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Ken Frieden

Syracuse University

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TELLER'S FIRST AND LAST VISITS TO SIGMUND FREUD

KEN FRIEDEN

During the 1930's, as a young Yiddish poet in New York, Yehuda Leyb Teller produced some of the memorable pre-war poetry of his generation. Like the introspectivist writers who inspired him, Teller was increasingly aware of political developments in Europe. The poetic cycle entitled "Psychoanalysis," one of Teller's most outstanding accomplishments, fuses real and imaginary dimensions. Two of the six "Psychoanalysis" poems confront Sigmund Freud and the situation of the European Jews.

Born in Tarnopol in 1912, Teller moved to New York with his mother in 1921. He received his B.A. degree at City College and later studied psychology at Columbia University. As a student he began to work for the daily newspaper *Der morgn zhurnal*; he simultaneously published his first collection of poems, *Simboln*, in 1930. Teller's second book of poems, *Miniaturen*, appeared in 1934. In 1937, as a successful journalist employed by *Der morgn zhurnal*, Teller traveled through Europe for several weeks and contributed a number of reports. During mid-May he witnessed the aftermath of the pogrom in Brisk, which reminded Teller of his childhood traumas during World War I. The introspective poet rapidly emerged as a poet of the age, reflecting on anti-Semitic violence. Subsequently he traveled to Vienna and paid his first visit to Freud. When Teller's *Lider fun der tsayt* was printed in 1940, it brought together the cycle of six poems called "Psychoanalysis," beginning with the poem "Jud Süß Oppenheimer During his First Visit to Professor Sigmund Freud."¹

Teller's last encounter with Freud occurred in March 1938, this time exclusively in the poet's imagination and verse. Long after Teller had returned to New York, he conjured up an image of Freud amid the Nazi takeover of Vienna in a poem called "Sigmund Freud at the Age of Eighty-Two." We may distinguish between Teller's prosaic and poetic encounters with Freud by differentiating between the activities of Judd Teller (the American journalist) and Yehuda Leyb-- or Yud Lamed--Teller (the Yiddish poet). Judd Teller was the flesh-and-blood author who actually met Freud; Yehuda Leyb Teller was his literary guise, his Yiddish voice, which in large part fell silent in the 1940's. After Yehuda Leyb published his last book of poems in 1940, Judd went on writing popular, essayistic books in English.

Judd Teller's initial visit to Freud was not part of his official itinerary in Europe; not until ten months after the European tour did Teller report on his impressions of Vienna. On the occasion of the German *Anschluss* with Austria in March 1938, at the end of a long article focusing on the Jewish quarter in Vienna, Teller refers to his meeting with Freud: "I remember a day in the office of Professor Sigmund Freud. A small man with a stone-gray face, with clever Jewish eyes and a vest buttoned up to his tie. The great psychologist, the great expert on the soul, the seer [choze] of human depths. He dropped a remark about Vienna: 'It is a city whose senses are already completely dulled. Such a condition borders on madness.'" Teller adds: "Nazi rule--that is the madness that hung over Vienna like a nightmare even a year ago."² Teller gives few details of their conversation; Yehuda Leyb's first "Psychoanalysis" poem appears to be a displaced expression of the meeting.

The poems in *Lider fun der tsayt* of 1940 are overdetermined by multiple causes in Judd Teller's life, both by primary traumas and recent occurrences. They confront mental conflicts associated with early memories of Europe, which had been effectively excluded from the author's prior poetry. The poem "Jud Süß Oppenheimer During his First Visit to Sigmund Freud" was published in October 1937 by the journal *In zikh*, five months after Teller's first visit to Freud. Like a dream that derives from yet alters recent and childhood experiences, this poem rewrites the encounter with Freud. Nevertheless, Teller's poem on Jud Süß Oppenheimer is formally structured as a psychoanalytic interview rather than as a dream. It is a monologue of Jud Süß, who comes to Freud in order to receive a diagnosis. At the same time, the poetic persona stands before the reader as if requesting an interpretation.

Teller's poem is composed of four basic movements: Jud Süß addresses Freud; he presents a collective case history; he describes repressed longings that frighten him; and he asks Freud for an interpretation. In a sense, Jud Süß becomes a figure for Jews in the twentieth century, beset by persecution. Thus Teller's poem suggests a scene of collective psychoanalysis in which the Jewish people ask Freud to explain the mysteries of Jewish history and anti-Semitism.

At the beginning and end of the poem, Jud Süß speaks to Freud. The speaker and listener are generalized beyond their individual identities, and assume the full burden of the Jewish past. Jud Süß begins by telling Freud:

That's you--the Wandering Jew.
From Esau's lullaby, from the Gentiles' legend.
And I am your nephew--Jud Süß Oppenheimer.
You who see far, see clearly, and see through,
May well say that I--am not I,
That the one who burns for balls and *shiksas*
Is not--Jud Süß.³ (1-7)

The poem metamorphoses Judd Teller's interview with Freud into a

meeting between two stereotypical Jewish characters: Jud Süß and the Wandering Jew. Jud Süß, a financial adviser to the Duke of Württemberg in the early eighteenth century, inspired anti-Semitic legends. The latter, the *eybiker yid*, began as a thirteenth-century legend among non-Jews. Toward the poem's conclusion, Jud Süß explains his identification of Freud with the Wandering Jew: "They say that at night / You mix herbs in boiling water. / That's you--the Wandering Jew" (45-6). Freud, as healer and dream interpreter, resembles a medieval alchemist. In fact, Freud himself feared that psychoanalysis would be labeled a Jewish science, and he sought to universalize its image. The irony of this effort did not escape Teller, especially after the Nazi invasion forced Freud to flee from Vienna in June 1938.

Jud Süß presents his case history in three images that constitute "the Gamzu tribe," a synecdochal figure of passive acceptance. First, he establishes

My lineage: traders in wheat and barley
 Who stealthily placed weights
 Beneath the scales.
 I know why.
 But you don't want to judge good and evil.
 You want to understand. (12-17)

Jud Süß remembers past misdeeds and underscores the need for deception. At the same time, he alludes to Freud's methodological preference for understanding over ethical judgment. This impartial attitude becomes obsolete when Jud Süß and Freud are faced by intense anti-Semitism.

Teller's speaker Jud Süß is dissatisfied with what he perceives as the Jews' restrained and passive life. Next he begins to represent himself as a vengeful Shylock:

I am Gamzu's grandson.
 He was a timid Jew.
 And now he stirs up riots in my dreams,
 Steals my voice for his blasphemies,
 And wants to claim his pound of flesh. (30-34)

According to legend, Jud Süß was ruthless and corrupt; in the novel *Jud Süß* of 1925, the German-Jewish author Leon Feuchtwanger depicted his licentiousness. Here, anachronistically or emblematically, he has witnessed the pogroms of the twentieth century. Teller links the sexual misdeeds of Jud Süß to these historical traumas:

In the wee hours with a Gentile girl,
 He [Gamzu] conjures up my violated sisters
 (Kishenev, Proskurov, Brisk),
 And my limbs rage to rape. (35-38)

Teller's novelty is to suggest that the Jew's sexual longings are a response to violence the Jews have suffered. Jud Süß goes one step further and admits to the cause of his discomfort: "I fear the yet unspoken syllable, / That which I have not foreseen" (39-40).

After he saw the destruction caused by the pogrom of Brisk in March 1937, Judd Teller met Freud. This encounter was presumably brief; one of Teller's newspaper articles describes Freud as "a miser with regard to time."⁴ In conveying their meeting poetically, Yehuda Leyb projected Judd Teller's bewilderment, anger, and frustration onto to the figure of Jud Süß, and juxtaposed his seething personage with the famous interpreter. The poem makes an urgent plea that Freud provide an interpretation, yet we hear nothing of Freud's response. Throughout the persona poem of Jud Süß, the psychoanalyst quietly listens to the free association of this legendary character. The poem reaches no conclusion, possibly because even Freud cannot cure a sickness that extends beyond an individual neurosis.

Yehuda Leyb Teller's last encounter with Freud was imaginary, though motivated in part by historical events. It is contained in the poem "Sigmund Freud at the Age of Eighty-Two," which is fourth in the "Psychoanalysis" cycle. Judd Teller had no direct experience of the German takeover, but he read the news reports. On March 13, 1938, *Der morgn zhurnal* ran the banner headline: "HITLER PROCLAIMS AUSTRIA'S ANSCHLUSS WITH GERMANY." On March 16, the headline concentrated entirely on the Jews' situation: "AUSTRIAN JEWS ARE DEPRIVED OF CITIZENSHIP." The front-page article included a photograph of Freud with the (inaccurate) caption: "Famous Scholar Freud [is] Among Those Arrested."

These reports are, then, a subtext to the poem Teller called "Sigmund Freud at the Age of Eighty-Two," first published in June 1938.⁵ This poem envisions Freud's predicament after the Nazis have invaded Vienna. The relevant context is less Freud's eighty-second birthday (on May 6, 1938) than the *Anschluss* two months earlier and the subsequent persecution of Austrian Jews.⁶ Teller leaves New York behind in order to imagine the position and mental state of Sigmund Freud at the time of Hitler's march into Austria. The opening strikes a dreamy, unreal note, employing rhythmic lines that alternate between pentameter and tetrameter, iambs and troches. This metrical irregularity, in a sequence of one-line sentences, gives the impression of troubled fragmentation:

Birds scream with mama's voice.
Papa throws himself beneath the wheels.
A frog crawls out of the young boy's hair.
Do you recall the dream of little Sigmund? (1-4)

Alluding to both Freud's childhood and to his professional case studies, the poem prepares the scene of the Nazis' arrival. The first line hints at a nightmare that Freud retells in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900): "It was quite vivid and showed *my beloved*

*mother with a peculiarly calm, sleeping facial expression, being carried into the room and placed onto the bed by two (or three) people with birds' beaks."*⁷ Freud recalls that he dreamed this at the age of seven or eight, influenced by depictions of Egyptian gods with bird beaks in the Philipppson Bible. The poem also begins with a trauma, referring to the anxious "dream of little Sigmund." With five succinct words, the poem suggests that now, at the age of 82, Freud is thrown back to his childish nightmares. Even if he has learned to interpret phobias, such as in the case of Little Hans,⁸ Freud himself returns to an almost childish helplessness and fear.

The poem next describes the aging master, initially from the standpoint of his rational self-control:

Now, at the age of eighty-two,
His nights are dry and clear
And grate with silence.
Sleep has been purified;
The complexes smoked out.

Every fear is shackled.
Every fright is bolted up. (5-11)

Through his self-analysis, Freud has worked through his neuroses and resolved his unconscious conflicts. In connection with his former anxiety dream he relates, the middle-aged Freud comments that he has not had any dreams of this kind for decades. As the poem asserts, "To overcome oneself is more / Than Charcot's hypnosis" (51-52). This paraphrases a Freudian view: hypnosis cannot cure underlying conflicts, which demand more thorough treatment by the psychoanalytic "talking cure."

"Sigmund Freud at the Age of Eighty-Two" shows the limitations of rationalistic Freudian assumptions, in light of the Nazis' rise to power. Beyond the sphere of self-control, other forces threaten destruction: "But in the eaves of nightly rest / Rustles the fear of death" (12-13). Freud's methods cannot abolish dark aspects of human experience such as the impulses Freud called *thanatos*. In this instance, however, Freud encounters a more specific danger than the universal threat of death. Based on reports that Freud was afraid to leave his home lest he be called names, the poem suggests that the Nazis' appearance in Vienna forces a new recognition. Teller's Freud has been sheltered from the political news, yet he senses disaster when he looks out his window:

It is not death. To trail death boldly
He has already learned
To gird up his loins,
Locking his knees in armor.

It is something else, and just as old.
By day he peered out his window,

Saw the saluting hands.
The Swastika. He smelled with his shrewd nose
The old bad blood
In young Aryan louts. (22-31)

Teller imagines Freud's state of mind between March and May 1938, confronted by persecution that is directed against him precisely as a Jew. The reference to "young Aryan louts (*yunge arier-shkotsim*)" provides direction for the remainder of the poem: Freud's gaze has alighted upon Nazi youths who salute Hitler's triumphal march.

The subsequent lines of the poem represent Freud's reversion to traditional, often pejorative epithets. As if to counter the anti-Semitic clichés leveled against the Jews, Freud returns to stereotypical Hebrew and Yiddish words of separation and scorn:

Shkotsim. In Hebrew-Jüdisch-Yiddish
Those whose name he bears have
Chewed the word like *matse*, kneaded it like *khale*,
Braided it like a candle for *havdole*--
Orl, *Esau*, *Goy*. (32-35)

Despite his modern science of psychoanalysis and his Viennese culture, Teller's Freud can only fall back on an archaic litany. The poem also insists on Freud's connections to Jewish rituals and biblical sources. Referring to Freud's psychoanalytic theories, the poetic voice asserts that

As Adam named the animals, he named every malice,
Wrote his own commentary
On Cain and Abel and the binding of Isaac.
But now, like the Patriarch who relished his son's fresh catch,
He appreciates the simple Hebrew-Yiddish:
Orl, *Esau*, *Goy*. (36-41)

Freud's commentary (literally his "Rashi," an *eygenem Rashi*) provides novel, psychological explanations for Cain's hostilities and Abraham's near-sacrifice. Furthermore, he is like "the blind Isaac" who blesses Jacob instead of the firstborn Esau, thus intensifying--at least in a rabbinic tradition--the dichotomy between Jews and non-Jews.

With the return of anti-Semitism, Teller's Freud reappropriates the ancient terms by which Jews separated themselves from inhospitable surroundings. The poem ends with Freud the former rationalist expressing his hatred of the Nazis:

Sigmund Freud at the age of eighty-two
Climbs out of the Swastikas, recites:
Haman. *Orl*, *Esau*. *Goy*. (53-56)

The crisis and breakdown become explicit in these lines, when the

scientist extricates himself from the Nazi symbol. Even the self-analyzed Freud, with his "complexes smoked out," rises to the occasion with an emotional response to the Nazi intruders. Teller projects upon Freud a radical turn that was analogous to the new tone of Teller's poetry.

Teller's poems "Jud Süß Oppenheimer During his First Visit to Sigmund Freud" and "Sigmund Freud at the Age of Eighty-Two" employ displacements that remove them from actual experiences. In a contemporary review of Teller's *Lider fun der tsayt*, Ephraim Auerbach argued that "poetry must distance itself from journalism with a decade of fantasy, in order to be able to look into it afterwards with eyes that see deeper, and glimpse eternity in events."⁹ Although Yehuda Leyb Teller embeds past events in poetic recreations, his poems cannot be reduced to their causative antecedents in Judd Teller's life; we need to recognize the figurative work by which the poet abstracts from his experiences. Like the psychological and rhetorical mechanism Freud calls the dream work, the poetic process distorts latent contents to generate the manifest text. This distortion is an essential characteristic of poetry, as it is essential to dreams. Freudian analysis strives to reverse the pathway taken by the dream work in order to discover underlying thoughts or repressed wishes. Teller's poems encourage, yet finally elude, a similar process of demasking: the meaning of these texts transcends their motivating experiences.

On his first visit to Sigmund Freud, Jud Süß Oppenheimer approaches the analyst with a respectful entreaty, at the same time as he employs a measure of irony. Can Freud's talking cure really be effective, under the present circumstances? The poem suggests that Freudian teachings cannot adequately explain overarching historical events; the illness of Jud Süß reaches beyond his individual, family romance, since his neurosis extends to all of Jewish life, traumatized by recurrent catastrophes. Similarly, "Sigmund Freud at the Age of Eighty-Two" shows that amid the Nazis' entrance into Vienna, Freud can only return to Yiddish and Hebrew words that separate him from non-Jews. Teller finally associates Freud with Rabbi Akiva, who recited the "Shm'a" while being tortured to death by the Romans: Freud "Joins all of being / To the wings of a Hebrew letter" (*Knipt on dos gantse vezn / On fligl fun yidishn oys*). Teller's "Psychoanalysis" poems imply, with a measure of wishful thinking, that the Nazis' arrival in Vienna would compel Freud to return from German to Hebrew and Yiddish.

NOTES

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1. The posthumous collection of Teller's verse--based on his three books and sporadic later writing--appeared in 1975 under the title *Durkh yidishn gemit*.

2. *Der morgn zhurnal*, 14 March 1938, p. 3.

3. "Jud Süß Oppenheimer af zayn ershtn bazukh baym Professor Sigmund Freud," first printed in the journal *In zikh*, October 1937, pp. 91-2, is contained in *Lider fun der tsayt* (New York, 1940), pp. 47-48, and in *Durkh yidishn gemit* (Tel Aviv, 1975), pp. 109-11. Translations are my own, cited from the original by line alone. I have consulted the rendering by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav in *American Yiddish Poetry* (Berkeley, Ca., 1986), pp. 521-23. A shorter version of the poem, entitled "Family Speaks Its Mind Before Professor Sigmund Freud," was collected in the posthumous volume *Durkh yidishn gemit*, p. 112, and translated in *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, ed. Irving Howe, Ruth R. Wisse, and Khone Shmeruk (New York, 1987), pp. 662-64. A Hebrew translation by Dan Miron is contained in his edition of Teller's *Mivkhar shirim* (Tel Aviv, 1986), pp. 122-24.

4. *Der morgn zhurnal*, 17 March 1938, p. 3.

5. "Sigmund Freud tsu tsvey un akhtsik yor," first published by *Inzikh*, June 1938, pp. 142-43; collected in Y. L. Teller, *Lider fun der tsayt*, pp. 54-55, and in Teller, *Durkh yidishn gemit*, pp. 118-20. Translations are my own, compared with "Sigmund Freud at the Age of Eighty-Two," in *American Yiddish Poetry*, ed. Harshav, pp. 529-33.

6. For an account of the Nazis' entrance into Freud's house, see Ernest Jones' *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud* (New York, 1957), vol. 3, pp. 218-19.

7. Translated from chapter 7, section D of Sigmund Freud's *Die Traumdeutung*, in the *Gesammelte Werke*, (London, 1942), vol. 2/3, p. 589. Compare Dan Miron's comments in his introduction to Teller's *Mivkhar shirim*, p. 51.

8. See Sigmund Freud, "Analyse der Phobie eines fünfjährigen Knaben" (1909), in *Gesammelte Werke* (London, 1941), vol. 7, pp. 243-377. The first English translation was published in Freud's *Collected Papers*, trans. Alice and James Strachey (London, 1925).

9. Ephraim Auerbach, in *Der morgn zhurnal*, 10 December 1940.