

CRAZY LEVI
Robert Greenberg
Program Note

"Crazy Levi" is the third of my works celebrating the rich, and today relatively unknown tradition of Yiddish language poetry. The first set, "The Passing Years" for baritone and piano, set poems by turn-of-the-century immigrants to the new world. The second set, "Iron Balconies and Lilies" for soprano and chamber ensemble, traversed the life experiences of a woman, from youth through extreme old age. Unlike these other pieces, which were comprised of various poems by various poets, "Crazy Levi" consists of a single, narrative poem by Rokhl Korn. It is a timeless tale of life, loss, humor, grief and death, the human spirit and the power of love.

Rokhl (Rachel) Korn was born in 1898, in a Polish village then in a region known as Galicia. "Crazy Levi" is an early poem. Typical of Korn's poetry, it is imbued with the atmosphere and spirit of the countryside, a characteristic which continued even after she left her native village for the more urban confines of Lvov and Warsaw. Korn managed to escape Poland and flee to the Soviet Union as a refugee during the second world war. She emigrated to Montreal in 1948, where she died in 1982.

"Crazy Levi" is a true duet for soprano and piano. The piano part, quite orchestral in concept, is not merely an accompaniment, but fully as important and dramatic an element as the voice part itself. The narrative nature of the poem requires the soprano to be a story teller as well as a singer, assuming the voices and moods of the characters and narrator as they appear during the course of the poem.

"Crazy Levi" was composed between December of 1992 and August of 1993.

Crazy Levi
Rokhl Korn

And no one knows what became of him, Crazy Levi,
who tied the roads
from Yavarev to Moshtsisk
to Samber to Greyding in a bow,
carrying always in his breast pocket
his letters from Rivtshe,
his uncle's youngest daughter.

All the houses in the villages knew him,
the road accepted his long shadow
like a horse that knows its rider,
and the dogs lay quiet in their doghouses
when the familiar smell of Levi's black coat
spoke to their hearts.

Women strong and wide and bent to the ground,
were in the field when Levi came by.
They would toy with him
and with a laugh that smelled of goodness, like dark bread,
they would say,
"Levi, you have no father, no mother.
Why don't you take a wife
like the rest of your people?
She would wash your shirt for you
and cook you a spoonful of something warm to eat."

And Levi would look at their raw, swollen feet
and plow the broad field of his forehead
with the painful thought that was always present to him:
"Because my uncle wouldn't give me his daughter for a wife,
I carry my heart around
like a cat in a sack,
and I want to leave it somewhere
so that it won't be able to find its way back to me."

And he would take a filthy piece of paper
from his breast pocket
and read aloud from a letter in German,
"An Liebchen!" -
and a red berry would blossom
in the dark moss around his lips:
Levi's crazy, melancholy smile.

But after one long hard winter
(worse than any the old people could remember),
the small eyes of the windowpanes
looked for Levi without finding him
and the dogs put their heads down to the ground

and sniffed at all the tracks on the road,
thinking that he might have come by.

And to this day, no one knows what became of him.
Maybe the hungry wolves in the woods tore him to pieces
or maybe his mother, who had died in the bloom of her youth,
missed her son, and a small white hand
reached out to him from the dark attic of an old house.

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