EVENT TITLE: Writing and Translating “The Other”: New Fiction from Frayed Edge Press

Event Description: Reading, particularly in translation, allows us insight into others' lives, cultures, and experiences. This event presents three books with cross-cultural themes, each set on a different continent. Originally published in Yiddish, Armenian, and French, all are newly available in English in their entirety for the first time. These works illustrate their authors' and translators' efforts to respectfully portray the "other"—those of a race, gender, culture, and/or time period other than their own.

EVENT CATEGORY: Fiction Readings

Event Organizer & Moderator
Alison M. Lewis: Alison M. Lewis has been a publishing professional for more than a dozen years, focusing on academic and independent press. She is currently the publisher and editor-in-chief at Frayed Edge Press, a small independent press located in Philadelphia.

Event Participants
Areg Azatyan: Areg Azatyan is an Armenian author of 6 works of fiction, all of which have been published by leading publishing houses in Armenia. He received the Presidential Youth Prize for Literature (2004), as well as Best Writer of the Year (2010) and several other international and national awards. As a filmmaker he has participated in a number of festivals, including Berlinale, Toronto, and Cannes. His novel, The Flying African has been translated into English by Nazareth Seferian and was recently published by Frayed Edge Press.

Laura Nagle: Laura Nagle is a freelance writer and translator based in Indiana. She is a 2020 ALTA Travel Fellow and the translator of Prosper Mérimée’s notorious 1827 hoax, Songs for the Gusle, published in 2023 by Frayed Edge Press. Her translations of short prose and poetry from French, Spanish, and Irish have appeared in numerous journals.

Yermiyahu Ahron Taub: Yermiyahu Ahron Taub is a poet, writer, and Yiddish literary translator. His most recent translations from the Yiddish are Dineh: An Autobiographical Novel by Ida Maze and Blessed Hands: Stories by Frume Halpern, the latter of which was published in 2023 by Frayed Edge Press. Taub

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements
[Approximately 2 minutes]

Welcome to “Writing and Translating ‘The Other’: New Fiction from Frayed Edge Press.” A few reminders before we begin:

• For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me [Alison] know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you. Please understand that some of our actual remarks may deviate somewhat from the text prepared in advance.

• Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.

• Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.

• Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.

• Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

Moderator Introduction
[Approximately 3 minutes]

Thank you for coming to “Writing and Translating ‘The Other’: New Fiction from Frayed Edge Press.” I’m Alison Lewis, the publisher and editor-in-chief at Frayed Edge Press, a small independent press located in Philadelphia, which has been in operation since 2016. While we don’t have any limits on who we publish, we do particularly seek to publish marginalized voices of all kinds as well as translated works of literary merit, including those from minority languages, which have been overlooked or forgotten. You’ll be hearing excerpts from three such translated works in this session.
Please welcome our author and translators! **Areg Azatyan** is an Armenian writer and filmmaker now based in the US. As the author of six works of fiction, he’s been recognized with several international and national awards, including the Presidential Prize for Literature (2004), and Best Writer of the Year (2010). As a filmmaker, his work has been recognized with several awards and prizes, and he has participated in more than forty international film festivals, including Toronto, Cannes, and Berlin. He’s the author of *The Flying African* (Frayed Edge Press, 2024), which has been translated by Nazareh Seferian from the Armenian. **Laura Nagle** is a freelance writer and translator of French and Spanish based in Indiana. She was a 2020 ALTA Travel Fellow and her translations of short fiction and poetry have appeared in numerous journals. She’s the translator of Prosper Mérimée’s notorious 1827 literary hoax, *Songs for the Gusle* (Frayed Edge Press, 2023). Despite the fact that Mérimée is well-known for his role in the French Romanticism movement and as one of the pioneers of the novella, this early work of his has never before been published in English in its entirety. **Yermiyahu Ahron Taub** is a poet, writer, and Yiddish literary translator based in Washington, DC. His most recent translations from the Yiddish are *Dineh: An Autobiographical Novel* by Ida Maze (White Goat Press, 2022) and *Blessed Hands: Stories* by Frume Halpern (Frayed Edge Press, 2023). Halpern’s short “slice of life” stories were originally published in mid-20th C. NY Yiddish newspapers and have been largely unknown to English-language readers. We’re pleased to have published the first-ever English-language translation of the complete collection of these stories.

**Participants will introduce their own work and read a selected story:**
[~20 minutes each]

[Please provide a draft of any remarks you intend make + let me know what you plan to read.]

**Alison Lewis:**

Areg Azatyan’s *The Flying African* is a series of connected stories presenting the hypnotic, surreal journey of a young Armenian writer on a whirlwind tour of African countries. Each chapter presents a snapshot of the traveler’s experiences, the country’s history or social conditions, and insight into the psychological realities of the characters. He’ll be reading the chapter focused on the country of Sudan.
Areg Azatyan:

DAY 9. THE GAMBIA
WHERE ARE YOU, ANTONIO?

I needed rest. Nothing comes easily: all the discoveries that I had been making were taking their toll on me. In all this time, there had not been a single time, in any country, when I had encountered simple reality. Of course, Chao could be regarded as “real,” but the game of Africa had continued around me and maybe I was the guilty one in all this. In any case, I continued my journey and kept enthusiastically moving along. My next stop was the Gambia, a country that I had always considered unusual. It is peculiar in that it is bordered by only one country, Senegal, on the north, south, and east, while the Atlantic Ocean lies to its west. I couldn’t name another state with a similar geographic setting, at least not in Africa.

It was no coincidence that Senegal and the Gambia had been a united country for about ten years. There are many similarities between the two countries— their architecture is very much alike, as are their climates, their ethnic groups and tribes, and their cities. The only significant difference—quite conveniently for me—was that the official language of the Gambia was English. I’m sure that an insider could list thousands of other differences, but none of them were visible to me.

Trying to forget the sad story of Baye Sidi with its unexpected ending, I crossed Senegal’s border and entered the Gambia. I entered from the southern part of Senegal, where the cities of Ziguinchor and Bignona are located, and decided I would leave the Gambia by ocean to go Guinea-Bissau; my travel itinerary was meant to avoid visiting the same country twice.

A border guard noticed that I was a foreigner and asked, “What is the purpose of your visit?”

“I want to see the country,” I said. “I’m looking for interesting things.”

The border guard asked me to follow him.
We went to a small hut-like structure that seemed out of place with its surroundings. There was a big wooden box inside. He asked me to step inside the hut and opened the box—there were little crocodiles inside! I counted twenty or twenty-five before I started to mix them all up. They were the size of shoes, dark green to black in color, moving slowly like crabs.

“Here is something interesting,” said the border guard. “Everyone says they’re lovely, aren’t they? What do you say?”

“Yes, very.”

“You can buy them.”

“What would I do with them? Crocodiles are predators; they’ll grow up and eat me up.”

“You will release them into the river.”

“I want to avoid unnecessary expenses. In any case, one day you are going to have to release them yourself.”

“No, we do business with a zoo, they’ll buy all of them. You can save at least one, if you like.”

“Is that what you would like?”

“What I’d like doesn’t matter. I am responsible for every one of them. If I’m found to be missing one, I’ll have to pay for it. I’ll give you a good deal; save the poor thing.”

I felt obliged to buy one, although I had never in my life needed a crocodile. The words of the border guard had been convincing.

“How much do I owe you?”

“1400 dalasi.”

“And in dollars?”

“About fifty dollars. OK, thirty. Isn’t it worth it? You’re saving a life.”
“Yes, the life of a crocodile who will grow up and devour everybody. Or maybe he won’t make it to adulthood, but just end up as prey for something else in the river.”

The little crocodile was looking at me and moving his mouth. It was like a raw cucumber. I put my finger in its mouth. It wanted to bite it off, but it did not have any teeth and its jaw muscles had not yet firmed up. I paid for it. The border guard let me pass without checking my documents. He just opened the so-called border and wished me well; the crocodile was wrapped in a white cloth in a small basket.

Having bought the crocodile, this gave me an excuse to see the Gambia River. The best thing would probably be to go to Banjul, the capital of the Gambia. That was where the river starts, or rather, where it ends as it flows into the ocean.

With my basket in hand, I slowly made my way to the nearest bus stop. The border guard had told me how to get to the river; I had to take a bus from there to Serekunda, and then on to Banjul.

I thought about the many sick people who sacrificed everything they had to seek a cure and live, but who died all the same. They don’t know what to do, and every step they take brings them to clinics, medications, and international relief organizations that work day and night to save them. And here I was, holding my basket carefully with both hands and heading towards the Gambia River to save the life of a little green animal. He was moving about inside, letting me know that he was angry.

The bus doors closed and its engine stuttered, sounding like an elephant’s heavy breathing. A Gambian with jaundiced eyes asked me, “What is that?”

“A basket,” I said. I was scared for a moment, although there were also a few women on the bus in addition to this man.

“I can see that it is a basket, but what’s in it?”

“The border guard gave it to me.” I took out the quivering crocodile and saw that it had soiled the white cloth.

“He gave it to you?”
“Well, he sold it to me.”

“For how much?”

“Thirty dollars.”

“He’s cheated you; they sell them in the shops for ten or fifteen dollars,” interjected a woman who had been sitting nearby all this time with her eyes closed, playing dead. “If you’re not a tourist, you can find even cheaper ones. That Antonio is a liar.”

“They’re no good,” came the voice of another woman sitting opposite the man with the jaundiced eyes. She kept shaking something in a big package in her hand. “You shouldn’t have bought it. I’ve tried them several times, but they’re no good. They’re right about Antonio, too.”

“It’s true,” said the woman playing dead. “I’ve also tried it a few times.”

“Really? I’m trying it for the first time. The border guard said I was doing a good deed. Is his name Antonio?”

“Yes. What good deed?”

“Well, saving them.”

Suddenly there was a fit of laughter in the bus. Even the driver, who had a moustache that did not suit him at all, dragged deeply at his cigarette and produced a mixture of laughter and coughing.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“You should have bought fish; their meat is more delicious.”

Everything became clear to me at that instant. I looked at the surprised crocodile. I was irritated and my desire to save the poor creature grew stronger. As if it wasn’t bad enough that they were taken to a zoo—now it turned out they were eaten, too.

I reached my destination in a few hours. The people on the bus looked half asleep, which I guess meant that they had slept half the way.

I was in Serekunda. I got into a taxi there and left for Banjul, or rather to some place where one could throw a crocodile into the river.
“Why bother? It will be hunted down all the same,” said the driver who seemed to be a good man, if one ignored his suspicious grey cap smelling of melted paraffin.

“I don’t know; this is what I want to do,” I said.

“Do you like fish?”

“Yes, why?”

“You eat fish, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, here they love to eat crocodiles. You can’t approach 1,455,842 people one by one and convince them to give up eating crocodiles.” At that moment I understood that he was very dangerous, given that he knew so precisely how many people lived in his country. That meant he would know many other things, too.

“Yahya Davda,” he said.

“What?”

“That’s my name. You can call me Yaya, that’s easier to pronounce. We still have a lot of time to spend together.”

At that moment, a woman appeared in front of the taxi and almost slipped, dropping the bags that she was holding, while Yaya stepped on the gas and accelerated.

“You ran her over,” I shouted.

“It’s nothing, don’t worry.”

“How can I not worry?”

“It’s nothing,” Yaya mumbled as he slowed down his green Peugeot. He’d said his car was a 1966 Bentley, but I knew it was a Peugeot because only French cars have a surprised look.

“Is there a post office here?”

“Yes.”
“And a telephone?”
“Sure. Who do you want to call?”
“Home.”
“Where’s that?”
“Armenia.”
“What’s that?”
“A country.”
“Ah, I thought it was the name of an office.”
“No. Can I call from this place?”
“I don’t know, you can try when we get there.”

I kept track and we were at the post office in seven minutes. I lost twelve dollars trying in vain to get a connection. I wrote a letter and asked them to send it as soon as they could. I handed the letter to the post office worker, and two minutes later we hit the road to Banjul again.

“They love you, don’t they?”
“Who?”
“Your parents,” said Yaya.
“Yes,” I said, taking a look at the crocodile. “They love me very, very much.”
“How come they let you go so far away? You’re still a child.”
“Because they really love me. I’m writing a book.”
“Good. You’ll write about me, too.” Yaya smoothed his hair with his hand, as if he was preparing for a camera. “What are you going to do when we get there?”
“I don’t know.”
“You don’t know?” he asked, surprised.
“Yes.”
“Why are you going there?”
“To throw this crocodile into the river.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“That’s it?”

“Yes.”

“And here I thought you were a serious writer.”

I didn’t understand what Yaya meant. I remained silent for the rest of the journey, thinking only that I wanted to get there as quickly as possible. I wanted to throw the crocodile into the river and then leave for Guinea-Bissau.

“Did you know that the Gambians were the first Black people to adopt Islam?” Yaya asked to break the silence. “I think it was in 1066.”

“No.”

“Then we were part of the Mali Empire, and then we were ruled by the Portuguese. The Polish, the Lithuanians, the British—we’re been ruled by them all. Antonio is the one to blame for all of that.”

“Why?”

“He sold the Gambia River to the British, who then closed all its banks.”

“But isn’t Antonio a border guard?”

“A border guard? Antonio was a scoundrel, a crazy servant. He was a slave-trader, he sold slaves. But his soul was that of a slave, too. He was a villain. He was the reason they exported three million slaves from our country in three years. Never mention his name again.”

“But you were the one who brought him up.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“What about the border guard?”

“What border guard?”

“Someone on the bus said his name was Antonio.”
“I don’t know, you must have gotten something wrong.”

Perhaps I had gotten something wrong, as always. But Yaya could quite easily be ignorant of his own history since he couldn’t even tell a Peugeot from a Bentley.

“Couldn’t there be another man named Antonio?” I asked.

“In the Gambia? Impossible. There could be a Jameh, or a Javara, but not an Antonio.”

“Maybe he had a Portuguese father?”

“No, impossible. He had four hundred years to change his name. If it were an English name, I wouldn’t be surprised; we were a colony of Great Britain up to 1965, but Portuguese...no.”

Yaya’s green Peugeot was clattering through Banjul’s long streets and it was clear that we were going to arrive soon. I looked at the green animal again and this time it was sad and curled up, as if having guessed where we were going.

“There it is, go about your business, save a meaningless and temporary life,” were Yaya’s last words to me. “Then go tell others about your heroic deed.” He closed the rusty, re-painted door and then left.

I had arrived. But at that moment, the only thing I could think of was the river with all its banks closed. It was impossible to reach the edge. The crocodile looked at me, as if trying to persuade me, then he came out of the basket and jumped onto the grass. I suddenly recalled that crocodiles were amphibians, so I hadn’t needed to make this long journey at all.

Only one question bothered me. Where was Antonio? It didn’t matter which Antonio. I had something to say to both of them...

Alison Lewis:

Laura Nagle has translated Songs for the Gusle, a 19th-century French literary hoax written by a young Prosper Mérimée. The author claims to have travelled to the “Illyrian Provinces” (what we might call “the Balkans”) and collected songs and folk stories from those peoples. Laura will read an example of one of the supernatural stories included – “On Vampirism.” It both tells a complete story and
offers a taste of the narrator’s tendency to pontificate. A few paragraphs from the lengthy Calmet citation included have been cut in the interest of time.

Laura Nagle:

**ON VAMPIRISM**

In Illyria, Poland, Hungary, Turkey, and parts of Germany, a forthright denial of the existence of vampires would leave a man vulnerable to accusations of irreligion and immorality.

The term “vampire” (in Illyrian, *vudkodlak*) is applied to any corpse that leaves its tomb, generally at night, and torments the living. Often, the vampire sucks the blood of the living from their throats, or else it might squeeze their throats, suffocating them. Those thus killed by a vampire become vampires themselves. It appears that vampires are stripped of any feelings of attachment; indeed, they have been seen to torment their friends and relatives, rather than strangers.

Some believe that a man becomes a vampire through divine punishment, while others consider it a matter of fate. The mostly widely accepted view is that schismatics and the excommunicated, when buried in holy ground (where they suffer great anguish, unable to find peace), take their vengeance on the living.

The signs of vampirism are as follows: the preservation of a corpse beyond the point at which other corpses begin to rot, fluidity of the blood, suppleness of the limbs, etc. It is also said that vampires keep their eyes open in their graves, and that their nails and hair continue to grow as in life. Some are recognizable by the noise they make in their tombs as they chew on whatever is nearby—in many cases, their own flesh.

These phantoms’ apparitions cease only when they are exhumed and beheaded and their bodies burned.

The most common remedy for an initial vampire attack is to rub the entire body, especially the part that was bitten, with a combination of the blood that flows in the vampire’s veins and the earth from around its grave. The wounds from a vampire bite appear as a small, bluish or reddish blotch, not unlike the mark left by a leech.
The following is a vampire story recounted by Dom Augustin Calmet in the second volume of his *Treatise on the Apparition of Spirits, Vampires, etc.*:

In early September, in the village of Kisiljevo, three leagues from Gradište, an old man died at age sixty-two. Three days after he was buried, he appeared to his son in the dark of night and asked for something to eat; once served, he ate and disappeared. The next day, the son told his neighbors what had happened. The father did not appear that night, but the following night he once again made himself visible and asked for something to eat. It is unknown whether his son gave him food or not, but in any case, the son was found dead the next day in his bed. That same day, five or six people in the village suddenly fell ill; and in a matter of days, they all died, one after the other.

The local officer or bailiff, once notified of these events, sent an account thereof to the court in Belgrade, which sent two officers and an executioner to the village to investigate the matter. The imperial officer, from whom we have this account, traveled there from Gradište to bear witness to this phenomenon, of which he had so often heard tell.

The tombs of all those who had died in the previous six weeks were opened. When they arrived at the old man’s tomb, they found him with his eyes open and vermilion in color. He breathed normally, yet was as motionless as a corpse. From this, they concluded that he was the very exemplar of a vampire. The executioner drove a stake into his heart. A pyre was erected and the corpse was reduced to ashes. No sign of vampirism was ever found in his son’s body, nor in any of the other corpses.

I will close by recounting a similar event that I myself witnessed. I will leave it to my readers to draw their own conclusions.

In 1816, I had set out on foot for a journey around Vrgorac, and I was staying in the little town of Vrboska. My host was a Morlach who was quite rich by local standards: a most jovial man—and, not incidentally, a bit of a drunkard—by the name of Vuk Poglonović. His wife was young and still pretty, and his sixteen-year-old daughter was quite charming. I wanted to spend a few days at his home so I could sketch some ancient ruins in the area, but I found it impossible to rent a room from him in exchange for money; he insisted on having me as a guest. The
price of my lodging, then, was a rather onerous display of gratitude, inasmuch as I had to hold my own with my friend Poglonović for as long as he wished to remain at the table. Anyone who has dined with a Morlach will understand what a trial that can be.

One evening, about an hour after the two ladies had left us, I was singing some local tunes to my host (as a ruse to avoid drinking any more), when we were interrupted by dreadful shrieks coming from the bedroom. Generally speaking, there is only one such room in the house, and it is shared by everyone. We ran, armed, to the bedroom, where a ghastly spectacle awaited us. The mother, pale and frenzied, was holding the body of her daughter. The girl, having fainted, was paler still than her mother and was laid out on the bale of straw that served as her bed. The mother cried out, “A vampire! A vampire! My poor daughter is dead!”

Together, we managed to help Chava come to. She told us that she had seen the window open and that a pale man wrapped in a shroud had thrown himself upon her and bitten her while attempting to strangle her. When she cried out, the specter fled and she fainted. However, she believed she recognized the vampire as a local man named Wiecznany, who had died more than a fortnight earlier. She had a small, red mark on her neck; I didn’t know whether it was a beauty spot or if she had been bitten by some insect while she was having her nightmare.

When I hazarded this conjecture, the father dismissed it abruptly. His daughter was crying and wringing her hands, repeating endlessly, “Alas! to die so young, to die unmarried!” The mother insulted me, calling me an infidel; she assured us that she, too, had seen the vampire with her own two eyes, and that she recognized him as Wiecznany. I resolved to keep quiet.

Every amulet in the house—and, indeed, in the village—was soon hung around Chava’s neck, as her father swore to go disinter Wiecznany the next day and to burn him in the presence of all his relatives. In this manner the whole night went by; there was no calming them.

At daybreak, the entire village was stirring: the men were armed with rifles and daggers; the women carried red-hot horseshoes; the children had sticks and stones. We made our way to the cemetery, as shouts and insults were hurled at
the deceased. With great effort, I emerged from the raging throng and went to stand beside the grave.

The exhumation took a long time. Everyone wanted to have a share in the effort, and so people were getting in one another’s way; indeed, there would surely have been some accidents had the old men not given the order that only two men were to disinter the corpse itself. As soon as they removed the cloth that had covered the body, a frightfully high-pitched scream made my hair stand on end. The sound came from the woman beside me, who shouted, “It’s a vampire! The worms have not eaten him!” All at once, a hundred mouths repeated her words, even as the corpse’s head was being blown to pieces by twenty rifles shooting at point-blank range. Chava’s father and relatives continued to assail the body with heavy blows of their long knives. Women used linens to soak up the red liquid that gushed from the mutilated body so it could be rubbed on the victim’s neck.

Despite the riddled state of the corpse, several young men removed it from the grave and took the precaution of tying it securely to the trunk of a fir tree. With all the children following behind them, they dragged the body to a small orchard facing Poglonović’s house. There, a heap of firewood and straw had been prepared in advance. They set fire to it, then threw the corpse on the pile and began to dance around it, each of the men shouting louder than his neighbor, as they continuously fanned the flames. The stench that emerged therefrom soon forced me to leave their company and return to my lodgings.

The house was filled with people; the men were smoking pipes, and the women were talking all at once and peppering the victim with questions, as she, still terribly pale, barely managed to reply. Wrapped around her neck were scraps of fabric saturated with the revolting red liquid that they took to be blood, which made for a ghastly contrast with poor Chava’s bared shoulders and neck.

Little by little the crowd dispersed, until I was the only remaining visitor in the household. The illness was prolonged. Chava dreaded nightfall and wanted someone to watch over her at all times. Her parents, fatigued by their daily work, could scarcely keep their eyes open, so I offered my services as an overnight companion, which they gratefully accepted. I knew that, from a Morlachian perspective, there was nothing improper about my proposal.
I shall never forget the nights I spent at that unfortunate girl’s bedside. She shuddered at every creak of the floor, at every whistle of the north wind, at the faintest of sounds. When she dozed off, she saw ghastly visions; all too often, she awoke with a start and screamed. Her imagination had been troubled by a dream, and now all the old busybodies in the countryside had managed to drive her mad with their frightening tales. She often said to me, as she felt her eyelids growing heavy, “Do not fall asleep, I beseech you. Hold a rosary in one hand and your dagger in the other; watch over me.” On other occasions, she would not sleep unless she could hold my arm between her hands, clutching so tightly that the outline of her fingers was visible on my arm long afterward.

Nothing could distract her from the dismal thoughts that hounded her. She was terribly afraid of death, and she believed herself lost and helpless, despite all our efforts to console her. Within a matter of days, she had grown shockingly thin; all the color had drained from her lips, and her large, dark eyes looked glassy. Truly, she was a dreadful sight to behold.

I attempted to influence her imagination by pretending to see matters as she did. Alas, having initially mocked her credulity, I was no longer entitled to her trust. I told her that I had learned white magic in my country and knew a very powerful spell against evil spirits; if she wished, I said, I would take the risk upon myself and utter the spell, out of love for her.

At first, her inherent goodness made her fear the consequences for my soul. Before long, however, her fear of death overpowered her concern for me, and she bade me try the spell. I had committed a few passages of Racine to memory; I recited the French verses aloud before the poor girl, who believed she was hearing the devil’s own tongue. Then, repeatedly rubbing her neck, I pretended to remove from it a small red agate that I had hidden between my fingers. I solemnly assured her that I had removed it from her neck and that she was saved. But she looked sadly at me and said, “You are lying; you had that stone in a little box. I saw you with it. You are no magician.” Thus my ruse had done more harm than good. From that moment on, her condition did not cease to decline.

The night before her death, she said to me, “It is my own fault if I die. A boy from the village wanted to elope with me, but I refused. I told him I would go with him only if he gave me a silver chain. He went to Makarska to buy one, and while he
was away, the vampire came. But if I hadn’t been home,” she added, “perhaps he
would have killed my mother. So it is for the best.” The next day she called for her
father and made him promise to cut her throat and legs himself to keep her from
becoming a vampire; she did not want anyone other than her father committing
these useless atrocities upon her body. Then she kissed her mother and asked her
to go and bless a rosary at the tomb of a man considered holy by the people of
the village, and bring it back to her afterward. I admired the sensitivity shown by
that country girl in finding such a pretext to prevent her mother from witnessing
her last moments. She asked me to remove an amulet from around her neck.
“Keep it,” she said to me; “I hope it will be of more use to you than it was to me.”
Then, with great piety, she received the sacraments. Two or three hours later, her
breathing grew heavy and her eyes grew still. Suddenly she grasped her father’s
arm and attempted to fling herself against his chest; and then she was dead. Her
illness had lasted eleven days.

A few hours later, I left the village, vehemently condemning vampires, revenants,
and all those who tell tales of such things.

Alison Lewis:

Yermiyahu Ahron Taub will read the title story of the book Blessed Hands: Stories
by Frume Halpern. In a few incantatory pages, "Blessed Hands" establishes some
of the central themes of the book: the body as the site of layers of present-day
and historical trauma, the role of the health practitioner in guiding the patient to
healing, and the ways in which class and access to resources figure in the
individual’s overall state of being.

Yermiyahu Ahron Taub:

Blessed Hands

Ever since Soreh stood up on her own two feet and became an independent
person, her hands had been in constant contact with human bodies. Her fingers
caressed their aches in nurturance, fusing with the pain that comes from hard
labor. The hands received thanks and blessings from all sorts of mouths and in all
sorts of languages. Sometimes, they were blessed with tears, and sometimes—
with a smile.
Soreh didn’t take pride in how her hands looked—unless she was working with them. Outside of her work, she maintained, they were nothing to flaunt. Her hands weren’t feminine enough. Heavy muscles, taut veins, wrinkled skin, broad palms—in other words, hands without any charm whatsoever. But when the hands came into contact with the human body, they were animated with a life of their own. They appeared tender and soulful—with a maternal devotion, with the will to lighten aches and alleviate suffering, with the drive to care for children and elders. The hands extended not just to the ailing organs but all the way to the human soul.

Through her two unlovely, but effective, hands, Soreh also connected often with those who didn’t understand her language and couldn’t make themselves understood to her. Her hands were her medium, and through them, patients felt her closeness down to the deepest depths of their suffering, ailing limbs. In their eyes, Soreh detected blessing without words. These mute blessings were a form of encouragement to her, a kind of force field—they were the foundation of the love she carried within her throughout these many years for all those who suffered.

Year in, year out—the same. The same people. The fingers know no prejudice. Agony is similar among all sorts of people. When someone is in pain, that “aagh!” has to be torn out. A broken organ is the same broken organ for everyone. And yet, each person contains within themselves a kind of distinctiveness, something that separates them from all others.

Quite often, it seemed to Soreh that not only did she fathom the sick, but they themselves understood her through her hands. They sensed her compassion. They saw how she absorbed their fears into her very being. As a result, the patients brought to Soreh not merely their own wounded lives but also the troubles of their children and their children’s children. In this way, she was woven into the lives of all of their families. She saw them around her, as if they were her own blood relatives.

An old mother, a seeming shadow of a human being with a body that looked like parched earth, who had long forgotten the touch of a friendly hand upon her body, sensed the proximity of Soreh’s devoted hand and became talkative.
The old woman didn’t know how many of her children perished in the gas chambers, but she did know how many of her grandchildren had. When she spoke about them, tears flowed down onto her hands. Those tears mixed with Soreh’s tears, and the old woman felt close to her. She blessed and thanked Soreh, and then became a part of Soreh’s family.

The old woman reminded Soreh of her own mother, her mother with her own blessed hands. She had been ill for a long time, suffering from staggering pains that allowed her no sleep. Her children were helpless. Soreh, who was some ten years old, wanted so much to help her mother that she ran her child’s fingers over her mother’s neck. It worked wonders. Her mother dozed off. From that point on, Soreh could always get her mother to fall asleep with her touch. Every time her mother opened her eyes and saw her youngest caressing her hair, she would say, “A blessing on your hands, my child!”

God wanted these same hands to draw their livelihood from touching the human body. Life also wanted Soreh to share the blessings of her hands. For those who most needed her hands, she could only spare a few minutes. The rest of her time she had to give to those who could pay. Still, in those few minutes, she served the neediest with her hands and she did so with great attentiveness.

These old, sick, and broken people were given a written chart with an allotted number of minutes. But for those who purchased her time, there was no chart; they just selected the time slot when it was too early for them to play cards or go shopping.

Those from the lower social strata were not terribly vigilant in their hygiene or particularly well-mannered; they were heavy and awkward in gait and often dull of mind. Still, when you dug deeper, when you brought out what was buried deep within, all that was most essentially human would shine forth, leaving you surprised and feeling small and insignificant in comparison. Over there—among the privileged and polished, the refined—there God had set His hand and shielded them, protecting them from all that was malignant. And yet there, when you scraped off the sheen, a little worm, a small parasite, would crawl out from behind the refined façade.

When Soreh went to her more privileged patients, she had to put on fresh, clean clothes. She had to doll herself up for the lackey who opened the door for her.
When she came to the lady of the house, she had to walk on tip-toes. She had to speak quietly, courteously, with submission, as if she were pleading for her very life. The genteel lady was just pure smiles and paid her banal compliments, and Soreh, too, had to smile and pay for the compliments.

The lady always had a lot to say. She usually complained about exhaustion stemming from too much thinking, from worry, from the servants—you didn’t even know how much to pay for their wages. Why, they themselves didn’t know how much to ask for! And what a hardship—there was nowhere to escape from them. It all wore terribly on her nerves.

The lady stretched herself out like a lazy, well-fed cat and yawned: it was all just too much! It had to stop! They needed to leave her in peace!

When Soreh worked on the lady in the low, soft bed, among all of the satin and silk covers, when she manipulated the soft body with its pampered limbs and listened to the lady’s babble, she thought about her own life. Right here, at the house of the person who had purchased her hands and forced her to listen to her silly chatter, Soreh wanted to demand a small piece of life for herself.

Reflecting on her life, Soreh asked herself: What would I be doing if I were at home? More than anything, she would see to it that her children went to bed on time. She longed to cuddle them, to help them fall asleep with a little story—one she longed to tell them but kept postponing because she had no time.

Soreh remembered her unfortunate mother in her impoverished shtetl of long ago. Her mother had sold her own baby’s milk. She hired herself out as a wetnurse for the wealthy. She had to let her own child go hungry, while the wealthy child grazed at her breast. She had to give away a mother’s love of her own baby to a stranger’s child.

Soreh started suddenly from her thoughts. She thought she was waking up from a dream and grew frightened—had she been speaking her thoughts aloud? Could her reflections have been audible? Had her fingers given away what she was thinking? They were like her musical instrument. Through her hands, her feelings were transmitted to others—over there. She could see that in their eyes. These were vibrating tones, mute music!
She reproached herself for the stolen time, and with the intensity and tenderness of the soul, began to pour herself into the realm of her hands—these hands that would surely lead her onto the right path. These lean, humble hands knew only one path—the truth—even toward those who cannot see another person’s truth.

In the room, the stillness was blue, silken. The air was saturated with blue apathy. The quiet, musical tick-tock of the wall clock in its crystal frame, which had been hanging for a few generations in this venerable apartment on Park Avenue, harmonized with her breathing and with the rhythm of her fingers as they moved from limb to limb. Soreh’s legs trembled slightly when she bent over. The little dog, napping on a padded, satin rocking chair, stretched out and yawned. This was no ordinary little dog. It looked like a clever housewife who knew all too well what’s what. Soreh loved dogs, but this creature that looked at her with the eyes of a human being was not to her liking. It seemed to her that the dog was watching her—tracking her every movement—with suspicious eyes. Each time she saw the little dog yawning or sticking out its long, pink tongue, or showing off its small, white teeth and silky fur, Soreh thought, “This is a real fancy dog that loves to flirt!”

When she was finished with her work, it was hard for Soreh to straighten up. But she didn’t want the little dog to notice, so Soreh mustered her strength and stood up straight with a gesture, as if casting off a heavy load from herself.

The lady turned to face her. She stretched out her just-massaged body and a delighted smile appeared on her face. Eyes lowered, she gazed upon herself, and as if talking to herself, said, “What blessed hands! What magical hands!”

Soreh quickly put on her coat and hurriedly headed out. She quickly ran past the doorman, feeling as if she had just done something foolish, as if someone had tricked her and she were a bit angry at herself. She quickened her pace, spewing a curse into the air. Then she made her escape, heading for home.

Q&A:
[Questions from the audience – ~10 minutes]

Before we open up to audience questions, I’d like to invite everyone to come to our author/translator meet & greets at FEP table T1635 in the exhibits area, immediately following this session.