



# *From the Labor Bund to the Lesbian Bar*



THE BIRTH  
AND LATER YEARS  
OF THE POET  
IRENA KLEPFISZ



BY  
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PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
ALICE PROUJANSKY



IRENA KLEPFISZ INSISTS that all her biographies identify her the following way: She is a socialist, a feminist, a dyke, and a practicing secular Jew. Emphasis on practicing. She is also a poet who, at 83, published a new collection, *Her Birth and Later Years*, which just won the Audre Lorde Award for Lesbian Poetry. The poems trace the bloody tumult and cultural efflorescence of the last eight decades — from the Holocaust to the movement for gay rights to the fight for justice in Palestine. Her verses on rebel womanhood, violent histories, queer love, and dissident, diasporic identity are urgent reading for the present.

The poems in *Her Birth and Later Years* are undated but arranged in an order approximating the flow of Irena's life, and for this reason,

I'll discuss them as they relate to her biography — a form that her second-wave feminist milieu often used as a way of reclaiming one's antecedents.

Irena was born in 1941 in the Warsaw Ghetto. Her parents were members of the Jewish Labor Bund, a secular, socialist, democratic, and militantly anti-Zionist movement founded in the Russian Empire in 1897. The Bund believed that Jewish liberation did not require an ethno-state in Palestine, but could be built in the countries where Jews actually lived, through a combination of working-class solidarity, strikes, street brawls, cultural institutions, and defiant ethnic pride. The Bund's insistence that Jews could flourish and fight for justice in the here and now profoundly shaped Irena's work and life.

In 1939, the Bund was the most popular Jewish party in Poland.

Four years later, its members had mostly been murdered in the Holocaust. Irena's father, Michael, became a bomb maker for the Jewish Fighters Organization, and died charging a German machine gun in the Warsaw ghetto revolt. Her mother, who she called Mama Lo, almost did not survive Irena's birth. She was so ill that, for the next six months, she entrusted Irena to the care of Michael's sister Gina. A fellow Bundist who worked for the resistance, rescuing Jews as they waited to be loaded onto boxcars, Gina died during the war from a stomach operation, which she received while passing as Aryan. When the priest read her the last rites, she told him "I am a Jew," as a final act of self-assertion. "Such a will to be known can alter history," Irena wrote in her poem "Solitary Acts." In photos, Gina resembles a tomboy Greta Garbo, dressed in

a suit, her hair slicked back: a gorgeous, ideal butch. Gina "was probably a lesbian," Irena told me. When the fate of the ghetto became undeniable, Mama Lo smuggled Irena to the Aryan side of Warsaw to place her at a Catholic orphanage, then kidnapped her back from the nuns and kept the two of them alive in the countryside until the war's end.

After the war, Mama Lo made the same choice as the vast majority of Polish Jews, leaving the country first for Sweden and then for the Amalgamated Housing Projects in the Bronx, which were filled with fellow Bundists. The Bronx kids, themselves Jewish, bullied Irena for her European dress and accent. She grew up between three languages. At home, her mother spoke Polish, a language many survivors rejected as that of their betrayers. Five days a week, she studied Yiddish at a school run by the Workman's

Circle, a secular Jewish mutual aid society entwined with the Bund. In school, she struggled with English. Secretly, she began to write poetry.

"America is not my place of birth, not even my chosen home. Just a spot where it seemed safe to go to escape certain dangers. But safety, I discover, is only temporary. No place guarantees it to anyone forever," Irena wrote later, in the poem cycle "Bashert."

Irena attended CUNY, when it was still called The Harvard of the Proletariat, and when it lifted countless working-class smart alecks (my Puerto Rican father included) into the middle class. She got her master's and Ph.D. at the University of Chicago. It was the first time she ever had friends who were not Jews. She wrote about walking through nighttime Chicago in the aftermath of urban renewal, when vibrant Black and mixed-race neigh-

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◀◀ Irena Klepfisz's possessions, including the back of a painting by her late partner, Judy Waterman, that is too large to fit through the loft's doorway.

↓ Irena Klepfisz holds a photograph of herself by Robert Giard.





borhoods were turned to rubble, their inhabitants forced elsewhere. She called it “the American hollow-ness... the incessant grinding down of lines for stamps, for jobs, for a bed to sleep in, of a death stretched imperceptibly over a lifetime.... The Holocaust without smoke.”

Through it all, she worked — sometimes as a scholar, a magazine editor, a professor, or a translator, but most often in the sort of pink-collar secretarial jobs to which women were then relegated. “No one asks me about work,” she told me, but work, trivial and life-consuming, was her constant. “i envied every person who was rich / or even had 25 cents more than me or worked / even one hour less,” she wrote in one of her “Work Sonnets.” Yet, these secretarial jobs were also spaces of solidarity with other women, the majority of whom were Black and Latina. For a decade, for barely any pay, she taught college classes in Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for women. Only later in her career would she be able to support herself as an educator and a poet.

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IRENA WAS 33 when she came out. It was a few years after the Stonewall Uprising. Let go from a teaching job at Long Island University and receiving unemployment, she left the city for Montauk, determined to be a poet. She wrote melancholy, pagan poems of that year of solitude, when the boundaries of a self dissolved into the vastness of nature: “in montauk it gets so clear that sky and sea / become discrete like jigsaw pieces you can pull / apart and fling yourself through the space / between.”

When she came back, queer culture was hopping. She became a habitu  of The Duchess, one of the hundreds of dyke bars that formed a now-vanished tapestry across the country. It was a “horrible, dirty, awful dive,” Irena said with great affection, and had a backroom where women could dance together, an act that was then a crime. At first, she was shocked by the appearance of the women, just off from their office jobs and garbed in the drag of compulsory heterosexuality. “These are all dykes?!” she asked herself. “It made me realize how many people really were closeted and were walking around basically in costume.”

Before she met her life partner, the painter Judy Waterman, Irena wrote a few seldom-quoted poems about sex and love between women. In “dinosaurs and larger issues” she writes of translucent Rachel, a pillow queen before the term was coined, who bites her hand and pulls her in and takes and takes:

In the dark her features  
are strong. she lies relaxed  
ready to accept the touch  
of my tongue ready to be cupped



sucked in me later she says  
i cannot reciprocate.

Irena’s lesbian world had much in common with the vibrant Bundist subculture in which her parents came of age. Like the Bund, queer women shut out of the mainstream built their own universe out of love and grit. “No institutions wanted us [the gays and the feminists] in any kind of way,” Irena told me, so she and her friends built their own platforms. By the 1980s, lesbians had created a national network of bookstores, newspapers, coffeehouses, bars, archives, and literary presses, to which Irena contributed with enthusiasm, particularly striving to make spaces for lesbian Jews. She started Out and Out Books with three friends, edited the first Jewish lesbian anthology, and co-founded the literary leftist magazine *Conditions*, which published

some of the most exciting feminist intellectuals of the era — Barbara Smith, of the Combahee River collective, and *Borderlands* author Gloria Anzald a.

A conversation with Anzald a triggered a new direction in Irena’s work. Anzald a often used untranslated Spanish in her writing, refusing to cut off her Chicana heritage to conform to white American sensibilities. Anzald a asked Irena why, since she grew up with Yiddish, she did not do the same. Irena began to use the language within her English poetry, as a chorus, a dagger, or refrain. Perhaps her best-known poem of this sort is “*Etlekhe verter oyf mame-loshn* / A few words in the mother tongue,” where she delineates the roles — Jewess, lesbian, whore, gossip, and little wife — that traditional society forced women to wear like straightjackets.

Growing up in the anti-Zionist,

↑ A bag printed with a photograph of Polish-Jewish poet Zuzanna Ginczanka, who was killed by the Gestapo, in Irena Klepfisz’s loft.

Bundist milieu, “Israel was not on my map,” Irena said. But after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and massacres supervised by the Israeli Defense Forces in Sabra and Shatila, she felt that the subject of Palestine could not be avoided. She met with Israeli and Palestinian feminists, and, with a few friends, started the Jewish Women’s Committee to End the Occupation, or JWCEO. It was a strictly DIY affair — often they stood on a street corner near the famous bagel joint Zabar’s and passed out fliers denouncing the occupation. “People would say the worst things to us, like ‘I wish you had died at Auschwitz,’” Irena told me. “I’d never heard Jews talk to each other that way. It was sobering. And, sometimes it was really good, because we really engaged people.” The JWCEO went on to inspire groups around the country. Irena is now a supporter of the one-state solution, of a single state in Israel-Palestine which would give equal rights to all, regardless of religion or ethnicity. *Her Birth and Later Years* includes a poem in memory of Razan al-Najjar, the Palestinian nurse murdered by an Israeli sniper during 2018’s Great March of Return in Gaza. However, her most astute piece on Palestine was written about a much earlier event — the 1967 war, where the quick Israeli victory inspired a poisonous joy in even the Bundist survivors:

Didn’t we all glow from it  
our sense of power finally  
achieved?

The quickness of the action  
the Biblical routes  
and how we laughed over  
Egyptian shoes in the sand  
how we laughed at another

people’s fear  
as if fear was alien  
as if we had known safety all of  
our lives.

There is no inborn difference between oppressed and oppressor — one becomes the other the moment that power shifts.

↓ Photographs of Irena Klepfisz; her mother; late partner, Judy Waterman; and father.



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IRENA’S POEM CYCLE “Bashert” is an uneasy exploration of overlapping oppressions, fates, and responsibilities. Bashert is an untranslatable Yiddish word, but “destined” is an approximation. The poem’s two lengthy dedications to “those who died” and “those who survived” are among Irena’s most famous verses. With incantatory, prophetic power, she pays tribute to those who did and did not survive the cataclysm. They are flawed humans, caught by vast and murderous history, who live or die based on the obscure interactions of luck, personal characteristics, and hunger for survival. While the poems are about the Holocaust, it is never mentioned by name, and for a time, the dedications became a staple of AIDS memorials.

Less has been written about the poems of “Bashert” that follow her dedications. These chronicle her life from the apocalyptic Polish countryside to her Chicago student days and her work as a teacher in New York to a class of Black and Puerto Rican kids. Born Jewish and marked for murder by the Nazis, raised among Holocaust survivors, she is white in the American context. These identities jostle each other painfully in a country she would never quite feel was her own.

The last poem, set in Cherry Plain, the tiny New York town where she and Judy shared a home, is titled “The Keeper of Accounts.” It is a brutal poem, the most gimlet-eyed; she conjures the poison stereotype of the Jewish shylock counting his coins, still portrayed in the paintings hung for luck in some Polish businesses. He is a monster formed by a society that would allow Jews no role other than as middlemen, thus turning them into



receptacles for popular rage. Her title plays on the multiple meanings of the word “accounting”. The ledger is as much historical as monetary; the debts owed are ones of blood as well as cash. She refuses to forget the crimes done against her people. She will take her due. “Like these, my despised ancestors / I have become a keeper of accounts. / I do not shun this legacy. I claim it as mine.”

The classic Yiddish writer I.L. Peretz used the term *Goldene Kayt*, or Golden Chain, to describe the way that Jewish culture had been transmitted from one generation to the next through the peregrinations of exile. The phrase speaks of roots that are not planted in any patch of soil, but rather, in the words of itinerant scholars, kicked this way and that by the whims of those in charge. It’s a patriarchal phrase. The generations here are male ones. But it has a vagabond beauty that hooked me, and I asked Irena: What makes up our *Goldene Kayt* on the feminist left?

“I think you have to find it,” she replied. “The links are there, but you have to put it together into a chain.” She spoke to me about the attempts that feminists and lesbians made to find their forebears and write a history of their own. “We discovered all these women that we never heard of. They were there. They lived. They made an imprint on the world. It’s just that they were never put together. The *Goldene Kayt* is there. We just have to fashion it.”

And so I add Irena’s words as links on that chain.

X

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# Free the Children

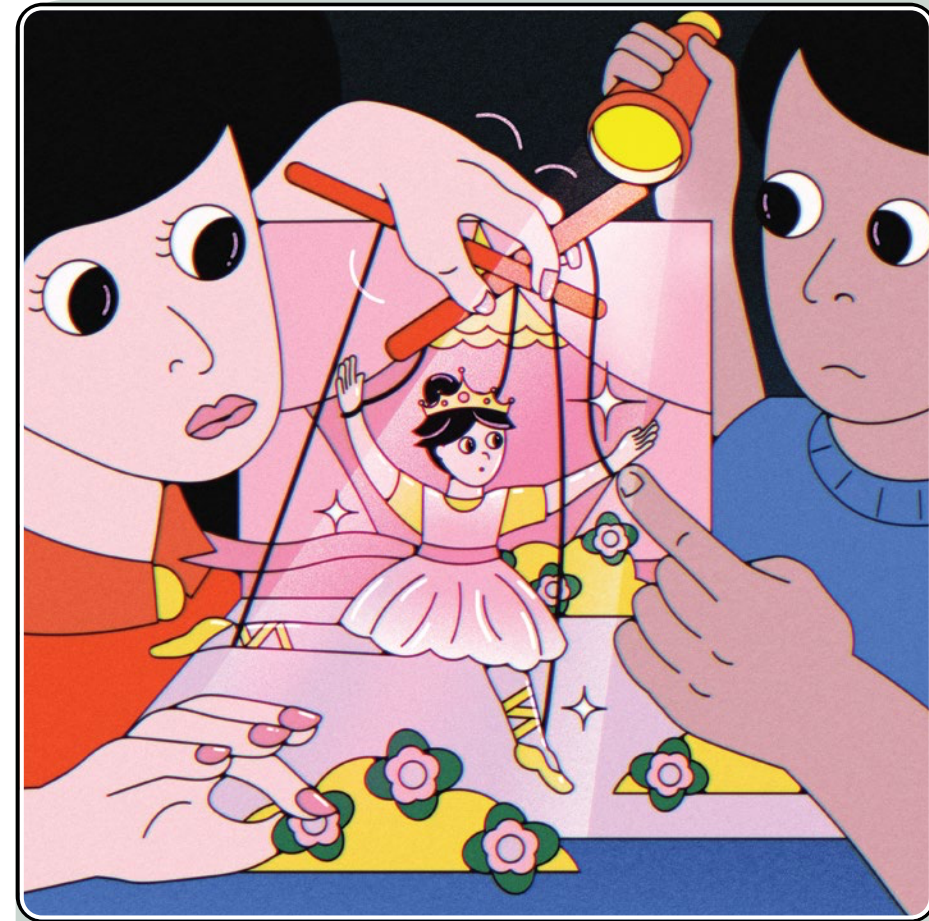
WE ASSUME PARENTS HAVE  
THE RIGHT TO CONTROL  
THEIR KIDS. WHY?

BY  
MAX FOX

ART BY  
EMMA ERICKSON

AN OMINOUS POLITICAL coalition has emerged in recent years, orchestrated by the reactionary right. This coalition has mobilized fascists and liberals alike to defend a vision of sex and society that many liberals imagine they might reject if it were stated plainly. As of April, more than 494 bills have been introduced in 47 states to restrict access to medical resources needed for youth transition or to compel schools to out trans children. The effects of these bills resonate with the hysteria that neo-nazis and Proud Boys have tried to generate around trans people, as they stage armed displays around drag shows to recruit for their movements.

This coalition feeds panic with the idea that trans people are an affront to a natural order of sexual difference and gender hierarchy. It suggests that teachers and internet forums and M&M ads are



turning children trans, and that children should not be able to socially or medically transition. This movement is coordinated from familiar precincts of the organized right — the Alliance Defending Freedom, the Family Policy Alliance, Phyllis Schlafly’s Eagle Forum — and self-defined feminists like Cathy Brennan and Martina Navratilova have found ways to participate as well. The ultimate goal is to legally enshrine hierarchical gender difference, in part by outlawing the right to transition. “This is a political winner,” Terry Schilling of the American Principles Project told the *New York Times* about his organization’s national advocacy campaigns against trans existence. But to achieve a legal regime of sex segregation (“separate is not inherently unequal,” states Bill No. 2076, now awaiting a vote before the Mississippi Senate), they must first attack children’s health care, because for now, according to Schilling, that’s “where the consensus is.”

In anti-trans activists’ and their Republican allies’ attempts to outlaw trans childhood, they argue that they are *defending* children from the scourge of being trans. They appeal to children’s innocence and the idea that kids are incapable of identifying their own gender. But behind all these claims is a premise so widely shared that it enables a coalition between fascists and liberals to become possible: Children are their parents’ property, and as such,