

Dr Benjamin Orenstein

## Ida Maze [aka Massey] RIP

(Memories and episodes regarding the deceased poetess, in connection with the activities of the Czenstochover Landsmanshaft)



A few days after my arrival in Montreal<sup>1</sup>, the painter Harry Daniels introduced me to the late Ida Maze. She had become acquainted with my writings and the first time she spoke with me at her previous home on Avenue de l'Esplanade, she asked me about the horrific events during the Second World War.

Influenced by my recollections, her diminutive body shrank even more and her face became covered with grief. Her deep, wide eyes became moist, and tears trickled down her elongated features. She apparently did not wish me to notice her tears. She excused herself and left the room, wiped her tears and immediately returned. Nevertheless, I *had* noticed it. I also noted that her shoulders appeared to have become lower, as if she had caved in under the burden of the Jewish misery, pain and suffering.

I felt bad that I had told her about the martyrdom of the children in the Nazi era, because this had awoken, in her, agony and reminiscences of her own suffering.

From time to time, I would meet Ida Maze at various communal functions and meetings. She appeared to me as a psychological phenomenon. On the one hand, she was a woman with an extraordinary enterprising spirit and organisational realism. On the other, she was a child, in the full sense of the word. She rejoiced like a child for the successes and achievements of others. She rejoiced like a child in the positive results of matters, which she had undertaken to carry out for others - for individuals, groups, societies or institutions. In such instances, she was as an infant - even if streaks of silver were already quite visibly interwoven in her once black hair.

This phenomenon is easily explained. She was always absorbed in children's poetry, and she therefore entered with her mind and thoughts into the psychology of children, which left a spiritual stamp on herself. It is a characteristic fact, that Ida Maze confirmed this herself in a poem she wrote:

*I am a mother of grown children already,  
And am still like a child myself.*

(See: *Vaksn Meine Kinderlech*  
[*My Little Children are Growing Up*], p.187)

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: The author, Dr Benjamin Orenstein, arrived in Canada on 28<sup>th</sup> October 1948.]

In 1954, Ida Maze published her book *Vaksn Meine Kinderlech*. I was among the first to read it and also the first to write a review, which was published in *Keneder Odler*, *Der Yiddisher Journal* and *Dos Wort*. She was understandably very pleased with this and thanked me. Since then, she followed everything I wrote and, each time she read a work of mine, she telephoned me and gave me her opinion.

Ida Maze conducted broad correspondence with poets and poetesses, who also sent her their newly-published books. From time to time, Ida Maze would want me to write reviews of certain books. However, she did not have the audacity to tell me. She did this in a very delicate manner. Firstly, she would instruct her friend of many years, the poetess Mirel Erdberg-Shatan, to telephone me and advise me of the newly-published book, and that she should deliver it to me personally or send it to me. A couple of days later, Ida Maze herself would ring me, to the effect that Mirel Erdberg-Shatan had told her that she had given me the book and that she (Ida Maze) would like to know whether I had already read it and what was my opinion of it. Upon hearing that I had already finished reading the book and had formed a positive opinion, and that I had already written a review and sent it in to the editors, her joy and glee were boundless and she would bless me with the heartiest of blessings.

On 19<sup>th</sup> April 1958, an anniversary banquet was held, organised by the Czenstochover Landsmanshaft of Montreal. The jubilee banquet took place at the auditorium of the Jewish Public Library and was dedicated to the tenth anniversary of the publishing of two books – mine and that of Szlojme Waga. Ida Maze participated in this jubilee banquet. She listened attentively to the speeches and congratulations that were delivered and the congratulatory telegrams that were read out.

After the twelve-year-old girl Gitte'le Ickowicz had finished reciting *The Mailman of Our Street*<sup>2</sup>, which I had written specially for her, Ida Maze rose and loudly addressed the Chairman in the following words, "Chairman! Let me speak now, because I cannot contain myself any longer - I must speak!" The Chairman of the jubilee banquet was Mojsze Altman – a *Częstochower landsmann*, of course, who had only recently arrived from the State of Israel. Not being personally acquainted with Ida Maze, he was perplexed and did not know what to do. I explained to the Chairman that the lady was the renowned poetess Ida Maze and that he should let her speak immediately - which is what transpired.

Her speech, on that occasion, was natural and spontaneous. Firstly, she dwelt on the profound impression made upon her by the recital of the talented twelve-year-old Gitte'le Ickowicz (nowadays already a sixteen-year-old actress, *keinehora*<sup>3</sup>), after which she congratulated the anniversary celebrants. Concurrently, she did not miss the opportunity to express her gratitude towards me for the published reviews of her book *Vaksn Meine Kinderlech*. She expressed the same in an entire array of other occasions.

In 1960, some two or three months following the death of her husband Elia Maze z''l, the writer Golde Gutman-Krimer arrived in Montreal from Argentina. The addresses she was given were to the "literary hostel", viz. to Ida Maze and Mirel Erdberg-Shatan. Despite Ida Maze's physical and psychological distress, she and Mirel Erdberg-Shatan organised an

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<sup>2</sup> [TN: The full piece is featured above in the chapter "The Mailman".]

<sup>3</sup> [TN: Yid. from the Heb., "no evil eye".]

evening in honour of the writer Golde Gutman-Krimer. Ida Maze rang me and asked me to come to the evening - no matter what. Even though I was busy on that Friday night, I still could not refuse Ida Maze, out of courtesy and respect for her efforts to show friendship towards the guest, the writer Golde Gutman-Krimer. Along with my wife, I attended the evening.

At the evening I spoke a few words, which pleased the guest, Golde Gutman-Krimer. Ida Maze's features simply lit up. A childlike smile enveloped her facial expressions, masterfully veiling the personal grief and agony smouldering in her heart. As soon as the evening came to an end, we - meaning the guest, Ida Maze, my wife and myself - sat down for a chat. After a few minutes, my wife turned to me, "Why should we sit here in the hall? Let's invite them to our house, where we can have a nicer time with a cup of coffee?" That is what we did. A few minutes later we were all at my house, and Ida Maze's sister, Mrs [Mollie (Malka)] Duchow<sup>4</sup>, was also there. Ida Maze had the greatest satisfaction, when I declared that, as soon as I finished reading the guest Golde Gutman-Krimer's book, I would write a review. It was the same with all the other reviews I published on the books of her numerous friends.

Ida Maze also took an interest in my activities at the Jewish Cultural Club, and she expressed her desire to be invited to such a meeting. She was indeed invited to an annual celebration, and also spoke up for a greeting. On the following day, she telephoned me and thanked me for the activities of the Cultural Club and for having given her the opportunity to express herself at such a glorious cultural occasion, where the Yiddish language rang out with its thousand charms, both in the lecture and in the excellent recitals and heartily sung Yiddish songs. She expressed her wish that I would invite her to all the Cultural Club's functions.

At the end of January 1962, I sent an invitation to Ida Maze to attend the memorial evening on the second anniversary of the death of Dr Filip Friedman z"l, which the Jewish Cultural Club and the Czenstochover Landsmanshaft of Montreal were to hold on 10<sup>th</sup> February 1962. Even though Ida Maze was an admirer of the great historian Dr Filip Friedman z"l, and even though Dr Ida Friedman from New York, the widow of Dr Filip Friedman, participated in that evening – nevertheless, Ida Maze still did not come. I sent her the book *The Life and Writings of Dr Philip<sup>5</sup> Friedman*, but she did not ring me. I could not understand it at all – what had happened? This was certainly not characteristic of her.

I was accustomed that [whenever] anyone came to the "literary hostel", viz. to her home, she would ring me up at once. She would phone me for anything - even to remind me to pay my membership fee at the Writers' Association and, here, Dr Ida Friedman had travelled to the ceremony, [and] she had not attended or even rung. I concluded that just then it had been a very frosty evening, and perhaps she was a bit chilled and was therefore unable to attend. But I could not comprehend [why] she had not responded to the book I had sent her and had not phoned me.

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<sup>4</sup> [TN: Spelt **דוּשאַ** in the original Yiddish; Professor Irving Massey, Ida Maze's son, has kindly informed us as to the correct spelling of his aunt's name.]

<sup>5</sup> [TN: Although we usually render Dr Friedman's given name as it appears in Polish sources – Filip – here we have spelt it verbatim as it appears in the English-language title page of the booklet in question.]

The matter was cleared up for me a little later, namely that she had sadly been very unwell the entire time and had become a [regular] resident in various hospitals. She was admitted to one hospital, came home, went to another hospital, came home again, and then the same story repeated itself once again. At first, she was in the private hospital at Côte-des-Neiges, then in the Royal Victoria and, finally, in the Jewish General. When she was in hospital, I wished to visit her, [but] I was firmly refused – “No, all visits are unwelcome in the interests of her health”. I could not imagine that she should be so unwell and that her end was nearing, due to the very simple fact that her mother had lived long, long after her hundredth year<sup>6</sup>. And [yet] she, Ida Maze, in the sixty-ninth year of her life, on Thursday, 14<sup>th</sup> June 1962, departed to eternity.

Ida Maze was as a mother for every newly-arrived poet and writer, serving [them] with her advice and deeds. She devotedly conducted communal activities for cultural and educational institutions. She was the *machnis orchim*<sup>7</sup> for guests arriving in Montreal. Her life was linked inseparably with Yiddish poetry and Yiddish song. Her own poems were mostly an expression of her moods. With her demise were extinguished her dreams and ideas, and Yiddish poetry in general, and Yiddish children’s poetry, in particular, have become impoverished.

Did Ida Maze think of death? The answer is yes. She gave expression to this in an entire array of poems. She even prophesied as to how the end of her life would be, how she would separate from this world. Here, I shall quote one strophe from a poem, which she published twenty-one years ago, in 1941, in her book *Naye Lieder* [New Poems]:

*I will fall like those  
With shoulders bowed  
Who go; close-mouthed—  
Without a sound*<sup>8</sup>.

(See [there], p. 138)

It is truly a shame that she has already departed. With her death, a warm-hearted person departed, a fine poetess and an involved cultural and communal activist<sup>9</sup>.

Honoured be her memory.

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<sup>6</sup> [TN: Ida Maze’s mother, Mrs Mary (Muscha) Zukowsky née Govezniansky, passed away on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1952 at the age of 103, as may be seen from her headstone in Montreal.]

<sup>7</sup> [TN: Heb., one who provides hospitality to wayfarers and guests; although used here in ref. to a woman, the term as it appears here is male.]

<sup>8</sup> [TN: Professor Irving Massey has kindly provided us with the paraphrasing of this strophe of his mother’s original Yiddish poem.]

<sup>9</sup> [TN: In the original Yiddish, this phrase reads, “...a fine poetess, a culture and involved communal activist.” We have amended the wording to better fit the context.]