

Looking back, reaching forward

For Irena Klepfisz, writing and doing are linked; both constitute a refusal to remain passive in the face of oppression

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

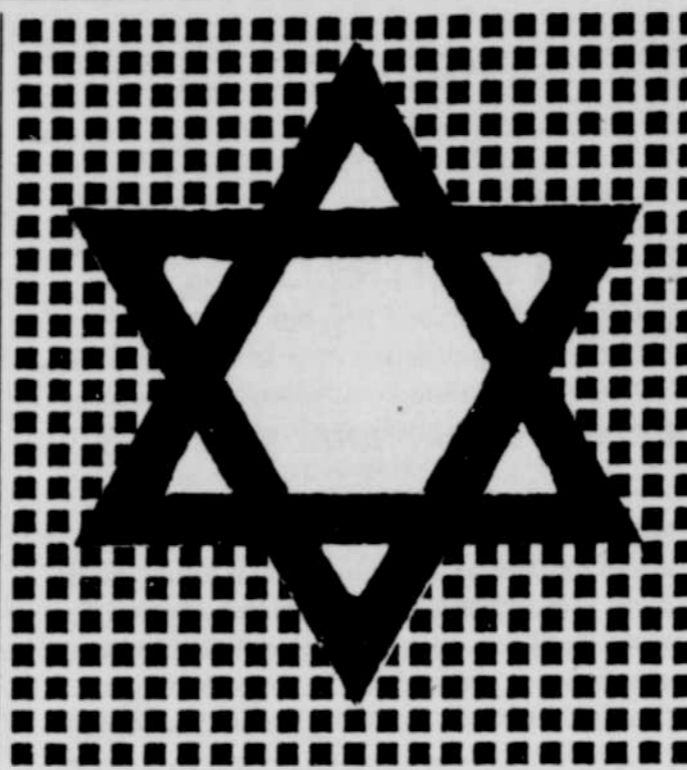
Some people glance backwards over the history of Jews and see only blank walls, a dying language, spans of time blurred by migration and erased by the Holocaust.

Profile

Irena Klepfisz looks back and finds strength. As a poet, essayist, political activist in the Jewish and lesbian/feminist communities,

Yiddish translator and teacher, Klepfisz believes that we must understand our personal and cultural histories if we intend to make the future look different than the past.

"There's enormous ignorance of who [Jews] are as a people . . . It's almost like no history existed before 1939," she said in an interview here last month. "There is such a blank about it. It's very tough for American Jews, if you don't have the language or the history. But I don't think it's any harder than it is for lesbians. Look at the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Some people are saying, 'There's a blank wall there,' and others are saying, 'No, there's a history. You have to look for it. You have to dig for it.'"



Klepfisz, 48, has been willing to dig — and to put forth what she finds in stark, strong poetry and impassioned activism. For her, writing and doing are linked; both constitute a refusal to remain passive in the face of oppression.

"I've written poetry since I was 17," she said. "I became public about my poetry and my lesbianism at the same time." Klepfisz, author of *Periods of Stress*, *Keeper of Accounts* and *Different Enclosures*, also co-edited *The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology*, which is being re-issued by Beacon Press this summer. She contributed to *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* and was co-editor of *Conditions* magazine.

In a reading last month sponsored by Portland New Jewish Agenda and the Portland State University Women's Studies Department, Klepfisz read selections from her work spanning topics of Jewish identity, Yiddish culture, Israel, feminism, office work and class. The visit was part of a west coast tour; Klepfisz said she hoped to spark thought about Jewish life in the United States as well as the fight for peace in the Middle East.

These twin themes — the personal and historical struggle to not only survive, but to thrive — emerged in the poetry she read, probing the links between individual, daily lives and larger events. Through poems such as "From the Monkey House and Other Cages," and "Work Sonnets," she examined the entrapments of history, class and work, the struggle for dignity and life within these multiple cages.

Other poems treated more explicitly the present battle in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as the roots of Klepfisz's own attitude about that struggle. A child survivor of the Holocaust (she was born in 1941 in the Warsaw Ghetto and came to the U.S. at the age of eight), she was raised among Socialist, secular Jews who celebrated their cultural and historic heritage.

Recently, Mid-East peace work has drained more and more of Klepfisz's time. She co-founded a New York group, the Jewish Women's Committee to End the Occupation, which has held weekly vigils urging American Jewish organizations to protest Israel's policies in the occupied territories.

"I feel frustrated. I wish we could get settled and move on. It's an issue that needs our attention and commitment, but at the price of other things that need to be done," she said.

"I feel like, as a Jew, I can't allow the American Jewish community to speak for me. I'm very conscious about my own background as a survivor. I was always raised with the horror of the fact that people could be passive or indifferent."

Other poems Klepfisz read treated the subject of language itself — for her, an essential bridge to her own past. She learned Polish, Yiddish and Swedish before she spoke English. In several selections, Yiddish phrases were woven through the poems like a salty thread. These poems, particularly, came alive in Klepfisz's voice, showing humor, wistfulness and pain that is less evident on the printed page.

Her work now as a teacher and translator of Yiddish brings her closer to hidden pieces of Jewish culture.

"One of the stories I'm translating is by an immigrant woman at the turn of the century, 1913. It's a total, direct, conscious feminist story, the most directly feminist thing I've ever read in Yiddish . . . I was really blown away because it was so explicit. There was something about making that leap. I feel kind of close to her. I'm interested in these women who were in the Jewish community, who are just totally buried."

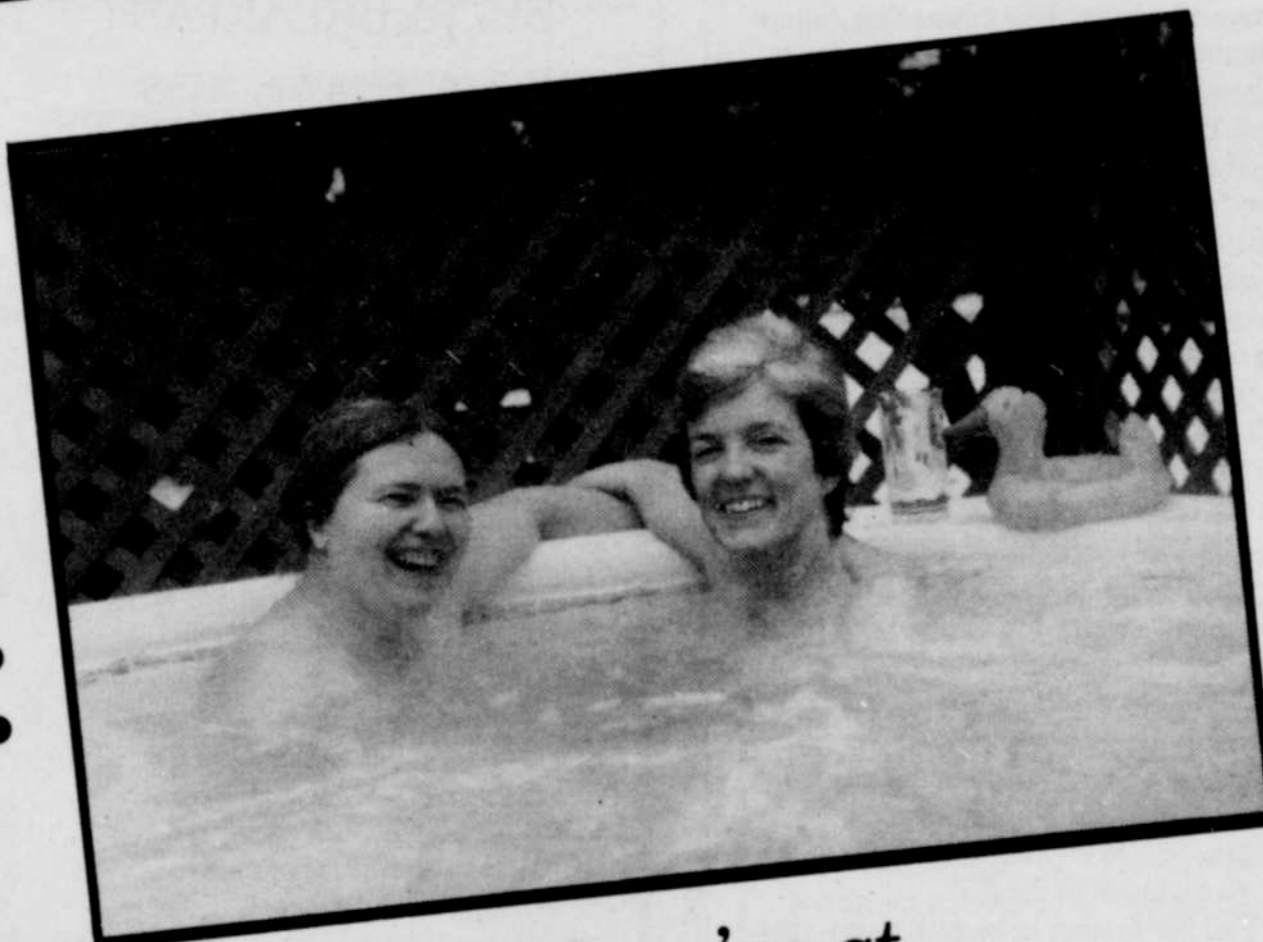
Often, Klepfisz's poems arise from the painful perspective of the outsider; "I feel like an immigrant in the US, with all the insecurities that that comes with," she told the audience.

Yet her poetry doesn't sound of defeat. It shows the plain miracle of survival, glimpses of hope wrung improbably from oppressive circumstances. In *Royal Pearl*, part of a series called "Urban Flowers," she writes of " . . . some/who dream of a splitting of an inner will/a wrenching from the designated path/who dream a purple flower standing solitary/in a yellow field."

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