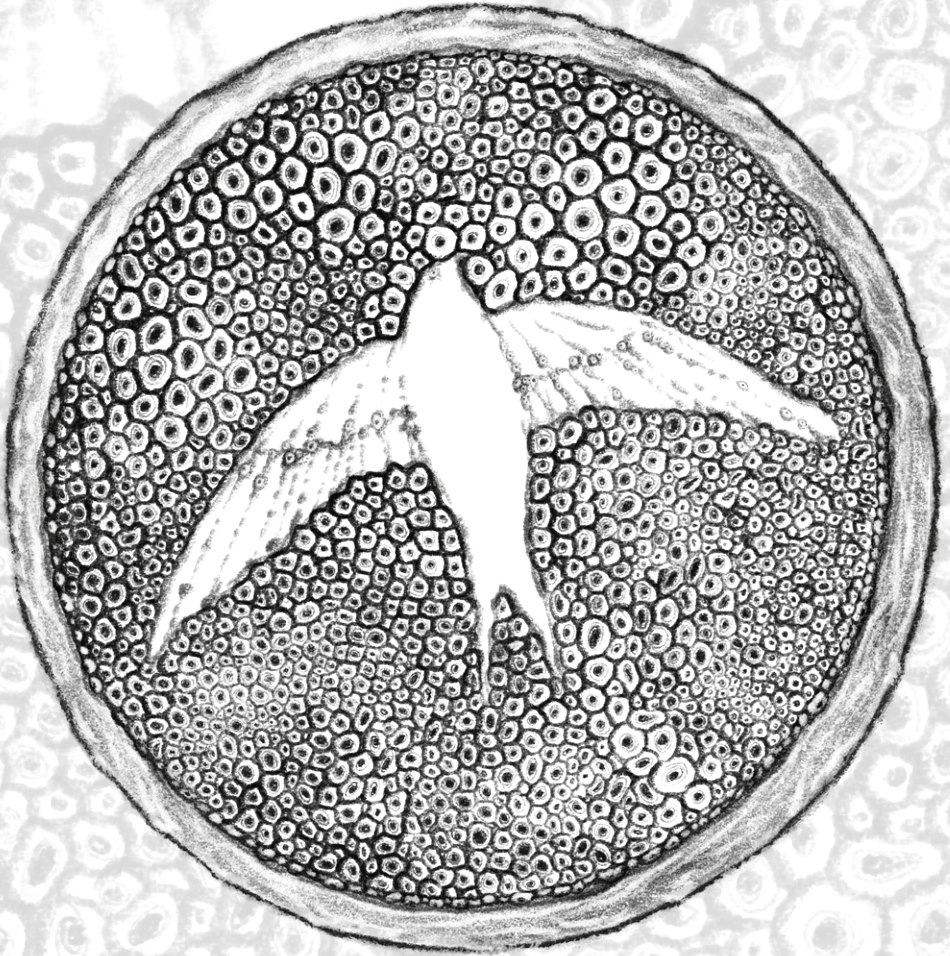


Frieda, Mother of Swifts



premiere: 12 September 2026





*The entire topography of my thinking lies within me,
and even if I were to be cast out of every existing world,
I'd still have a fictional world that formed me, in which
I have made myself at home.*

Topografia myślenia, [Topography of Thinking],
Joanna Kulmowa





Frieda, Mother of Swifts

script and direction

Justyna Biernat



Dona, Dona

אויפֿן פֿורל ליגט דאָס קעלבל,
ליגט געבונדן מיט אַ שטריק,
הויך אין הימל פֿליט דאָס שוועלבל,
פֿרייט זיך, דרייט זיך הין און קריק.

לאַכט דער ווינט אין קאַרן,
לאַכט און לאַכט און לאַכט,
לאַכט ער אָפּ אַ טאָג אַ גאַנצן
מיט אַ האַלבער נאָכט.

דאָנא, דאָנא, דאָנא...

שרייט דאָס קעלבל, זאָגט דער פֿויער:
ווער זשע הייסט דיך זיין אַ קאלב?
וואָלסט געקערט צו זיין אַ פֿויגל,
וואָלסט געקערט צו זיין אַ שוואַלב.

בידנע קעלבער טוט מען בינדן
און מען שלעפט זיי און מען שעכט,
ווער ס'האָט פֿליגל, פֿליט אַרויפֿצו,
איז בײַ קיינעם ניט קיין קנעכט.

lyrics:

Aron Zeitlin

music:

Sholom Secunda

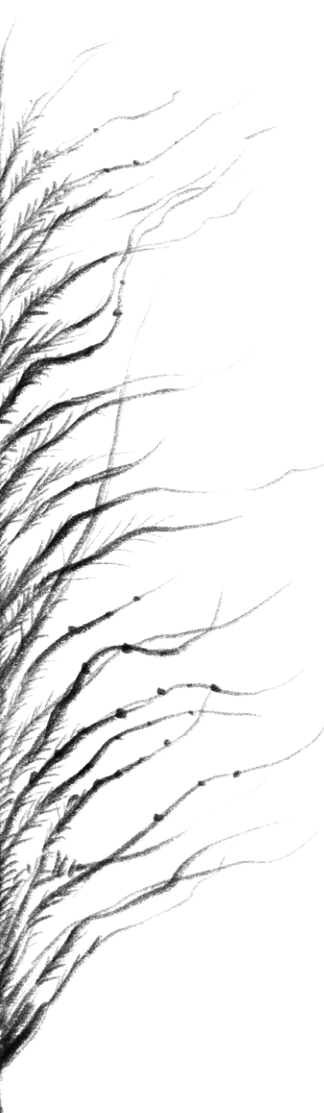
source:

<https://yiddishsongs.org/dona-dona/>

The Yiddish song "Dos kelbl" [The Calf] was written for Aaron Zeitlin's play "Esterke", staged by Maurice Schwartz in 1940 at the Yiddish Art Theatre in New York. The song is often referred to by the words of its chorus, "Dona, Dona". It gained popularity thanks to English-language renditions, particularly that by Joan Baez.



Dona, Dona



In a wagon lies a calf;
it is tied with a rope.
High in the sky a swallow soars,
is joyous and runs back and forth.

The wind laughs in the rye,
laughs and laughs and laughs.
It laughs a whole day
plus half the night.

The calf cries and the farmer says:
Who told you to be a calf?
You could have been a bird,
You could have been a swallow.

Poot calves are bound
and dragged and slaughtered.
Whoever has wings flies high
and is no one's slave.

premiere: 12 September 2026
44 Konstytucji 3 Maja Street, Tomaszów Mazowiecki

Frieda, Mother of Swifts

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vocal coaching – Katarzyna Rychlik
costumes – Anna Jędraszczyk

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Joanna Kulmowa *Topografia myślenia*, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz *Dzienniki*,
Jacek Karczewski *Zobacz ptaka*, Ted Hughes *Swifts*,
Michał Piasecki, *Z Tomaszowa do Magnitogorska*

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published by:

Spaces of Memory Foundation
Tomaszów Mazowiecki, 2026

opposite page: photo by Mateusz Majka

JERZYKI



Lebenslauf

Ich, Frieda Bornstein, wurde
geboren am 29 September 1885 zu Tom
(Russl.-Polen) als Tochter des Fabrikanten
David Bornstein. Bis zu meinem
16 Lebensjahre besuchte ich das Pilsener
gymnasium, welches ich Krankheitshalber
nicht gänzlich absolvieren konnte.
Nachdem ich bereits an der Berner
Universität die Zulassungsprüfung be-
standen habe, wurde ich am Ende des
Sommersemesters 1906 an der philosophischen
Fakultät immatrikuliert.
Während meiner Studienzeit war ich auch
2 Semester in Prag, wo ich die
Vorlesungen folg. Herren Professoren
besuchte: Dr. Wierzejski, Dr. Rostafinski,
Dr. Godlewski, Dr. Garbowski, Dr. Yff.
In Bern besuchte ich

Frieda Bornsteinówna

David Bornstein ran his wool mill, which specialised in the production of cloth and coarse fabrics, in the town centre, *in der gas*, as the Jews of Tomaszów used to say in Yiddish. Although he had no family tradition of weaving and no roots in Tomaszów Mazowiecki – having arrived there at the age of seven with his parents from Przedbórz – he gradually extended his industrial activities in the town. In 1906, he set up a cloth and knitwear factory – together with Abe Śpiewak, he purchased former industrial plots situated beyond the bridge, *iber der brik*, in the industrial part of the town near Wielki Staw and the River Wolbórka.

Bornstein's efforts coincided with a period of intense urban growth in Tomaszów, which had been fast expanding since the late 19th century. The Tomaszów railway line was running, and the town's main streets were lined with wide pavements and hard surfaces.



David Bornstein's Cloth Factory. Jerzy Pawlik Collection
Opposite page: Univ of Bern. BB_IIIb_1301. Frieda Bornstein's
university application



Dawid Bornstein. APTM.SP.BETM.Zesp.1.sygn.75 t.2

Sara Bornstein. APTM.SP.BETM.Zesp.1.sygn.75 t.2

In 1897, there were 9,330 Jews in Tomaszów – 46.7 per cent of the town's inhabitants, and among them the Bornsteins. Dawid and his wife Sara (née Rubinstein) had six children, whose Jewish names were Hersz, Frajda Ruchla, Pesa, Szlama, Moszek, and Zysla. The family left their home at 30 Kramarska Street (now Grunwaldzka Street) to move into a villa at 6 Warszawska Street, adjacent to the new factory grounds. Bornstein's expanding factories stretched along Warszawska Street, Władysława Street (now Kottłątaja Street), and Wesola Street (now Konstytucji 3 Maja Street).

Frajda Ruchla Bornstein – listed in pre-war documents as Frieda or Franciszka – was born on 3 October 1885. Like her siblings, she began her education in Tomaszów before continuing her studies at the University of Bern. At the time, Switzerland was a popular destination for young people from the Russian partition. At the Faculty of Philosophy, Frieda studied ornithology, botany, and zoology. She dedicated her thesis on feathers, published in Berlin in 1911, to her dear parents: "Meinen lieben Eltern gewidmet."

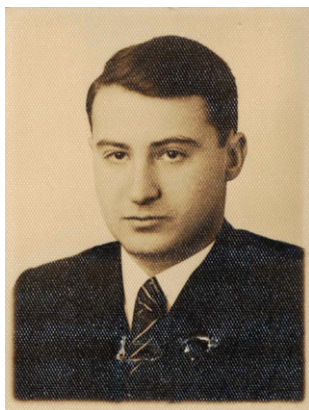
After finishing her studies, she decided to return to Tomaszów. There, in 1913, she married Benjamin Rajgrodzki, a 32-year-old engineer and technologist originally from Kleck but living in Warsaw. She was 27 at the time and held the title of Doctor of Philosophy, a fact that was meticulously recorded in the marriage certificate. The marriage ceremony, conducted by Rabbi Hersz Izraelowicz at the local synagogue, was preceded by notices in Tomaszów and Warsaw, and a proper prenuptial agreement was also drawn up. The newlyweds settled at 6 Warszawska Street. A year later, their son Ignacy was born, followed seven years later by a daughter, Bronisława. Unfortunately, both Frieda and Bronisława (known as Bronka) suffered from health problems.

Frieda's daughter, Bronka, died suddenly of a heart attack in 1938. Witnesses to her death were Frieda and Heniek Bierzyński – a frequent guest at the factory owner's villa and Halina Aronson's admirer. Halina and Bronka were not only friends from Humanities Grammar School but also, importantly, cousins. Their mothers, the sisters Frieda and Zysła, known as Zofia, shared the family home. A few years earlier, their elders had passed away – Dawid Bornstein in 1933 at the age of 73, and Sara a year later at the age of 75.

Following the outbreak of the Second World War and the heightened repressions against the Jewish popu-



Bronka Rajgrodzka, Frieda's daughter.
Class photo, 1936.
Tony Bernard Collection



Ignacy Rajgrodzki, Frieda's son. Warsaw University Archive. Rajgrodzki graduated the Faculty of Law at the Warsaw University

lation, Frieda and her entire family were resettled to the ghetto. The Rajgrodzki family first lived at 30 Kramarska Street, and then at 22 Krzyżowa Street. There were 15,000 Jewish men and women in the Tomaszów ghetto. The liquidation of the ghetto took place in late October and early November 1942. Jews were deported to the Treblinka extermination camp. A forced-labour camp, known as the 'little ghetto', was set up for those who remained imprisoned in the town. Frieda's son, Ignacy, who had served as a policeman in the ghetto, was shot at the Jewish cemetery alongside his newlywed wife, Itta, née Bresler.

After the war, Frieda's sister Zofia confirmed that the 58-year-old had died of typhus. Together with her second daughter Roma (her first daughter, Halina, had died shortly after the liberation) and Heniek Bierzyński, Zofia left Poland. Heniek settled in Australia, whilst Zofia and Roma went to New Zealand. However, before they left their hometown of Tomaszów in 1946, Zofia Aronson provided evidence at the Magistrates' Court: "Frajda Rucha Rajgrodzka, née Bornstein, daughter of Dawid and Sara, née Rubinstein, born in Tomaszów Mazowiecki in 1885, died in Tomaszów Mazowiecki on 10 April 1943, as a widow."



*Wanderers who knew,
or recognised, no borders*

The Town

The common swift is a bird only slightly larger than a sparrow, placed in the order Apodiformes – meaning ‘footless’ or ‘short-legged’ – which also includes hummingbirds. The species is closely associated with urban areas and predominantly nests in crevices and openings in buildings. As early as the 19th century, the common swift was widespread across Europe, including in Polish territories, where it used man-made structures instead of its original breeding sites – rock crevices and tree hollows. Did the teenage Frieda watch swifts nesting in the walls of factory buildings of Tomaszów, or darting over the waters of the *Wolburke* – as the Jews called it – which cuts through the town and, moments later, flows into the Pilica?

The Migration

From a distance, the swift is merely a speck in the sky – a dark, crescent-shaped outline, a blackish-brown bird with a lighter, whitish patch on its throat. The swift’s long, arched wings make it a bird that cannot stop flying, racing ceaselessly across the blazing summer sky. Even the swifts’ breeding season passes at a dizzying pace – these fast-moving birds arrive in European cities from sub-Saharan Africa at the beginning of May, more and more often a little earlier, only to return as early as the beginning of August. Was this restless nature of the common swift close to Frieda’s heart? She herself travelled as far as Switzerland to pursue a degree in natural sciences – in mid-May 1906, she became a student at the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Bern. Upon completion of her first year, she returned to the Polish lands and spent a year as a visiting student at the

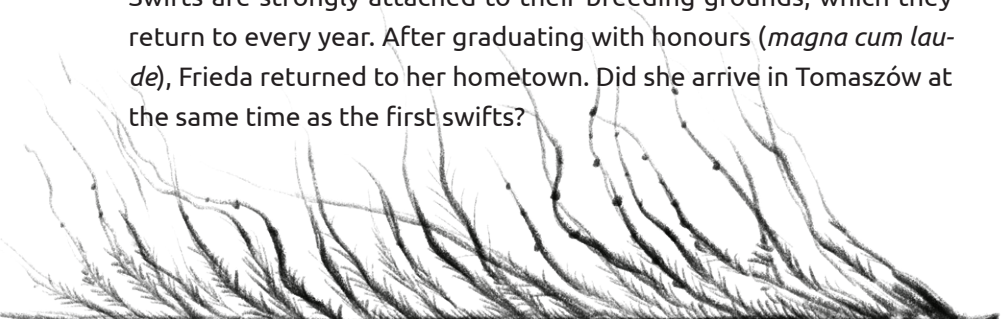
Jagiellonian University. In the winter of 1908, she found herself back in Bern, where she was awarded her doctorate on 5 May 1911.

The Moulting

Feathers are one of evolution's most remarkable advances. Light yet durable, they have enabled birds to take to the skies and adapt to life in just about any environment – from sandy deserts and high mountains to polar regions. The feathers enable birds to fly, help maintain a regular body temperature, and provide protection against the elements. Their colours can serve both to provide camouflage and to communicate with other birds. A feather is a product of the epidermis, composed mainly of keratin, and grows from a follicle located in the skin. During its development, it is nourished by living tissue, but once growth is complete, the feather turns into a dead structure. Over time, feathers wear out and must be replaced by new ones through moulting. Although some swifts fly continuously, all year round, they still have to moult. How does this moulting process take place, and how does a new feather form in place of the old one? It was specifically this process that Frieda devoted a significant part of her research to, under the supervision of the zoologist and ornithologist Theophil Studer. Before she completed her thesis – *Über Regeneration der Federn und Beziehungen zwischen Federn und Schuppen* [On the Regeneration of Feathers and the Relationships between Feathers and Scales] – she sliced bird tissues into thin sections, stained them, and examined them under a microscope to find answers to questions that developmental biologists are still asking today.

Powrót

Swifts are strongly attached to their breeding grounds, which they return to every year. After graduating with honours (*magna cum laude*), Frieda returned to her hometown. Did she arrive in Tomaszów at the same time as the first swifts?



What does theatre have to do with swifts?

Theatre projects exploring local history in Tomaszów Mazowiecki

Every town has its own history and people who are keen to learn about it and keep alive the memory of the place where they live or where they come from. This memory can be preserved in many different ways: by gathering documents of past events in archives, preserving traces of the past in museums and official collections, or producing academic studies. But there are other ways too – less formal and institutional, more educational and artistic – projects carried out together with the local community. Such approaches need not be mutually exclusive; they can run parallel to one another or intersect, creating new value. This is precisely what the Pasaże Pamięci Foundation, based in Tomaszów Mazowiecki, and its director, Justyna Biernat, are doing by combining academic work with educational and pedagogical activities. Some of the Foundation's recent activities have taken the form of stage productions. The shift towards pedagogical and theatrical work, stemming from the academic and educational interests of the Foundation's leader, creates a further space for contemplating local history alongside the Tomaszów community.

"Frieda, Mother of Swifts" is the third production staged by the Foundation in recent years. The first two – "The 1905 Strike" and "Halinka" – were created in collaboration with pupils from Secondary School No. 1 in Tomaszów Mazowiecki. However, the aim was not to set up a school theatre group, let alone a theatre club. The historical and educational dimensions, realised through theatrical means, took centre stage. In this context, the process of creating the productions and evaluating the events that were the basis of both scripts was

even more important than the final artistic outcome of the project, the performance itself. This form of education that involved theatre became an integral part of the school's life, albeit as an extracurricular, non-compulsory activity, employing methods from the field of theatre pedagogy that were quite unusual for a school setting.

Each successive production by the Foundation is subtly linked to the previous one. The first one dealt with the pupils' strike that took place in 1905 at the Tomaszów Grammar School (formerly the Humanities Gymnasium). The protagonist of the second one was Halina Aronson, also a pupil at that school, and one of its other characters was Halina's cousin, Bronka Rajgrodzka – the daughter of Frieda and the titular protagonist of the third production. As can be seen, all these stories intertwine and branch out, whilst the stage performances shed light on successive chapters of Tomaszów's history. This, in fact, is the most obvious common thread running through these productions – they all grapple with events or figures connected with Tomaszów Mazowiecki. Beyond that, each of them – albeit in different ways – emphasises the town's multicultural character. They highlight the fact that the fate of the Jewish community constitutes a significant part of Tomaszów's history.

"Frieda, Mother of Swifts" is a continuation of the Foundation's previous activities, but this time these activities play out beyond the school walls – and indeed, beyond the walls of any educational or cultural institution. This allows the Foundation to engage more effectively with the Tomaszów community. Open recruitment for the group – which now includes not only pupils from one secondary school but from all schools in the town and surrounding area, as well as adults – has created an opportunity for people of different ages to take part in the project. In this way, people with different life experiences, motivations, and interests are brought together. Some are simply passionate about theatre and the arts; others would like to learn about the history of Tomaszów; others still are fascinated by nature and, in the context of this production in particular, ornithology.

This provides an opportunity for intergenerational collaboration and the exchange of experiences, knowledge, and skills amongst the participants. In this instance, theatre becomes a platform for collaboration and an educational tool. As a result, learning about local history takes place through group preparations, creating stage characters and exploring their life stories together, and shedding light on the historical context by conducting research with archival materials.

Frieda Bornstein's life and legacy are part of the history of multicultural Tomaszów. The group creating the production drew particular inspiration from her ornithological research into the common swift. This material served as both inspiration and a challenge: how to weave bird-themed motifs into a performance dedicated to local history. Fortunately, the different elements of the production provide a range of possibilities. These references can be found on many levels: from the characters, through song and movement, to the costumes. But the motif of a flock of birds can also serve as a metaphor and this offers scope for theatrical interpretations and stage convention. Through the prism of a flock of birds, one can tell not only the story of a Jewish researcher of swifts, but also that of the entire community living in Tomaszów Mazowiecki. After all, the life of the play's protagonist is just one of thousands of life stories of Tomaszów's inhabitants. Perhaps drawing on the story of Frieda and the swifts will prompt both the performers and the audience to take notice of the town's erstwhile inhabitants. This is the painstaking and responsible task of projects such as "Frieda" – to cultivate, through theatrical and educational activities, the memory of those who are no longer with us.



The project is co-financed by the Forum for Dialogue.

The project "Building a Network of Holocaust Educators in Poland" is supported through a grant provided by the U.S. Consulate General in Kraków.

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