GEORG MORDECHAI LANGER

POEMS AND SONGS OF LOVE
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Translated by
Elana and Menachem Wolff

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For Zaidi: Shimshon Senderovits
in memory
The idea for this work took seed in early 2011. I was doing research for a biography course and the final assignment involved using tools and templates learned in the course to present the life story of a person, no longer living, who had made a significant contribution to humanity. I chose Franz Kafka (1883–1924).

Kafka was a natural choice. I was drawn to his work as a teen; still have the tattered, $5.95, 1976 Schocken paperback edition of Kafka, The Complete Stories—now held together with elastic bands—that I took on my first trip to Israel and read at Kibbutz Ein Harod during my year there. I first read Kafka's novel The Trial on the kibbutz, too, and was deeply affected by the grim humour, relentless portrayal of bureaucratic absurdity, stripped-down writing style, and dark enigmatic ending.

Back then—long before instant Internet access to details of a person’s life—I read The Trial straight-up, without biographical information. I found nothing overtly Jewish in the work. Yet perhaps because I was experiencing my own Jewish awakening at the time, I couldn’t help seeing it as a Jewish, as much as a universal work, despite its distinctly Christian references—the Virgin, Christ, and the priest in the pivotal “In the Cathedral” chapter.
The last chapter, in which Josef K. is executed for a mysterious crime—not having been formally indicted or tried—felt reminiscent of the story of Abraham and The Binding of Isaac told in Genesis 22:1–19. In both accounts, there is an uphill trek outside the city, to a stark location where the final act is to take place. There is the stone on which the 'sacrifice' is laid—in Isaac’s case, also bound. There is the knife, the test, and the intercessory angel. In the Biblical account, Abraham’s hand is stayed by the angel at the last moment—when it is clear he has shown complete spiritual surrender to God’s command. A ram then appears in a nearby bush, is sacrificed instead of Isaac, and the son comes down from the mountain, with his father, to live and prosper. In The Trial, a human figure appears in a flash of light in an upper storey window at the penultimate moment—angel-like, perhaps feeling for Josef K. and wanting to help. But there is no intercession. The Biblical story is harsh, yet Abraham and Isaac both pass the supreme test and the ordeal ends with reprieve and continuity. The Trial ends with a guilty verdict, Josef K.’s submission to execution, and “shame” (“Schamm”) that transcends death.

The Trial left me rattled—fraught with unsettling questions about guilt, shame, responsibility, obedience and freedom, death, existence and transcendence. Albert Camus once said that “the whole of Kafka’s art consists in compelling the reader to re-read him.” And indeed, over the years, Kafka became one of the authors I returned to, and encountered in the work of others—as diverse as Walter Benjamin, Milan Kundera, Haruki Murakami, Gabriel García Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Salman Rushdie, J.M. Coetzee, W.G. Sebald, and Zadie Smith.

Through winter and spring of 2011, I was poring over Kafka’s oeuvre—the well-and lesser-known fiction, the notebooks, diaries, correspondence, and many of the studies and biographies—seeking threads and themes in his lifeline, their metamorphoses through cycles and crises, and a picture of how life intentions were or were not met. The sources seemed endless, and the presentation had to be kept to an hour, so there were choices to be made about what would be charted and what would be left out.

A key theme of Kafka’s biography is the centrality of friendship to his literary development and posthumous success, particularly the extraordinary friendship of Max Brod (1884–1968). The two came from the same assimilated, German-speaking, Jewish, middle-class Prague milieu, and met at (what was then) Karl Ferdinand University in 1902. They were both aspiring writers studying law, and connected quickly over love of argument and literature. Early in their friendship, Brod introduced Kafka to people who would also have lasting impact on the author, including his first muse and two-time fiancée, Felice Bauer (1887–1960), and his first publisher Kurt Wolff (1887–1963). Kafka published seven small books during his lifetime, and was hardly known beyond a small group of discerning readers. Yet in 1907, before he had published a single word, Brod wrote a review for the Berlin weekly Die Gegenwart in which he ranked his friend in the same prominent company as contemporaries Heinrich Mann, Frank Wedekind, and Gustav Meyrink. Brod encouraged and promoted Kafka throughout his life, and, as Kafka’s literary executor, famously saved the unpublished work from incineration, disavowing Kafka’s last request that “Everything in the way of diaries, manuscripts, letters (my own and others’), sketches, and so on, be burned unread.” Instead, Brod prepared and negotiated publication of Kafka’s three unfinished novels—The Trial in 1925, The Castle in 1926, and Amerika (Brod’s title for Der Verschollene) in 1927. And he continued to devote his energies to securing his friend’s manuscripts, advocating on behalf of his literary reputation, and arranging the publication of much of his other writing as well—the diaries, the massive body of
correspondence, stories, sketches, and notebooks. There is no
doubt that without the uncommon devotion of Max Brod,
Franz Kafka would not be known as he is today.

In 1910, at Brod’s urging, Kafka began to keep a diary.
First published in 1951 as part of Brod’s edition of Kafka’s
Collected Works (Gesammelte Werke), the Diaries 1910–1923
present jottings on everyday matters, as well as fictions, draw-
ings, and reflections on art, theatre, and literature. It was in
these pages that I first encountered Georg (Jiří) Mordechai
Langer, a fellow Prague Jew and convert to Hasidism whom
Brod also introduced to Kafka, early in 1915. This was a sem-
inial year for Kafka, the year The Trial was abandoned and The
Metamorphosis published. At this time Kafka was also deep
into probing his Jewish identity, primarily through a passion
for Yiddish theatre, which he saw as embodying the spirit of
an authentic, living Jewish culture. The Diaries include some
thirty entries on the Yiddish troupe from Galicia that per-
formed in Prague from 1911 to 1913—descriptions of the ac-
tors, synopses of the plays, and critiques of the performances.
He was also drawn to the folk and mystical traditions of the
Hasidic life that Langer had chosen for himself.

Langer is mentioned only briefly in biographies on Kafka
and a short entry in A Franz Kafka Encyclopedia notes that the
importance of Georg (Jiří) Mordechai Langer in Kafka’s life
has been “largely overlooked.” I was intrigued by the refer-
cence—in the Encyclopedia and elsewhere—to an elegy for
Franz Kafka, written by Langer in Hebrew and published in a
small collection at the Prague Jewish printing works in 1929. I
was eager to read the piece, but locating it turned out not to
be easy. I also wanted to know more about its author and his
relationship with Kafka, but what was available was sketchy.
So I did not include Langer in my June, 2011 biography presen-
tation. Afterwards, however, I took up the search for the poetry
collection containing the elegy, and for anything I could find
on Langer and the Kafka-Langer connection, starting with a
more thorough reading of the Diaries and Letters.

Kafka first refers to Langer in his diary entry of March 25,
1915 as “the Western Jew who assimilated to the Hasidim ... G. in
a caftan.” In the September 14, 1915 entry, he writes of a Sat-
urday (Sabbath) visit “with Langer and Max” to the apartment
of the “wonder-rabbi on Harantova Street in Žižkov”—a work-
ning-class Prague suburb (where Kafka would be laid to rest in
the New Jewish Cemetery in June, 1924). Kafka records snip-
pets of Langer’s Hasidic stories in his entry of October 6, 1915.
And on December 25, 1915, writes—in mocking amusement—
of the religious custom of not learning Torah on Christmas.
Langer “will only be able to read Max’s book in thirteen days ...
[on the] Russian Christmas ... You are not allowed to think of
Torah in the toilet and for this reason you may read worldly
books there. A very pious man in Prague ... knew a great deal
of the worldly sciences, he had studied them all in the toilet.”

The fifth and final reference to Langer in the Diaries is a
one-line entry on October 20, 1921. Kafka’s health was then de-
teriorating. He had been diagnosed with tuberculosis after a
pulmonary hemorrhage in August, 1917, and in October 1921
was forced to take a further leave from his vice-secretarial
position at the Workmen’s Accident Insurance Institute. On
October 20th, Kafka was visited by his friends at his parents’
home: “In the afternoon, Langer, then Max, who read Franzi
aloud.”

Langer is also mentioned in several of the Letters—first in
mid-July, 1916, in a letter written to Max Brod from the Schloss
Balmoral Hotel in Marienbad. Kafka spent ten days at the
Bohemian resort with his then-fiancée Felice Bauer. Langer
happened to be there at the same time, with the entourage of
the ailing Rabbi of Belz, and the two friends met up. Kafka
recounts their meeting to Brod at length. Noteworthy is a
detail of their trek to the Ambrosius Spring: “... On the way we
title that indicated to František the comfort afforded his brother by “that meagre measure of poetry ... vouchsafed to him in spite of all his tribulations.”

I was unable to find any of Langer’s poetry in Toronto, or online. In August 2011, Menachem and I were in Israel. We hoped to find a copy of Piyyutim ve-Shirei Yedidot at one of the used or rare bookstores in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, but came up empty-handed. We did find the title in the system at the National Library—at the Givat Ram campus of The Hebrew University in Jerusalem. But the book was in storage, not in the stacks, and we were told it could take several days to locate, if it could be located at all.

I was not prepared to be disappointed, and the day before we were set to depart Israel we received email notification that the book had been found and could be retrieved at the Judaica Reading Room. Operating against Friday traffic and early Sabbath closing hours in Jerusalem, we taxied across the city to the Givat Ram campus. In the intense fluorescence of library quiet, I was handed the little original—a plain cardboard-cover book, barely 5” × 7”. I turned it over in my hands. It was Langer’s first book of poems—one of a small edition that he had surely brought with him on his long escape from Prague in 1939 and bequeathed to the library in 1943. I turned the cover and examined the title page—the thin square Hebrew print; the author’s name at the top—Mordechai Georgo Langer (not Jiří, and Georgo—oddly—rather than Georg); the title—Piyyutim ve-Shirei Yedidot; the contents—sixteen poems listed in triangular configuration; the place of publication—Prague; the year, 1929—in Hebrew letters, not numerals; the name of the publisher—Dr. Josef Fläsch.

There was not a single return-date stamped on the old-fashioned sign-out form pasted to the right-hand side of the next page. I felt like I was the first person to have opened the little book to air. A shyness overcame me and I turned each page carefully, checking its integrity—like a young mother examining her newborn’s fingers and toes. I came to the twelfth poem—“On the Death of the Poet”—after Franz Kafka, the name inserted plainly under the title, and I knew that I would read every one of these pieces in the way a poet wants to be read, and that my husband Menachem and I would do the work of translating the collection together.

The poems that unfolded to us were startling—not only works of a gifted Hebraist steeped in the language, texture, and voice of Biblical and medieval liturgical poetry, but also very modern—invoking contemporary references and deeply personal experience; poems of profound loneliness and longing, and, as we would fast discover, undisguised, unrequited homoromantic love.

Once we had translated several of the pieces, I began to see František’s Nine Gates portrayal of brother Jiří in a different light. No doubt his religious transformation was exceptional for the time. But perhaps František constructed an exaggerated narrative of the family’s response to Jiří’s conversion to Hasidism and continued unconventionality in order to avoid addressing the far more sensitive matter of his homosexuality.

Langer’s explicit disclosure of his homosexual identity in 1929 with the publication of Piyyutim ve-Shirei Yedidot (Poems and Songs of Love) was a daring act of self-expression. Given that he was religious, too, he would have been living under great inner weight—that of making meaning of his sexual orientation in light of his commitment to Torah Judaism, which prohibits homosexual relations. Perhaps his way of reconciling the two was to suppress acting on his sexual desires. If the poems are any indication, Langer’s lot in love was non-fulfillment and longing. In the poem “Like the Dying Inside,”
for example, he writes of “tremours of a secret love / you dare
not / love / to the end.” And in “To an Estranged Friend” he affirms that “you, whom I so loved, will never know it ... Only my poetry is an escape for me, my lamentation my refuge.” Langer’s is a poetry of deferment, substitution, spiritual reaching, and deep existential sadness.

I first sought out Georg Jíří Mordechai Langer’s work because of his connection to Franz Kafka. And it was the elegy for Kafka that I looked for when I took hold of Langer’s little book. Given my interest, my initial inclination was to read Kafka into the collection as a whole—beyond the poem explicitly dedicated to him—even as the main subject of Langer’s homo-romantic focus. Such a reading is certainly possible—Kafka is the only friend named in the collection and there are a number of descriptions and inclusions that could correspond to the author. From different sources we know that the two men walked, talked, and passed time together in the city in ways that figure in the poems “My Companion,” “A Meeting,” and “Handsome Lad.” We know that Kafka was tall, handsome, boyish-looking even at the end of his life; his dark eyes unusually striking. It is also said that his laughter was hearty, his speech eloquent, and his presence powerful. In the poem “My Companion” we have “your perfect pliant height ... faithful eyes, / in which God expressed his endless depth.” In “The Strength in Splendour”: “Laughter lights his comely face” and “Pearls shower from his mouth.” And in “Handsome Lad”: “On a city garden bench ... There I sat, there you sat too, handsome lad ... ” Then there is the elegy itself, in which: “The water-air-fire, the animate-plant-inanimate join with me together who were estranged from me till now / with every show of kindness, they lend a hand to me / caressing me genteely and behold you are among them ... Place between my breasts the weight of your shadowed soul / and the dream of your bones, lay down on my pillow’s softness ... ” This is the language of elemental love—beyond life. And it is followed by the poem “Alone” in which “I did not press you to my breast, / my arms did not envelop you, / ... my heart was aflame and I did not tell you ... And now you are gone, and nothing is left / but the remembering / and the regret / and darkness / and gloom.”

Could it have been that Franz Kafka was Georg Jíří Mordechai Langer’s great, secret, unrequited love? Maybe. It is tempting to think so, and the mystery of it adds a certain cachet to Langer’s work. Yet whether or not Kafka was the love, and subject of more than just one of the poems, Songs and Poems of Love stands as a unique collection of modern Hebrew poetry, one that merits attention and appreciation for its passionate voice, unusual craft, and courageous authenticity.

ENDNOTES


2. Meditation (Betrachtung)—a collection of eighteen short pieces), The Judgment (Das Urteil), The Stoker (Der Heizer — later published as the first chapter of Amerika/The Man Who Disappeared), The Metamorphosis (Die Verwandlung), A Country Doctor (Ein Landarzt—a collection of fourteen stories, including the title story), In the Penal Colony (In der Strafkolonie), A Hunger Artist (Ein Hungerkünstler—four stories, including the title story).


a short biography and study of Langer’s Hebrew poetry published in Hebrew in 1984 by Israeli literary scholar Miriam Dror, based on her MA thesis. Halper relates that Dror’s study does not address Langer’s explicit homoeroticism, which leads one to surmise that even as recently as the 1980s Jewish homosexuality as a topic of public discussion in certain quarters was still beyond the pale. All the more so then, when František Langer penned his portrayal of his brother decades earlier. But the possibility that Miriam Dror and František Langer were not aware of Langer’s homosexuality is extremely unlikely.

22. Diaries, pg. 341.
23. Foreword to Nine Gates, pg. xvii.
25. Foreword to Nine Gates, pg. xx.
27. Foreword to Nine Gates, pg. xxii.
28. Foreword to Nine Gates, pg. xxv.
29. Foreword to Nine Gates, pg. xxv.
30. Foreword to Nine Gates, pg. xxix.
32. In an essay titled “Coming Out of the Hasidic Closet: Jiří Mordechai Langer (1894–1943) and the Fashioning of Homosexual-Jewish Identity,” published in the Jewish Quarterly Review, Vol. 101, No. 2 (Spring 2011), pgs. 189–201, pioneering LGBT historian Shaun Jacob Halper takes up the question of how Langer used sexological and psychoanalytical knowledge to articulate a specifically Jewish identity; and the question of why homosexuality became for Langer a Jewish question. Halper focuses predominantly on Die Erotik der Kabbala (reissued by Neu Isenberg, 2006), Langer’s first book and comprehensive statement on sexuality and Judaism, yet notes that the evidence for Langer’s homosexuality, in addition to Die Erotik der Kabbala (only available in German), comes from his Hebrew poetry and personal correspondence. I did not come across Halper’s article till fall of 2012, a full year after Menachem and I had taken up our translation of Langer’s poems, by which time the discovery of the homo-romantic content was long behind us. Halper’s study takes a major step towards redressing Langer’s long neglected story and oeuvre. It includes extensive notes, including reference to
It is said that a translated work is essentially a new work—given the strictures that inevitably arise when words from different languages attempt to describe the same experience. Translation of poetry—an especially concentrated form of language—entails particular compromise, and the nature of the compromise can change from piece to piece. Working side by side, Menachem and I engaged in many a lively discussion over how to render an idiom, colour a word, or untangle a syntactical ambiguity in order to correctly and effectively convey meaning and evoke the elusive quality of tone in moving from Langer’s Hebrew to English.

Hebrew is a much more highly-inflected, compressed language than English. Thus, apart from the different alphabets and the placement of the Hebrew original on the right and the English translation on the left—to accord with the direction of reading—the overall appearance of the poems, juxtaposed, is distinct. In the first poem “A Vision,” for example, the first line of eight Hebrew words translates to nineteen in English and rolls over onto two lines. In both languages, however, lines that run over are indicated by an indentation and the two are considered one. So although the English looks more verbose, and is, both versions have the same number of overall lines. We
wanted to maintain as much uniformity as possible, and line-by-line readability for bilingual readers.

In any translation there are words, phrases, or references that are difficult, even impossible to convey out of their cultural context. In the original book, the poem “Like the Dying Inside,” set to a tune for chanting the book of Lamentations, includes cantillation tropes that are not easily replicated and not meaningful to most people. These marks have been left out of the Hebrew in this translation. Langer makes use of many Biblical terms and references that lend a spiritual depth and kabbalistic resonance to his poems. We made every attempt to bring this richness into the English and have cited sources in the endnotes. Some terms have multiple meanings in Hebrew and the informed Hebrew reader will be sensitive to the nuances. Thus, in the poem “The Arielites Will Sweetly Sing”—a Zionist paean and idyll that draws on verses from Isaiah and Song of Songs—the term “Arielites” can be translated as angels, scouts, seers, generals, or heroes; even Jerusalemites. We chose to transliterate the term, with a slight modification—from Erelites to Arielites—as the two words are used interchangeably in some sources and we considered the latter more familiar and pleasing to the English eye and ear. Given the context, the English reader will likely understand Arielites to be a kind of angel. We also transliterated “Adiriron” in the poem “When I See Your Heavens,” as this is a kabbalistic term associated with God’s power—from the word “adir,” meaning mighty or powerful—and there is no English translation.

Five of the sixteen poems in the collection—“The Strength in Splendour,” “A Meeting,” “The Arielites Will Sweetly Sing,” “Handsome Lad,” and “When I See Your Heavens”—also feature end rhyme that we could not, for the most part, replicate in English. Instead, we opted for a mix of alliteration and assonance. And twelve of the poems address a male, as indicated by masculine markers in Hebrew. Yet this is unequivocal in only three of the translated pieces—“The Strength in Splendour,” “Handsome Lad,” and “On the Death of the Poet.” Because English does not carry gender markers, the full extent of the homo-romantic content is not evident from the translations alone. We have indicated in the Endnotes, the lines and words in the original poems that clearly express homo-romantic inflection.

In some pieces, we altered word order and prepositions to achieve a natural flow in English. Hebrew syntax is more malleable, and what works in Hebrew can sound extremely stilted in English. For example, an interlinear translation of the first line of the poem “A Meeting” would be: “From peace / was abandoned / my soul / on a night of darkness / a night of cold,” which is not poetic, let alone syntactic in English. We rendered it: “My soul was abandoned by peace one night, one cold dark night.” We chose to keep the passive form of the verb and to vary the repetition slightly so as to stay close to the tone of the original, without sounding too sing-songy in English. But we could have chosen the more active, direct, and less poetic: “Peace abandoned my soul one dark night, one cold night.” Langer wrote a classical Hebrew and some of his usages sound arcane. In a few cases, we debated whether to paraphrase an old-fashioned expression or suppress it altogether. In “Alone,” for example, we chose to translate the twenty-first and twenty-second lines: “I did not tell you / with my mouth.” The dictionary defines “b’mo-pi” on the twenty-second line as “in my very mouth,” which sounds unnatural, especially after the line “I did not tell you.” We considered supressing it, then decided to leave it in. After all, Langer was a specialist and didn’t write a willy-nilly line. We settled on “with my mouth,” though I initially pulled for “I did not tell you / in words” rather than “with my mouth.” In sum, we attempted through many revisions to honour the original—its architecture, mood, tone, and style—while at the same time making the poem viable to the English reader.
Particularly resistant was the matter of how to translate the title of the book—*Piyyutim ve-Shirei Yedidot*. In his Foreword to *Nine Gates*, František Langer offers *Poems and Songs of Friendship*, and this is the most common rendition in English references to the collection; *Poems and Odes of Friendship* is another version. In the online *Yivo Institute for Jewish Research* (author Avner Holtzman; translator David Fachler), the title is translated *Poems and Songs of Friendship*, but the Hebrew is transliterated incorrectly as *Piyyutim ve-Shirei Yedidat*. The error is in the last word, which in the original is *Yedidat*, not *Yedidut*. The difference between an “o” and “u” in Hebrew is only the matter of a vowel-dot placement, and *yedidat*—meaning “friendship”—is the much more common word of the two. But it is not what Langer wrote. And *yedidot*, an uncommon word, in liaison with *shirei*—songs—means love-songs. The term *shirei-yedidot* appears in the song, *Shir Ha-Kavod*, “Song of Glory”—attributed to Rabbi Judah the Hasid (d.1217). Langer knew his Hebrew liturgy. He may have opted for the word *yedidat* over the more explicit word for love—*ahava*—as a matter of subtlety. Or he may have chosen the word for its worshipful overtones. But whatever the consideration, his choice was surely deliberate. For months, Menachem and I proceeded under the working title *Poems and Songs of Friendship*, acquiescing to the ‘accepted’ translation. The more we steeped ourselves in the work and its language, however, the clearer it became that Langer had really not written poems of friendship—a relationship that connotes mutuality and equality—but rather, quite unmistakably, poems and songs of unreciprocated love.

—Elana Wolff, June 2013
A VISION

Like a man raised up at night from the depths of his heart by the terror of a dream, thus I awoke from the slumber of my life, and behold:

All creation was as if immersed in a magical sleep, within which everything restlessly works perforce.

All the empty space of the world sleeps too, the celestial wheel as it turns, and time as it hastens away.

Earth and everything on her slumbers: the greenishness of the valley, the mountains, the water, the air.

As heaven's lightning flares on high, and the din of God's thunder is heard on earth, everything sleeps.

The entire universe drowses: the buzz of the bee in the field, the chirp of the bird in the wood, and their echoes rest.

In sleep nations rise, in hibernation they murmur, their downfall comes in slumber.

All the acts of man are slumber, napping is the heart's regard.

And there are those, hastening as if to awaken: prophets, masters of mysteries, bards, philosophers—all in vain; from their repose there is no exit.
Even upon our freedom of choice sleep has been decreed

for it is given to us against our will.

Once again I have opened my pupils wide and behold:

All of creation resembles a woman in labour.

Baying in terrible pain, like a birthing mother in bitter despair,

and the angel Gabriel standing above, fiery forcep in hand.

He pulls the fruit of wickedness from her womb till her muscles scream,

but the foetus cannot emerge because of its girth, for it is great.

And all creation wallows in its blood, roaring like a lion

in its sorrow—and there is no help.
LIKE THE DYING INSIDE
(Sung in the Eastern European tune for Lamentations)

The sun has already set,
the last
twilight
of a spring evening
has ended and gone.

Slowly the silence has donned the garments
of darkness and spread its wings over the garden.

With my companion the black sadness, who will never betray me,
onward I wander
far from the clamourous city.

The moon's luster decants its magic
in a whisper upon trees,
the nightingale in the distance
pours on the rosebush sorrow from its song.

And I continue walking, moving farther into the lap of the night.

Silence upon everything—
the rustling of the tree has ceased,
and the trilling of the nightingale in the distance

is dying down,

like the dying inside

the heart of man—

tremours of a secret love

you dare not

love

to the end.

וְסִלְסוּלֵי הַזָּמִיר בַּמֶּרְחָק

הוֹלְכִים וְגֹוְעִים,

כִּגְוֹעַ פְּנִימָה—

זַעֲזוּעֵי אַהֲבָה חֲשָׁאִית

שֶׁאוֹתָה לֹא־תָהִין

לֶאֱהֹב

לֶאֱהֹב לֶאֱהֹב

לֶאֱהֹב.
to be revealed. He wanted to, but did not want to ... " And it seems that Langer, in his restraint, was honouring this two-fold will.—Perhaps, as well, a sensitivity to a parallel two-foldness in Langer had something to do with Miriam Dror’s omission of any allusion to the homo-romantic in her study of his poetry. Langer wanted to be revealed for who he was in his deepest being. And he did reveal his homo-romantic self in his poems, but he also retained concealment. Dror, it appears, chose to uphold the veil.

—Elana Wolff, February 2014

Dear Editor, I received with gladness your suggestion that I write my memories of my friend Franz Kafka, but my gladness soon turned to mourning as I held the quill in my hand to carry out the task. I pondered at length, searched my memories extensively, yet despite the full medley of years in which I had the fortune to dwell in Kafka’s shadow, I find almost nothing to quench your thirst or the thirst of your readers in the way of adding to the understanding of this enigmatic man. Lest you think forgetfulness is responsible for this, it’s not. Hardly a day goes by that I do not call up his memory before me; that is to say, the memory of his great and wondrous personality. Yet not one particular detail, nor any miraculous tale will I recall. To what can this be compared?—To the student of the the Ba’al Shem Tov who went out into the world to spread praise of his master far and wide. Yet when the opportunity to praise the master arose, the student was not able to answer a single question. The situation is the same with Franz Kafka. And this is directly connected to his very nature, to the secrecy of his soul. He, Kafka, simply did not want to be revealed. He wanted to, but did not want to. He reached out and didn’t reach. And he succeeded in both objectives, as will be seen.
Kafka was an absolutely original man. A poet, though his habit was to conceal his originality as much as possible, to present himself to others in the camouflage of an ordinary person, just one of us. Thus, as if in spite, he did not leave me a thing in which I can distinguish myself in writing my memories of him. I remember well his dry laughter, his deliberate movements, his elegant style of speech—"elegant style" is a term I learned from him—but what do these things have to do with writing memories? Only this do I know with certainty, that his influence on me was huge, that I learned a great deal from him, and am indebted to him for so much. From him I learned, for example, that a person must read a poem every day. One and not two. This he repeatedly instructed. Because no brain can take more than this. And the words of a wise man are charms. When my first poems appeared—in Kolot [Voices, Warsaw literary journal published by Eliezer Steinman, 1923–1924]—Kafka said to me that they resemble, a little, Chinese poetry. So I went and purchased for myself a collection of Chinese poetry in French translation by Franz Toussaint, and from then on this delightful book never left my table. I said that Franz Kafka read my poems. Does this mean he knew Hebrew? Is this a detail that writers of his biography have not taken note of? Yes, Kafka spoke Hebrew. We always spoke Hebrew to one another in his later days. He, who promised over and over that he was not a Zionist, learned our language in middle age, and learned it with great diligence. And unlike the other Prague Zionists, he spoke a fluent Hebrew. This brought him special personal satisfaction, and it seems to me I would not be exaggerating if I said that he took heartfelt pride in this knowledge. For example, once when we were travelling together by streetcar and speaking about the airplanes that were circling the skies of Prague at that moment, some Czech people who were riding in the streetcar with us, upon hearing the sounds of our language—which it seemed pleased their ears—asked us what language we were speaking. When we told them, and the subject of our conversation, they were surprised that it was possible to converse in Hebrew, even about airplanes ... How Kafka's face lit up then from happiness and pride! And he was happy for every new Hebrew word he learned from me, too, for every word was like a treasure. Of course he also read Hebrew for pleasure. But he did not like verbose writers, writers excessive in their expressions and calculated in their use of rare words. Of these he once said to me: They want to show their expertise at using the Hebrew dictionary. He was not a Zionist, but he deeply envied those who fulfilled the great principle of Zionism, bodily; that is, the principle of immigrating to the Land of Israel, literally. He wasn't a Zionist, but everything that happened in our Land touched his heart. He was particularly interested in the activities and education of the Land-of-Israel youth. Here's an anecdote: He came across a letter by a young man in the newspaper which contained a description of a trek in one of the deserts with which our Land is blessed. The description was not encouraging in any way. One did not gain anything from it except details of fatigue, thirst, and sweat. Yet precisely this—the presentation of negative and repellent aspects, as it were, appealed to Kafka ... For the man was unusual ...

One time he shared with me his desire to set fire to all of his unpublished writing. "If this is what you want," I asked, "why do you write at all?" “I do not know for certain,” Kafka answered. “Still, something compels me to leave behind me a trace ... ” Indeed, afterwards he did burn a large portion of his writings. And what a shame for the loss.

Kafka’s special humour, in which bitterness and dryness were mixed, did not leave him, even in his last hour. When it drew near, the doctor who was caring for him wanted to open the door, but did not want Kafka to suspect he was leaving him alone, so he stood and said, "I am not going away from
“But I am going away from here,” replied Kafka. And with that he left this world.

This may be the place to share a strange incident, though it has no connection to Kafka himself—after all, we are enlightened people, free of any superstition. And I only share it as it pleases the ear. For if it was he who caused it, we would rightly say that it was characteristic of him more than a hundred of his other deeds. This incident happened many days after his death, in the home of our mutual friend Max Brod. The latter took upon himself to arrange the remnant of the late Kafka’s writings and to publish them. Needless to say, Brod dealt with the writings in good faith and guarded them like the apple of his eye. One evening, a well-known author came to visit him in his home and Brod wanted to show him Kafka’s manuscripts. This was not something he would have done readily with anyone else, simply on the principle of privacy. He, Brod, got up to take the writings from their case and was about to present them to the guest. But at that very moment the light went out in the entire house and in the adjacent houses, due to an electric failure. The honoured guest left, greatly disappointed, having not glimpsed a single letter.

As mentioned, there is no special significance to this incident. I only bring it as a metaphor and example. In any case, this brings to an end, for now, the account of my memories of Kafka. With all due respect,

—Mordechai Georgo Langer

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Elana Wolff has published four collections of poetry with Guernica Editions, including You Speak to Me in Trees, awarded the F. G. Bressani Prize for Poetry. She is also the author of Implicate Me, a collection of essays on contemporary poems; co-author with the late Malca Litovitz of Slow Dancing: Creativity and Illness (Duologue and Rengas); and co-editor with Julie Roorda of Poet to Poet: Poems written to poets and the stories that inspired them. A bilingual editions of her selected poems, Helleborus & Alchémile, was released with Éditions du Noroît in 2013. Elana has taught English for Academic Purposes at York University in Toronto and at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem. She currently divides her professional time between writing, editing, and designing and facilitating therapeutic community art courses.

Menachem Wolff grew up in Jerusalem and immigrated to Canada in 1972. He attended the University of Toronto where he graduated from the Faculty of Dentistry. In addition to being in private dental practice, Menachem holds a longstanding interest in Hebrew and Biblical studies and regularly serves as leader of synagogue services. The collaborative translation of Georg Mordechai Langer’s poetry collection, Piyyutim ve-Shirei Yedidot—Poems and Songs of Love—is his first literary work.
Georg (Jiří) Mordechai Langer was a Hebrew poet, scholar, folklorist, journalist, and teacher. Born in 1894 to an assimilated Prague Jewish family, he converted to Hasidism in his teens, lived five years in the Hasidic court of the Belz Rabbi, and remained unconventionally religious for the rest of his short life. His writings include Devět bran (Nine Gates)—a compilation of Hasidic tales; Die Erotik der Kabbala (The Eroticism of Kabbala)—a psychoanalytic study of Hasidic Judaism; and two small collections of poetry, including the homo-romantic Piyyutim ve-Shirei Yedidot, here translated as Poems and Songs of Love, containing an elegy to his friend Franz Kafka. Langer escaped Prague in 1939 and made his way to Tel Aviv where he died of the nephritis in 1943.