# Mendl Mann
## *The Fall of Berlin*



**TRANSLATED AND WITH AN
INTRODUCTION BY MAURICE WOLFTHAL**

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Cover image: Marc Chagall, *L'auteur Mendel Mann dans son village* (1969), reproduced at http://yiddish.haifa.ac.il/tmr/tmr12/tmr12021.htm. Courtesy of Zvi Mann.

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# Introduction

A million and a half Jews fought in the armed forces of the Allies during the Second World War. They served in the armies, navies, and air forces of their native lands. Many who were forced to flee the Nazis then joined the war effort in the countries that had given them refuge. Between 490,000 and 520,000 Jewish soldiers fought in the Red Army.[1] Most of them were native-born Soviet citizens; others were refugees from Poland and other lands occupied by the German Army. More than 120,000 Jews in the Red Army died in combat, and another 75—80,000 were murdered by the Germans as prisoners of war.[2]

Mendl Mann's series of Yiddish Second World War novels—*Bay di Toyern fun Moskve* [At the Gates of Moscow], *Bay der Vaysl* [At the Vistula], and *Dos Faln fun Berlin* [The Fall of Berlin]—recount the war against Hitler from the unique perspective of Menakhem Isaacovitch, a Polish Jew who flees the Germans and finds refuge in the Soviet Union. Although the trilogy is a long saga that reflects Mann's experiences as a frontline soldier, each book can stand on its own. Although Mann was fluent in Polish and Russian, he chose to write in Yiddish, both out of his devotion to the language, and because he aimed to reach what was left of the Yiddish-speaking world. In 1939 there had been an estimated eleven million Yiddish speakers, but the Nazis and their collaborators murdered more than half of them. Only *At the Gates of Moscow* was translated into English.

Menakhem, the protagonist of the saga, is now called Mikhail. He fights in the Red Army, both to defend the country that welcomed him and to seek revenge on the Germans who are destroying Poland and exterminating the Jews. By introducing us to ethnic Russians,

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1    Yitzhak Arad, *In the Shadow of the Red Banner*: *Soviet Jews in the War Against Nazi Germany* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2010), p. 5.

2    Ibid., p. 126.

Belarussians, Ukrainians, Kazakhs, Tatars, Kalmyks, Georgians, Caucasians, Mordvins, and Siberians, Mann emphasizes the multiethnic character of the Red Army's war against Hitler. But Mann makes clear that in their defense of the Soviet Union, the Jewish soldiers, like the other "nationalities," were struggling to fight a war in the shadow of Stalin, a dictator whose paranoia and whose murderous secret police, the NKVD, poisoned the war effort.[3] In addition, as the trilogy reveals, the Jews were fighting to defend a country where antisemitism still persisted at all levels—including the armed forces—despite more than twenty years of official Soviet ideology.

While the three books reflect Mann's grueling years as a frontline soldier, his life before that had been vastly different. Born in 1916 in Plonsk, Poland, he spent his childhood in the nearby village of Sochocin, which had been settled by Jewish farmers in the nineteenth century. His memoir, *Mayne zikhroynes fun plonsk* [My Memories of Plonsk][4] lovingly evokes this rural life: the open skies, the meadows, rivers, lakes, farms, orchards, water mills, horses, cattle, shaggy dogs, and country folk. His friends were the children of farmers, Jewish and Christian. Mann's trilogy is suffused with affection for village life.

The family moved to Plonsk when he was eight, and lived on the *Shulgas* [Synagogue Street]. His parents sent him to a *kheyder* (traditional Jewish religious school), a *khinukh yeladim* (modern Hebrew-language Zionist school), and a Polish public school. The politics of the Second Polish republic were frequently discussed at home, and Mann witnessed a Socialist demonstration when he was ten. At age twelve he studied Polish with a private teacher, who instilled a love of Polish poetry in him, but he was becoming increasingly aware of the precarious status of Polish Jews.

His neighbor, a tailor who sang as he worked, invited him to a meeting where he saw a portrait of Ber Borochov, with the inscription:

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3    NKVD The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, abbreviated NKVD, was the interior ministry of the Soviet Union. Established in 1917 as NKVD of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, the agency was originally tasked with conducting regular police work and overseeing the country's prisons and labor camps (Wikipedia entry, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NKVD).

4    Mendl Mann, 'Mayne zikhroynes fun plonsk' [My Memories of Plonsk], in *Sefer Plonsk ve-ha-Sevivah* [The Book of Plonsk and its Surroundings], ed. by Shlomo Zemach, Mordekhai Ḥalamish, and Mendl Mann (Tel Aviv: Irgun Yotsey Plonsk be-Yisrael, 1963), pp. 570–90.

"Long Live the Jewish Working Class in Palestine." But that meeting of the *Poalei Zion* [Workers of Zion] was disrupted by "Reds" who saw Zionism as nationalistic betrayal of Marxist ideals. But the movement appealed to Mann by holding out the hope for Jews to have a land of their own, where they would cease being an oppressed minority, and he became a leader of a Poalei youth group. He began to write poems, most in Polish, some in Yiddish, and the dream arose of becoming a writer.

Mann's older brother Wolf (Velvl) was an established painter who did landscapes in oils and watercolors and drew portraits in charcoal. Mendl, too, was drawn to art from an early age, and his teachers recognized his talent. He later followed him to Warsaw, where he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts and exhibited his work. He began publishing Yiddish poems in *Literarishe bleter* [Literary Pages], the *Folks-tsaytung* [People's Newspaper], and the *Arbeter-tsaytung* [Workers' Newspaper].

When the Germans invaded in 1939, Mann escaped to Tuczyn, where he met Sonia, his future wife, and then to Kharkov. He attended a teachers' institute and was sent to teach in Tengushay, Mordovia. Their son Zvi was born there. Mann was mobilized by the Red Army to drive out the Germans, and he fought from Moscow to Warsaw to Berlin. His wife was also mobilized, and she sang for the troops. Mann's knowledge of German was an asset in interrogating captured soldiers both in the USSR and in Germany.[5] His fluency in Polish was useful when the Red Army advanced towards Germany. Mann's artistic talent contributed to war posters and newspaper propaganda. Once, on the occasion of Stalin's birthday, he was told to produce a lifesize portrait and to hang it prominently outside. But a fierce wind was blowing, and as he tried to fasten the portrait he accidentally drove a nail through Stalin's forehead. For this perceived insult to the leader, he was sentenced to the mines in the Urals, but he managed to survive and rejoin the army at the front.

In the meantime, the Germans had forced the Jews of Plonsk into a ghetto. They had systematically murdered about 12,000 Jews from the city and its environs.[6] After Mann's discharge from the Red Army, he returned

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5 The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or Soviet Union, abbreviated USSR, was a federal socialist state in Northern Eurasia that existed from 1922 to 1991. It was a one-party state governed by the Communist Party, with Moscow as its capital in its largest republic, the Russian SFSR.

6 Geoffrey P. Megargee, *The United States Holocaust Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, *1933–1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), p. 26.

from Berlin to Poland, hoping to start a new life and to help rebuild the
Jewish community. He went to Plonsk and learned that his entire family
had been murdered, as had his wife's in Ukraine. She was overwhelmed
with survivor's guilt for the rest of her life, particularly because she had
not taken her baby sister with her to the USSR. Mann went to Lodz and
devoted himself to work on behalf of Jewish children who had survived
and were now orphans. He headed the department of culture and
education of the Central Committee of Jews in Poland. There he wrote an
anthology of poems, *Di shtilkeyt mont* [The Silence Demands its Due], the
first book published in Yiddish in Poland after the war.

In 1946 Mann attended a meeting of survivors in Warsaw held to
commemorate the Ghetto Uprising of 1943, at which the importance of
finding the Ringelblum archives was discussed.[7] Increasing Communist
repression and outbreaks of antisemitic violence culminating in the Kielce
pogrom of 1946 drove him to leave Poland.[8] He settled in Regensburg,
where he continued to be active in the Jewish community. There, in 1947,
he co-edited with Yekheskel Keytlmann[9] an illustrated Yiddish newspaper,
*Der nayer moment* [The New Moment], named after the Warsaw paper
that he had written for before the war, *Der moment*. They also produced a
literary journal, *Heftn far literatur*, *kultur*, *un kritik* [Volumes for Literature,
Culture, and Criticism]. Mann contributed to the journal *Fun letstn khurbn*
[From the Last Extermination], whose purpose was to document the
Holocaust. Published in Munich by the Central Historical Commission
of the Central Committee of Liberated Jews in the U.S. Zone, it was
distributed to all the DP camps and abroad.[10]

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7    Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History*? *Emanuel Ringelblum*, *the Warsaw
     Ghetto*, *and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007),
     p. 205.
8    Between 1945 and 1947, an estimated 150,000 Jewish survivors left Poland for the
     DP camps in Germany. See Laura Jockusch, "Paradise Lost? Postwar Memory of
     Polish Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union," in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 24
     (2010), 373–99.
9    Jechezkel Keitelman was one of a cadre of survivors devoted to maintaining
     Yiddish literature after the Holocaust. Among his works were: *Oysterlishe geshikhtn
     un andere dertseylungn* [Strange Stories and Other Tales] (Regensburg: Yidishe
     zetser, 1947), *Oysgehakte velder* [Cut Down Forests] (New York/Philadelphia, 1952),
     and *Oyfn veg keyn Uman*: *un andere dertseylungen* [On the Road to Uman: and Other
     Stories] (New York: Tsiko, 1967).
10   See, for example, Mendl Mann, "*Der oyfshtand in tutshiner geto*" [The Uprising in the
     Tuczyn Ghetto], *Fun letstn khurbn*, 9 (September 1948): pp. 59–66.

Mann never felt at ease in Germany, and he wrote of his ambivalence about living in the country that had nearly exterminated the Jews.[11] He attempted to go illegally to British Palestine with his wife and son on the steamship Exodus in 1947 alongside 4,500 other Holocaust survivors, but the British sent them back to Hamburg. Mann managed to get to Israel in 1948 and served in the army for eight months. He then lived in the former Arab village of Yazur and continued to write. He wrote intensely and prolifically, primarily at night.

Though some of his work now reflected his life after the war, his devotion to Yiddish continued unabated, and he corresponded with Yiddish writers abroad. He moved to Tel Aviv in 1954, and worked with Avrom Sutzkever on the editorial board of the premier Yiddish literary journal in Israel, *Di goldene keyt* [The Golden Chain], to which he contributed poems and literary criticism until the end of his life, as well as to a dozen other periodicals. He continued to draw and paint, particularly scenes of nature, as a way to relax. Mann visited the United States and Paris.

Though Mann took pride in the new Jewish state, he grew increasingly bitter at the vilification of Yiddish as the despised language of a weak people without a homeland.[12] The fact that Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion led this campaign was particularly galling to him, in that Ben-Gurion was himself from Plonsk. Mann left Israel in 1961 and settled in Paris, where he edited *Undzer vort* [Our Word]. When survivors from his hometown published the memorial book *Sefer Plonsk ve-ha-Sevivah* [The Book of Plonsk and its Surroundings], he was one of its editors, contributing extensive sections in Yiddish. Mann's son, Zvi Mann, recounts that when his father presented Ben-Gurion with the *Sefer Plonsk*, Ben-Gurion disparaged the book because Mann had written his essays in "*zhargon*," a term denying Yiddish its rightful status as a real language. Mann took the book back and slammed the door.[13]

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11  Michael Brenner, 'Impressionen jüdischen Lebens in der Oberpfalz nach 1945', in *Die Juden in den Oberpfalz*, ed. by Michael Brenner and Renate Höpfinger (Munich: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2009), p. 241.

12  Tamar Lewinsky, 'Dangling Roots? Yiddish Language and Culture in the German Diaspora' in *We are Here: New Approaches to Jewish Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany*, ed. by Avinoam J. Patt and Michael Berkowitz (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), pp. 308–34.

13  See National Yiddish Book Center, Wexler Oral History Project, interview with Zvi Mann, son of Mendl Mann, June 18, 2014, https://archive.org/details/ZviMann18Jun2014YiddishBookCenter
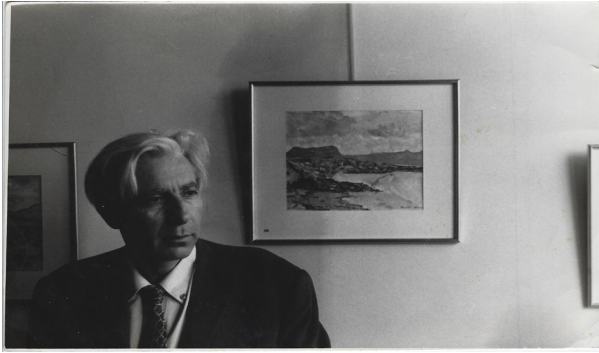
Mandl Mann in 1966 by uncknown photographer. Courtesy of Zvi Mann.

Mann exhibited his paintings in Paris in 1967. He collected art, and Marc Chagall became a close friend. When Mann published an anthology of short stories, *Der shvartser demb* [The Black Oak] in 1969, Chagall provided an aquarelle for the frontispiece. It depicts Mann going back to his hometown and taking notes, with the souls of the murdered Jews floating in the sky.[14]
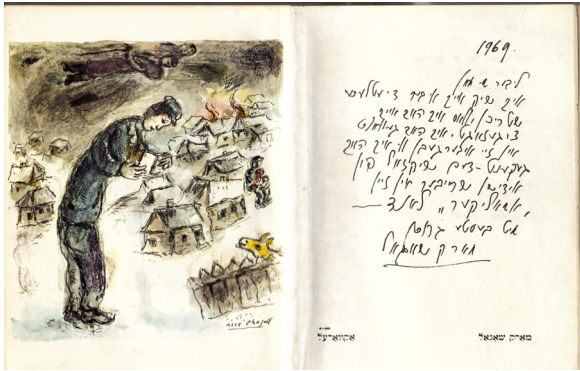


Marc Chagall, 'L'auteur Mendel Mann dans son village'(Author Mendel Mann in his hometown). Aquarelle with Chagall's handwritten dedication[15] to Mendel Mann. Reproduced in Mandel Mann's *Der shvartser demb* [The Black Oak], Paris: Undzer kiem, 1970, and at http://yiddish.haifa.ac.il/tmr/tmr12/tmr12021.htm. Courtesy of Zvi Mann.

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14   See "Signed Marc Chagall Aquarelle" by Zvi Mann and David Mazower, in *The Mendele Review: Yiddish Literature and Language*, http://yiddish.haifa.ac.il/tmr/tmr12/tmr12021.htm

15   The note reads:
      *Dear M. Mann, I am sending you a few of the features I promised you. In them I wanted to express—as far as I was able—the fate of the Yiddish writer in his "former" land –*
      *With best wishes*
      *Mark Chagall*

Many of Mann's works were translated into English, German, Hebrew, French, Danish, Spanish, and Italian. Mendl Mann died in Paris in 1975 at the age of 59 as a result of old war wounds, and his son brought him back to be buried in Israel in Kibbutz Kfar Giladi.



Book covers of French editions of Mann's trilogy: *Aux Portes de Moscou* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1960); *Sur la Vistule* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1962); *La Chute de Berlin* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1963). Courtesy of Zvi Mann.

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