

Yenta Mash's "A Seder in the Taiga"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/yenta-mashs-seder-taiga>.

Introduction

Yenta Mash (1922–2013) grew up in the region once known as Bessarabia (present-day Moldova). In 1941, she was exiled to the Siberian gulag, a notorious labor camp for political prisoners, by Soviet forces. She endured seven years of hard labor before leaving the prison camp and making her way to Chisinau, then the capital of the Moldavian Socialist Soviet Republic. In 1977, in her fifties, Mash immigrated to Israel and settled in Haifa, where she began to write and publish. Her short stories were published in Yiddish journals in Israel and the United States, and her work was collected in four volumes published in Israel. She was honored with Israel's Itsik Manger Prize for outstanding contributions to Yiddish literature in 1999 and with the Dovid Hofshsteyn Prize for Yiddish literature in 2002. She died in 2003.

Mash's story "A Seder in the Taiga" offers students an introduction to a harrowing component of the Jewish experience in the Soviet Union, and this kit provides some background information that will help to contextualize the story within that history. In addition, the story offers commentary on the holiday of Passover and what it means to celebrate Passover during times of great hardship.

Cover image: Illustration of the Angel of Death by El Lissitzky, from *Had Gadya: The Only Kid* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2004), n.p., a facsimile of Lissitzky's first 1919 edition. © 2020 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Subjects

Art, Eastern Europe, Gender, Jewish Holidays, Memoir, Religion, Soviet Union, Women Writers, Yiddish

Reading and Background

- The full story "A Seder in the Taiga" by Yenta Mash, translated by Ellen Cassedy, can be found [here](#).
- The story can also be found in the collection *On the Landing: Stories by Yenta Mash, translated by Ellen Cassedy*, along with fifteen other stories that cover a range of Mash's experiences and observations. You can listen to [this interview](#) with Ellen Cassedy about discovering and translating Mash's work, or hear her discuss the translation in [this video](#).
- The Yiddish original of "A Seder in the Taiga" can be found as a PDF [here](#), as it appears in *Mit der letster hakofe (The Last Time Around)*, Tel Aviv, 2007.
- Those wanting to learn more about the Jewish experience under Soviet rule in this period may wish to consult the following resources: Anna Shternshis, *When Sonia Met Boris: An Oral History of Jewish Life Under Stalin* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Atina Grossmann, Mark Edele, and Sheila Fitzpatrick, eds., *Shelter from the Holocaust: Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union* (Wayne State University Press, 2017); and Markus Nesselrodt "I bled like you, brother, although I was a thousand miles away': postwar Yiddish sources on the experiences of Polish Jews in Soviet exile during World War II," published in the journal *East European Jewish Affairs*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (2016), 47-67. In addition, Megan Buskey's article "My Family's Siberian Exile," about her Ukrainian family's life in Stalin's special settlements in Siberia, is accessible and informative.
- For more information on the Gurs Haggadah, or to read it in full, see the [Experiencing History project](#) of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, or *The Gurs Haggadah: Passover in Perdition*, edited by Bella Gutterman and Naomi Morgenstern.
- To learn more about El Lissitzky, see [this entry](#) from the YIVO encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe as well as [MOMA's page on the artist](#) which includes images of 122 works. See also [Victor Margolin's commentary on El Lissitzky's Had Gadya](#).



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Resources

1: Film excerpt, interview with Yenta Mash, ca. 1990, in Boris Sandler's "Fridays at Leyvik House," 2015.

In this interview with Yenta Mash, conducted in the early 1990s, Mash describes why she didn't begin to write in Yiddish until her immigration to Israel. The interview is featured in the documentary, *Fridays at Leyvik House* (2015), beginning at 31:57 and ending at 35:54.

Suggested Activity: Watch the clip with your students and ask them to discuss their reactions. Why do they think Mash is often asked about beginning to write at an advanced age? What does that tell them about cultural expectations for the typical trajectory for a writer's career, and why Mash didn't follow that typical trajectory? In her response, Mash discusses the long-lasting impact of her traumatic experiences on her ability to express herself. Ask your students what Mash means when she says that "Siberia persecuted me" long after she had left the prison camp. In what ways was she persecuted and how did that impact her life? How do your students think that writing about her past from a distance of time and space might have shaped her work?

Source: *Forverts*, "Fridays at Leyvik House," Oct. 4 2017, video, 47:15, <https://youtu.be/Epeawwf1V6A>.

2: Oral history excerpt, Molly Fogarty, "Father's Childhood in Poland and Exile to Siberia," 2016.

In this excerpt from her oral history interview, Molly Fogarty discusses her family's history, including exile to Siberia from Soviet-occupied Poland.

Suggested Activity: You can use this testimony as a starting point to contextualize Mash's story, supplementing the testimony with additional background information about the gulag under the Bolsheviks (see the Reading and Background section of this kit).

Watch the interview and ask your students to record a list of details they hear in the testimony. Ask them in what ways the details they hear in this testimony are consistent with the details in Mash's story. Does hearing the testimony change your reading of the story in any way? How did you feel hearing Fogarty's second-hand account of a long period of her father's life, versus reading Mash's first-person (semi)-autobiographical narrative recounting one particular moment in the gulag? What did each experience add to your understanding of this episode in history?

Source: Molly Fogarty, interview by Tatiana Panova, "Father's Childhood in Poland and Exile to Siberia," Yiddish Book Center: Wexler Oral History Project, Feb. 12 2016, <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/oral-histories/excerpts/woh-ex-0004958/father-s-childhood-poland-and-exile-siberia>.

3: Excerpt, Nina Gagen-Torn's gulag testimony, 1995.

Nina Gagen-Torn (1900-1986) was a Russian and Soviet poet, writer, historian, and ethnographer. During and after the Great Purge (the Soviet Union's campaign of political repression lasting from 1936 to 1938 and involving widespread surveillance, imprisonment, and executions), she spent the years 1936-1942 in Kolyma labor camps and 1942-1943 in exile, as well as serving prison time in 1947-1952 in Mordovia. She was permanently exiled to the Yenisey River region in 1948 and amnestied in 1954.

Gagen-Torn was an accomplished ethnographer who had served as a researcher at the State Academy of the History of Material Culture, taught Russian and Ostyak languages and geography at the Institute of the Peoples of the North, and researched for the Institute for the Study of the Peoples of the USSR, Soviet Academy of Sciences, and Institute of Anthropology and Ethnography prior to her internment. She applied her ethnographer's eye to her dire experiences during her time in exile. This excerpt was taken from *Memoria*, a compilation of diary entries and letters she originally wrote during her exile. In the passage, she describes different expressions of faith (political and religious) among Siberian prisoners. After her exile, Gagen-Torn returned, with much difficulty, to scholarly work, and was a pioneer in the fields of ethnography of the peoples of the Soviet Union, Russian and Bulgarian folklore, and the history of Russian ethnography.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students to discuss: What does this excerpt reveal about the relationship between the prison authorities and the idea of religion? How does that further illuminate the Mash story for your students?

Gagen-Torn writes that she would like to paint the scene that she describes. Invite your students to draw or paint either Gagen-Torn's scene, or a moment from Mash's story that they feel shares aspects of Gagen-Torn's scene. Ask them to explain what emotions they are trying to convey through their artwork.

Source: Nina Gagen-Torn, "On Faith," in *Gulag Voices: An Anthology*, ed. Anne Applebaum (Yale University Press, 2011), 79-80.

4: Images, Passover Haggadah from the Gurs Camp, 1941.

After the French Third Republic surrendered to Nazi Germany in 1940, the Nazi-allied Vichy government began interning Jews who were deported from Belgium and Germany in several detention camps, among them the Gurs camp located in the Pyrenees mountains in southwestern France. There, internees lived, and many died, under conditions of disease and deprivation. In the spring of 1941, a small group of Jews in the camp worked together to produce a Haggadah, the text that sets forth the ritual of the Passover Seder, to celebrate Passover at the camp.

The document, five handwritten pages long, was composed largely from memory by Aryeh Ludwig Zuckerman over many months and under harsh conditions. Rabbi Leo Ansbacher arranged an addendum of Hebrew songs and hymns typed in Latin characters. The Haggadah was used during the 1941 celebration of Passover in the camp. While the Haggadah closely resembles traditional Haggadahs and does not make reference to the circumstances of living in the camp within the body of the text, testimony from survivors attests to its special significance to the camp's prisoners as an assertion of their own humanity in the face of the dehumanizing conditions they endured. These two images show the first page of the Haggadah and the first page of the Latin-alphabet addendum.

Suggested Activity: In Mash's "A Seder in the Taiga," a group of women prisoners in a Soviet gulag improvise to perform the ritual of the Passover Seder under nearly impossible circumstances. The Haggadah from the Gurs Camp represents a similar dedication to the ritual at a moment when mere physical survival seems improbable. Have your students examine the image of the Haggadah and note details that demonstrate the care taken to create this object. Why was it so important to the prisoners in the Gurs camp to have a physical Haggadah, when some prisoners had the text memorized? How might ritual, and ritual objects, be of particular importance in dire circumstances? Ask your students to consider the artifact in relationship to the Seder described in Mash's story. In what ways do they see the two improvised Seders as emerging from a similar impulse, however your students might understand that impulse (to evoke holiness, to maintain something like normalcy, to connect the present to the past, to imbue the passage of time with meaning)? How do they see these rituals as different?

Also, ask your students to consider: What are the gendered dimensions of these two improvised rituals? What impact might Aryeh Ludwig Zuckerman's upbringing as a man in a traditional Jewish environment have had on his creation of the document? What are the ways that traditional gender divisions are disrupted or upheld through this artifact and through Mash's story?

Source: Rabbi Leo Ansbacher and Aryeh Ludwig Zuckerman, Passover Haggadah from the Gurs Camp, 1941, Accession Number 2000.552.1, U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/passover-haggadah-from-the-gurs-camp#>. Courtesy of Joan Inge Maas.

5: Excerpt, the Passover Haggadah.

In "A Seder in the Taiga," Mash discusses the women's matzah as a Siberian "bread of affliction." This is a reference to a declaration in the Passover Haggadah, recited at the start of the *magid*, or retelling, section.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students to consider the idea of "bread of affliction" in the context of Mash's story. What are the resonances between the women's situation in the gulag and the Exodus story they are retelling? Ask your class to divide in half for a debate—one side argues that the tiny, misshapen matzahs are not authentic matzahs, and the other side argues that the matzahs are *more* authentic because they were produced at a time of suffering.

Source: Pesach Haggadah, Magid, *Ha Lachma Anya*, source sheet compiled on Sefaria, https://www.sefaria.org/Pesach_Haggadah%2C_Magid%2C_Ha_Lachma_Anya.3?lang=bi&with=Versions&lang2=en, accessed Jul. 17 2020.

6: Illustration, the Angel of Death from El Lissitzky's "Khad gadyo," 1919.

Yenta Mash's "A Seder in the Taiga" references the singing of "*Khad gadyo*," an Aramaic-language cumulative song traditionally sung toward the end of the Passover seder. In the song, a small goat is pursued by predators, culminating in the Angel of Death. Those unfamiliar with the song can find lyrics [here](#), and can listen to versions of the song in many Jewish languages [here](#).

The avant-garde artist El Lissitzky (1890-1941) made illustrations of the traditional Passover song "*Khad gadyo*" early in his career, when he immersed himself in the Jewish cultural renaissance that flourished in Russia from roughly 1912 to the early 1920s. This illustration depicts the final verse of the song, when the Angel of Death arrives to slay the butcher who killed the ox that drank the water that extinguished the fire that burned the stick that beat the dog that bit the cat that ate the goat, an ultimate end to a grisly tale.

Suggested Activity: Although the song "*Khad gadyo*" has been interpreted in many ways, one common interpretation is allegorical—comparing the goat to the Jewish people, the father who bought the goat to God, and the other characters to nations who conquered Israel, ending with God coming and liberating the Jewish people from its persecutors. In "A Seder in the Taiga," Mash uses the narrative "*Khad gadyo*" to offer criticism against God for intervening only after the Angel of Death has brought the story to the ultimate destruction. God comes to liberate, but only after the destruction has been too great for such salvation to be any consolation.

Ask your students to examine the illustration and discuss what they see. How is Lissitzky representing and interpreting "*Khad gadyo*" and specifically the Angel of Death? Does Lissitzky's visual interpretation match the way Mash interprets the song in her story?

Source: El Lissitzky, *Had Gadya: The Only Kid* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2004), n.p. © 2020 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.