish.⁹⁹

Her poems written in Yiddish are certainly most infused with motifs connected to tradition and religion. In these poems, she most often addresses God directly, usually in the form of lamentation. It is also here that she introduces vocabulary linked to Yiddishkeit. Some diversification can be seen in her poems that are more dependent on the language used. It is in Yiddish, for example, that she writes a poem addressed to the Sabbath:

The Shabbat evening!
 What a relief, what sanctity
 Resides in your darkness,
 What piety, what fearfulness
 You bring into my heart.¹⁰⁰

In Baum's Yiddish poetry, we can see traces of her inner struggle: she did not want to abandon Orthodox Judaism, but, at the same time, desired a life in which she could realize her ambitions and expand her independence. In one poem, she admonishes herself:

Listen to your fathers' voice,
 Abandon the wild . . . of water!
 Return to the deathly silence
 Of your cold room,
 Chain your free will,
 Live according to the old order!¹⁰¹

What elements of tradition were impossible for her to accept? In addition to attitudes toward women's education, Baum found the way marriages were arranged to be troubling, as I will elaborate later. A very clear instance of a conflict arose in late 1918, when she left home to work as a clerk in a

⁹⁹Baum, Collected poems in Polish, manuscript, October 14, 1918.

¹⁰⁰Baum, Collected poems in Yiddish, manuscript, December 20, 1919.

¹⁰¹Ibid., November 13, 1917.

different town. Her parents strongly opposed her choice: “Father told me categorically that he would not let me go to work anymore, that they did not need my money, and that they did not wish to see me working for a Christian.” Unlike her parents, Baum did not see it as problematic that her employer was Christian. She observed the Sabbath when employed by him, not working on Saturdays. When she lost the position after going back home for the fall Jewish holidays, Baum believed she was fired because of her Sabbath observance.

Immediately, when the first day after the Holidays arrived, despite my parents’ threats and pleas, I returned from T. [Tomaszów] to work. But evidently something better is awaiting me, because my position turned out to be taken by a different person and my former boss explained that he could not wait for me any longer. I am convinced, however, that it was due to my Saturdays which I do not want to devote to some L. [the town L.] or a few marks.¹⁰²

Baum’s overall approach to religiosity was characterized in the following way: “Her religious consciousness was independent, original, bereft of the force of habit and social pressure. She did not walk the old, well-trodden, and even paths but rather followed her individual one.”¹⁰³

Feminist Tropes, Attitude toward Men, Relations with Women

Baum’s worldview, despite being based on tradition and religion, and apart from her Zionist orientation, contains some clearly feminist elements. The most prominent is her fight for education, discussed earlier. In her diary, however, she also allows also for her dislike of men to come through: “For me, without exception, man was an enemy of woman. Because I thought so, I wanted to delay getting to this enemy. I knew that I could not remain a virgin forever, I decided to get married later, but to be happy at the same time.”¹⁰⁴ Baum often refers to her arguments with her father, but she reserves her sharpest criticism for her brother, who lived in the parental home with his wife and three children. It was because of her brother, wrote Baum in 1914, that she felt suicidal: “I want to shout, to weep, but quietly, so that my family does not hear anything. And how strong I must be not to be a coward and kill myself.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰²Baum, *Diary*, October 10, 1918.

¹⁰³Baum, *Ketuvim*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁴Baum, *Diary*, May 4, 1912.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, June 8, 1915.

In her relations with both her father and brother, Baum felt as though she were a stumbling block. Her mother shared her sentiments.

My brother brought those pathetic sounds on in me (...). Only because of him the world is a hell for me from the early years. I am ashamed to call him an enemy but he was certainly never my friend. Earlier, when he was unmarried, he often looked at me with hostility, but I thought it was not important because the separation was coming—he would get married soon and leave our house, my mother said, and finally I would be free.¹⁰⁶

This hope proved, however, to be in vain, as Baum's brother did not leave the parental home after his wedding.

Baum's parents tried to get their daughter married off quickly. The conversations on the topic started well before she turned 16. Nearly every evening, her mother attempted to convince her to get married, using Baum's sensitivity as an argument.

My mother tried to persuade me by saying that I was so sensitively brought up and that I had to have a gentle, good man for a husband, from a rich family, because after the wedding she did not want to see me in her home but to be off with the husband.¹⁰⁷

Baum saw these efforts primarily as a wish to be rid of her. She did not rebel directly, but by means of varied reasons kept sending suitors away, also hoping that her parents were unable to provide a dowry good enough to secure for her a "suitable match." She also mentioned that it was possible to marry at the age of 30. This angered her father who, as she wrote, "was often angry at me and used to say that I was completely spoiled and stupid."¹⁰⁸ The issue of Baum's marriage disappeared during the war, only to return after the family's situation stabilized early in 1920. With noticeable irony, Baum wrote that, as her family was considered well-off, various people started to show interest in her: "An uncle, my father's brother, who otherwise would not even want to hear about me (truth be told, that is my own pessimistic opinion) wants me now to marry his son."¹⁰⁹ Even though this cousin had lived with Baum's family for about half a year because of his military service, he was a stranger to her. At this point, however, Baum had one goal—*aliyah*. Her father made one condition: first marriage and only then, possibly, emigration.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., May 4, 1912.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., April 1920.

Father says (apart from many other things that I cannot even repeat) that he will not let an unmarried woman go to Palestine alone. “I will give you a husband and then...” Father to give me a husband—what can I say—he knows me and surely will give a man appropriate for me!¹¹⁰

These words reflect Bronia’s criticism of arranged marriages and, again, of the way her father was treating her. She knew, however, that she needed to submit, as tradition required: “I have not found anything for my own ‘self’ in him, but how can I say no when everybody says that this is an excellent match for me. I am to accept everything without complaint, to be obedient like our grandmothers and mothers.”¹¹¹

Baum’s determination to leave for Eretz Israel was so strong that her most important criterion in choosing a husband was the candidate’s attitude toward Zionism. The cousin was initially opposed to the ideology, but changed his mind, probably due to Baum’s influence.

This man, I will not say is bad, but still not good for me. He’s got many shortcomings but the most important is his hostility toward Zionism. My soul weeps when he attacks Zionism like a true enemy. I’ve come to hate him because of that. But I don’t know why, but now Zionism starts to interest him. He even decided to say (not to me, of course) that he is ready to go to the [Middle] East.¹¹²

The condition regarding immigration to Eretz Israel was ultimately included in the marriage contract.¹¹³ The agreement was nearly cancelled when Baum learned that her future husband’s family was not interested in her at all because, supposedly, they thought that “if not this one, there will be another.”¹¹⁴ She felt hurt, but at the same time was glad to have a reason to cancel the arrangement. She saw the prospect of not marrying as an opportunity for freedom, independence, and staying true to herself.

With terrible impatience, with tortured expectation, I looked forward to the ultimate parting of our ways. The thought of being free

¹¹⁰Ibid., October 1920.

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³In the biographical sketch preceding Baum’s writings published in Israel we find information about this: “To beloved Zion she arrived with her future husband in fulfillment of the marriage contract obligating her to immigrate to Israel. As the husband, he did not even consider their good financial situation because in Lodz he was thought to be one of the best merchants.”

¹¹⁴Baum, *Diary*, January 1921.

again, of being independent smiled at me, but on the other hand, filled me with fear. (...) I was afraid, but I definitely wanted to break the understanding with my uncle's son as soon as possible and to remain myself.¹¹⁵

She could not talk about this with the cousin himself, as she noted: "His son (uncle's) of course does not talk with me about it (we are children of Hasidim), but I know that he wants to bring us together in every way possible."¹¹⁶ Finally, after hearing from her uncle that she was dearer to them than a daughter, Baum became engaged to her cousin in June 1921. It was also then that she stopped writing in her diary. The last sentence reads: "June 1921. And my cousin became my fiancé and [unreadable] on heart."¹¹⁷ This major change in her life evidently prompted her to abandon the writing she had taken up nearly ten years earlier. From her biography, one can conclude that, contrary to her fears, marriage did not limit her independence. It appears that it had actually helped her become fully involved in the cause of girls' education and journalism in Orthodox circles.

Relationships with men are rather marginal in Baum's writing. Her relationships with other women were much more important in this part of her life. This is not surprising, given that she grew up in a Hasidic family, where tradition severely limits contacts between the sexes. Several factors influenced Baum's deep relationships with other women, which can be described through the lens of the idea of sisterhood. First, women accompanied and helped her during her educational quest. During the war, it was in their company that she worked at a hospital and became involved in charity work. Their companionship was at that time based on common activities and shared goals, but more than that: in Baum's poems we find expressions of the deep feelings she had for her girlfriends. Some poems may be described as homoerotic. Some are accompanied by additional remarks about the person or when the poem was written, which may be seen as confirming their rootedness in her real friendships from the period. For example, alongside the comment, "From when I worked with O.L.," we find a poem about the necessity of putting an end to a dangerous friendship and the accompanying pain:

Chasm between us,
I must disappear from your eye.
Oh, let me look at your face once,
Less terrible my fate will be.
What? Friendship threatens us?

¹¹⁵Ibid.

¹¹⁶Ibid.

¹¹⁷Ibid., June 1921.

And you are grey, without sun rays?
Oh, heavens, my weak eye
May it turn into stone!¹¹⁸

Another poem, with the name “Pola” scribbled below, speaks of harmony in a friendship which demands that formal behaviors are put aside, that conventions are forgotten and give way to spontaneity and sensuality, leading to love.

Convention, rule, etiquette, formula!...
Why need we disturb the quiet friendship
Harmony? What use of clichés?
Let us abandon the rules! Let us drink the aroma
Of quiet, spring-like, normal, cordial
Without any additions, without awful nausea.
Let us submit to the strength of our young hearts,
May they take us into the land of love!¹¹⁹

In another poem, Baum describes what brings young women together. In her view, it is confessions shared during sleepless nights, common experiences and pain, and promises of eternal friendship, so common among teenagers. Friendship, however, is always tested and exposed to the dangers of decay and falsity.

My girlfriend! Time will surely easily
Hurt and separate us,
Will it that easily
Bring us together and heal?
Think, how many tears
We shed together,
How many common moans
The river of the past contains.
And the chain of mutual confessions,
That our hearts have known,
How many sleepless nights
They have brought to us? (...)
But our paths not parallel,
We must meet
Even in the land of the spirits
We will see each other.
And when we see each other,

¹¹⁸Baum, Collected poems in Polish, manuscript, February 27, 1919.

¹¹⁹Ibid., August 15, 1918.

How will you defend yourself,
 When I surprise you,
 That you play with friendship?¹²⁰

Baum lamented that youthful friendships were often destroyed by the abandonment of idealism. As a twenty-four-year-old woman, she appealed to her childhood friend that they return to the lofty goals they used to share, that they renew their, as she wrote, “holy” friendship.

Rachel!
 Every moment, memories far and close,
 Die within us.
 And rebellion rises in my soul,
 What has happened to our great words?
 Where is childhood, where the bond
 That used to bind us so strongly? (. . .)
 Resurrect, Rachel, resurrect in your heart
 Our youthful holy friendship,
 And I will pray to God
 For the flower of rebirth.¹²¹

Three years earlier, in 1917, Baum addressed a farewell poem most likely to the same Rachel. There, in the war years, she recalled their careless childhood and the time spent together by the Pilica river. This poem is one of the most audacious:

To my R.
 Farewell, oh farewell, your eyes full of tears
 Are a monument in my memory.
 Farewell, oh Dear, won't it be holy to you
 The groan that begs and tortures?
 Farewell the times of our playing together,
 And you, the moments of childhood joys,
 Farewell, the ghost of our common dreams,
 Farewell, the dear past.
 I will not see you again, spring forests,
 Will not find respite from pain in your shade.
 Farewell, Pilica, I will not ever feel
 Your cool waves on my face in July.
 Farewell, Rachel, may you remember vividly
 My last embrace.

¹²⁰Ibid., June 1919.

¹²¹Baum, Collected poems in Polish, manuscript, March 20, 1920.

Farewell and remember that you only
I chose for fulfillment of my wishes.¹²²

Some of Baum's poems addressed to her friends speak of jealousy and betrayal. In friendship, which she calls "an alliance of souls," she demands loyalty and exclusivity. When writing about disappointments in her friendships, she often refers to an illness. Despite being a topos of erotic poetry (love as illness, dying of love, etc.), in Baum's case it also reflected reality. She suffered various conditions, from health issues in early childhood (described in her diary), through afflictions affecting her eyes, to a fragile psychological makeup involving nervous breakdown and episodes of depression. In the diary, we also read about long periods of illness that are not described in detail. Baum's fear of being rejected by a friend because of her poor health finds expression in one of her poems directed to Pola:

Oh, Pola, tell me! Is it true you betrayed
My honest feelings?
That recklessly you broke our souls' alliance,
That you forgot our time together
That you do not remember me among your new friends?
Have you really thrown away the old friendship key
Together with old pain?
Do you really avoid me
Because my illness must poison?
And maybe I am guilty here,
Maybe it is my soul's deceit again,
Maybe I have accused you
Wrongly? Oh, Pola, come back!¹²³

Sometimes, following the biblical model of love contained in Song of Songs, where love is presented as a primal power matched only by death ("Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame," Song of Songs 8:6), as well as tendencies present in decadent poetry, Baum balanced between the two forces. In one poem, she sketches an image of her friend in the death throes. It is difficult to determine whether it is a description of authentic experience, which is possible given that the poem was written during the war. It appears more probable, however, that the poem expresses fantasies occasioned by abandonment. Death can also be a metaphor for the loss of faith.

¹²²Ibid., July 10, 1917.

¹²³Ibid., September 3, 1918.

Oh, when I furtively glanced into her soul,
 I wanted to step back in fear,
 What a sight, my God!
 Emptiness around. Cinders after fire.
 (...) I did not know that she
 Pierces my heart first with pleas,
 And then with a sword of doubts and defeats,
 That she aims at my chest so healthy thus far,
 That she burdened it with her stone so heavy.
 But I woke from an awful terror,
 I breathed deeply, opened my arms:
 "Be well," I said, feeling weak,
 And then I heard: "Your girlfriend is dying."
 I run to her: she is not moving, no life,
 At the torture of her lethargy I must look.
 I am silent but I ask for a farewell.
 She stands up and says:
 'May your soul match mine!'
 She said and died.¹²⁴

Baum did realize that accusations of betrayal and disloyalty could stem from her own hypersensitivity, which she referred to as the "demon of jealousy," always lurking and ready to strike suddenly, even within a moment of happiness.

Yes, Pola, my sunny moments
 The demon of jealousy cannot stand,
 My quiet joy terrifies him,
 Oh, how dreadful he must be! (...)

Clouded my forehead
 Lightened a little,
 Having you so close
 But he noticed it suddenly
 And said: I will ruin everything
 And on this bright day full of promise
 You were overwhelmed by the specter of longing.
 You left me coldly, without a word of goodbye,
 I was left disappointed, sick.¹²⁵

Baum compared nurturing a friendship to working the soil, which demands labor and patience waiting for the crop. There was a dose of uncertainty here,

¹²⁴Ibid., August 11, 1918.

¹²⁵Ibid., October 9, 1918.

however, because some of her friends had such great potential that they were ready to “sow another field, as well,” far from where Baum is waiting for the crop to appear. The question of disloyalty recurs.

I wanted to embrace you, to caress you,
 To warm up congealed blood.
 I resurrected every blissful memory,
 So that our sowing was not in vain.
 But sudden shivers shook my soul,
 What if my companion destroyed my labor?
 If the seeds sowed in her field
 Were long devoured by December cold?
 And what if weeds, wild plants
 Will grow and my poor field
 Won’t find strength to defend itself
 And slowly my awaited crop is dying?
 And what if that rich in seed
 Will sow a different field far away?
 Am I to leave everything to decay,
 Or cry out: wait my patience!?¹²⁶

These poems beg the question of whether they are a record of very emotional friendships or of erotic relationships. Perhaps it is merely a matter of the highly emotional style of Baum’s poetry and her use of lyrical clichés grounded in classical European literature? Erotic literature from the early twentieth century has numerous neoromantic elements and concentrates on love as a dark, fatal force, often demonic, condemned to unfulfillment. While one should be cautious when trying to determine the nature of these relationships, it is impossible to ignore Baum’s stated dislike of men and her use of such unambiguous phrases as “to caress” or “fulfill wishes.” Simultaneously, it is important to keep in mind that she always remained within Orthodox Hasidic tradition, and hence any possible prohibited relationships were bound to give rise to fear and guilt. It is therefore possible that the recurring motif of sin has to do precisely with that sphere of her life. In one of her poems, she writes of the necessity for repentance:

Do not reject me, Father,
 Uncomforted child,
 May the pleas be answered.
 I am ready to repent
 For terrible sins,

¹²⁶Ibid., August 24, 1918.

Companions of my past days.
 But who can swear,
 That my future will be
 Pure, stainless and guiltless?
 Am I guilty that my heart is full of desire?¹²⁷

It is interesting to note that in the introduction to Baum's posthumously published writing her female friends are mentioned twice. They are described as those who abandoned their faith at a certain point of their lives: "And although her female friends moved away from religious Judaism and toward an alien culture, she remained faithful—strong in her faith, connected to the Torah and tradition."¹²⁸ The female friends are thus presented as dangers that Baum manages to overcome. More than that, she ultimately triumphs and becomes a guide for her lost friends.

Her pure blood, carrying the forebears' heritage, gave her strength and power to oppose the recurring attacks of her female friends who were opposed to her views. She faced all that and emerged victorious, filled with peace. And how amazing is it that she found recognition in her female friends' eyes precisely because of her unconditional faith in God. She gained respect and obedience like a master from a student.¹²⁹

This is either the version that Baum presented to her husband or the way he interpreted her diary and poems while preparing them for publication. None of her writing from before their marriage was included in the volume he published.

New Rachels—Neo-Orthodox Women Poets

Baum's writings can be read in a variety of contexts. Her proficiency in several languages alone allows seeing her work in connection with Young Poland as well as Russian, Yiddish, and Hebrew literature. Analyzing all these connections is outside the scope of this article. I will, therefore, present a synthesizing comparison of her writings from 1912–1921, and the circumstances and nature of women's Yiddish poetry. The early twentieth century saw literary debuts of poets who could be described as Neo-Orthodox, first

¹²⁷Ibid., February 15, 1918.

¹²⁸Baum, *Ketuvim*, 4.

¹²⁹Ibid.

and foremost Miriam Ulinover¹³⁰ and Roza Yakubovitch.¹³¹ Ulinover decided to speak through the voice of an innocent girl in her poems written in a folk style. Her work has very little in common with Baum’s. It is in the poetry of Roza Yakubovitch that we find an interesting comparative context.¹³² In the opening poem of her first published volume, Yakubovitch describes how difficult it is for an Orthodox woman’s voice to be heard in the world of Jewish poetry:

Behind me grandfather cries out: Jewish child you must remain
At your ancestor’s home, inside—female voice may not resound,
it’s shameful!
Oh look, the night turns into a powerful day.
I go and extend my arm, ready to create.¹³³

The creative process is presented here as a liberation. A woman is leaving the sphere of darkness behind her and turns toward limitations established by the rules of tradition. Yakubovitch refers to the prohibitions against the female voice (*kol isha*) in public:¹³⁴ as she begins to create poetry which, in Yiddish,

¹³⁰Miriam Ulinover (1888–1944) was born into an affluent family in Lodz. Initially, she wrote in Polish, German, and Russian but in time chose Yiddish. Her husband was a Hasid and they kept kosher. In 1922, Ulinover published a volume *Der bobes oytser* (*Grandmother’s Treasure*), with an enthusiastic introduction by David Frishman, a connoisseur of Jewish poetry. In her apartment in Lodz, at Dzielna 11 (now Narutowicza), Ulinover created a literary salon. She was killed in Auschwitz in 1944. See Natalia Krynicka, *Arajnfir*, “Introduction,” in Miriam Ulinover, *A grus fun der alter hejm. Lider* [*Greetings from the Old Home: Poems*], ed. Natalia Krynicka, trans. into French Batia Baum (Paris, 2003).

¹³¹Roza Yakubovitch (1889–1942), writer, poet, and journalist born in Przasnysz to a religious family. Her father was a rabbi in Siedlce and Będzin. Yakubovitch attended Russian and Polish schools (the Polish school in Będzin) and learned Hebrew from local writer, Yakov Ber Zajac. Through him, she also discovered Yiddish literature. After she married, Yakubovitch moved to Kalisz and there became involved in the periodical, *Yiddishe Vochenblatt*. She dated her debut to 1910, but in *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur* Chaim Leyb Fuks wrote that her first publication appeared in *Roman Tsaytung* in 1908 under the pen name Rozalia Yakubson. A volume of poetry, *Mayne gezangen*, was published in 1924. Yakubovitch left Kalisz for Lodz when the German army entered. In Lodz she lived with Miriam Ulinover. She died in the Warsaw Ghetto.

¹³²See Kathryn Hellerstein, Roza Yakubovitch, in Kathryn Hellerstein, *A Question of Tradition. Women Poets in Yiddish, 1586–1987* (Stanford, 2014), 212–42.

¹³³Roza Yakubovitch, (*Mit pasn goldnem morgnrojt...*) [*With the stripes of the golden dawn...*] in R. Yakubovitch, *Mayne gezangen* (Warsaw 1924), 5.

¹³⁴*Kol isha* (female voice): its audibility in the public sphere is regulated by Jewish law. In Orthodox Judaism, it is forbidden that a man praying or studying Torah should hear a female voice singing. A woman’s voice has a strong sexual dimension (it is qualified as *ervah*, nakedness). Halakhic authorities still debate the scope of this law and discuss whether it applies to all women or only to the voice of an unknown woman. Another question is whether the rule is applicable to all prayers or only to Shma Israel.

even on a purely linguistic level has very strong associations with singing (in Yiddish poem is *lid*, a song), Yakubovitch's grandfather—an incarnation of tradition, and its guardian—reminds her that by becoming a poet she is violating the rule that commands her to stay at home, to remain in the private sphere and thereby follow the prohibition against the feminine voice in the public domain. Rebelliously, Yakubovitch entitled her first poetry volume *Mayne gezangen* (*My Songs*). Instead of the ambiguous *lid/lider*, she decided to use *gezangen* which is derived from *zingen*, to sing.

From Yakubovitch's biography as well as from her poetry, we know that she never left the world of Orthodox Judaism. What, then, was the meaning of that gesture of protest? In my opinion, it is an expression of changes affecting the status of women within Orthodoxy (including Hasidism). More and more girls from Orthodox families attended non-Jewish schools. That opened their intellectual aspirations, but there was no traditional system of education where girls could pursue their interests in a religious setting. In addition, World War I unexpectedly and radically altered the situation of the Orthodox communities. In many cases, it undermined the authority of those who claimed that certain rules, norms, and traditions were immune to change. Religious communities were also more and more active in politics. As a result of all those trends, Jewish feminist movements within Orthodoxy began to develop. The best known example of that is Sarah Schenirer (1883–1935),¹³⁵ who created the Bais Yaakov network of Orthodox schools for girls, strongly linked to the women's faction in Agudas Isroel. The processes originating in World War I contributed to the emergence of Neo-Orthodox women. Aron Zeitlin (1889–1973)¹³⁶ analyzed this new phenomenon in an article in 1931.¹³⁷ He called such women *Bnoyske*¹³⁸ and, in reference to Stanisław Wyspiański's *Wesele* [*The Wedding*], described them as New Rachels.¹³⁹ *Bnoyskes* were young women who either remained within the Hasidic world

¹³⁵See Caroline Scharfer, "Sarah Schenirer, Founder of the Beit Ya'akov Movement," *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 23: *Jews in Kraków*, ed. Michał Galas and Antony Polonsky (Oxford and Portland, OR, 2011), 269–75.

¹³⁶Aron Tzeitlin, eminent writer and poet, wrote both in Yiddish and in Hebrew. In 1907–1938 he lived in Warsaw where he played an important role in intellectual and artistic elites. In 1930–1934, Tzeitlin served as the president of the Jewish writers' association. He published a well-respected literary journal, *Globus*. Tzeitlin introduced mystical motifs in his writings. He was also opposed to the politicization of Yiddish literature.

¹³⁷Aron Zeitlin, "A milkhome tsvishn yidishe froyen in Poyln" [*A War among Jewish Women in Poland*], "Der Tog," October 4, 1931.

¹³⁸Bnoyske, from Bnoys Agudas Yisroel.

¹³⁹Rachel, one of the key personas in Stanisław Wyspiański, *The Wedding* (Cracow, 1901). Her real-life counterpart was a Jewish woman, Pepa Singer, daughter of the Bronowice innkeeper in whose establishment the wedding was taking place. Rachel is shown as a woman immersed in poetry. Her father says about her: "Whatever books there are, she reads them,

or returned to Orthodoxy after a period of fascination with foreign cultural patterns. They were well read, aware of political and social issues, active, and sought allies, Bnoyskes used methods from the secular sphere. Zeitlin wrote that such women were “Rachels, who are not ashamed of their father’s traditional coat.” Both Yakubovitch and Baum were New Rachels.

Wyspiański’s Rachel is a representation of these young Jewish women, who grew up on Young Poland literature, and who themselves decided to write. For this reason, Zeitlin’s reference to Rachel is very apt. Tadeusz Żeleński, known as Boy,¹⁴⁰ also noticed an increased interest in literature and arts among Jewish women.

There were many such Rachels in Cracow: at reading rooms for women, libraries, theaters, concerts. This role of Rachel in the Bronowice wedding is so immensely interesting. That house is “full of singing and poetry,” but it is Rachel who is as if organizing all that. She is the one who gives will to the Poet’s whim.¹⁴¹

Y. L. Peretz also described these Rachels of the beginning of the twentieth century. Concerned primarily about Jewish culture, he was rather sarcastic in his description and even mentioned the Rachels’ favorite readings.

Our Hasidic daughters; oh, let us not disturb them! They are so elegant in their joy! The aroma of the finest perfumes surrounds them. And they are all so pale. And they all read Przybyszewski¹⁴² and Żeromski, and all are in love with Osterwa.¹⁴³ Their eyes are like [those of] gazelles, thin, long brows and those shadows under their eyes (...).¹⁴⁴

and she kneads the dough, she went to the opera in Vienna and does all laundry at home, and she knows entire Przybyszewski, and wears her hair in a semicircle, like angels on Italian paintings.”

¹⁴⁰Tadeusz Kamil Marjan Żeleński (pen name Boy, 1874–1941), one of the most prominent literary and theater critics, a translator of French literature, writer, social activist, medical doctor by training. He was an outspoken proponent of contraception and sexual education. For his liberal views, he was vilified by the conservative circles before World War II.

¹⁴¹Tadeusz Żeleński-Boy, *Plotka o “Weselu” Wyspiańskiego*, online edition: Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, *Plotka o “Weselu” Wyspiańskiego* (Warsaw, 1922), <https://wolnelektury.pl/katalog/lektura/plotka-o-weselu-wyspianskiego.html>, retrieved June 16, 2017.

¹⁴²Stanisław Przybyszewski (1868–1927)—Polish writer of the Young Poland period, representing Decadentism. Przybyszewski wrote in German and Polish. He is considered the precursor of intellectual Satanism.

¹⁴³Julian Maluszek (stage name, Juliusz Osterwa) (1885–1947)—Polish actor and theater director.

¹⁴⁴Yitskhok Leybush Peretz, *Nokh a greserer blof*, no. 240, Haynt, November 1, 1912, cited after Chone Shmeruk, *Legenda o Esterce w literaturze jidysz i polskiej. Studium z dziedziny*

A few years later, in 1926, eminent writer and editor Aron Alperin (1901–1988) expressed a similar opinion, and lamented that Jewish women were less and less interested in Yiddish literature:

It is clear that the non-Jewish book market to a large degree relies on female Jewish readership. Jewish women buy books whenever they can. A non-Yiddish writer can rely on them. If Przybyszewski, Boy, Lorentowicz, Lechoń, Iwaszkiewicz, Tuwim, Słonimski are giving a talk in town, who is in the audience?¹⁴⁵ Obviously, nearly exclusively middle-class Jewish girls.¹⁴⁶

It was not by accident that Alperin mentioned Przybyszewski first. He was worshipped by Jewish women. Sarah Schenirer, before she became active in the field of education, was described as a Hasidic woman.¹⁴⁷ However, in her diary, she mentions having just seen a play by Przybyszewski, an author who found inspiration in Satanism. The women who in the United States continue Schenirer's work today may find that rather difficult to accept.¹⁴⁸

October 17, at night (1910–JL)

As for my engagement, my girlfriends took me today to the theater to see “The Nuptials of Life” by Przybyszewski. Not a bad thing, but as usual with Przybyszewski: certain distaste, some unintentional unHINGING. . .¹⁴⁹

wzajemnych stosunków dwóch kultur i tradycji, trans. Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska (Warsaw, 2000), 79.

¹⁴⁵Prominent figures in Polish cultural life.

¹⁴⁶Aaron Alperin, *In kamf far a yidisher lezerin* [*In the fight for a Yiddish woman-reader*], “Literarische Bleter,” 1926, no. 91.

¹⁴⁷Worship of Przybyszewski among women, including Jewish women, is an interesting phenomenon given the strong misogynistic views reflected in his writings more than once. The question is to what degree his female readers internalized his image of woman as a demonic, neurotic figure, following her instincts—an eternal enemy of man. See Dariusz Dziurzyński, *Strategie mizoginistyczne Stanisława Przybyszewskiego na podstawie “Synagogi Szatana,”* in *Wiek kobiet w literaturze*, ed. Jadwiga Zacharska, Marek Kochanowski (Białystok, 2002), 189–201.

¹⁴⁸Bais Yaakov schools today exist mostly in the United States. Approximately 15,000 girls attend them. The schools adhere to the rules of Orthodox Judaism. Unlike their pre-war counterparts, they could scarcely be described as modern or as taking advantage of the newest education trends (as were the Bais Yaakov schools before the war, without contradicting their religious character).

¹⁴⁹Sarah Schenirer, *Diary* (in manuscript, in the private collection of Darek Diekiert, whom I thank for making it available to me). It is interesting that in her diary, written in Polish, Schenirer mentions various lectures for women organized by Polish feminists. She attends, for example, one “On female hygiene” by Justyna Budzińska-Tylicka as well as Szymonowska’s lecture “On school.” Apart from that, the diary indicates that Schenirer regularly attended

Przybyszewski’s “The Nuptials of Life”¹⁵⁰ tells the story of a woman who abandons her husband, becomes involved with another man, and for this reason has to give up her baby. It is intriguing that Schenirer connected her own engagement to a play about an unfaithful wife. She saw her own upcoming nuptials as a tragedy. The marriage was short and the divorce was erased from Schenirer’s official biography after she became the head of the Bais Yaakov movement and was cast in mythical light and revered as a tsaddik.

Bożena Umińska, considering Rachel (from Wyspiański’s drama), presented an interesting thesis about the emancipatory flight of Jewish women into the world of art which becomes an asylum and does not demand that they leave their identities behind them:

Rachel inhabits a different world. Like Irma from *Antysemityzm*,¹⁵¹ Rachel is safe but not hidden in the world of art. Like Dina from *Di brider Ashkenazi*, she lives in the domain of literary fiction. (...) Art is the most democratic area, the relationship between the creator and the recipient: they are necessary for each other and together they create the world of art, democratic and noble, egalitarian and elitist simultaneously. (...) In the world of

public lectures about literature, for example, Koch’s and Potocki’s presentation about contemporary Polish literature. She had doubts, of course, but explained: “Having nowhere to go to nourish the soul, Jewish soul, nearly every day I went to Koch’s lectures. Great dramatic poetry and theater development. Excellent, researched material” (February 12, 1913, 1:30 a.m.). In a memoir which she wrote much later in Yiddish, she explains why she could not join Zionist organizations but attended lectures organized by Polish societies. “Apart from that. I was very interested in scientific matters and occasionally I went to lectures organized by Christian women associations. In fact, I was very ashamed after each such visit, but there were no other places where one could hear people lecture about scientific issues. I know one can say I am a liar, because there were already in Cracow various youth organizations for girls, but I need to tell you only one story to show that there was no room for me there. One Friday, a cousin called, a passionate follower of the organization *Ruth*. She invited me to their evening meeting. I wanted to be nice and went with her, but I was very surprised to see with my own eyes the leader to turn on the light. I have always known that the organization was not particularly religious, but I never suspected that they were publicly breaking Shabbat!” Schenirer, then, wanted to attend lectures devoted, for example, to women’s questions but could not accept the distancing from Judaism present in Jewish feminist societies. For this reason, she preferred to go to meetings of Christian organizations—from them she would not expect a respect for the laws of the Torah. That she frequented such lectures throws new light on the genesis of the Bais Yaakov movement. Until now, the lectures of Moses David Flesh, which Schenirer attended in Vienna during World War I, were considered fundamental to her later activism. In reality, it was a result of diverse intellectual impulses including those coming from Polish feminist circles.

¹⁵⁰*The Nuptials of Life* premiered on October 9, 1909 in the City Theater in Cracow. Schenirer most likely attended this performance.

¹⁵¹*Antysemityzm*, Gabriela Zapolska’s novel published in 1921.

art the prejudices and schemes of everyday life do not apply or at least apply less and less. As a recipient, as a lover and connoisseur of modern art, the Young Poland poetry is someone else than just a daughter of a local innkeeper.¹⁵²

This hypothesis appears particularly apt in cases of Jewish women poets like Roza Yakubovitch and Bronia Baum who in some areas remained within the traditional Jewish world but treated their creativity as an area of emancipated femininity, a sublimation of desires and aspirations often awoken by art, literature, and education.

The New Rachel, as Zeitlin described her, differs from Wyspiański's creation in her wish to fulfill her creative ambitions within her own culture without feeling inferior, without "coming uninvited to someone else's wedding," but aware of European literary models and not afraid to reach for them.

The Compulsion to Write and Its Origin

Baum's son, who was the first to undertake the project of publishing his mother's writing, could not read her diary in Russian nor her poetry in Polish. Both the poet's husband and son strived to popularize her work primarily because they knew how much it meant to her. Reading her manuscripts today, we can see that writing was for her the basic form of free expression, her daily therapy in a world by which she felt threatened—by historical circumstance, tradition, rules of a patriarchal community or even her own weakness. Philippe Lejeune argued that for many young women, a diary was a "way to construct their individuality, to determine their paths and prove their worth."¹⁵³ These words certainly apply to Baum.

On occasion, Baum herself referred to her need to write as akin to an illness: "Writing—this is my disease, and now I am very, very, sick."¹⁵⁴ She defined her creativity as compulsion. At times she considered it a curse and torture:

To write? What's this torture for?
Why torment weak nerves,
Pore over paper all the time,
Be in fear of bad censorship?¹⁵⁵

¹⁵²Bożena Umińska, *Postać z cieniem. Portrety Żydówek w polskiej literaturze od końca XIX wieku do 1939 roku* (Warsaw, 2001), 152.

¹⁵³Lejeune, *Dziewczęce*, 210.

¹⁵⁴Baum, *Diary*, November 1915.

¹⁵⁵Baum, Collected poems in Polish, manuscript, February 14, 1920.

On occasion, she distanced herself from the egoism of her own writing, from the fact that in her writing she was not able to move beyond the recesses of her own self.

Yes, I regret that I regret, I hate myself for always hating myself, I cry over my weeping soul and I cannot help myself. Characteristically, I do understand all that, I do understand that I care about frivolities, that it is not worth it to spend so much time on my own self and conscience. That I talk too much about myself, that I keep on carping about myself and my own misery. It is so petty, so brazen to always talk about oneself and yet my egoistic analyses are my favorite work, my own misfortune is my favorite topic and wandering around the labyrinth of my soul is a true stroll for me.¹⁵⁶

Baum also worried whether her words could find a respectful listener. It seemed to her that there was nobody to hear her cries and hence that it would be better to stay silent: “All experiences I am used to recording on paper. But what is the point? Isn’t it better to be silent when I know that my words will not find attention?... Who will look at my work with respect?”¹⁵⁷

At times she tried to quit writing but she always reverted to it as a way of dealing with herself: “Not to write anymore? Not to write?! (...) I am to bid farewell to writing, I who find in it a way to forget about all the misfortunes of my life? Oh, you will forever stay with me, you, my only healing remedy.”¹⁵⁸ She did not perceive herself as an extraordinary person; she did not believe her life to be exciting enough to be recorded on paper. On the contrary, at the very beginning of her diary, she confesses: “From my childhood, I do not recall anything important happening to me.”¹⁵⁹ Elsewhere she describes her life as dull: “The tedium of my life unfolds evenly. What was and what am I to write about if the only melody to be heard is ‘repeat the past’ with only minor alterations?”¹⁶⁰ Writing was meant to fill the void that Baum experienced. In one poem, she describes the world as “only cramped emptiness.”¹⁶¹ Writing served as a means of self-realization. The limits of language and available forms made it difficult for her fully to express her feelings: “If my language were like my feelings, I would speak endlessly. But I do not have such a gift and, unfortunately, I must use my rigid pen to describe this life of mine,

¹⁵⁶Baum, *Diary*, March 1919.

¹⁵⁷*Ibid.*, October 1915.

¹⁵⁸*Ibid.*, July 18, 1916.

¹⁵⁹*Ibid.*, May 4, 1912.

¹⁶⁰*Ibid.*, February 1918.

¹⁶¹Baum, Collected poems in Polish, manuscript, December 30, 1918.

so rich in sadness.”¹⁶² She was not satisfied with her writing. She felt that her potential diminished as she poured the words on paper. Even writing in three languages was insufficient to express herself: “Why do such wise words sound so silly to me? Is not all this breathing with a lie? (...) Oh, I am silly with all my questions, enormously amusing. Who am I asking? You, my patient paper, my friend or some living dead?”¹⁶³ In one of her poems, she summarizes, as follows:

To dream of a great work,
To create mere words,
Is this not a deadly blow??¹⁶⁴

Baum did not accept her writing because in her head she had an image of a monumental literary work that in no way corresponded to her own “wandering in the labyrinth of her soul.” Everything she wrote appeared trivial and unimportant to her—mere words. That is why, on occasion, she wanted to give up writing. The following words of Hélène Cixous are very fitting here:

And why don’t you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it. I know why you haven’t written. (...) Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it’s reserved for the great—that is, for “great men”; and it is “silly.”¹⁶⁵

Baum used an interesting term for her inability to find words for her emotional states: an “organ of speech paralysis.” According to Carolyn Burke, “the very forms of the dominant forms of discourses show the mark of the dominant—masculine—ideology. Hence, when a woman writes or speaks herself into existence, she is forced to speak in something like a foreign tongue, a language with which she may be personally uncomfortable.”¹⁶⁶ Anne Leclerc appealed to women to find a language “that does not enslave, that does not take the speech away but that sets it free.”¹⁶⁷ These words could serve as a tagline to this poem by Baum:

Louder, louder
My heart is beating,
Quieter, quieter

¹⁶²Baum, *Diary*, June 8, 1915.

¹⁶³*Ibid.*, January 27, 1916.

¹⁶⁴Baum, Collected poems in Polish, manuscript, February 14, 1919.

¹⁶⁵Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 876.

¹⁶⁶Carolyn Greenstein Burke, “Report from Paris: Women’s Writing and the Women’s Movement,” *Signs* 3, no. 4 (Summer, 1978): 845.

¹⁶⁷Anne Leclerc, *Parole de femme*, cited after Elaine Showalter, *Krytyka feministyczna na bezdrożach*, trans. I. Kalinowska-Blackwood, “Teksty Drugie,” 1993, no. 4/5/6: 129.

My word sounds.
 Every new impression—
 Speech organ paralysis.
 Every new feeling—
 Speech does not sound.
 Collapses the strength of a word.¹⁶⁸

Summary

Baum's manuscripts constitute a valuable source for studies of local Jewish history, especially in the period of World War I, as well as for the study of Orthodoxy. In addition, it is a very interesting, unique, multilingual source of additional knowledge about the flourishing of poetry among Jewish women. It is particularly significant in that Baum was not a widely recognized poet. She was of the second order of writers, and precisely this undistinguished character of her work allows us to see her as a more typical representative of the generation of Jewish women born in the late nineteenth century who chose poetry as a vehicle of self-expression. In addition, Bronia Baum's writings come to us from the culture of Orthodoxy, which is less accessible to outsiders. Most surviving memoirs of Jewish women were written by women belonging to progressive circles, while Baum remained religious, Orthodox, and Hasidic to the end of her life. Her fight against the limitations of women's education, her complex relationships with other women, her struggle to find a way to set her voice free as well as the restraints imposed by the available literary forms constitute interesting issues for critical feminist analyses.

Translated from Polish by Barbara Krawcowicz

¹⁶⁸Baum, Collected poems in Polish, manuscript, February 1, 1920.

Figure 1. Bronia Baum (left), with her mother Beyla Rudel, daughter of Leibush Melshpays, her father, Tzvi Mordechai Baum and an unidentified girl.

Figure 2. Bronia Baum.

Figure 3. Baum’s public elementary school graduation certificate (1909).

Figure 4. Baum, fifth from left.

Figure 5. Postcard Bronia wrote to her friend Cela from the educational summer camp, 1919.

Figure 6. Children and staff at the summer camp which Baum ran in Piotrków Trybunalski, 1919.

Figure 7. Baum photographed in Eretz Israel.

Figure 8. Invitation to the wedding of Bronia Baum and Avrom Moyshe Baum, December 14, 1921 (Łódź).

Figure 9. The building on the left is Baum's first home in Tomaszów Mazowiecki, Kramarska Street (now Grunwaldzka Street). From the Jerzy Pawlik collection.

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