

Blume Lempel's "Neighbors Over the Fence"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <https://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/blume-lempels-neighbors-over-fence>.

Introduction

Blume Lempel (in English she stressed her surname on the second syllable) might not be a familiar name in most Jewish or American literature classes. However, the unique Yiddish short stories she wrote towards the end of the twentieth century are sure to captivate any reader. Lempel was born in Khorostkov, Galicia (today in Ukraine), in 1907 (or perhaps 1910) as Blume Leye Pfeffer and died in Long Island, New York, in 1999. Her life spanned most of the twentieth century, from her childhood and adolescence in pre-war Eastern Europe, to her young adulthood in Paris, to her six decades in the United States. As a child, she attended a *kheyder* (traditional religious school) and a Hebrew elementary school. In 1929, she immigrated to Paris to join her brother who was living there at the time. Together with her husband, she left Paris for New York in 1939 at the cusp of World War II. Her first short story was published in 1943 in a New York Yiddish newspaper, and she continued to publish short stories in periodicals around the world, and later in two collected volumes. Although she was widely published and even recognized with several awards and prizes in the Yiddish cultural sphere later in life, she did not break into the mainstream American Jewish literary community.

In the short story "Neighbors Over the Fence" the relationship between two women, Betty, an Eastern European Jew, and Mrs. Zagretti, an Italian Catholic, takes center stage. The two women share an immigrant background, though they never explicitly discuss either this commonality or their differing cultures and religions. However, the women slowly bond over their shared practice of gardening, keeping a friendly distance on either side of the fence.

This kit gathers together oral histories, letters, and contemporaneous writings to give context to Lempel's story, and to help students explore some of the complexities of Jewish modernist writing.

Cover image: Blume Lempel's typewriter, photographed by Adah Hetko, 2019.

Subjects

Fiction, United States, Women Writers, Yiddish

Reading and Background

- Ellen Cassedy and Yermiyahu Ahron Taub's translation of "Neighbors Over the Fence" appeared in the Yiddish Book Center's 2013 *Pakn Treger* Digital Translation Issue.
- The volume *Oedipus in Brooklyn* (Mandel Vilar Press and Dryad Press, 2016) offers the most comprehensive set of translations of Blume Lempel's short stories into English. More information on this volume, as well as a comprehensive overview of reading resources related to the book can be found [here](#) on the Yiddish Book Center's website. "Neighbors Over the Fence" can be found in this collection.
- This [encyclopedia entry](#) from the Jewish Women's Archive gives a short biographical overview of Blume Lempel's life.
- The *Pakn Treger* article "Modern in Autumn" discusses Lempel's life as a writer and includes several photographs.
- In "Discovering and Translating Yiddish Writer Blume Lempel," (an episode of the Yiddish Book Center's podcast *The Shmooze*), translator Ellen Cassedy speaks about what drew her and fellow translator Yermiyahu Ahron Taub to Lempel's stories and gives a taste of her bold, surprising work.
- The article "To Dive into the Self: The Svine of Blume Lempel" by Ellen Cassedy and Yermiyahu Ahron Taub analyzes the themes and aesthetics of Blume Lempel's oeuvre of short stories. The article also discusses Blume Lempel's friendships with other Yiddish women writers, such as Chava Rosenfarb and Malka Heifetz-Tussman.



The Great Jewish Books Teacher Workshop, a program of the Yiddish Book Center, is made possible with support from the Jim Joseph Foundation. The Foundation, established in 2006, is devoted to fostering compelling, effective Jewish learning experiences for youth and young adults in the U.S.

- Other translations of Lempel's work can be found in anthologies including *Beautiful as the Moon, Radiant as the Stars: Jewish Women in Yiddish Stories*. Translations have also appeared in the journal *Bridges: A Journal for Jewish Feminists and Our Friends* and in the Yiddish Book Center's *Pakn Treger*. Many of these translations are testament to the important groundwork that Jewish feminists have laid in making Yiddish women writers accessible to a broader (mostly English-speaking) audience.
- The essay "Queens of Contradiction: A Feminist Introduction to Yiddish Women Writers" by Irena Klepfisz in the anthology *Found Treasures* is an excellent and rich resource for discovering the broader history of Yiddish women writers in which Blume Lempel was embedded. A translation of Lempel's piece "Correspondences" also appears in this anthology. Irena Klepfisz also describes the search for Yiddish women writers in [this oral history interview](#).
- For more recent discussions about discovering, translating, teaching, and reading Yiddish women's prose, consult the articles "The Feminine Ending: On Women's Writing in Yiddish, Now Available in English" by Madeleine Cohen, "Translating and Teaching Yiddish Prose by Women" by Anita Norich, and "The 2087th Question or When Silence Is the Only Answer" by Irena Klepfisz.
- For more information about free indirect discourse, a modernist narration technique Lempel uses in the short story, see the [Oxford Research Encyclopedia](#).

Resources

1: Video excerpts, oral history interview with Blume Lempel by Itzik Gottesman, 1985, and letter, Chava Rosenfarb to Blume Lempel, 1983.

In 1985, the researcher Itzik Gottesman interviewed Blume Lempel at her home in Long Beach, New York. The 30-minute interview covers Lempel's biography, her relationship to Yiddish literary circles, and her life as a writer. In the first two excerpts, Lempel discusses her upbringing and her relationship to writing. The third excerpt is from the very end of the interview where Lempel decides to invite the interviewer into her home for a snack.

Chava Rosenfarb (1923–2011) was a Canadian Yiddish writer from Poland who was well-known for her numerous works of poetry and prose, and especially her Holocaust fiction. Blume Lempel and Chava Rosenfarb began to correspond in 1982 when Rosenfarb reached out to Lempel after reading her stories in the prestigious Yiddish literary journal *Di goldene keyt* (*The Golden Chain*).

Suggested Activity: Have students watch the first two excerpts. The interview takes place in Blume Lempel's garden. Ask students what they think about this setting for an interview. How public or private of a space does this garden seem to be? How might the public or private nature of the space change the tone or content of the interview? Does seeing this garden change how they imagined the setting of "Neighbors over the Fence"? If so, how?

Now have students read Chava Rosenfarb's letter to Blume Lempel. What echoes do they notice between Rosenfarb's letter and Lempel's words in the interview? How does Lempel view the boundary between her writing and her personal life?

Now have students listen to the third interview excerpt. Ask students what they think about the moment when Lempel invites the interviewer inside. Does it remind them of the moment when Mrs. Zagretti enters Betty's home for the first time? Why or why not?

Having learned more about Blume Lempel's life, ask students whether they think "Neighbors Over the Fence" borrows autobiographical details from Lempel's life? Is Betty the same as Blume Lempel? A version of her? Neither? What about Mrs. Zagretti: do they see elements of Lempel in Zagretti? Are there autobiographical elements in both characters despite their differences? Can we as readers ever truly determine whether a story is autobiographical? What can be gained and lost when we read fiction through the lens of autobiography?

Sources: Blume Lempel, interview by Itzik Gottesman, 1985.

Blume Lempel and Chava Rosenfarb, "I Feel a Connection to You," trans. Ellen Cassedy and Yermiyahu Ahron Taub in the 2019 *Pakn Treger* Translation Issue (Amherst: Yiddish Book Center, Summer 2019 / 5779).

2: Excerpts, Blume Lempel's "Neighbors Over the Fence," trans. Ellen Cassedy and Yermiyahu

Ahron Taub, 2013.

Although the story is written in the third person, Lempel uses a modernist narrative viewpoint called “free indirect discourse” to explore the thoughts and feelings of her characters in “Neighbors Over the Fence.”

Suggested Activity: Before reading these excerpts, have students discuss the point of view or points of view found in Lempel’s story. It may be fun to avoid looking at the text and instead to base the discussion off of students’ memories and impressions of the text. Whose story is being told? From whose perspective does the story seem to be told? Who is the narrator?

Now have students read the two excerpts. Whose perspectives are highlighted in each of the excerpts? What do we learn about each of the characters through these perspectives? What observations and judgments are they making about each other?

Source: Blume Lempel, *Oedipus in Brooklyn and Other Stories*, trans. Ellen Cassedy and Yermiyahu Ahron Taub (Takoma Park, MD: Mandel Vilar Press & Dryad Press, 2016).

3: Text excerpt, Betty Friedan’s “The Feminine Mystique,” 1963.

Betty Friedan (1921–2006) was a Jewish American feminist writer and activist. Friedan’s 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique* is often pinpointed as the spark that ignited the second wave feminist movement in the United States. In 1966, Friedan co-founded the National Organization for Women (NOW) and was elected its first president. In these two short excerpts, Friedan discusses “The Problem That Has No Name” which, according to Friedan, (white) suburban housewives were grappling with in the 1950s.

Suggested Activity: Before reading the short excerpts from *The Feminine Mystique*, ask your students what time and place they imagine “Neighbors Over the Fence” is set in. Aside from what we know about Blume Lempel’s life, are there any clues in the story that give the reader a sense of place and time? Or does the story evoke a certain time- and placelessness?

After reading the excerpts, ask students to describe “The Problem That Has No Name” in their own words. Who does and doesn’t suffer from this problem, both historically and in today’s circumstances? Do Betty and/or Mrs. Zagretti face this problem? How might they differ from the general “suburban American housewife” at the center of Friedan’s argument? What dissatisfaction or fulfillment might Betty and Mrs. Zagretti be facing, considering their families remain entirely in the background of the story? Ask students to imagine how the two characters might react to reading Friedan’s bestseller.

Source: Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1963), 15, 18.

4: Text excerpt, Michel Foucault’s “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” 1984, and text excerpts, Blume Lempel’s “Neighbors Over the Fence,” trans. Ellen Cassedy and Yermiyahu Ahron Taub, 2013.

Michel Foucault (1926–1984) was a French historian and philosopher, associated with the structuralist and post-structuralist movements. Foucault introduced the concept of heterotopias to the humanities. He defines them—in contrast to utopias—as sites “which somehow mirror and at the same time distort, unsettle or invert other spaces.” Examples include cemeteries, asylums, museums, gardens, prisons, fairs, and more.

Suggested Activity: Have students read through the excerpt from Michel Foucault. How would they define a “heterotopia” in their own words? Can they think of spaces that they encounter that Foucault might consider “heterotopias?” Ask students to discuss how gardens fit Foucault’s definition of heterotopia using their own words. Could any garden be a heterotopia according to Foucault?

Now have students read the two excerpts from Blume Lempel’s short story. Ask students whether they consider Betty’s and Mrs. Zagretti’s neighboring gardens a heterotopia? Why or why not? How do their gardens differ from their domestic spaces? How do their gardens facilitate their interactions? Why is it that the women can bond across their gardens but not inside their homes?

Sources: “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” Michel Foucault, trans. Jay Miskowiec in *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* (October 1984), 3, 4, 6.

Blume Lempel, *Oedipus in Brooklyn and Other Stories*, trans. Ellen Cassedy and Yermiyahu Ahron Taub (Takoma Park, MD: Mandel

Vilar Press & Dryad Press, 2016).

5: Text excerpts, Adam Meyer's "Occupying the Middle: Italians, Jews, and Racial Positioning in Edward Lewis Wallant's *The Pawnbroker* and John A. Williams' *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*," and oral history excerpt, interview with Howard Pressman, 2016.

The first section of Adam Meyer's article "Occupying the Middle" gives a history of the racialization of Italians and Jews within the Black-white divide operative in the United States. In the late nineteenth century both Italians and Jews were variously coded as non-white or "not quite white" but slowly moved towards "becoming white" after the mid-twentieth century.

Suggested Activity: Have students read the excerpt and then discuss some of the following questions: When were Jews and Italians considered not-white? Does that mean they were considered Black? How could the race of people suddenly change over time? Why did Jews and Italians move into whiteness?

Meyer's historical overview does not mention gender. How might this move towards whiteness have affected Jewish and Italian women differently from Jewish and Italian men? Are there indications in Lempel's story that the women are bonding over a shared feeling of not-quite-whiteness? Does the setting of the story, presumably in a suburb with single family homes, evoke whiteness?

Next, watch the Wexler Oral History Project excerpt with your students. What elements of Howard Pressman's recounting remind you of Lempel's story? What is different? What could it be about women's domestic roles that facilitates neighborhood relationships, even across racial and religious categories? How does Lempel's story address the divide between Judaism and Catholicism?

Sources: Adam Meyer, "Occupying the Middle: Italians, Jews, and Racial Positioning in Edward Lewis Wallant's *The Pawnbroker* and John A. Williams' *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light*," *Journal of Ethnic American Literature*, no. 8 (2018): 48, 49, 50.

Howard Pressman, "My Jewish Mother Farming with and Baking for Italian Neighbors: Interfaith Friendships in the Bronx," interview by Christa Whitney, "Howard Pressman's Oral History" Yiddish Book Center: Wexler Oral History Project, August 15, 2016.

6: Oral history excerpts, interview with Paul Lempel, 2019, and image, Blume Lempel's typewriter, 2019.

In 2019, Christa Whitney interviewed Paul Lempel, attorney and son of Blume Lempel, in Eastchester, New York. Paul Lempel was born in Paris, France, in 1935. In these two excerpts he describes the space his mother created for writing in their Brooklyn apartment, as well as their subsequent home and garden in Long Beach, New York.

Suggested Activity: Ask students to imagine Blume Lempel's writing spaces or garden, either by drawing a picture or by describing them with words. When might she have had time to write there? What kind of ideal work space or garden would your students create for themselves if there were no constraints? What are their favorite or ideal spaces in a home?

Have students return to the text, taking note of how often and in what manner Betty's typewriter is mentioned. What changes about their understanding of Betty knowing that she regularly sits at the typewriter? How does that differentiate her from Mrs. Zagretti?

Finally, have students draw or describe the typewriter they imagine Betty using. Then, show them a picture of Blume Lempel's typewriter. What differences do students notice between Lempel's typewriter and their rendering of Betty's typewriter? Did students imagine Betty using a Yiddish typewriter? How modern did they imagine Betty's typewriter to be?

Sources: Paul Lempel, interview by Christa Whitney, "Paul Lempel's Oral History," Yiddish Book Center: Wexler Oral History Project, May 10, 2019, [online](#).

Adah Hetko, "The Story Behind the Yiddish Book Center's Yiddish Typewriter Collection," Yiddish Book Center: From the Vault, [online](#).

7: Read Blume Lempel in Yiddish, and listen along to the audiobook

Sami Rohr Library of Recorded Yiddish Books: "A rege fun emes" by Blume Lempel

In the 1980s and '90s, Yiddish native speakers, many of them professional actors, recorded a large collection of Yiddish literary works for Montreal's Jewish Public Library. In [this recording](#), Esther Tsederboym and Aaron Irlicht read Blume Lempel's short story collection, "A rege fun emes," published by I.L. Peretz Publishing House in Tel Aviv, in 1981.

Sources:

Audio recording: <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/audio-books/smr-blume-lemp...>

Full Yiddish text of book: <https://ia601004.us.archive.org/22/items/nybc201097/nybc201097.pdf>