

Yankev Glatshiteyn and The Glatstein Chronicles

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

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Teachers' Guide

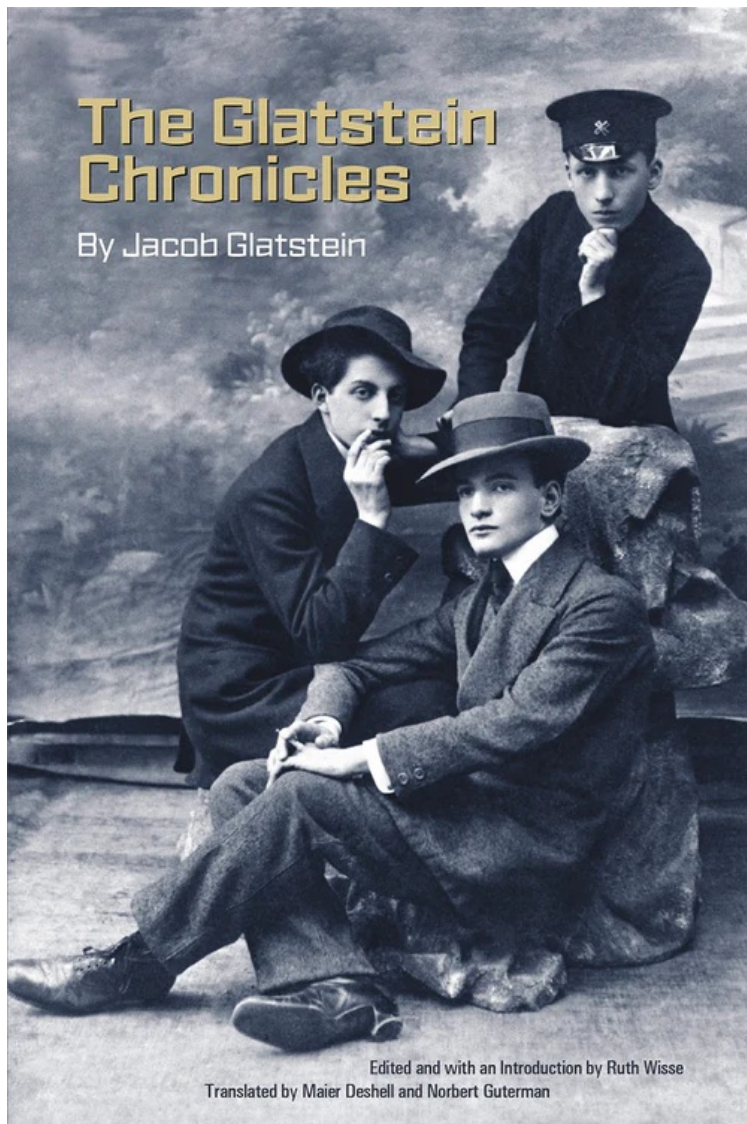
This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <https://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/yankev-glatshiteyn-and-glatstein-chronicles>.

Yankev Glatshiteyn (also known as Jacob Glatstein or Jacob Gladstone) (1896–1971) was one of the most important poets of American Yiddish literature. Born in the Polish city of Lublin, Glatshiteyn immigrated to New York at age 18, in 1914. In 1919, he helped establish the new Yiddish poetry magazine, *In Zikh*, ("Inside the Self"), which introduced Anglo-American modernism into Yiddish literature. This literary circle, who became known as the *Inzikhistn* (Introspectivists), focused on the role of the individual in the modern world, unmarked by Jewish identity, history, or culture. His 1938 poem, "Good night, World," was seen by critics as grappling with modernism, Enlightenment, and traditional Jewish life at a time of profound transition and loss. Glatstein continued to write for the Yiddish press, published many more books of poetry and collected essays, was translated into many languages, and continued to be active in Yiddish literary circles until the end of his life.

Jacob Glatstein and *The Glatstein Chronicles*: A Guide for Reading and Reflection



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In the summer of 1934, the New-York based Yiddish modernist poet Jacob Glatstein (1896-1971; his name is also transliterated as “Glatsteyn”) made a trip back home to Poland to visit his dying mother. The middle-aged, married with children, American intellectual traveled by ship from New York and then via rail to Paris, through Nazi Germany, and back to impoverished Lublin, Poland.

After spending a short time with his mother, she passed away, and he oversaw her burial according to Jewish custom. Afterwards, Glatstein spent a few days in a kosher sanitarium for mentally exhausted patients, in order to gain strength for the trip back, and to gather information about Polish Jews facing increasing poverty and antisemitic persecution. The trip lasted only eight days, but the effects of it lasted a lifetime. Glatstein never visited Poland again; the Polish Jewish civilization that nourished the early stages of his life had been rendered extinct by the Nazi genocide of Polish Jews, and the destruction of Polish Jewish society.

As a result of this journey, Glatstein decided to embark on a large-scale prose work, which was a departure from his usual poetry and journalism. He created a trilogy of semi-autobiographical novels. The first volume, titled in Yiddish as “Ven yash iz geforn” (“When Yash Set Out”, translated as *Homeward Bound*), was serialized in the pages of the poetry magazine “Inzikh” and published in book form in 1939.

The second volume, “Ven yash iz gekumen” (“When Yash Arrived,” translated as *Homecoming at Twilight*) was serialized in the Zionist American journal “Yidisher Kempfer” and published in book form in 1940. The third volume, which was to be titled “Ven yash iz tsurikgekumen,” or *When Yash Returned*, was never written; a few minor fragments were published.

Glatstein felt that his attempts to write about the Holocaust in fictional form failed, and so he returned to composing poetry and literary essays that addressed the destruction of European Jewry. His 1938 poem, “Good night, World” (*A gute nakht velt*), also based on his 1934 journey, became the most translated, anthologized, and analyzed of all his works. Glatstein’s trip had illuminated for him the great contradictions of being a Jew in the modern world: rising antisemitism, and the world’s inadequate response, highlighted the false promise of modernity and the Enlightenment, that Jews would be granted equal rights as citizens; on the other hand, although the narrator of the poem claims he wants to return to the traditional Jewish world, as a secular modern poet, that world is also not his home. Although written before the Holocaust, this poem is often taught as “Holocaust literature” because of its prescient treatment of Holocaust-related themes such as homelessness and exile, the failure of the modern world, the end of eastern European Jewish civilization, and the role of art and literature in a cruel and destructive world. To read more about this poem, please visit the National Yiddish Book Center’s Teach Great Jewish Books website, teachgreatjewishbooks.org, where a teachers’ resource kit provides extensive sources and analysis of the poem.

Critics now consider *The Glatstein Chronicles* to be among the finest literary achievements of modern Jewish fiction. As a work of world literature, the *Chronicles* can be read together with other works of world literature dealing with similar themes such as migration, homecoming, identity crisis, trauma, memory, and human catastrophe, such as the Hebrew Bible’s “The Book of Jonah,” Homer’s “Odyssey,” Thomas Mann’s “Magic Mountain,” and Sholem Aleichem’s stories such as “Home for Passover” and “The Man from Buenos Aires,” and should be included in the growing library of works about dispossessed people, marginalized minorities, ethnicity, and the crisis of modernity.

Jacob Glatstein: “A Jew from Lublin”

Born in 1896 in the Polish city of Lublin, then part of the Russian Empire, to a middle-class family of merchants, Jacob Glatstein received both a non-Jewish and religious Jewish education. As a student, he read Hebrew, Yiddish, and world literature together with traditional scriptures. Although he began writing poetry and stories in Hebrew and Yiddish at a very young age, he only achieved publication upon his arrival in America at the age of 18, making him a true American Yiddish writer. In 1914, due to familial financial problems, he immigrated by himself to New York to live with his uncle. Working in sweatshops during the day and studying English at night, Glatstein quickly made his way to New York University, where he studied law, although he never graduated. At the same time, he made the acquaintance of the poets Aaron Glanz-Leyeles (1889-1966) and Nahum Baruch Minkoff (1893-1958), and in 1919 they established the poetry magazine *Inzikh*, modeled after Anglo-American high-modernist “little magazines” such as “Poetry” and “The Egoist.” This magazine revolutionized Yiddish literature and positioned Glatstein as an emerging new voice.

Introspectivism, 1919-1930

In its early stages of publication, *Inzikh* was an elitist publication dedicated to modernist poetry and serious literary criticism. The rebellious poets, who were almost entirely unknown, launched a revolution in Yiddish poetry, which they articulated in an extensive theoretical manifest. Entitled “Introspectivism” (“In Zikh” means inside the self), the poets followed the footsteps of other European and Anglo-American modernist movements such as symbolism, expressionism, and futurism, and criticized Yiddish literature that was detached from the realities of Jewish life in big metropolitan cities. The *Inzikhists* or Introspectivists endorsed a poetics of restrained emotion, analytical investigation of the self, free verse, and thematic eclecticism. “The world exists, and we are part of it”, says the manifesto, “But for us, the world exists only as it is mirrored in us, as it touches us.” They believed that to be meaningful in an era of world wars and revolutions, Yiddish poetry should reflect conditions of the modern world. Their writing followed what they termed “individual rhythm,” which honored the subjective nature of the individual even as it amplified the anonymous conditions of collective life in the urban metropolis, bringing to life the sounds of the rushing masses, the cacophony of cars and traffic, the movement and sound of underground and aboveground trains, and random and estranged human relations.

Because of this focus on the individual within the modern world, Glatstein and his fellow *Inzikh* poets argued that they could wear their Jewishness lightly, claiming:

We are “Jewish poets” simply because we write in Yiddish. No matter what a Yiddish poet writes in Yiddish, it is ipso facto Jewish. One does not need any particular “Jewish themes”. A Jew will write about an Indian fertility temple and Japanese Shinto shrines as a Jew. A Jewish poet will be Jewish when he writes poetry about “Vive la France”, about the Golden Calf, about gratitude to a Christian woman for a kind word, about roses that turn black, about a courier of an old prince, or about the calm that comes only with sleep. It is not the poet’s task seek and show his Jewishness. Whoever is interested in this

endeavor is welcome to it, and whoever looks for Jewishness in Yiddish poets will find it.

Critics argue that the confidence of this position, in the World War I era, comes from the *Inzikh* poets' youthful fervor, and from their relative comfort and stability as immigrants who had established a foothold in American cultural and social life.

Inzikh became a dynamic platform for poetic innovation and critical mastery and featured emerging new female poets such as Anna Margolin and Celia Dropkin, who were also experimenting with new thresholds of form and content within Yiddish poetry. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, Glatstein published a significant body of poetic work, including three books of verse: *Yankev Glatshteyn* ("Jacob Glatstein," 1921), *Fraye Ferzn* ("Free Rhythms," 1926), and *Kredos* ("Credos," 1929). His experimentalism led him gradually from an internal focus on the poetic self to an examination of the external world. This internal transition was almost complete at the time that Glatstein took his journey back to Europe in 1934. His experiences there would profoundly impact his poetic subject matter for the rest of his life.

Back to the Tribe: *Inzikh* in the 1930s (1934-1940)

When *Inzikh* resumed publication after a break in April 1934, the world had changed: Joseph Stalin was the leader of the Soviet Union, Benito Mussolini ruled Italy, and Adolph Hitler had taken over Germany. Stalinism, Fascism, and Nazism became major threats to western democracies overall, and to Jews specifically. The Jewish community in independent Poland, which was the largest Jewish community in the world at that time, felt trapped between Communism and Nazism. Few could escape to the United States or mandate Palestine, even if seemed a viable option.

The *Inzikh* poets felt they could not remain impartial and had to take a stronger political stand. The journal conducted fiery debates about art in the age of totalitarianism, condemning writers from right to left on their rejection of artistic freedom. They believed that defending democracy and artistic freedom were necessary to protect artistic autonomy. This renewed interest in social and political questions, as well as Jewish identity, also brought a partial turn to prose fiction, as Glatstein serialized the first installment of the "Chronicles," "Homeward Bound" in the pages of *Inzikh*.

"Homeward Bound" (1938): The Modernist at Sea

"Ven yash iz geforn" ("When Yash Set Out" or *Homeward Bound*) was published in book form by *Inzikh* in 1938. This volume is bound in time, place, and consciousness: Yash (the Polish rendition of the poet's first name), a Jewish poet and journalist from New York, embarks on a journey by ship back to his native Poland to visit his mother on her deathbed. The story, told by a first-person narrator, leads its readers to label it an autobiography or a travelogue, genres often dismissed as "semi-literary." Yet, the novel is in fact a serious modernist investigation of Yash's midlife identity crisis, and a meditation on Jewish survival.

Yash's sense of urgency to see his dying mother catalyzes the book's plot, and what differentiates him from his fellow passengers on board the ship. The steamer seems to Yash like a world following its own maritime laws, and the people seem like actors in a play, disguised as men and women of leisure, looking for casual encounters but nevertheless open to expose their inner selves to the ever-alert artist.

The trip is also a reverse of the archetypal Jewish immigration narrative, from old world to new. The clash between these two opposing narratives, immigration and return, prompts the reader to rethink the redemptive arc of the classic story of immigration, from persecution to freedom, and from failure to success. Instead, Glatstein is ambivalent towards his own American success, and questions the prices Jews were made to pay in order to assimilate into American culture.

Upon arrival in France, Yash travels by train through Nazi Germany to Lublin, Poland. The emotional train ride triggers memory and fear. Yash is back to being a small, powerless Jewish boy from Poland. The volume with the train conductor announcing Lublin station.

Return at Twilight (1940): The Modernist Retreat

Published in 1940, "Ven yash iz gekumen" (*Arrival at Twilight*) largely skips the death and funeral of Yash's mother, except for one passage, where he quotes from Genesis 23:8-17, where Abraham buys the Cave of Machpelah as a burial place for his wife, Sarah. The story underscores how Yash feels when the local Jewish burial society in Lublin overcharges him for his mother's burial. After this unsettling experience shattering Yash's dream of a victorious return home as the "American son," he then visits a Jewish sanitarium outside of Lublin to recuperate. Much of the novel's plot revolves, therefore, around the leisurely routine of the exhausted patients and the hotel staff. The volume appears at first glance more traditional in form and content, showcasing a

gallery of predominantly traditional Polish Jews, but it nevertheless retains and deepens its modernist sophistication by expanding the novel's present with associative digressions, genre eclecticism (the novel features a small play starring the young Yash) and internal streams of consciousness.

The inhabitants of the hotel, including its owner and staff, as well as occasional visitors, showcase the physical and mental decline of Polish Jewry at its final stages: older patients, Hasidic masters and their families, townspeople, pretend relatives and past acquaintances looking for charity, and potential mentors. The main surrogate father and self-proclaimed expert in Jewish affairs is a dying second rate writer of Hasidic tales (a parodical rendition of the great Yiddish writer, I. L. Peretz). Steinman, accompanied by his single daughter, is, as his name suggests, as strong as a rock and rooted in the history of Polish Jews. The uprooted cosmopolitan has found in him suitable anchor and a guide to all that is Jewish and sentimental. Yet while Steinman will remain to die on Polish soil, the living Yash will return to his wife and children in New York.

The novel ends after a brief, unexpected tour of Kazimierz, the Jewish quarter of Krakow. The story focuses on the famous legend of Esterke who like her namesake in the biblical book of Esther, had an intimate relationship with the Polish king Casimir (1310-1370). According to the legend, due to this relationship, the king favored the Jews and granted them various privileges. This folkloric element, which steered the imagination of Polish Jews for generations, helps Yash navigate his final, emotionally-charged hours in Poland. Like many other stories in the book, it reinforces Jewish ancestry in Poland, Jewish rootedness in the Polish landscape, and the love-hate relationship between Jews and gentiles. The paradox of Polish-Jewish coexistence and of the integrative vision of Jewish modernity is at the core of the book's tragic and elegiac final farewell. The singing voice of the nightingale heard out of season in the countryside is a metonymical device symbolizing both Polish Jews and Jewish literature.

The novel concludes with Yash standing in his hotel room, staring at his open suitcase and contemplating the voyage home. The finality of the Polish era in Jewish history and the open-endedness of the personal journey are both articulated in Yash's ambivalence towards his recent experiences and are reflected in the book's open ending: an end that is also a new beginning.

Jacob Glatstein returned home to New York but did not finish the intended Yash trilogy. He did not want to return to Poland, the site of so much recent Jewish tragedy; he believed that the Holocaust ended the prospects of Jewish continuation on European soil. Glatstein continued to write for the Yiddish press, published many more books of poetry and collected essays, was translated into many languages, and continued to be active in Yiddish literary circles until the end of his life.

MULTIMEDIA RESOURCES

Glatshiteyn was a modernist who was influential to, and influenced by, the Yiddish modernist literary movement in general. For more on Yiddish modernism, visit this brief [overview](#), with links to the works of other Yiddish modernist poets. After that, check out Glatshiteyn reading his [poem "1919"](#) (in Yiddish).

Geoffrey Gladstone, grandson of Yiddish writer Jacob Glatstein, discusses his wishes for his relationship with his late grandfather in this [oral history clip](#) from the Yiddish Book Center.

Listen to the recording of this past [public program](#), on "Jacob Glatstein and Yiddish Rage" with Sunny Yudkoff and Saul Zaritt.

Glatshiteyn on Yiddish Poetry [After the Holocaust](#) (in Yiddish with English subtitles).

American Yiddish Poetry [Reading Resources](#)

Yankev Glatshiteyn's "Good Night, World:" Teacher [Resource Kit](#) by Anita Norich

Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, "A Writer in the Spa: Identifying Jacob Glatstein's Protagonist," In Geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies, 2017. <https://ingeveb.org/blog/a-writer-in-the-spa-identifying-jacob-glatsteins-protagonist>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

For "Homeward Bound":

In the novel, the first-person narrator Yash is given the compliment of having "Golden Ears." Following the poetic method of

Introspectivism favoring an indirect and analogues investigation of the self, how does the role of Yash a bystander and listener, reflects on his psychological change from a cosmopolitan modernist to a “sentimentally educated Jew”?

The novel’s plot takes place during a few summer days in late June and early July 1934. What historical events, both European and American, are mentioned explicitly in the novel and how do they reflect on Glatstein’s existential crisis and artistic vision? In addition, how do redemptive ideologies such as communism, Zionism, fascism, and Nazism are examined in the novel?

For “Homecoming at Twilight”:

Upon recuperating in a Jewish sanitarium outside of Lublin, the American Yash is confronted with the decline of Polish Jewry. Who are the Jews he encounters, what are the problems they share with him, and what do they teach him about Jewish survival?

The novel puts in its center the character of Steinman (and to a lesser degree the one of the lawyer Neifeld), an older writer of Hasidic tales who serves as a father figure and guide to Yash and other hotel guests. Steinman’s life story, told in instalments, is similar to many Jewish Enlightenment-era autobiographies and is a narrative of a late homecoming. How does Steinman’s mentorship change Yash’s modernist sensibility and renewed interest in traditional Jewish folklore?

The novel concludes with two significant metonymies: the singing of the nightingale heard out of season on the trip to Kazimierz, and the open suitcase placed in Yash’s hotel room. How do they reflect on such themes as Jewish and non-Jewish relationships, Jewish spirituality, Polish naturalism as a national movement, diaspora nationalism, Jewish art, and above all, the transformation of Polish Jewish heritage from a living organism to an artifact of memory?

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Resources

