Kadya Molodovsky (1894–1974), born in a small town in Grodno province in the Pale of Settlement, was, like many Yiddish writers of the last century, multilingual, peripatetic, well-educated in secular subjects and in religious texts, a teacher of Yiddish and Hebrew, a socialist, and a Zionist. Although this range is usually ascribed to the men of her generation, she is perhaps the most prominent (although not the sole) instance of its applicability to women as well.

Until fairly recently, critical and popular belief held that if women wrote Yiddish literature at all, they wrote primarily poetry, long considered a more fragmented genre, less tied to the social and historical realities of the world, and thus more appropriate for Jewish women. In addition, women faced at least two other obstacles: the domestication and feminization of Yiddish language as mame loshn (mother tongue) had rendered it the language of home; and, at the same time, writing Yiddish literature had been masculinized, considered an enterprise for men. (Consider, for example, that Sholem Aleichem gave the great Yiddish author Mendele Moykher Sforim the moniker zeyde — grandfather.) Kadya Molodovsky’s life and work challenges these assumptions about gender and Yiddish literature.

The author of collections of poetry, novels, memoirs, plays, essays, and reviews, Molodovsky was a prominent figure among modernist Yiddish writers in Poland, Russia, the U.S. and Israel. She also had the distinction of being the only woman in the history of Yiddish literature (!) to edit a major literary journal, Svive (Milieu), published as a bimonthly in New York from 1943–1944 and then again as a quarterly from 1960–1974. In addition, she served as editor of the literary pages of the Warsaw Communist Yiddish daily Fraynd (Friend), from 1934–36, and of Heym: dos vort
fun der arbetndiker froy in Yisroel (Home: the word of the working woman in Israel) in Tel Aviv, from 1950–52.

My translation of her novel, Fun Lublin biz Nyu York (From Lublin to New York), published in 1941, seeks to make this important work accessible to a wider audience, to return Molodovsky’s prose writings to their rightful place in the Yiddish literary tradition, and to counter prevailing views of Yiddish and of female immigrant writers. The novel tells the story of Rivke Zylberg, a twenty-year-old woman who comes to her relatives in New York just two months after the Nazi invasion of her native Poland. Central to this story, and a particular challenge for translation, is Molodovsky’s careful attention to the nuances of English words and the struggle to acquire a new language. English that is foreignized by being transliterated into Yiddish can be found on nearly every page of her book, sometimes translated into Yiddish and sometimes left to be understood by context alone. Molodovsky thus presents her reader with challenges similar to those faced by Rivke, who arrives in New York knowing no English, uncertain of her ability to learn it.

Molodovsky explores her protagonist’s struggles with the difficult task of learning the mores of her new culture and understanding the unfamiliar expectations and images of women in America. Rivke wonders whether it is really true, as one prospective employer tells her, that it is easier to find a husband than a job in her new land. She is both callow and thoughtful; she is as likely to comment on her cousin’s hairstyles and jealous desire for nicer shoes as on the effects of American assimilation or her increasing fear of what is happening to Jews in Europe. Although we learn of Rivke’s fiancé, who has fled from Lublin to Palestine, and of the two American alrightniks who flirt with and court her, this is not a love story in any traditional sense. Rather, it is the story of a woman in the midst of world historical crises trying to make sense of her place in a bewildering, threatening world shaped by the immigrant experience, gender, and the Holocaust as it is unfolding.

In her writings, Molodovsky disdained the notion of “women’s poetry,” or “women’s literature” and dismissed the idea that one could discern a “woman’s voice” in literary texts. Similarly, I rejected the idea that there was such a thing as a gendered translation or
a woman’s voice in translation. And yet some of the inevitable problems of translation were resolved for me by paying equal attention to the dignity of Yiddish literature and to feminist sensibilities. I did not, for example, want to reproduce either the Yinglish/pidgin English of many immigrant texts that make a mockery of both languages and the people who strive to learn them. Nor did the elevated Yiddish-in-English of Henry Roth's monumental Call It Sleep seem quite right. I sought, instead, to reproduce in English translation the struggles that both Rivke and Molodovsky's Yiddish readers would have faced. Molodovsky uses quotation marks to set off the English words that Rivke hears but doesn’t understand or is trying to learn. I italicize these words in translation, as they would have been heard by a Yiddish speaker: tchuinkgum, seekrit, poketbuk, teeytsher, sayl and so on. Though they are clear enough if sounded out, the reader may have to struggle a bit, and this foreignizing of what one expects to understand is also one of the goals of this and other translations.

Perhaps a most interesting example of feminist sensibilities in translation as well as the dignity of Yiddish literature is the problem of the book’s subtitle: tog-bukh fun Rivke Zilberg. In library catalogs, critical references, even within the Yiddish book itself, this has always been rendered as “Diary of Rivke Zilberg.” I chose to translate it as “The Journal of Rivke Zilberg” for several reasons. Yiddish does not distinguish between “diary” and “journal,” but there is a subtle distinction in English. “Journal” connotes a more contemplative genre, pointing away from the daily recording of events and toward the kinds of ruminating analyses of actions, feelings, and observations that Molodovsky is aiming at in this work. Women write diaries; men write journals. Diaries are meant to be read only by the writer; journals may be interesting enough to warrant a larger audience. (The same argument might be made about the most famous diary of the 20th century, The Diary of Anne Frank, a work begun the year in which Molodovsky’s novel was published that bore witness to the experiences of a particular time and place, and whose author also envisioned a wider audience.)

From Lublin to New York offers a view of the material and inner life of its central figure, her feelings and thoughts about work, men, family, money, clothes, handbags, and the yearning for the physical reality of a home. By inviting us to read and respond, it also makes us figures in the developing drama of the war years and of the gendered immigrant experience. Addressed to an audience which, its author hopes, will care about these things and respond to them not only with sympathy but with something more substantive, the book is a call to historical memory and to action.