

Studies in Jewish Civilization 9

# Yiddish Language & Culture: Then & Now

Edited by  
Leonard Jay Greenspoon

# **Yiddish Language & Culture**

Proceedings  
of the Ninth Annual Symposium  
of the Philip M. and Ethel Klutznick  
Chair in Jewish Civilization  
October 27 & 28, 1996

# Yiddish Language & Culture

Then & Now

*Studies in Jewish Civilization* — 9

Leonard Jay Greenspoon  
Editor



Center for the Study of  
Religion and Society

The Klutznick Chair in Jewish Civilization

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*To*  
*Steve Riekes*  
*a true friend*  
*a loyal supporter*  
*a mentsh*

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## Acknowledgments

The fifteen papers in this collection were among those delivered at the Ninth Annual Symposium of the Philip M. and Ethel Klutznick Chair in Jewish Civilization at Creighton University on October 27 and 28, 1996.

Although by now many aspects of planning and running a symposium are well established, each year's event presents unique challenges and possibilities. It is only through the dedication, hard work, and good nature of a number of people that we manage to overcome obstacles, turn last-minute crises into rewarding circumstances, and leave everyone — audience and participants alike — with the distinct feeling that it really was worth it. Special thanks go to Gloriann Levy, director of the Jewish Cultural Arts Council and frequent liaison between Omaha's Jewish community and Creighton University, and Maryellen Read, assistant to the Klutznick Chair and accomplished organizer of all things great and small. We did not know it at the time, but the Ninth Symposium was to be Maryellen's last. She will be missed by many! Kay Reploge, who joined the Klutznick office last summer, took over where Maryellen had left off. Kay has put her distinctive mark on this volume, earning heartfelt thanks from all. My comrade-in-arms, Bryan LeBeau (Director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society) is deserving of an enormous debt of gratitude. His reassuring words kept me and this project on track, avoiding most time-consuming detours and potentially ruinous delays or wrecks!

Two of the Symposium participants, Bob Rothstein and Cecile Kuznitz, made special efforts to insure the success of this volume. To them and to all contributors, go our sincere thanks and hope that they will not be disappointed with this volume and its contents.

We dedicate this volume to Steve Riekes, Phil Klutznick's nephew, who more than any other single individual has been responsible for the growth and continuance of these symposia. Steve has never failed in his enthusiastic encouragement of the Chair and its activities, and his support — in so many ways — has been crucial. Thank you, Steve!



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LEONARD J. GREENSPOON, CHAIRHOLDER  
THE KLUTZNICK CHAIR IN JEWISH CIVILIZATION  
CREIGHTON UNIVERSITY  
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## Editor's Introduction

One of the distinctive features of the Klutznick Symposium is that each year we select an entirely new topic with the aim of presenting a synthesis of the finest scholarship to the broadest possible audience. When we annually issue a Call for Papers, announcing the subject matter of the next Symposium and inviting potential presenters to submit a proposal, we never know for sure what the response will be. And yet experience has taught us one thing — we will not be disappointed.

So it was that we were not entirely surprised, but very pleased nonetheless, with the large number of high quality proposals we received in response to our Call for Papers for the Ninth Annual Symposium, held on Sunday, October 27, and Monday, October 28, 1996. From that number we selected twenty individuals, who over the course of two days presented nineteen well-received papers. The presenters range from internationally-known scholars to graduate students, and their topics span the centuries and the continents. In this volume we publish fifteen of these papers, written accessibly for the educated general public, accompanied by sufficient documentation to please even the most exacting scholar.

I would like to offer one further general characterization, which also serves to distinguish the Klutznick Symposium from others that have dealt with Yiddish language and culture. Our Call for Papers was widely disseminated, with the result that we attracted scholars not typically associated with Yiddish studies, as well as seasoned Yiddishists. This provided additional approaches and subjects that are not usually discussed in such settings. Moreover, we had no agenda — ideological, hidden, or otherwise — that motivated our choices of presenters or presentations. Rather, as is always the case with a Klutznick Symposium, speakers were given the chance to interact with each other and with eager audience members, and all had the opportunity to enjoy what Omaha and its truly remarkable Jewish community has to offer.

The first two papers in this collection are the keynote addresses, which provide masterful overviews in the areas of literature (*Roskies*) and art (*Soltes*). But these are more than surveys, since both presentations serve to correct previous, widespread misunderstandings and to enhance our

appreciation of some of the central figures in Jewish/Yiddish arts and letters. Suffice it to say that few, if any, of those who savor these articles will ever read Yiddish literature (in the original or in translation) or look at a piece by Chagall (or another artist discussed by Soltes) in exactly the same way. And what a marvelous introduction for those who are as of yet unfamiliar with this material!

The next three articles deal with interconnections linking Yiddish with certain institutions in eastern Europe in the realm of politics (*Kuhn*), urban life (*Kuznitz*), and theater (*Schedrin*). Although on the surface it may appear that these contributions appeal only to specialists, this is not the case. The often stormy relationship (or better, set of relationships) between the use or non-use of a specific language and political organizations, day-to-day life on the streets, in the schools, at the marketplace, and as a carrier of culture are issues as alive today as ever. Thanks to these three authors, the material is accessible to thoughtful readers at many levels.

Yiddish theater has not, of course, been restricted to its eastern European origins. Nor has it always been judged on purely aesthetic grounds. A case study from New York City (*Nahshon*) well illustrates the latter point; a detailed chronicle of Yiddish Theater in Omaha (*Pollak* and *Greenbaum*) highlights its ability to entertain and draw crowds for decades far away from the so-called centers of American Jewish life.

The Holocaust wiped out the indigenous centers of Yiddish speakers throughout Europe, but it did not succeed in crushing interest in the Yiddish language or more broadly in a Judaism that identifies in one way or another with Yiddish culture. Two papers deal specifically with the "Now" of Yiddish life: in contemporary Hasidic communities (*Isaacs*), which lie somewhat at the periphery, and in mass marketing aimed at a consumption-oriented public (*Halter*), which some would argue lies at the heart of capitalism. Not surprisingly, the issues addressed in these chapters are among the most widely controversial in this volume. To their credit, the authors face these issues directly, allowing all readers to make up their own minds on the meaning of such phenomena for today's Jews as well as for the Judaism(s) of tomorrow.

Jewish literature, in the multitude of its nuances and significations, is as popular as ever, and its connections with Yiddish remain alive in spite of the ever-decreasing base of Yiddish-speakers. This is true in the realm of poetry as well as prose. Yiddish poetry, especially that produced by

women, has not always been accessible to the general public. One theme, the matriarchs, in this far too neglected area is beautifully brought to life in text and translation (*Hellerstein*). Jewish-American literary life and productivity, as exemplified in the world of Irving Howe (*Weinberger*) and the works of Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud (*Kremer*), are at the heart of the other two presentations relating to literary themes.

How has Yiddish functioned in the liturgical life of Jews and in their experience of Scripture? Two of the presentations gathered together in this volume recount aspects of the richness of Yiddish as a bridge between humanity and the divine. But they do so from very different perspectives: from the inside (*Freund*), revealing the remarkable ability of Yiddish to strengthen Jews in their inner lives, and from the outside (*Greenspoon*), demonstrating the perceived power of Yiddish to convey the message of Christianity to immigrant and other Jewish communities.

It will surprise few that Yiddish is as effective at expressing the earthiest sentiments as it is at conveying the loftiest thoughts. We often associate particular foods and dietary restrictions with Jewish life, and many of these associations, graphically and comically expressed, form the basis for the final chapter in this collection (*Rothsteins*). From their analysis we learn a great deal not only about the life of eastern European Jews, but also about the many similarities and marked differences between them and their non-Jewish neighbors.

It is not a simple matter to sum up the fifteen chapters of this book in a single phrase or sentence. Perhaps it is not even desirable to do so. Building on the topic of the volume's last paper, we can probably best look upon this collection as a feast. Readers can sample from various articles as they might do from trays of food set out on a table; they can choose to select only one or two articles for detailed consideration, just as some people will eat only one or two items from a buffet; or they can read the entire volume, cover-to-cover, filling their minds with its richness as many fill their stomachs at lavish dinners. However they may approach this volume, we have only one last comment: Essen, essen, nicht fressen (eat, enjoy, but not in excess)!

*An additional note:* There are wide disagreements among Yiddish scholars and speakers over the proper way to transliterate and translate into English Yiddish terms, both proper names and common nouns, verbs, etc. We have decided to allow all authors the freedom to handle these matters

as they choose. The result is consistency within each article, but not throughout the entire volume. We apologize if this approach offends some, but our primary concern in this regard has been to accommodate our contributors rather than to align ourselves with some "higher standard."

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## Yiddish in the Twentieth Century: A Literature of Anger and Homecoming<sup>1</sup>

David G. Roskies

Back home in New York I am a member of a *khevra kadisha*, a Jewish burial society. It has taught me to distinguish between the living and the dead. No amount of verbiage or hype can bring a dead man back to life. When the oxygen stops flowing to the brain and the blood stops pumping from the heart, a person ceases to be among the living. Rumors of a renaissance do not a resurrection make.

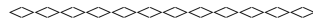
As a member of a *khevra kadisha*, I have also learned to recite the entire book of Psalms. But when first it came my turn at *shemirah*, "to guard" the dead person on the eve of burial, I was not prepared to confront the full range of emotion expressed in this ancient anthology. Having studied the Siddur in the Jewish People's School of Montreal, I was of course familiar with the psalms of thanksgiving and praise that make up the Kabbalat Shabbat service and the *Psukei Dezimra*. Having then attended a Protestant high school, I learned to recite the Lord's Prayer, Psalm 23, by heart, in English. Nothing in my formal education or socialization as a Jew prepared me for the anguish and anger, and especially for the elemental cries for revenge that punctuate the Psalter with such regularity.

What happened to this Jewish rage and why is it so hard to retrieve? It was buried, I am now convinced, with the demise of a living Yiddish culture.

The most important lesson I have learned, however, as a member of a *khevra kadisha* is that attending the dead is a *khesed shel emes*, the highest mitzvah of all, because there is no expectation of reward. We do

what is required for its own sake, and out of the public eye. In Jewish tradition it is considered a greater act of loving kindness than delivering a eulogy or reciting the Kaddish.

This, then, is the prescribed way of acknowledging the break, the irreparable loss. One must first voice the Yiddish anger that lies buried just beneath the surface. One must, above all, distinguish between past significance and present meaning, which is to say, attempt to understand modern Yiddish culture on its own terms, as a closed chapter of Jewish and human history with its own internal logic, and to pursue one's inquiry without regard to all the pressing needs of the present.



Yiddish literary greatness was reserved for those who steeled their art and pitted their faith against the forces of darkness. The first to do so was Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1810), who wove fantastically elaborated tales so as to keep alive the lonely struggle for redemption. Then came Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (1836-1917), better known through his sidekick, Mendeleyev the Book Peddler, who constructed an elaborate allegory called *The Mare* in order to expose the intellectual betrayals here on earth.<sup>2</sup> Not until the wrenching experiences of the twentieth century, however — secularization, migration, war, and mob violence — did anger become the warp and woof of Yiddish letters.

I.L. Peretz (ca. 1852-1915) broke new ground in Jewish culture because he revealed himself to his Yiddish readers as what he was: a hardnosed survivor of the *khurban beit hamidrash*, the ruined House of Study, who now made his home in the secular world. Peretz's first masterpiece depicted this urban intellectual traveling through the outback collecting statistics on the economic plight of the Jews. It was punctuated by an outburst of helpless rage, bordering on madness.<sup>3</sup>

Tomorrow morning I will record information.

I know in advance what I'll come up with. . . . I will find waifs next to the geese and ducks in the water at the edge of the swamp; infants in the cradle, crying their lungs out; the helpless sick in bed; boys, hardly more than children, boarding with strangers in order to study Talmud; young married women, modest or immodest in their coarse wigs. No sooner do I close my eyelids than I visualize a horde of faces utterly feeble, sallow,

ashen, and twisted, hardly a one with a smile, hardly a one with a dimple; the men unvirile, lumpish; the young women with runny eyes, bearing things — a bushel basket of fruit, or a sack of onions, or a baby plus the sack of onions.

I know in advance that I will find an unlicensed gin mill, a couple of horse thieves, and more than a couple of smugglers.

What will be the upshot of the statistics? Will statistics tell us how much suffering is needed — empty bellies and unused teeth; hunger so intense that the sight of a dry crust of bread will make the eyes bulge in their sockets, as if drawn out by pliers; indeed, actual death by starvation — to produce an unlicensed gin mill, a burglar, a horse thief?

("Bilder fun a provints-rayze," 1891; trans. Milton Himmelfarb)

This was the 38-year-old author's long day's journey into night, which marked the end of his faith in science and social engineering and the beginning of his career as a Yiddish parodist and modernist.

No wonder, then, that when Peretz abandoned the critical observation of present reality for the reinvention of the past, he found Reb Nahman of Bratslav and was the first modern Jewish writer to hear the voice of a lonely visionary speaking through those seemingly naive tales. No wonder, that after numerous experiments with dramatic genres, Peretz wrote his own *Walpurgisnacht*, set in the old marketplace of an ancient Polish-Jewish town and starring the most blasphemous figure yet to appear on the Yiddish stage: the *badkhn*, or Jester, a combination folk bard and heretic. The Jester observes, then orchestrates, a vast assemblage of Jews living, dead, and in-between, using the cover of night to ridicule all the redemptive schemes — whether sacred or secular — that once had vivified the Jewish body politic. Betrayed by the past, the Jester betrays it in turn, championing the only potent force still left — Death itself.<sup>4</sup>

Because Peretz's *Bay nakht afn altn mark* (*At Night in the Old Marketplace*) was too technically bold and ideologically bleak ever to be staged as written, its broad historical sweep and depth of cultural layering failed to set a new standard in modern Yiddish letters. Instead, that honor was conferred upon someone more modestly attired: Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye der milkhiker* (*Tevye the Dairyman*). Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916) proved that he could match Peretz, his great contemporary and rival, betrayal for betrayal. Sender Blank, the eponymous hero of Sholem Aleichem's first major novel, was betrayed by his spoiled and greedy son;

Sheyne-Sheyndl, wife to Sholem Aleichem's first schlemiel hero, turned every letter to Menakhem-Mendl into a manic catalogue of his betrayals, real and imagined. But Tevye — Tevye was the sum of all personal betrayals, the patriarch-without-sons fated, therefore, to import his bridegrooms, who in turn brought nothing but anarchy, apostasy, suicide, and cynicism in their wake.

A close cousin to Mendelev the Bookseller, Tevye collars his horse and his God whenever the emotional need arises, and only later does he confide in Pani Sholem Aleichem, his chief confidant. Behind all the verbal antics, however, the trilingual wordplay and folksy parables, the dialogues-within-monologues, the scriptural malapropisms, there stands a father in the eye of the storm, whose desire to emulate the personal God of Israel is matched only by his anger at the inscrutable God of History. Tevye is a latter-day Job, but he is also the Almighty, who must banish Eve (Chava) from the Garden; he is father to Hodel, his second daughter, who is ready to martyr herself for the cause of political salvation like her namesake Esther; and he is Abraham, cast into exile. If Peretz envisioned a grotesque reversal of Ezekiel's Valley of the Dry Bones, then Sholem Aleichem, through Tevye, replayed the whole history of biblical and exilic Israel on Mother Russia's unredeemed soil. And what Tevye could not experience, living as he did on the outskirts both of city and town, was left for other demented fathers to experience, as recounted live in the third-class train compartment to the anonymous traveling salesman, the stand-in editor of Sholem Aleichem's very bleakest work, *The Railroad Stories*.<sup>5</sup>

With the deaths of Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz, and the closing of their canon, the anatomy of betrayal, which is to say, the philology of anger, became more specialized and localized. A division of labor ensued. On the one hand, there were Yiddish writers (like I.M. Weissenberg and Oyzer Warshawski) who used the image of the shtetl (or Jewish market town) to document the extent of communal betrayal. On the other, there were H.D. Nomberg, David Bergelson, and Lamed Shapiro, for whom the betrayal of all personal aspirations was a given, and what was left was to chronicle the pain, the psychic aftermath. Both groups together up-ended the legacy of the Founding Fathers by replacing invective — mere verbal aggression — with the depiction of brute violence: class warfare, pogroms, and particularly suicide.

Henceforth, with the mass dispersion of Yiddish-speaking Jews over the seven seas, each new center had its own grounds for hope and despair.

America was fertile ground for Yiddish parody, the amalgam of hatred and love that so perfectly expressed the pace and wrenching price of change. Out of the Yiddish humor magazines there emerged the greatest of all Yiddish parodists, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern (1886-1932). He appeared in many guises — as street drummer, nobleman-turned dishwasher, Zarkhi the Philosopher-Clown, and most laughable of all, as Moyshe-Leyb, the sad-eyed Yiddish poet with a pipe in his mouth, composing verses amidst fire escapes and pushcarts. <sup>6</sup>

There are people who maybe go on bragging  
 That it's not nice to crowd around a wagon  
 With onions, cucumbers, and plums.  
 But if it's nice to schlep in streets after a death wagon,  
 Clad in back, and lament with eyes sagging,  
 It is a sin to go on bragging  
 That it's not nice to crowd around a wagon  
 With onions, cucumbers, and plums.  
 ("Keyn mol shoyne vel ikh nisht zogn"; trans. Benjamin & Barbara Harshav)

The material struggle is the irreducible core of human existence, rendered by a wish list of sweet and sour fruits and vegetables that so deliciously subvert the rhythm and the rhyme: "Mit tsibeles, un ugerkes, un floymen" ("With onions, cucumbers, and plums").

Nothing like Halpern's anger had ever been heard in Yiddish before, as encyclopedic as the scope of his parody: an apocalyptic response to the First World War with its parody of Hebrew poet laureate Hayyim Nahman Bialik; anti-ballads that retold the story of Creation, the birth of Jesus, the saga of mass immigration, the squalid tale of "A Little Love in Big Manhattan." Halpern even transmuted the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, that lightning rod of protest among radicals the world over, into an existential parable, poignant to this day. Moses and New World Mendele, Jeremiah and EveryJew — who knows what other parodic roles Moyshe-Leyb might have played had death not ended his act, at the age of 46?

In America, every Yiddish writer was free to reinvent him- and herself. Anna Margolin (1887-1952), the pen name of Rosa Lebensboym, imagined herself as a homosexual lover in Ancient Greece and as Caesar about to marry his own sister. To those who abhorred the pursuit of pure

pleasure, Margolin-Caesar had this to say: <sup>7</sup>

In a wreath of roses, with wine, till late,  
In haughty calm, I heard the news  
About the weakling from Nazareth  
And wild stories about the Jews.  
("Ikh bin geven a mol a yingling"; trans. Benjamin & Barbara Harshav)

At the opposite end of the poetic spectrum stood H. Leivick, arguing by personal example and historical exempla for sublimation as the supreme act of moral courage.

Henceforth, with the division of the globe between Right and Left, it was open season for ventilating one's rage. Where one's personal rage was forged in a furnace of revolutionary and liturgical poetics, the results could electrify. Peretz Markish (on the left) composed his travesty of the kaddish for the victims of the Ukrainian pogroms. Uri Zvi Greenberg (on the right) took leave of Christian Europe, rescuing only its Jewish-born Messiah. But when the Communist Party laid down the law ("socialist in content, national in form"), prophetic anger gave way to programmatic anger. New journals like *Oktyaber*, *Di royte velt* in the U.S.S.R., and *Der hamer* in the U.S. of A. spewed forth denunciations as fast as the Party faithful could churn them out. The exceptional writer, like Der Nister (1884-1950), who fell afoul of the Party almost upon his return to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, took the betrayal out on himself. His swan song as a symbolist writer was a confession of guilt, in which the hero-scholar and former circus performer awoke from a drunken stupor "Behind the Fence," where, according to Jewish custom, suicides are buried.

With the rise of a Nationalist Socialist ideology that singled out the Jews for eventual destruction and signalled the abandonment of the Jews by Western civilization, every year would be a hundred in the chronology of rage.

1933. Sholem Asch writes *Der tilim-yid* (*The Psalm-Jew*; published in English as *Salvation*), the psychological portrait of a saint named Yehiel whose "strength lay in his faith, a deep, inward, blind faith in God's goodness," who believed "that there was no evil either in God or in His creation," but whose recourse to the entire book of Psalms, the book that first taught Jews — and Christians — how to talk to God, also makes Yehiel a conduit for divine wrath.

1934. I.J. Singer begins the serial publication of *Di brider Ashkenazi* (*The Brothers Ashkenazi*), which documents the rise and fall of Jewish Lodz, the Manchester of Poland. His verdict: Jewish life is built on sand.

1935. Repudiating a humanistic world order in which individual action counts for something and where the betterment of life on earth is a laudable goal, younger brother Isaac Bashevis Singer publishes his first novel, *Satan in Goray*, in book form. Through a Polish shtetl torn apart by the messianic heresy of Sabbetai Zvi, Bashevis enlivens the terrors of history, which mirror the moral and political crisis of his day. The novel ends with a dybbuk blaspheming against the entire religious and social order.

1936. Folk bard Mordecai Gebirtig breaks with the melancholy tenor of his songs to write "Es brent!" a desperate call for Jewish self-defense after the pogrom in the Polish town of Przytyk.

1937. Novelist Mikhoel Burshtin writes *Bay di taykhn fun Mazovye* (*By the Rivers of Mazovia*), where he gathers his fellow Polish Jews to weep and calls upon them to rebuild the ravaged shtetl.

April, 1938. American poet Jacob Glatstein writes: <sup>8</sup>

Good night, wide world.  
Big stinking world.  
Not you, but I, slam shut the gate.  
In my long gaberdine,  
With my flaming yellow patch,  
With my proud gait,  
At my own command —  
I go back into the ghetto.  
("A gute nakht, velt"; trans. Benjamin & Barbara Harshav)

Glatstein heralds the journey home of a whole generation of Yiddish cosmopolitans, and a journey into the abyss for those millions of his European brethern who are given no choice.

1939. "At the edge of the abyss," writes Itzik Manger in the preface to his fanciful biography of Shmuel-Aba Abervo, subtitled *Dos bukh fun gan-eydn* (*The Book of Paradise*), "even laughter becomes desperate." Only a few copies of the book make it out of Poland.

November 15, 1940. At the command of the Germans, the Jews of Warsaw are locked into a ghetto wherein Emanuel Ringelblum relocates his staff of chroniclers and statisticians. The Oyneg Shabbes archive will

comprise over 7,000 documents by the time it is buried underground; an assemblage of laments, confessions, and indictments, some of high literary quality, most of them as yet unpublished.

1942. Lodz ghetto. After the latest deportation of 34,000 Jews and a few months before his wife, six-year-old daughter Blimele and newborn son are to be taken away, poet Simkhe-Bunem Shayevitsh writes "Friling taf-shin-beys" ("Spring, 1942"), where he invites Hayyim Nahman Bialik to revisit the City of Slaughter.

February 14, 1943. Vilna ghetto. Poet Abraham Sutzkever imagines the day of liberation as a Day of Wrath, and he asks: <sup>9</sup>

How and with what will you fill  
Your cup on the day you're free?  
Will you in your joy still  
Hear the scream of the past  
Where the skulls of chained days  
Clot in bottomless pits?

And he answers:

In a rubble-encrusted old city  
Your memory will be like a hole,  
And your glance will burrow furtively  
Like a mole, like a mole.  
("Vi azoy?"; trans. C.K. Williams)

October 3, 1943. Vittel, France. Poet Yitshak Katzenelson begins writing his jeremiad, "The Song of the Murdered Jewish People." In it he chronicles the destruction of Jewish Warsaw, settles his score with the Jewish Police and the Jewish Labor Bund, conjures up a Jewry that is no more, and calls upon the heavens to destroy the Germans, a nation of murderers.

1943. New York, NY. Breaking ranks with those of his fellow American-Yiddish writers still wed to the present, I.B. Singer writes in a manifesto: <sup>10</sup>

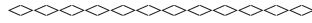
We believe that the Jewish attachment to the past can accommodate an extremely progressive outlook, for the history of the Jewish people is the



history of an ongoing revolution against the powers of darkness.

To make good on his credo, Singer adopts the voice, the diction, and the malediction of the Devil.

I rest my case.



Anger, I have argued with increasing vehemence, is both the subject and substance of a culture reputed to be nothing if not *heymish* (homey) and humorous. I have spoken with so much authority because my case is built on the achievements of Yiddish literary scholarship since the Second World War. Yiddish academic scholars were able to see what they saw, first of all, because they disavowed the living community of Yiddish critics, pedagogues, and ideologues. As someone still educated within the Yiddish secular school system, and as someone who went on to found a Yiddish youth movement, I can personally testify that the price of admission to academe was that I repudiate the platforms of the right, left, and center that had heretofore determined the meaning of Yiddish and the members of its pantheon. My Folkshule teachers, for all their erudition, would not have recognized the Peretz I have just described. To raise Halpern above Avrom Lyessin or H. Leivick in the American-Yiddish pantheon would have seemed to them heretical. To mine the wellsprings of anger in Sholem Aleichem, of all people, would have struck them as absurd. And we all know what the Yiddish establishment thought about I.B. Singer, so ably rendered by Cynthia Ozick in her mini roman à clef, "Envy, or Yiddish in America." <sup>11</sup>

Yiddish scholarship, produced mainly in Hebrew and in English, has been guided by an unwritten mandate to decenter, defamiliarize, and recontextualize its subject. In this respect, it is no different from sister disciplines in the humanities, or, for that matter, from Jewish Studies throughout the Western hemisphere. Because there is no state apparatus or national consensus to which Yiddish scholars are anywhere answerable, they are able to pursue an almost independent course. And the course they have taken is summed up by the (slightly emended) title of a famous essay by T.S. Eliot, "Anger and the Individual Talent." Anger, in their scheme, is what separates the major from the minor writers, the singular talents from the epigones. Here is how it works:

The Polish-born scholar Khone Shmeruk has consistently championed those writers who defied the ideologies of the Yiddish street and whose greatest works were therefore declarations of independence. Thanks to Shmeruk, we now have a veritable Library of Yiddish Iconoclastic Writing: Peretz's *At Night in the Old Marketplace*, Uri Zvi Greenberg's complete Yiddish verse, Israel Rabon's novel *Di gas (The Street)*, the *Khumesh-lider (Bible Poems)* of Itzik Manger, the monologues of Isaac Bashevis Singer. Were it not for Shmeruk, we would know next to nothing about that most hidden of Yiddish writers, the Hidden One himself, Der Nister.<sup>12</sup>

Coming from the Israeli academic scene, Dan Miron began his Yiddish career by demystifying the figure of Mendele the Book Peddler, the so-called Grandfather of Yiddish Literature, revealing the extent of Abramovitsh's alienation from the world of the Little Jew. Once Miron gets through with him, no one would want to claim Mendele as a *zeydee* (grandfather)! Whether studying the image of the shtetl in Yiddish fiction, the nineteenth-century Yiddish novel, the rise-and-fall pattern in Sholem Aleichem's major works, or Sutzkever's *Lider fun togbukh (Poems from a Diary)*, Miron takes a hardnosed secular approach. Miron has also had the chutzpah to question the scholarly construct of *Sifrut Yisrael*, the image of an internally coherent Jewish literature in many languages. Where his teacher Dov Sadan saw continuities, the endless recycling of words, phrases, images, and motifs from one form of Jewish self-expression to another and from one language to another, Miron sees only multiple ruptures with the past.<sup>13</sup>

For Benjamin Harshav (formerly Hrushovski), the viable traditions in Yiddish poetry are those associated with modernism. Defining radical openness as the *pintele yid*, the essence of the Yiddish language itself, Harshav resurrects the speech rhythms and cosmopolitan world view of the Introspectivists, the American Yiddish modernists, and their cohort.

The theme of betrayal runs like a bold thread through the critical writings of Ruth Wisse. Wisse pulls at the thread from both ends, exposing the despair of Yiddish writers like Abramovitsh, Peretz, Halpern, Glatstein, and Sutzkever, at the betrayal of the Jews by their Christian lovers-in-arms, and the furious rage of these same writers at Jewish self-betrayal. Where, for example, readers celebrated only the playful wit of Peretz's inaugural poem, "Monish," Wisse sums it up as "a painful parable about the makings of the modern Jew out of compounded acts of betrayal — his betrayal at the hands of Maria after he himself had betrayed

the Jewish commandments in an attempt to win her heart." <sup>14</sup> No one, according to Wisse, waged that two-sided battle more courageously — and recklessly — than Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, and no one was himself betrayed more thoroughly than Peretz, by those who claimed to speak in his name.

The next generation of Yiddish scholars has followed suite. The price of betrayal is suicide for passive Jewish men and passionate Jewish women, whom Janet Hadda psychoanalyzes in her book on the subject. My own work and that of Abraham Novershtern on apocalyptic themes and responses to catastrophe look at the subject of betrayal from God's perspective. Ken Frieden traces the uses of irony and satire in his overview of *Classic Yiddish Fiction*. Irony and satire are of course literary vehicles for what other people call: anger. <sup>15</sup>

But there is more. Because the scholars are rapidly becoming the purveyors of Yiddish culture, as well as its main interpreters, now that the lay community of Yiddish publishers, critics, pedagogues, and ideologues has almost ceased to be active and a small group of academics has entered the breach in faraway Oxford, England, the new consensus on Yiddish literature is being shaped by the politics of scholarly editing and the politics of translation.

The rule of thumb among textual editors is to go with the latest available version of a text. This presupposes a culture in which authors are at leisure to revise their work, and where ever more complete editions of their oeuvre appear in their lifetime. Not so in Yiddish. There is no such thing as a truly complete *Complete Works* of any major Yiddish writer: not Abramovitsh, not Peretz, not Sholem Aleichem, not Bergelson, not Der Nister, not Markish, not Halpern, not Glatstein, and not (for all his promises) I.B. Singer. Despite important work done in the U.S.S.R. on two of the Founding Fathers, Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem, which was picked up again decades later in the State of Israel, no such project was ever brought anywhere near to completion. To overcome the ideological fault lines that run through the twentieth century, moreover, Yiddish textual editors have had to adopt the unorthodox principle: the earlier, the better. Thus, in order to restore what is Jewish to the major Soviet-Yiddish writers who were forced to expunge all expressions of petit bourgeois nationalism during the 1930s, before they themselves were expunged on August 12, 1952, editor Khone Shmeruk invariably chose those versions of their poetry and prose published before 1929. The textual apparatus at the end of his landmark anthology, *A shpigl oyf a shteyn*, <sup>16</sup> bears eloquent testimony to the price exacted by Soviet re-education. Conversely, in

order to restore what is radical and experimental to the American-Yiddish modernists after most of them recanted and became kosher members of the literary establishment, editor Benjamin Harshav consistently favored those editions of their verse published before 1940.

At the heart of Yiddish culture lies the most disastrous of all cultural ruptures, the destruction of European Jewry. Whether consciously or not, those who translate Yiddish literature in the wake of the Holocaust are guided by the aesthetic principle: the angrier, the better. How else to explain two brand new translations (one in English, one in Hebrew) of Sholem Aleichem's *Ayznban-geshikhtes* (*Railroad Stories*); an *I.L. Peretz Reader* that gives greater weight to the critical realist than to the writer of literary fairy tales and hasidic monologues; two English-language anthologies of shtetl novellas that do more to bury the shtetl than to praise it; the translation into English, Hebrew, and French of Israel Rabon's horrific novel, *The Street*, immediately upon its rescue from obscurity; and the various translations of Glatstein's selected poetry (particularly his Holocaust poetry) into English by Ruth Whitman, Etta Blum, Cynthia Ozick, Richard Fein, Benjamin and Barbara Harshav, and Barnett Zumoff. The newest ism to hit the field of Yiddish — feminism — has already produced anthologies of everything from Yiddish *tkhines*, women's petitionary prayers, to Yiddish lesbian verse. But at least in one case, that of poet-translator Irena Klepfisz, *mame-loshn* (the mother tongue) stands for all those mothers and daughters ground to dust, even in a utopian world devoid of patrimony.

To fully appreciate the power of this scholarly revision, we would do well to recall the portrait of Yiddish culture that it most immediately replaced: the one painted by the late Irving Howe. Expressing his own poignant sense of loss, and recognizing the ever-growing chasm between the world of Yiddish and the worlds of secular politics, Howe had this to say: "*The virtue of powerlessness, the power of helplessness, the company of the dispossessed, the sanctity of the insulted and the injured* — these, finally, are the great themes of Yiddish literature."<sup>17</sup> I dare say there are many in this audience who would still prefer Howe's elegiac and frankly engage approach to the one I have been describing, and I will have more to say about this at the end of my presentation. But even on its own terms, Howe's descriptive model does nothing to address the dark side of its own theme: the rage that one feels on being powerless, dispossessed, insulted, and injured. There is no Yiddish equivalent, after all, to "turning the other cheek."

"Anger and the Individual Talent" represents a real breakthrough in our critical as well as cultural self-understanding. It suggests, first of all, a way of separating the major writers from the minor writers. As much as we admire the quiet lyricism of I.J. Segal, or the wry understatement of Yoysef Rolnik, or the Proustian expeditions of Yosel Birstein through the streets and back alleys of Jerusalem, Segal, Rolnik, and Birstein must remain minor writers precisely because the element of Jewish anger is missing from their work. Secondly, it forces us to take a second look at the presence or absence of anger *within* a given writer's work. For example, so long as we fail to tap into the hidden rage that underlies the classical meters and extravagant rhymes of Abraham Sutzkever, we cannot begin to define how his neoclassicism diverges from everything that came before it. Conversely, the moments of serenity and romantic love that appear in Halpern's verse are that much more precious against the backdrop of his perennial anger. Only recently, moreover, have we been made aware of the self-censorship of Jewish rage in the writings of Holocaust survivors, especially, as Naomi Seidman has demonstrated, when Yiddish is abandoned for other languages. <sup>18</sup>

Anger, then, defines the Yiddish literary canon.

But the dialectical movement of rebellion and return is what defines modern Yiddish culture as a whole. For out of the anger came a negotiated return to the discarded past, a passionate desire to rebuild the culture out of its shards.

Peretz conjured up an apotheosis of *mesires-nefesh*, "Devotion Without End," a love that conquers all.

Sholem Aleichem turned the tally sheet of personal failures into a luminous tale about the infinite resilience of one Sholem Aleichem, the artist, in *Funem yarid* (*From the Fair*), which he touted as his Song of Songs.

Out of Glatstein's modernism came *Yidishtaytshn*, Yiddish-in-all-its-meanings, the discovery that language is fate, is the poet's sole window to the world; came "The Bratslaver to His Scribe," the quest for wholeness through the persona of a zaddik turned pantheist-poet.

After giving the Devil free rein to blaspheme and to seduce the innocent and the not-so-innocent, I.B. Singer wrote his tales of breathtaking humanity: "Gimpel the Fool," "The Spinoza of Market Street," "The Little Shoemakers."

Out of the Holocaust came Sutzkever's *Geheymshot* (*Secret City*), the great epic of survival in classical metre, came *Gaystike erd*, the Odyssey

of a saving remnant of Jews returning to their "Spiritual Soil."

Following the expulsion of Jews from Poland in 1968 and the exodus of Jews from the Soviet Union in the '70s and '80s, Yiddish writers who for decades had been writing for their desk drawers came to Israel and there gave voice to thanksgiving.

Yiddish is not merely a literature of exile. It is most decidedly and unambiguously a literature of homecoming as well.

The scholars, too, if you prick them, they bleed. Here is not the place to reveal that Shmeruk, Miron, Harshav, Wisse, Roskies, and others are rebels and dreamers manqués, that they too bring to the study of their subject a personal drama of rebellion, loss, and negotiated return. But here is the place to honor, in conclusion, the greatest Yiddish scholar of all times, the late Max Weinreich. Published posthumously in 1973, his *History of the Yiddish Language* constructs a mighty edifice of Jewish interlinguistics, a new field of research, in order to place the Yiddish language at its very pinnacle.<sup>19</sup> Writing in a superidomatic scholarly style, designed to speak volumes about the suppleness of modern Yiddish, Weinreich also provides his readers with a myth of origins. In a place called Loter, somewhere in the early Middle Ages, was born "the language of Derekh haSHaS," the perfect fusion of a Talmudically-rooted and integrated Yiddishkeit with all that was best in the surrounding cultures. Yet this work of consummate scholarship and abiding love was the product of a man himself consumed with rage. Max Weinreich, we were told by his surviving son at a recent memorial conference, was consumed with rage at the Germans for incinerating millions of Yiddish-speaking Jews, the soil upon which the sapling of Yiddish scholarship had barely begun to grow; rage at Hitler's professors for poisoning the wells of Wissenschaft, the ideal of enlightened learning that was to have nourished a world entire.

The terrible divide that separates the Jewish past from the hyphenated Jewish present makes it all the more inevitable that Yiddish culture will be viewed through the prism of our contemporary, postwar sensibilities. This tension between "past significance" and "present meaning" exists in every living culture. You can be sure that when the revisionism stops, not only is the patient dead; she has been erased from living memory as well. I do not, therefore, deny the right of those who use Yiddish to bash Zionism, to promote radical feminism and alternative lifestyles, or to denounce the legacy of the Jewish Left. Bash *gezunterheyt*. Nor do I claim immunity from the same ideological pressures that affect everyone else. My own presentation opened with a thinly-veiled polemic against the chorus of

cheerleaders who would have us believe that some miraculous Yiddish renaissance is now underway. Where I draw the line, however, is over the historically verifiable legacy of Yiddish literary culture. Because so many fine scholars have established a fruitful and ongoing dialogue with that culture, in the disinterested, *kheshed-shel-emes* way that scholars have of talking, they have succeeded in capturing its internal rhythm, logic, direction. That is no small miracle, if you ask me. No smaller miracle than that so many Yiddish rebels came back from the cold and turned their psalm of rage into a psalm of thanksgiving. Or, as Glatstein prophesied and said: "The joy of homecoming weeps within me; *S'veynt in mir di freyd fun kumen*." <sup>20</sup>

## Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this essay appeared in *Il mondo yiddish: saggi*, ed. Elèna Mortara Di Veroli and Laura Quercioli Mincer, a special double issue of *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* LXII, no. 1-2 (1996): 467-82.
- 2 Sholem-Yankev Abramovitsh, *Di klyatshe oder tsar baley khayim*, in *Ale verk fun Mendeley Moykher-Sforim* (Warsaw: Farlag Mendeley, 1928), vol. 5; trans. as "The Mare" in *Yenne Velt: The Great Works of Jewish Fantasy and Occult*, ed. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Wallaby, 1978), 545-663.
- 3 "Impressions of a Journey Through the Tomaszow Region," in *The I.L. Peretz Reader*, ed. Ruth R. Wisse (New York: Schocken Books, 1990), 19-84.
- 4 I.L. Peretz, "A Night in the Old Marketplace," trans. Hillel Halkin, special issue of *Prooftexts* 12 (1992): 1-70.
- 5 Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman and The Railroad Stories*, trans. with an intro. by Hillel Halkin (New York: Schocken Books, 1987).
- 6 Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, "I Shall Never Go On Bragging," in *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*, ed. Benjamin and Barbara Harshav (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 416-419.
- 7 Anna Margolin, "Ikh bin geven a mol a yingling," in *Lider*, ed. Abraham Novershtern (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991), 3. The translation is as yet unpublished.
- 8 Jacob Glatstein, "Good Night, World," *American Yiddish Poetry*, 304-7.
- 9 Abraham Sutzkever, "How?" in *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, ed. David G. Roskies (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 495-96.
- 10 Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Problems of Yiddish Prose in America (1943),"

trans. Robert H. Wolf, *Prooftexts* 9 (1989): 12.

11 In Cynthia Ozick, *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1971), 41-100.

12 On Manger, Singer, and Der Nister, see David G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), chaps. 6-8, and the relevant notes.

13 See Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: A Study in the Rise of Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973); idem, *Der imazh fun shtetl: dray literarishe shtudyen* (The Image of the Shtetl: Three Literary Studies), (Tel Aviv: Y.L. Perets, 1981); idem, *Im lo tihye yerushalayim* (If There Is No Jerusalem . . . : Essays on Hebrew Writing in a Cultural-Political Context), (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1987), 93-171. The University of Syracuse Press is soon to publish a collection of Miron's essays on Yiddish and Hebrew fiction.

14 Ruth R. Wisse, *I.L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1991), 16.

15 Ken Frieden, *Classic Yiddish Fiction: Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).

16 *A shpigl oyf a shteyn: antologye* (A Mirror on a Stone: Anthology. Poetry and Prose of Twelve Murdered Yiddish Writers in the Soviet Union), ed. Benjamin Hrushovski, Abraham Sutzkever and Khone Shmeruk (Tel Aviv: Di goldene keyt and Y.L. Perets, 1964).

17 Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, eds., *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Viking, 1989), p. 38. Emphasis in the original. See Edward Alexander, "Irving Howe and Secular Jewishness: An Elegy," *Judaism* 45:177 (Winter 1996): 101-18.

18 Naomi Seidman, "Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage," *Jewish Social Studies*, n.s. 3 (1996): 1-19.

19 Max Weinreich, *Geshikhte fun der yidisher shprakh: bagrifn, faktn, metodn* (History of the Yiddish Language: Concepts, Facts, Methods), 4 vols. (New York: YIVO, 1973). The first two volumes were translated by Shlomo Noble and Joshua A. Fishman and were published by the University of Chicago Press in 1980.

20 Glatstein, "Good Night, World," last line; my translation.



## Language, Art and Identity: Yiddish In Art From Chagall to Shalom of Safed

Ori Z. Soltes

As is well known, the twin pillars of romanticism and nationalism in the 19th century had as a multi-layered focus the idea that language, literature, music, and the visual arts reflect (or should reflect) the Land and the People — the notion that all of these are interwoven threads in the tapestry of identity, that one can understand a people, and it can understand itself, by the connection to the land where it originated and the language it speaks, the literature in which that language is expressed, and the other oral, musical, and visual means by which it expresses itself.

For the Jews, of course, this provoked the layered question of where we fit in: *which* land *where*, if Jews were to think in Romantic Nationalist terms. From Moses Hess to Theodore Herzl they looked East (or as the case may have been, south) toward *Eretz Yisrael*.<sup>1</sup> So, too, the question evolved as to *how* that sense of self should be expressed towards Eretz Yisrael: in political, spiritual, or cultural terms?

This question, in turn, interwove with the developmental strands of the *Haskalah* (Enlightenment), which had begun sometime earlier and included among its accomplishments the beginning revival of Hebrew as a spoken language — as a secular literary and even street language. The Zionist question included the sub-question of what should be the language of national Jewish self-realization; which language *should* be the primary carrier of Jewish identity. Should it be Hebrew? Incontestably the most universally used language among Jews, Hebrew was, however, a language that had been used for so long and in so many places only as *Lashon*

*haKodesh* (Sacred Tongue), and not as an everyday language. Should it be German, which was for many of the fathers of the Zionist movement the language of high culture? Or should it be Yiddish, which was for most of the population associated with Zionism at the end of the last century (as opposed to its leadership) the language that everyone spoke, everyone understood, everyone knew?

It was admitted — begrudgingly, perhaps — that there were other languages that Jews elsewhere used, such as Judaeo-Spanish, but these others could not lay claim, at least among those who were creating the Zionist idea, to the kind of universalism that Yiddish or Hebrew could. The solution to this problem of Jewish linguistic identity within the Ashkenazi, mostly Yiddish-speaking world had begun in part as bilingualism. Writers like Bialek (as was alluded to by David Roskies in his presentation)<sup>2</sup> wrote bilingually: some poems in Hebrew, some poems in Yiddish, and some poems in both languages. "The City of Slaughter," for example, is different in its Hebrew and Yiddish versions: passages that are missing in one language are present in the other, and more importantly, a completely different tone emerges when the poet addresses God — in such an informal, personal way in the Yiddish version, and with a more formal tone in the Hebrew language version — in that post-Kishinev pogrom outcry that is so magnificent a part of the rebirth of modern Hebrew poetry, but also of the continuum of modern Yiddish poetry.<sup>3</sup>

Yiddish had, after all, been for so long for so many the *volksprache*, the *mame lashon*. It should not surprise us, therefore, to learn that, even in the visual arts, this part of the Jewish linguistic identity might express itself. This is so in the work of an artist like Marc Chagall, for instance. Although he would come to speak French, and knew Russian and no doubt Lithuanian, Yiddish was really the language with which Chagall grew up in Vitebsk and with which he remained most comfortable to the end of his life. Chagall, who very much reflects the shtetl world that is expressed in Yiddish, makes repeated use of what, if we know the language, we recognize as puns and plays that visualize turns of phrase. For instance, folklorist Dov Noy has alluded to the turn of phrase, *vardreihen im kopf* — "to twist around the head," which is a way to say (among other things) "to fall madly in love." Understanding this Yiddish turn of phrase helps us better understand one of the most charming of Chagall paintings.<sup>4</sup>

*The Birthday* (Figure 1), painted in 1908, celebrates an earlier moment, when, on his birthday (he was perhaps 17 at the time) Bella, his future wife (barely 16), had arrived at his studio door with a little bit of a



Figure 1  
The Birthday

picnic and told him that she knew it was his birthday because his mother had told her so. He himself, so absent-minded, had no idea that it was. "Do you know what day it is?" she recalls asking him, in a later (posthumously published) memoir.<sup>5</sup> He responded: "No, I never know what day it is! What do you mean?" "Well it's your birthday, silly!" — and so on. That Vitebsk-reminiscent painting shows a soaring Bella at a diagonal to the picture plane, with Chagall also soaring parallel to and above her. His head is twisting around back in a most extraordinary rubberized gesture as he kisses her. If we understand that this is a statement of the love that he is expressing for her and how soaring the experience of emotion at that time was in retrospect, *vardrehen im kopf* is exactly and literally what is visually expressed on the canvas. The "twisting of his head" is what we see as a visualization of the "falling madly in love" that he feels.

Again and again we find Chagall offering us musicians such as the *Violinist* (figure 2) painted about 1920 or so. Typical of his style, this work presents a magnificent boldness of color just as we see certain peculiarities of detail, such as the eyes of both the violinist and the young boy who stands near him, and the twists and turns of both expression and color. It doesn't take very sophisticated Yiddish to understand that this violinist is not simply a violinist, but a *klezmer*, a musician who wanders from town to town, entertaining and uplifting the people of the grey-brown



Figure 2  
Violinist

*shtetlach* — the world from which Chagall came, which he has characteristically transformed into a world of pure color, as he would do repeatedly throughout his career. This is particularly appropriate in the present context because the *klezmerim* (plural form of *klezmer*) themselves had as their goal and their responsibility to change that dark world into one of color, enlivening its weddings and other celebrations. The *klezmer* is, in turn, ancestor and associate of the *badchan* and the *tummler* (terms for comedian-entertainers) and other such elements of Jewish society that over the course of time spilled from the old world to the new, from the *shtetlach* to the Catskills.

But consider: this particular *klezmer* stands as stiff and still as an Icon. His enlarged eyes also remind us somewhat of the Icon tradition that was so much a part of the Russian and Lithuanian worlds in which Chagall grew up and from which, in part, he drew his color sensibilities and, perhaps in this case, the hieratic stiffness of his subject.<sup>6</sup> At the same time these are *groyse oygen*, which in Yiddish doesn't just mean "large eyes." It means eyes which have seen a lot, ears which have heard a lot. And a *klezmer* is one who knows a lot because he's seen and heard a lot — because he is someone who travels all over the place; he brings news from isolated *shtetl* to isolated *shtetl*.

Moreover this *klezmer* offers a vision that is both outward and inward. This intermediary between *shtetlach* is like the prophet or seer who intermediates between heaven and earth, or the poet, artist, musician who also intermediates in being inspired (*in-spirited*) by God. Observe, then, these eyes: one out, one in; one open, one closed. Look, too, at the young lad with him, with the same eyes: the music that the *klezmerim* play is not

music that any of them knew how to write down, but rather passed from father to son, from generation to generation. So we can see him as a kind of blind poet-seer — a Jewish Homer — with his young guide. When we add Yiddish, we know that this poet is a *klezmer* who stands before us, with the son who will carry forward his musical and gossiping traditions.

So, too, we can perhaps recognize in the upper right-hand edge of the building behind them the two first letters in Russian of the word *poritz*. Perhaps: *poritz* is a word that means "landed gentry" in the Russian from which it was borrowed into Yiddish. Chagall, then, is being ironic: this is a word that refers to members of the leisure class, which is the opposite of that from which this itinerant musician comes. He is more like you and me, everyman and everywoman on the *shtetl* street, who are uplifted and entertained by the colorful music that he offers. But there is irony within the artist's Yiddish-borne irony. The secondary meaning of *poritz* — in Yiddish, as opposed to the original Russian — is "a learned man." This is and is not what we see before us: the *klezmer* who is not learned in the book-sense, but extremely so in the world-experience sense, with his inner and outer vision.

Fiddlers appear again and again out of Chagall's paint brush. One, who hovers on or above the roofs of Vitebsk, dates from 1920-21, and was part of a huge series of theatre sets in Moscow (figure 3). For, at about that time, Chagall was called upon to help prepare the Jewish Chamber Theatre for the Sholom Aleichem plays that would be presented there.<sup>7</sup> With typical élan, he festooned the theatre with fantastic decor. The vestibule presented images of a *badchan*, a violinist, and circus people. Names and other things were written everywhere in Yiddish.



Figure 3  
A Fiddler

Within the Theatre itself, among other works, Chagall created four major images to suggest four major arts. Representing Drama was a *hassid* — perhaps modeled on the image of his father. Representing Dance was the image of a woman dancing, perhaps based on his mother, with the words *kol kallah* ("the voice of the bride") and nearby *kol hatan* ("the voice of the groom"). So a *hassaneh*, a Jewish wedding, represented Dance.

Literature was represented by *asoyfer* or a Torah scribe, whom we see writing, not in Hebrew, but in Yiddish. Indeed, he doesn't write "In the beginning . . ." (with which words the Torah begins), but those classic opening words: "*a mahl in . . .*" "Once upon a time in . . ." with which Yiddish stories begin. So Chagall's scribe is, at the same time, a simple (*proste*) storyteller who tells his stories in *mame lashon*. Coming out of the head of the scribe is a cow, with "Chagall" written in Yiddish coming out of its mouth, even as the artist's signature is found elsewhere on the image in Russian. The painter may be Chagall as "Russian," but the true story-teller is Chagall the Jew, the *yid*, out of whose head that bovine symbol of fertility — and thus the fertility of ideas and images — emerges.

Music is represented by the violinist: we recognize a *klezmer* again, a musician, but more than this we can recognize a distinct part of the artist's personal vocabulary. His uncle Neuach was a fiddler. And Neuach apparently fiddled like a cobbler. Chagall's mother used to say to him: "*geh spielen oyf dem dach!*" — Go play on the roof!" And so we see him again and again and again in a range of related works depicting fiddlers on the roof.



Figure 4  
A klezmer Musician

This image, repeated in a number of versions, also plays and puns backwards on the Yiddish phrase, *az s' regent*

*mit gold, shteyt yeder man unter a dach* — "when it starts raining gold, then everyone will have a roof over his head" — precisely the opposite of what Chagall has depicted. Indeed, the musician whose violin plays gold and yellow, below whose feet the very earth starts to acquire that tinge, has not a roof over his head (Figure 4), but under his feet, as he hovers over the roofs. And after all is said and done, what is this fiddler who is Uncle Neuach and is also the allegory of Music? He who plays in the air over the roof is, of course, a *luftmensch*. One doesn't require Yiddish to understand the words of that layer of meaning, but we can't appreciate what that layer is without Yiddish, since simply translating it as "airman" won't quite do the job. One who has no means of support, one who has no substance, one who in some corners of the Yiddish speaking world is somewhat of a no-goodnick, that is a *luftmensch*—and that's what we see again and again represented by Chagall. He is, as it were, Sholom Aleichem's *Menachim Mendel*, the classic good-for-nothing in that author's works.

Moreover, we see a floating figure over his head, as we also did in the earlier version of this subject. That figure keeps changing from painting to painting, but is always floating and often with a halo. The figure has, then,



Figure 5  
Red Angel

the look of a *malach*, a guardian angel. As Chagall's images often play with words that come out of his Yiddish-speaking background, so in particular with angels, especially the *Red Angel* (figure 5). One version

was done in the 30s. An earlier one was done in 1922; having come back to Russia during the beginning of World War I, the artist stayed through the revolution and all that followed. He left in 1922, having been virtually pushed out of his position as Commissar of Arts in Vitebsk by Tatlin, Malevich, and the Suprematist and Constructivist artists whom he had brought into Vitebsk to be part of what he was creating there.<sup>9</sup> Again in about 1933, at the time of the rise of Hitler, he reworked this angel, this *malach*, and again in 1947, when he was leaving the United States to return to Europe in the aftermath of World War II. He had managed to find refuge in America during the Holocaust, but during that time he suffered the extreme trauma of the death of his beloved first wife, Bella.

It is, then, a *malach ha movehs*, an angel of death, that floats, bloodred, down the picture plane. Its association, given the times of his life when he painted this image, is with conditions when things were going unhappily: we see the familiar violin towards the bottom of the canvas, but there is no player to play it. The music is silent. Everything is indeed topsy turvy, upside down — *moyshe kapoyre*, although Chagall might not yet have been familiar with this phrase growing out of the Yiddish Theatre on this side of the Atlantic (with which he was presumably not yet familiar at the time when he painted this version).



Figure 6  
Wild Coachman

There is another path of interpretation for this angel. For a second way to view Chagall's understanding of Jewish life and the Jewish way of thinking is that the angelic figure is the *Shekhinah* — that aspect of God that *descends* to be among us when we suffer, that went out with Adam and Eve in



their exile from the garden, that stayed with the Children of Israel as they moved through the wilderness. According to the Hassidic tradition, the *Shekhinah* also descends from Heaven just prior to Shabbat (*Shabbos*) which day is a portion of Heaven on Earth, a piece of Paradise within (over against) the painful week. For Chagall, red appears and reappears throughout his work as a color symbolizing love and passion — not sacrifice and death, as it does in traditional Western, Christian painting. So it is not inconceivable, particularly when one considers the female appearance of this angel, that she is not a falling angel or a *malach ha movehs*, but the *Shekhinah*, descending to comfort the artist at these times of difficulty. More likely it is *both* of these: positive and negative. Indeed, I am not suggesting that one interpretation should stand in lieu of the other, but that the *Red Angel* represents a paradox, an internal contradiction consistent with the contradictions rampant in *shtetl* life as an intense microcosm of the human, and certainly Jewish, condition generally.

One of the brilliant and beautiful qualities of Chagall's work, both when he clearly does and when he does not make use of Yiddish as a support structure for his vision, is the way in which the spaces of heaven and earth meet; the way in which the times of past, present, and future combine. In the foreground of a painting called the *Wild Coachman* (Figure 6), we see what is apparently the Jewish keeper of an inn. We know that it is an inn because of the Russian word over the door. And we know that within the Pale of Settlement it was most often Jews who ran such inns. So we might well infer that this is a Jewish innkeeper who stands there with his bucket bigger than life, off to go fetch water, his wife by the door. The name of the painting is derived from what is going on in the painting's background, where we see a wagon and horse with the driver losing control. One way to see wagon and rider is that they are almost falling backward at an angle. Another way to view them is that they are about to take off into heaven. The whole atmosphere around them is colored a marvelous yellow, orange, and red, a very fiery color.

And as much as we can see this wagon and horse as just a wagon and horse out of control, we cannot miss the possibility that it is an image of Elijah in his fiery, heaven-bound chariot (cf. 2 Kings 2: 11-12). That is to say that the biblical past has suddenly entered into the *shtetl* present. A coachman has become Elijah, going up to heaven in a fiery chariot. Although Elijah is the harbinger of the *mashiach* (messiah), here, by way of a pun available only through Yiddish, he is not the harbinger of the *mashiach* — he is not Elijah, but simply *meshugeh* (crazy), losing control



Figure 7  
White Crucifixion

of his horse. And if the coachman, placed in the background, is the *meshugeneh* harbinger or non-harbinger of the *mashiach*, then who is the innkeeper in the foreground? He would be the equivalent of the one who observes the miraculous moment of Elijah's ascent, the prophet's

successor Elisha. At the same time we might understand him as a different sort of figure associated with the arrival of the *mashiach*. With his *groyssye oygen*, one eye in and one eye out, he might well be a hidden Hassidic *tzadik*, a *lamed-vavnik*. This simple (*proste, narrish*) innkeeper is precisely the kind of individual who, in the Hassidic tradition — in the Yiddish-speaking tradition — could be one of those unrecognized, anonymous *tzadikim*, those *lamed-vavniks* for whose sake the world continues to survive until the *mashiach* arrives.

But when one speaks of the *mashiach* in the context of Chagall and his relationship to the internal Jewish and external Christian world of which he was part, we cannot avoid the extraordinary *White Crucifixion* of 1938 (figure 7), in which we see what is for Christianity the *mashiach*: the *Christos*. Jesus is wrapped in a *tallis*-like loincloth, that re-identifies him as the Jew that he was. To the left and right of him, a whole array of Jewish crises crowd the painting. Elders hover in horror in the upper left hand side, one of them with *t'fillin* (phylacteries) on his forehead (lest there be any doubt that these are Jewish elders). Right below them, the houses are topsy turvy — *moyshe kapoyre* — with figures hurtling towards them with red flags. We realize that what Chagall has done is to take the events he witnessed during and remembered in the aftermath of the revolution of 1917, while he was back in the new Soviet Union, and refocussed them towards the extraordinary German pogroms that began in the year of this painting, with *kristalnacht*. Mensheviks versus Bolsheviks had equally found Jews in the middle, the one side accusing the Jews of being allied with the other and vice versa.<sup>10</sup> The artist has thus carried reflection of the Jewish reality after World War I towards combination with imagery found in other paintings of World War II.

The art has merged an earlier (post-1917) USSR with the Germany of 1938, a Germany of which Chagall cannot have been unaware since he was connected artistically not only to the Paris where he lived but to the Berlin where he once also had gallery representation. Thus the two worlds have come together; from pogrom to pogrom we see a horrible succession of scenes. In the upper right a synagogue burns. But a synagogue on fire — *es brennt a feuer* — doesn't just mean that there's a fire burning. *Es brennt a feuer* also refers to burning with impatience. The impatience here is for the coming of the *mashiach* and the ending of the kind of scenes which surround the figure whom we see crucified in a diagonal column of light.

A figure runs into the synagogue to rescue the Torah Scrolls, to save not only the *Toyreh* but the *seckl* (little sack) that contains the Torah within

it. Indeed when our eyes follow to the lower right-hand part of the painting, we recognize a triple pun with respect to *seckl* and *peckl* (little pack)-because we see a figure who flees towards the canvas edge, but cannot get out of the picture. Such a figure, with a pack on his back, is a repeated image in Chagall's paintings. Many interpreters have taken it to be the image of Elijah; others take it to be the *Wandering Jew*. Clearly this figure, with a *peckl* on his back — a *seckl* on his back — can be both. More to the point, *yeder hat sich sein seckl* means in Yiddish, "everyone has his own *tzoresh* (problems, difficulties)," which is precisely what the figure is ultimately doing, bearing *tzoresh* on his back. This is the Jewish condition that Chagall is depicting, swirling around the crucified image: the Torah itself, both the Torah scroll in the lower right-hand part of the painting and *Toyreh* in the larger sense — where the term refers to the whole Rabbinic tradition as an underpinning to the world from which Chagall comes, filled with both Yiddish and Hebrew, their respective literatures and learnings — that *Toyreh* is burning. *Es brennt a feuer* up towards the feet of the ladder leaning up against the crucified one.



Figure 8  
Der Galaganer Han

We observe, at the bottom of the image, a Menorah. But counting its lights as often as we wish yields only six candles on this seven-branched candelabrum. This is to say that it is missing the seventh, redemptive candle, the *shabbos* candle — which, again by way of a pun, could also be called the *shammes* candle. Given the mournful context, it is as if we are sitting *shiva* (i.e., are in mourning) without *shiva* (= "seven") because the seventh candle isn't there. But it is actually the figure above the menorah that is the *shammes* (= "servant") in the sense of being the "suffering servant" about whom the prophet

Isaiah talks. That Jew wrapped in his *tallis*-loincloth, that Jew who is *not* presented as he is in the traditional Christian representation as the savior of humankind-the redeemer of all of us for our sins, who sacrifices himself for humankind on the Cross. *Chagall's* crucified Jesus is merely a suffering *Jew*. There is no redemption for him; there is no salvation for him. The ladder, upon which ordinarily Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea would be shown poised, gently and lovingly lifting the body off the Cross, is quite empty as it leans against the long diagonal beam of light-as-cross. The ladder is enveloped by emptiness. There is no salvation for a Jesus who is simply a suffering Jew.

Perhaps Chagall adds yet another contradictory, paradoxical level to the interpretative context of the painting by way of Yiddish. For, if the *figure* in its stream of golden light is placed in a position that allows it to be viewed as being there in lieu of the seventh candle, then *er brennt sich* — *he* burns. And the wish: "May you burn like a candle" — *sollst brennen vi a licht!* — also applies. If, on the one hand, this is Jesus reconsidered - and reconfigured not as the savior of humankind but as a suffering Jew, he is also seen as he has been seen for so many centuries through Jewish eyes: as a symbol of that force, the Christianity which bears his name, which has made Jews suffer. Thus Chagall throws at him that invective "*sollst brennen vi a licht*" not instead of, but simultaneously with offering the notion that "*er brennt sich.*" The artist presents a complex series of turns to the verbal-visual events that carry us with him into the period of the Holocaust.



Figure 9  
Proganada Poster

But if we backtrack just for a moment to the time period when Chagall was still in Russia in the new Soviet Union and still exploring the

possibilities there, we find that there are other artists of the 1920s in that world who made use of Yiddish in a very *positive* way. Among these one of the most famous was Eliezer (El) Lissitsky (1890-1941), better known for his interest in Constructivism and for being part of the avant-garde of early Soviet art.<sup>11</sup> But in the atmosphere of the post-revolution, when Lenin was encouraging all and sundry, Jews included, to seek out their ethnic and spiritual roots, Lissitsky also turned specifically to his Jewish roots. One can see an instance of this in his 1919 illustrated *Had Gadya*, where we see pictured the *yngl* (young boy) and the *tzigl* (little goat); the entirety is in Yiddish. In the lower right hand corner of the image we read in Yiddish that it is all drawn by El Lissitsky.

Another of his Jewish-Yiddish works, *Der Galaganer Han* (figure 8), is also part and parcel of what in the 1920s in the new Soviet Union was burgeoning as Yiddish visual, musical, literary, and theatrical culture. As Yiddish language-use flourished, Yiddish poems, stories, and plays were performed and presented in one city after another,<sup>12</sup> and Jewish life seemed to have a glowing future — so much so that we also have a whole range of propaganda posters (Figure 9) by Jewish artists like Isaac Baer Ryback (1897-1935), who, about 1926, created advertisements for what was to be the new Jewish homeland. Not *Eretz Yisroel*, but a corner of the new Soviet Union that would be the answer to the question asked a generation and a half earlier: where should that homeland be? Why not here? Surely, here (the new Soviet Union) is where it could be. So

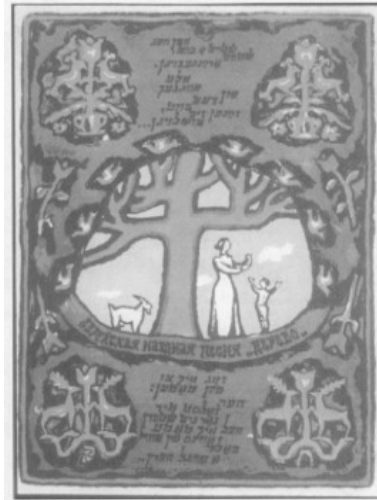


Figure 10  
A Tree from Jewish Folk Songs

Ryback writes across a sort of arc over the back of the man with the plow: "Build Communist life in the fields of the USSR!"

Consider also the Yiddish words along the bottom of the poster: "*Erd Arbeit Anstatt Luft-Parnasseh!*" (Working the earth instead of living on air). Two things are particularly interesting about this. There is, of course, the Zionist "Let's get back to the Earth and really make lives for ourselves" idea. But there is also the noteworthy linguistic contrast between *arbeit*, which in its association with *erd* suggests "real work," and *parnasseh*, meaning "just making a living" (indeed, in its association with *luft*, it suggests earning a living from air), which recalls the idea borne by the image that Chagall had offered, of the *luftmensch* violinist, who is an unfortunate alternative to the man with the plow shown by Ryback. Ryback's figure symbolizes the good, solid life available. Indeed, at the upper left of the poster there is an entire description (in Yiddish) of how good it will be for the *mishpucheh* (family).

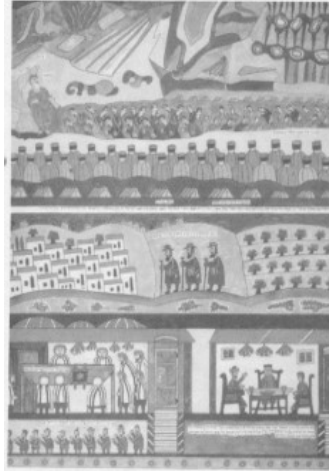


Figure 11  
Shavuot

This sense of the possibilities of the new Soviet Union began to collapse after Lenin's death in 1924. By 1928 Stalin had moved toward a position of greater and greater control, and by 1934 he had achieved full command, receiving the rubber stamp imprimatur of the Central Communist Party leadership for his ideas, such as that reflected in the decree that there be only one form of visual and other self-expression: Soviet Socialist Realism. Ethnic self-expression and exploration were crushed. In the years that followed, artists throughout the Soviet Union found themselves caught in what is commonly referred to as the Two-World Condition: having to have one face out towards what is officially acceptable and the other face in, to what they produced for an audience of family, friends, and trustworthy

cohorts. For Jewish artists, this became a *three*-world condition. The issue was not just the dichotomy between official and unofficial art — between conformist and non-conformist self-expression — but the added question of where to place one's Jewish identity within either of these modes of creative behavior.

By the late 1940s, of course, Stalin turned venomously against the Jewish community in particular. In 1953 he died, and there was a brief thaw in the political, and therefore artistic, condition of the USSR. This was the kind of thaw that made possible the magnificent series of lithographs that Anatoly Kaplan (1902-1980), a kind of visual Sholom Aleichem, would produce.<sup>13</sup> For example, and appropriately enough, between 1953 and 1963, Kaplan produced a series based on Sholom Aleichem's Yiddish stories and poems illuminating *shtetl* life. In 1962 Kaplan produced *A Tree from Jewish Folk Songs* (Figure 10) as a bilingual work. Across the bottom of one image, where one sees boy, mother, and little goat, the title is written in Russian. Below it the poems begin in Yiddish: "I say to my mother . . ." (*Zog Ich zu mayn mamen . . .*) — which is what is being illustrated above. So the sense of bilinguism remained a remarkable continuum underneath the surface of what was officially acceptable, visual, and public in the Soviet art world of the 1950s, 1960s and 70s as well as through most of the 1980s.

In the period between the Russian Revolution and Stalin's death the most obvious other suggestion as a location for the Jewish homeland was of course the site of our place of inception as a people, *Eretz Yisrael*, which would be established in formal political fashion by 1948. There we find the work of an extraordinary diversity of artists, like Shalom Moskowitz (1900-1980) — Shalom



Figure 12  
Nye Preeslonyatsa



of Safed — who came into his own in the 1960s as an artist whose style is generally referred to as primitivist.<sup>14</sup> In a manner wonderfully reminiscent of medieval sensibility, but also of Chagall, Moskowitz repeatedly offers scenes with action carried on simultaneously in different time periods; past and present are combined before our eyes. The artist also combines texts with his images in a bilingual manner. Thus in *Shavuot* (figure 11), for example, we observe Moses along the upper register at Mount Sinai, and the long descriptive inscription is given entirely in Hebrew, identifying *Moshe Rabbenu* (our teacher Moses) and *Har Sinai* (Mt. Sinai), and telling us about . . . *Kol Ha'Am Asher baMachaneh* . . . — ". . . the entire people that was in the camp. . . ." The lower half of the painting (really the lower two-thirds) gives us not only a scene of today and the here and now in the Safed area from which the artist comes, and the celebration of the holiday of Shavuot, but Yiddish inscriptions that tell us what these illuminations are all about. Thus in the lower right hand corner, for example, we see and read, in part: "*er sitz sich mit sein familie*. . . ." — the celebrant "sits down [to celebrate] with his family."

Two different, interesting matters might be noted here. First, that Shalom of Safed uses Yiddish for describing the here and now because that is the language that he uses everyday, whereas he uses Hebrew only under carefully prescribed conditions such as biblical contexts, even though he lives in the land where Hebrew is in active everyday use. Second, that we are reminded of the mixed parentage and

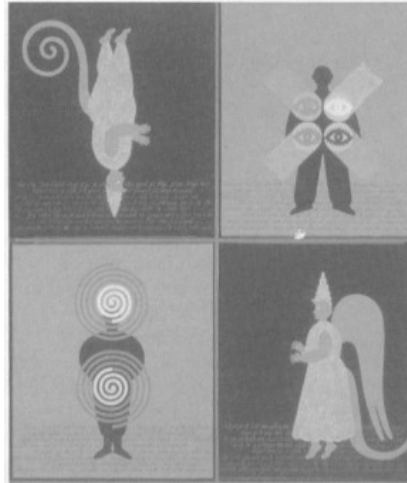


Figure 13  
Metamorphoses

rich range of nuance of Yiddish, in comparing Moskowitz's choice of the word *familieh*, derived from German, with Ryback's choice of *mishpucheh*, from Hebrew (just as earlier the nuanced distinction between *arbeit* and *parnasseh* was noted).

Let us turn this screw of language, art, and identity one final turn by way of the issue of Jewish bilingualism with which we began — the Zionists' question, a century ago, of Hebrew versus Yiddish — and by way of a secondary issue in our discussion, Russian. A work of 1987 by Eric Bulatov, a well known and outstanding contemporary Soviet artist, who happens to be a Jewish artist, is very consistent with the Jewish tradition of using text as art, text as commentary on art, and art as commentary on text, which is also a tradition within Soviet art.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, particularly in Soviet Jewish art, one observes an obvious prominence to the relationship between image and text. In the work *Nye Preeslonyatsa* Bulatov (figure 12) has given us an image of a field with the forest behind it and a sky filled with clouds rising above it in mock Soviet Socialist Realist style. The whole forest is overrun by the inscription (and painting title) in Russian: "not be leaned on." This is a pun of course. One used to see endless "do not . . ." signs dominating the interiors and exteriors of Soviet buildings and properties. So too placard inscriptions all across the Soviet landscape: bombastic statements about "Five Year Plans," reminding the public that the Soviet landscape is a unique paradise, and varied boasting about the greatness of the Soviet Union and its government. Yet this is a government not to be leaned on — not to be depended on (this is the pun) and not to be trusted, particularly, given the context of nature's elements, as the government which had been promoting ecological irresponsibility for seventy years by the time of this painting. It is also a specific protesting reference to the field, the trees, the sky — that they are "not to be leaned on," in the sense of "not to be crushed, not to be ruined" by the ecological carelessness of that same government, as that irresponsibility was so glaringly revealed by the 1980s.

Differently, a work was done in 1993 by Grisha Bruskin, another outstanding Soviet Jewish artist, who now resides in New York City.<sup>16</sup> The work is from a series called *Metamorphoses* (figure 13), in which the images are overrun with inscriptions in Hebrew and in Yiddish. These are images that, on the one hand, the artist relates to the robotic representation of Soviet war heroes. On the other hand, one might say that they reflect the Three-World Condition to which I alluded earlier. That is, these figures as *mitten darinnen*, *nisht ahin*, und *nisht aher* (in the middle of things,

neither here nor there) — they are "between worlds" — symbolize the Two-World condition. But Bruskin's third world (of the Jewish Three-World Condition) is the inscriptional world that he, as a Jew, adds to the two worlds of official and non-conforming — *nisht ahin and nisht aher* — Soviet art. Bruskin's "inscriptions" are virtually unintelligible: if they are the texts of illuminated manuscripts, they are also mystical texts accessible only to the few who know them; they speak a secret hieroglyphic language that can be understood only by a priesthood of Three-World non-conformists.

How do these two works offer a final twist to our discussion of language, art, and identity, and specifically Yiddish in art? Because Bulatov and Bruskin offer us a symbol of the massive emigration of Jews out of the former Soviet Union to Eretz Yisrael in the late 80s and early 90s: new fields, forests, and skies about which to be concerned because of a government there which is not particularly responsible with respect to ecology and which incoming Soviets learned rather quickly not to trust. By now a political party representing the specific interests of Soviet Jews in Israel has emerged, and the language of those Soviet Jews, Russian, has overrun the land. One can't go to a major population center in Israel without finding massive signage in Russian (reminiscent of that in Bulatov's painting).

If Bruskin uses Hebrew and Yiddish and Bulatov uses Russian, we are made conscious of the fact that in Eretz Yisrael, at the end of the 20th century, a linguistic heritage of complexity is still in formation. That complexity is not only Yiddish at its base, as it has been over so many Jewish centuries. It is not only Hebrew — a modern Hebrew affected, during the past century in particular, by Yiddish, as by other languages throughout its history. The complexity is on the verge of becoming something further transformed, with Russian as a dominant third element with Hebrew and Yiddish. Jewish language and art meet identity at multiple crossroads, of which Yiddish is a key, but not the only one. We must keep our eyes and ears open (so that they become *groysse oygen*) to the linguistic *klezmerim* of our People in its Land and the art that they produce.

## Notes

1 Moses Hess, *Rom und Jerusalem* (Berlin, 1863); Theodore Herzl, *Der Judenstaat* (Vienna, 1896).

2 See the published version of that talk elsewhere in this volume.

3 See *Kol Shirei H.N. Bialek (The Complete Poems of H.N. Bialek)* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: D'vir Publishers, 1966).<sup>4</sup> A small and very general Chagall bibliography might include Sidney Alexander, *Marc Chagall* (New York: G. Putnam's Son, 1987); Susan Comton, *Chagall* (Philadelphia: The Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1985); Walter Erben, *Marc Chagall* (New York: Praeger, 1966); Howard Greenfield, *Marc Chagall* (Chicago: Follett Publishing Co., 1967); Michael Makarius, *Chagall: The Masterworks* (Portland: Portland House, 1970).

5 Bella Chagall, *Burning Lights* (New York: Schocken, 1953).

6 See, for example the *Icon of Saints Prokopios, Demetrios and Nestor*, Monastery of St. Catherine on Mt. Sinai, 11<sup>th</sup> century; the *Miniature Mosaic of Christ*, Museo Nazionale, Florence, 12<sup>th</sup> century; the *Mosaic Panel of St. Demetrios and Two Children*, Church of St. Demetrios, Salonica, 7<sup>th</sup> century.

7 See the catalogue of the exhibit *Marc Chagall and the Jewish Theatre* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992-93).

8 See Alexander, *Chagall*; Stephanie Baron and Maurice Tuchman, eds., *The Avant Garde in Russia, 1910-1930* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Hirshorn Sculpture Garden & Museum, 1980); John E. Boulton, ed., *Russian Art of the Avant Garde, 1902-34* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988).

9 For general discussion of this see Louis Greenberg, *The Jews of Russia, Vol II 1881-1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951).

10 See Baron and Tuchman, *Avant Garde*; Ori Z. Soltes, *Old Voices, New Faces (Soviet) Jewish Artists from the 1920's-1990's* (Washington, DC: B'nai B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum, 1992); Ori Z. Soltes and Alexandre Gertsman, *Here and There; Then and Now* (Washington, DC: B'nai B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum, 1996).

11 Such as were presented at the Moscow theatre for which Chagall did sets (cf. above).

12 See B. Syris, *Anatoly Lyvich Kaplan, Khudozhnik* (in Russian) (Leningrad, 1972).

13 See Susan Tumarkin Goodman, *A World of Their Own: Naive Artists from Israel* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1987).

14 See Baron and Tuchman, *Avant Garde*; Boulton, *Russian Art*; Soltes and Gertsman, *Here and There*; Eric Bulatov, *Moscow* (London: International Center for Art, 1989).

15 See Soltes and Gertsman, *Here and There*.

## Organizing Yiddish-Speaking Workers in Pre-world War I Galicia: The Jewish Social Democratic Party

Rick Kuhn

### Turn of the Century Galicia

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Galicia was amongst the poorest parts of Europe.<sup>1</sup> This territory, the Austrian part of partitioned Poland, had a population of 7,136,000 in 1900. But the province was unable to support its inhabitants. The legacy of a very recent feudal past, productive forces there were at a very low level. Despite the fact that three-quarters of the population was engaged in agriculture, the province was a net importer of foodstuffs including grain. Industry was also underdeveloped. Galicia was the least industrialized province of the Austrian ("Cisleithian") part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. But the breakup of feudal conditions after 1848 and particularly the end of serfdom began a process of rapid social change. Poverty led hundreds of thousands of Galicians to leave as seasonal workers in Germany or emigrants to Vienna, other large European cities, and the United States. At the same time, the size of the working class increased rapidly during the period before World War I, from its very low base. In 1902 there were 181,500 workers in industry, mining, and trade and transport, in 1912 301,500 — a forty percent increase in a decade!

After the Russian Empire, the Jewish population of Galicia, 812,000 in 1900, was the largest in the world. Jews were particularly concentrated in the more backward eastern part of the province.<sup>2</sup> The

social transformations of the second half of the nineteenth century hit the bulk of Galician Jews very hard. The penetration of capitalist market relations into the countryside undermined their distinctive economic role as an intermediate layer between the Polish nobility and, through the markets of the larger towns, the wider capitalist world on the one hand and the Polish and Ukrainian peasantry on the other. Their old roles in the administration of feudal estates, licensees of the nobility's privileges (notably the selling of alcohol), and as traders were progressively undermined. The liberation of the peasantry, gradual improvement in the means of communications and transport, and the lure of work in larger towns in Galicia and beyond increased mobility but reduced the social role of the numerous class of Jewish petty merchants. On top of these pressures, antisemitic campaigns in the name of Catholicism and Polish nationalism sought to shift business away from Jewish enterprises to Polish ones.

The historical social role of the bulk of east European Jewry and the effects of early capitalist development meant that, at the turn of the century, Jews were more urban than the rest of the Galician population and more likely to emigrate. While Jews constituted eleven percent of the Galician population in 1900, they comprised twenty-seven and twenty-one percent of its two largest cities, Lemberg (now Lviv in the Ukraine, in Polish Lwow) and Krakow.<sup>3</sup> Lemberg's population grew very rapidly from 159,000 in 1900 to 260,000 in 1910, Krakow's from 91,800 to 152,000. The Jewish workers of the cities, towns, and villages (*shtetleh*) did not constitute a modern factory proletariat. The backwardness of industry meant that the number of factories was small. Industrial production was still largely organized on an artisanal or semi-artisanal basis. This was particularly characteristic of Jewish employment. While over a half of all people engaged in industry were workers, for Jews the figure was less than a third.<sup>4</sup> Many Jewish workers were employed by Jewish bosses, especially in smaller towns and *shtetleh*. Despite their overrepresentation in urban areas, only ten percent of workers (41,254 people) were Jewish, roughly their proportion in the overall population.<sup>5</sup> Overpopulation weakened the bargaining position of the working class, Jewish, Polish, and Ukrainian. Hours of work were comparable with those of early English capitalism and pay rates, especially in less skilled trades, were miserable.

Apart from a privileged layer of well-off Jews, the language of the Jewish masses was Yiddish. In that language "Yiddish" means both Jewish

and Yiddish. Some knowledge of other languages, especially Polish but also Ukrainian in eastern Galicia, was no doubt widespread, particularly among those whose jobs put them into regular contact with the wider population. But the language of Jewish homes, social and religious communities was Yiddish. The traditional religious elementary school, the *kheder*, inculcated literacy in classical Hebrew, the key to the study of the Torah and Talmud. Economic changes also led to a secularization of Jewish life. Between 1900 and 1910 the number of *khadorim* fell from 749 to 624. More Jews were educated in modern secular or, to a lesser extent, Hebrew schools.

### **Jewish Workers in Galicia <sup>6</sup>**

Despite the miserable conditions which drove many to emigrate, groups of Jewish workers were prepared to fight to improve their lives in Galicia. The Kolomea talis weavers' strike of 1892 was a notable example. It drew the attention of the international socialist movement, especially through Max Zetterbaum's article in the theoretical organ of German Social Democracy, *Die Neue Zeit*.<sup>7</sup> In an effort to improve their starvation wages, the weavers struck for about four months before being forced to return to work. In July, 1892, a Jewish workers' party and its organ, the *Arbetershtime (Workers Voice)*, were established.<sup>8</sup> The following year the "Jewish Social Democratic Workers of Lemberg and Krakow" was the first Jewish social democratic organization to send a delegate to a Congress of the Socialist International.<sup>9</sup> The newspaper and group proved short lived. But Jewish workers' associations were established in Lemberg, Krakow, Kolomea, Stanislawow and other towns under the auspices of the Social Democratic Party of Galicia. This represented a shift from the previous practice of organizing Yiddish- and Polish-speaking workers in the same organizations.<sup>10</sup>

During the 1890s in "Lithuania," in the Russian Pale of Settlement, there were even more dramatic demonstrations of the combativeness of Jewish workers. There, the concentration of the already impoverished Jewish, mainly artisanal working class under deteriorating economic conditions led to the rapid emergence of workers' circles, associations and unions. Under the leadership of the Vilna group of Jewish socialists, these were pioneers of mass working class organization in the Russian Empire. In 1897, they constituted the Union of Jewish Workers in Russia and Lithuania, the Bund. The organization initially focussed on

economic demands and the strike movement. After the turn of the century the Bund also conducted extensive political work through its press, and in the form of demonstrations, leaflets and agitation that reached the conscripts of the Tsarist army. By 1905, over 30,000 workers were in organizations associated with the Bund. It remained the largest social democratic organization in the Russian Empire until the explosive growth of the wider movement in the course of the 1905 revolution. It remained the most effective current in the cities of the Pale and some areas of Poland throughout the revolutionary period. The Bund provided an important model for many Jewish members of the Polish Social Democratic Party (PPSD) in Galicia.

The PPSD was established in 1890.<sup>11</sup> Among its most influential figures were a number of Jewish intellectuals, notably Herman Diamand. The party's most prominent leader, Ignacy Daszinsky, expressed the view that the Jews were a nation; he was initially hostile to assimilationism as the Party sought to involve the Jewish working class. But, as Henryk Grossman argued, the PPSD leadership, including those with Jewish backgrounds, essentially left the organization of Jewish workers to the Jewish workers themselves and adapted Jewish clericalism, preferring appeals to religious over class solidarity: "This unworthy opportunism soon reaped what it had sowed and, after 1897, the Jewish workers' movement suffered a severe decline."<sup>12</sup> This coincided with the PPSD's increasing nationalism and assimilationist attitude towards Jewish workers. The version of socialism the PPSD presented to Jewish workers was an abstraction that did not address their immediate problems as an oppressed, as well as exploited group: socialism as the ultimate goal, the Party argued, would solve the Jewish question. What is more, the PPSD had a nationalist orientation that precluded taking the problems of organizing Jewish workers seriously in practical terms. As a consequence, the struggle of the Polish social democrats with Zionism amounted to a confrontation between Polish and bourgeois Jewish nationalism. Grossman argued:

The task of Jewish socialism was not only to broaden the general principles of socialism but particularly to analyze *all the practical interests* of the Jewish workers' movement, as well as all the important phenomena of Jewish social life. It had to discover the causal relations from the perspective of those principles and their



place in our general economic, political and cultural development.<sup>13</sup>

In the absence of central coordination, the Yiddish union movement suffered a dramatic decline between 1897 and 1899. The PPSD's Yiddish organ, the *Volkszeytung (People's Paper)*, also ceased to appear regularly and reemerged only during election campaigns.<sup>14</sup> A conference of Jewish members of the PPSD in 1899 did not improve the situation. An ineffective attempt was made in 1902 to set up a separate Jewish organization, modelled on the Bund. But concern that the PPSD was hostile to organizing Jewish workers grew, particularly as Jewish social democrats sought to combat the rising influence of labor Zionism, which had started to find adherents, particularly amongst white collar workers.

The situation began to change from 1902. Three significant factors were involved in the renewed growth of Jewish workers' organizations in Galicia. First, the economy revived after a recession. Second, the example of the social democratic movement's and particularly the Bund's rising influence and membership in Russia during the period provided an inspiration for activists in Galicia. The efforts of a layer of young Jewish intellectuals was the third factor behind the revival of the Jewish workers' movement.<sup>15</sup>

Thanks to religious traditions, literacy was much more widespread among Jews than the rest of the population. Because Yiddish was not generally recognized by the Austrian state as a language, there were, however, no Yiddish language public schools. Nor were public funds available to support private Yiddish language schools. The *khadorim* were concerned with religious education. So access to secondary education tended to be restricted to those educated in the language of a dominant national group (in Galicia this was usually Polish) and to people from well-off backgrounds. Jews, mainly from privileged social groups, were more strongly represented among students in academic secondary schools, *Gymnasien*, than the general population. The figure was over eighteen percent in 1900-1901. Apart from issues of literacy and the importance attached to education, this also reflected a higher concentration of Jews in larger urban centers. Similarly, in the summer semester of 1901, more than twenty percent (402) of students at the University of Lemberg and over fourteen percent (184) of those at the University of Krakow were Jewish.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1880s and early 1890s, a small layer of young, well-off and well-educated Jews oriented itself politically to the working class and social democratic politics through the PPSD and its predecessors. There was a parallel, but distinctive phenomenon during the following decade. A minority of these young Jews, among the larger general and Jewish high school and university population,<sup>17</sup> was again drawn towards social democratic politics. But, rather than assuming the homogeneity and Polish character of the Galician proletariat, these socialist students focussed particularly on Yiddish-speaking Jewish workers. From 1903 Henryk Grossman, for example, was the secretary of the association of Jewish workers, *Vorwärts* (*Forwards*, in Polish *Postęp*) in Krakow. Two other figures also played a decisive role: Jakob Bross also in Krakow and Karol Einäugler in Lemberg.<sup>18</sup> Together with worker activists and other students, they built organizations in Krakow, Tarnow, Przemyśl, Lemberg and in other towns. These organizations included both local associations, with union and educational functions open to all Jewish workers, and branches of the central Austrian craft trade unions.<sup>19</sup>

### **Towards an Independent Jewish Organization**

In 1903, the already erratic publication of the Party's Yiddish newspaper, edited by Diamand, was suspended. Nor did it publish pamphlets which dealt with the concerns of Jewish workers or engage Yiddish-speaking agitators. At the 8th PPSD Congress in January, 1903, Diamand argued that Jewish workers should assimilate into superior Polish culture and read either Polish or Ukrainian social democratic newspapers. But there was a considerable demand for social democratic material in Yiddish. Given that the Party was unwilling to satisfy it, the gap was filled by Bund publications. The PPSD's attitude to Yiddish also placed in doubt the future of Jewish workers' educational associations and unions, *Briderlichkeyt* (Brotherhood) and *Forwards*, associated with the Party. These groups had organized weekly lectures in Yiddish, as well as choirs, amateur dramatics, libraries, and reading rooms. Daszynski, however, affirmed their continuing usefulness and proposed a special conference of Jewish party members to assuage their rising concerns.<sup>20</sup>

The conference of Jewish PPSD activists took place on 9-10 May 1903 and was, from the perspective of the Party leadership, successful. Diamand read a letter from Victor Adler, the historic leader of the general Austrian Party and friend of Daszynski. Adler expressed his opposition to

the formation of a separate Jewish party.<sup>21</sup> In other words, such a party had no chance of admission to the general Austrian organization or of financial support from its German component, which was comparatively well-off and provided substantial subsidies to the PPSD. All but two of those present opposed setting up such an organization. One of those who abstained was Henryk Grossman. In recognition of the claims that the Party was not doing enough work amongst the Jewish proletariat and the need for central coordination, the conference called for the establishment of a provincial Jewish Agitation Committee. But it was placed under Diamand's control and, in effect, existed only on paper.<sup>22</sup> The inactivity of the Agitation Committee was a factor in secret preparations for the establishment of a new Jewish social democratic organization. So was the directive that members should not distribute literature produced by the Bund, the most important source of socialist material in Yiddish.

To sustain, let alone expand the Jewish workers' organizations and activities, the dissident movement's leaders believed more agitators, literature, and especially central coordination were essential.<sup>23</sup> They were certainly right. But the need for clear, militant politics, coordination, and centralization to promote working class self-activity also applied to the Galician and, indeed, to the Austrian working class as a whole. The PPSD's nationalist orientation was becoming more and more central to its activities. This was particularly apparent in the increasingly close links between the Polish social democratic leadership in Galicia and the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), led by Jozef Pilsudski, in Russian and German Poland. The PPS was the most nationalist of the socialist currents in the other parts of partitioned Poland. The relationship between the PPSD and PPS was formalized in the face of opposition from a number of political currents in the Party at the Galician organization's Congress, held in Krakow during 9th October 1904.<sup>24</sup> The early years of the twentieth century also saw an increasingly parliamentarist orientation emerge in the General Austrian Social Democratic Party. Already in 1897, the General Party had capitulated to nationalist pressures by adopting a federal structure.<sup>25</sup>

The existing nationalist frameworks of the PPSD and General Party both constrained the freedom of action of the Jewish militants in Galicia and influenced the direction of the militants' thinking. They opted to form an independent Jewish social democratic party in Galicia. The alternative of constructing a cross-national radical socialist opposition to the PPSD leadership was not systematically explored. But some efforts

were made in this direction, notably the publication in Krakow of an oppositional student journal, *Zjednoczenie*, in early 1905, initially under Grossman's editorship.<sup>26</sup> Another option, exemplified by Karol Sobelsohn, later better known as Karl Radek, was identification with the radical Social Democratic Party of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania, led by Rosa Luxemburg and Leo Jogisches.<sup>27</sup> But this led him out of Galicia and to a focus on politics in Congress (Russian) Poland.

In Przemyśl, on 28-29 August 1904, the Jewish militants caucused before the 9th PPSD Congress. They decided not to set up a new party straight away but they did establish a secret initiative committee, based in Lemberg, with Karol Einäugler as secretary and Ruben Birnbaum as chairperson. Tactics for the PPSD Congress were also worked out. At the Congress Grossman moved a motion of no confidence in the Agitation Committee because of its ineffectiveness. The motion was defeated. But the Congress decided that "a special class organization of the Jewish proletariat would damage the interests of the whole proletariat." Fourteen Jewish delegates and one other favored an autonomous Jewish organization. Subsequently the Party leadership dissolved the ineffective Agitation Committee because of fears that it might operate as a "party within a party." Henceforth agitation among Jewish workers was to be conducted under the direct authority of the PPSD leadership.<sup>28</sup>

This development was unfavorable but predictable. The campaign for an autonomous Jewish social democracy continued. In January, 1905, in Krakow a pamphlet was published in Polish: *The Proletarian in Relation to the Jewish Question*, by Henryk Grossman, which expressed the theoretical stance of the secret committee. The PPSD leadership mounted a counter campaign. Eventually this targeted the basic organizations of the Jewish working class. The Galician trade union conference of April, 1905, under the influence of the PPSD, decided that the Jewish educational associations and general trade unions should be dissolved within a year. PPSD leaders regarded these as nests of "sedition."<sup>29</sup> With the Jewish proletariat's capacity for political and social activity under threat, the members of the secret initiative committee felt compelled to act. Its seat was shifted to Krakow, where Grossman took over as secretary.<sup>30</sup> The initiative it took was to be crowned with considerable, though ultimately circumscribed successes, which are examined in the following sections.

## The Establishment of the JSDP

The Bund was the organizational model for the Jewish Social Democratic Party of Galicia (JSDP). Developments in Russia, where the Bund played a prominent role, had decisive influence in the formation of the Party. This was clear in a resolution at the JSDP's founding Congress, which expressed "admiration and recognition of the fighters of all nations in Russia, who struggle for the liberation of the proletariat from the Tsarist yoke."<sup>31</sup> Systematic public justification for its existence was, nevertheless, conducted in terms of the theory and history of Austrian social democracy. This was because the new Party sought admission as a federal component of the General Austrian Party, alongside the other national parties. Such arguments also reflected the use the Bund itself had made of the development of federalist organizational forms and ideas in the Austrian Party. In 1897, the General Party was reorganized as a federation of national parties. At the 1899 Brünn Congress the Party adopted a policy of national autonomy for Austria on the basis of (not necessarily contiguous) territories made up of members of particular nationalities.<sup>32</sup> Karl Renner from 1899 and later Otto Bauer, leading theoreticians of Austrian social democracy, advocated individual national autonomy through voluntary participation in official national institutions on a basis modelled after the organization of religions.

These developments, moreover, provided a theoretical rationale for the Bund's position in its conflict with and subsequent departure from the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in October, 1903. If Grossman, in particular, developed a case for the existence of a Yiddish-speaking Jewish nation in eastern Europe<sup>33</sup> and the JSDP made effective arguments based on precedent for its admission to the General Party<sup>34</sup> (this was never, however, achieved), there was another argument that was persuasive in its pragmatism. First, the PPSD was nationalist and incapable of relating to Jewish workers. Secondly, the General Party was organized on a federal basis. So, while a militant, internationalist organization of the entire proletariat was desirable, the only means situation available for the social democratic organization of the Jewish proletariat was an independent Jewish organization, which could hope to gain affiliation to the General Party. Anselm Mosler, a pioneer of Galician socialism and co-founder of the JSDP, summed up this position very clearly:

I personally believe that the best form of organization is indeed territorial. That is, instead of Polish, Ruthenian and Jewish parties on Galician territory we should have just one party, a Galician one. However, if the Germans, the Czechs, the Poles, the Ruthenians, the Italians and the Southern Slavs have their own organizations, there is no reason why the Jews should not have the same right. Where is it written down that there shall be only six national organizations and not, God forbid, seven?<sup>35</sup>

The Party's perspective involved not only the establishment of a distinct Jewish Party. It also expressed a commitment to solidarity and close cooperation with the Polish, the general Austrian, and indeed international, social democratic movement. This was expressed at the JSDP's first public appearance. On May Day 1905, the new Jewish Social Democratic Party of Galicia was proclaimed at rallies of Jewish workers.<sup>36</sup>

In Krakow militants distributed the Party's founding manifesto *What Do We want?* (in Yiddish, *Vas villen mir?* and Polish *Czego chcemy?*),<sup>37</sup> *The Proletarian in Relation to the Jewish Question* and a new Yiddish monthly, the *Yidisher Sotsyal Demokrat (Jewish Social Democrat)*. They also collected donations for *Naprzod (Forwards)*, the PPSD daily.<sup>38</sup> Speakers in several cities explained the necessity of such a party and that Jewish workers, under the banner of their own party, wanted to fight together, hand in hand, with Polish and Ukrainian workers. As an expression of this desire, processions formed under red banners after the rallies. In closed ranks the Jewish workers marched to the central assembly points and

After a choir sang the Marseillaise a huge, demonstrative procession of Jewish workers formed up to join the Polish comrades at the riding school and rally together with them. All Jewish unions joined the ranks. Fifteen red placards were carried above the tightly packed crowd, with Yiddish and Polish slogans (five with political and economic demands, nine with the names of trade unions: bakers, metal workers, boot makers and shoe makers, painters, cabinet makers, tailors, commercial workers, the general union of women workers, the young workers' alliance and the general union *Forwards*). This impressive procession, in fours and eights, sparkled with red. Everyone was decorated with

redcarriages — the symbol of this year's May Day. Satisfaction and happiness radiated from all faces: everyone was beaming. Three hundred young people with their banner were taking part for the first time in this festive procession beside old, grey-headed proletarians — perhaps their fathers — all concerned with one thought, with one and the same sentiment.

Hearts beat with happiness in response to the events of the day: at the sight of hundreds of demonstrating Jewish workers; at the thought that the sublime idea of socialism had reached even these, the most disenfranchised of people; and at the thought that the Jewish proletariat had now straightened its hunched form, lifted its head bravely and come to *self awareness*. This wonderful procession, having passed through the Jewish district, grew like a wave, swelled. The closer it came to the riding school the larger it became. The number of demonstrators amounted to over 2,000 Jewish workers.<sup>39</sup>

In Lemberg eight hundred marched with the JSDP, in Przemyśl one hundred, and in Tarnów 180-200 Jewish workers participated in meetings held by the new party.<sup>40</sup> This new party was also known as the "Galician Bund" and ZPS (from its initials in Polish), while PPSD leaders and (following them) leaders of the General Austrian Party referred to it as the "Separatists."

The JSDP's widespread support among Jewish workers was indicated by the attendance of fifty-two delegates from eight large urban centers in Galicia at its founding Congress in Lemberg on 9-10 June 1905. The Congress was opened on the anniversary of the death of Hersh Lekert,<sup>41</sup> by "a well trained male choir giving a beautiful rendition of 'Di Shvue,'" the Bund's anthem.<sup>42</sup> Resolutions expressing the distinctive features of the organization were adopted. These included the desire for close cooperation with the PPSD, despite its hostility, and for membership of the General Austrian Party; a commitment to combating Zionism in all its forms, as the national chauvinist standpoint of the Jewish bourgeoisie; demonstrations along the main streets of the cities. The JSDP reported demonstrations along the main streets of the cities. The JSDP making the publication of a Yiddish weekly newspaper a priority; and establishment of an association of young Jewish workers. It is also notable that women delegates to the Congress drew attention to the need for more intensive organizational and agitational work among women workers.<sup>43</sup>

Agitation (focussed on specific and immediate issues) and propaganda (dealing with matters in a more systematic way that links issues together) in Yiddish was a crucial question in the foundation of the new party. But this was an aspect of a deeper concern to relate to the specific consciousness of Jewish workers in order to transform it. As the JSDP's manifesto pointed out, it was not possible to use the same means to relate to Jewish workers as to Polish workers: "It is necessary not only to speak to a Jewish worker in another language, one must also understand his psychology; one must be able to speak to his soul, fire him up, revolutionize and seize him!"<sup>44</sup> So the publication and distribution of literature in Yiddish were important priorities. Six thousand copies of the Yiddish *Vos villen mir?* were published (and another five thousand in Polish), while five thousand copies of the *Jewish Social Democrat* were issued before it gave way to the weekly *Der Sotsyal Demokrat* (*Social Democrat*) in early October, 1905. By its third issue the weekly was appearing in a print run of 2000. Between the Party's foundation and October, 1905, it had issued ten thousand leaflets in Polish and Yiddish. Twenty-five hundred copies of the JSDP's 1905 pre-conference document were published in Yiddish (1,500 more in Polish). The Bund was the main source of the Yiddish books and pamphlets that were advertised in the *Social Democrat*.

### Party Activity

According to its report to the October 1905 Congress of the General Austrian Party, the JSDP soon had 2,500 members, on a conservative estimate. They were principally organized through branches of the central (i.e., Austrian) trade unions, educational associations, and local general trade unions that were associated with the Party.<sup>45</sup> Only in 1911 was membership of the Party reorganized on an individual basis.<sup>46</sup> Organizing work, particularly in the *shtetlekh* could be dangerous. In October, 1906, a Party member was killed in a political assault, in Janow, near Lemberg.<sup>47</sup> Efforts to establish a Party presence in Chrzanow, in the form of a *Forwards* organization, were met with political violence from local reactionaries too. They destroyed Party literature and physically attacked Henryk Grossman and other comrades from nearby Krakow. These events gave rise to the successful prosecution of some of the perpetrators in the local criminal court, as the JSDP sought to demonstrate not only that could it physically defend itself but that it was also possible to challenge



the local notables, capitalists, and councillors, headed by prominent Hasidic Jews who had organized the assault.<sup>48</sup> The subsequent ups and downs of the Chrzanow organization illustrated how, in smaller towns and *shtetlekh*, local organizations were often very unstable.<sup>49</sup>

Moyshe Papier, in a report to a Party Conference on 3-4 August 1907, argued that the JSDP had experienced a first phase of development when its forces were gathered together during the period of political upheavals that ended with the first elections to the Austrian parliament under universal suffrage, in 1907. A second phase had now begun, he argued, during which it was necessary to adopt a much more systematic approach to building the Party, including greater central coordination of strikes and boycotts to ensure they generated sustainable extension of the Party's organizations.<sup>50</sup>

Between the second JSDP Congress of 30-31 May 1906 and the third on 18 October 1908, membership had risen from 2,800 to 3,500.<sup>51</sup> By the fourth Congress on 25-26 October 1910, membership had risen to over 4,200 and the Party was made up of eighty organizations in thirty-two localities.<sup>52</sup> The position of the JSDP was further strengthened when the Jewish Section of the PPSD, with its small following, joined the autonomous Jewish socialist Party in May, 1911. This took place in the lead up to the Austrian elections of that year and helped consolidate JSDP support for PPSD candidates. After the elections, however, the attitude of the PPSD became progressively more hostile. Eventually the former leaders of the Jewish section, though not its rank and file membership, returned to the Polish Party. The JSDP nevertheless continued to grow. The Jewish social democrats of Bukowina also adhered to the JSDP after 1910, while retaining membership in the Bukowina party which was essentially a federation of national organizations. At the 6th Party Congress of 23-24 October, 1913, the organization was renamed the Jewish Social Democratic Party of Galicia and Bukowina. Eight hundred of the Party's 4,500 members were in Bukowina.<sup>53</sup> The decline in membership in Galicia may have been a consequence of the deep economic crisis and higher unemployment of the previous two years. Poverty and hunger also led to the mass emigration of Jewish workers. It is also worth noting that the Party had, at different stages, a number of organizations outside Galicia including those in Vienna, Antwerp, New York, and Bielsk in Silesia.<sup>54</sup>

A key element of the Party's activity was the publication of the weekly *Social Democrat*, which integrated and stimulated the JSDP's

political, trade union, and cultural work. Its establishment and continued publication from October, 1905, was a strong indicator of the young Party's growth and health. This was a huge task for a small organization made up of impoverished workers and without any paid officials. What is more, the articles by a number of the intellectuals who worked on the paper, including Grossman, had to be translated from Polish. The activities and publications, including the Krakow daily *Naprzod*, of the much larger PPSD were underwritten by financial support from both the German-Austrian Party and the German Social Democratic Party.<sup>55</sup> Until the Jewish Party's newspaper was moved from Krakow to Lemberg in 1908, it had a four page tabloid format. Its leading articles oriented the membership politically on what the leadership regarded as key issues. Later pages provided accounts of the activities and internal life of the organization, its local committees, associated unions and educational groups in different towns and villages. The *Social Democrat* carried material on important industrial conflicts in which members were involved, as well as political disputes, especially with the PPSD and Zionists. Some major political events in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and in other countries were covered along with developments in the Austro-Hungarian and international social democratic movements. From its first issue the paper also carried literary material: stories, dialogues, and poetry by famous and less well-known Yiddish writers.

Apart from membership growth, perhaps the most important index of the success of Jewish social democracy in Galicia was the development of a cadre of agitators and activists. This had two aspects. First, the Party attracted considerable numbers of young intellectuals, especially students, with middle class backgrounds. They were a crucial element in the initial organizing core of the organization and some, like Grossman, already had experience working with proletarian groups. The JSDP provided a framework in which their further political development took place as they sought to organize workers. But the Party and the associations out of which it grew, also developed a layer of activists and leaders with working class backgrounds.<sup>56</sup> This provided a sharp contrast with the PPSD, whose focus on the Polish working class and national interests had directed most of the earlier generation of Jewish socialist intellectuals away from systematic efforts to mobilize Jewish workers. The JSDP realized its critique of the PPSD by forming a leadership cadre at the level of the whole Galician organization and in the larger towns and districts. The establishment of effective schools for agitators was one of

the Party's priorities, though there seem to have been problems in carrying it through.<sup>57</sup>

A crucial area of JSDP activity was in the unions. The Party also sought to organize women and young workers, and placed a great deal of weight and devoted considerable resources to political campaigns. These areas of activity, together with the organization's cultural activities, are very briefly outlined in the following sub-sections.

### Unions

A central focus of the JSDP's activity was supporting workers' economic struggles and their efforts to build trade unions. This took two main organizational forms. On the one hand, Party militants were active in or led branches of the central Austrian trade unions; on the other, they were the mainstay of general local unions that organized workers from different trades in small localities or where there were insufficient numbers to form branches of the central unions.<sup>58</sup> These *Forwards* associations also functioned as associations of the JSDP-influenced branches of different central unions in the larger towns.<sup>59</sup> The Party also sustained educational associations, often called Brotherhood.

The rules of the central unions, including a minimum membership, applied to their local branches. These could, in turn, call on the considerable organizational and financial resources, including sickness, unemployment, and strike funds, of the wider Austrian organizations. In 1905, Yiddish-speaking shoemakers, painters, tailors, bakers, metal workers, shop assistants, butchers, hatmakers, furniture carpenters, brush makers, women feather pluckers, and horsehair workers were organized by the JSDP. This was a period of rapid economic growth and worker militancy. The Party successfully led a series of strikes, including one of Krakow washerwomen, and took solidarity action with striking Polish construction workers.<sup>60</sup> In 1906, the Party led twenty-nine branches of central Austrian unions. But the Austrian unions, on the prompting of the PPSD, created obstacles to the recognition of branches led by members of the JSDP. According to a report to the Party's 1908 Congress, given the period of labor unrest, the number of such branches could have been doubled but for this interference. At the time of the Congress twenty-nine central union branches and thirty-six general unions were led by the Party.<sup>61</sup> The number of branches under JSDP influence subsequently rose to fifty in 1910 and sixty-eight in twenty towns in

1913.<sup>62</sup> The Galician Trade Union Commission, with its PPSD leadership, was particularly unhelpful in organizing Yiddish-speaking workers. Although a majority of delegates to the Galician conference of the Tailors' Union were JSDP members<sup>63</sup> and around three-quarters of the membership was Jewish, its local newspaper was in Polish. The 1910 conference of the central unions in Galicia rejected proposals to publish a trade union newspaper in Yiddish or to employ a Yiddish-speaking secretary, i.e., organizer. This was despite a decision to raise union dues in order to engage four additional secretaries. 2,500 of the 17,520 workers represented at the conference were in Yiddish locals.<sup>64</sup> Financial advantages to union members and the JSPD's commitment to working class solidarity nevertheless meant that the branches it led remained in the central unions.

The determination of Yiddish workers to fight for their rights as workers secured some significant advances in wages and conditions and in recognition by the general union movement. Metal workers in the general *Forwards* Yiddish union in Lemberg, for example, had sought permission to set up a branch of the central union for some time without success. Only after a successful four-week strike, which drained their organization's funds, was their request granted.<sup>65</sup> By late 1910, the attitude of the central union leaderships in Vienna to Jewish workers in Galicia had softened. New Jewish locals were set up and the Tailors Union began to publish a journal in Yiddish.<sup>66</sup>

The general unions associated with the Party were usually called *Forwards*, as in Lemberg and Krakow. At its foundation the JSDP was supported by the bulk of the organized Jewish working class in Galicia. These workers were overwhelmingly located in Lemberg and Krakow and several larger towns. One of the Party's important achievements was the extension of organization, through general unions, to the proletariat and home workers of the *shtetlekh*. Given overpopulation, the extension of capitalist production relations into Galicia was associated with very low wages and long hours of work. Many artisans lost their autonomy and became home workers, laboring for up to eighteen hours a day, rather than a factory proletariat. Employees in shops and small workshops were under similar pressure.<sup>67</sup> The first issues of the *Social Democrat*, for example, reported the establishment of a local *Forwards* union in Podgorze, where shop assistants were working up to seventeen hours a day. This approach to organizing contrasted with that of the local Zionists. They had organized a petition for shorter hours, which the employers had simply rejected.<sup>68</sup>

Thanks to these tactics the number of towns represented at the second Party Congress, in 1906, had risen from seven to twenty.<sup>69</sup> One of the more remarkable union struggles supported by the Party was a strike by forty *kheder* teachers in Stanislawow. This lasted for six weeks and ended in a victory. The strikers became loyal party members.<sup>70</sup> By 1910, the *Forwards* groups functioned as unions primarily in the smaller towns. In the larger ones, where branches of the central unions existed, they were mainly educational associations.<sup>71</sup>

### Women, Youth, and Elections

The Party's union work was complemented by its efforts to specifically organize women and young workers. Three women were among the delegates to the founding Congress of the JSDP.<sup>72</sup> In Krakow, soon after its establishment, it led a women's union and extended this kind of organization to other towns.<sup>73</sup> In line with the general social democratic position, a women comrade, Fargel, pointed out to the 1906 Congress that the regime's introduction of universal suffrage was not universal at all. It did not allow women to vote! Her contribution was met with bravos.<sup>74</sup>

The Jewish Social Democratic Party quickly established an organization for young workers, as it became impossible for members who were oriented to the JSDP to remain in the Galician branches of the Central Association of Young Workers in Austria. The new organization had over one thousand members by October 1905, although its fortunes fluctuated thereafter. After the unification of the JSDP and the PPSD's Jewish Section, the Bukowina organizations of young Jewish workers, still in the Austrian Association, united with the JSDP's youth group. From the start of 1912 its publication, *Freye Jugend* (*Free Youth*), began to be published in Czernowitz. In 1913, the combined organization, with 1,500 members, was the largest association of young socialist workers in Austria, after those of the Czech and German parties.<sup>75</sup> JSDP university students were also active. They became the mainstay of *Zjednoczenie* (*Unity*), the journal set up in 1905 by students from various socialist currents hostile to the PPSD leadership. In 1914, they set up a journal more directly associated with the JSDP.<sup>76</sup>

### Political Campaigns

Political campaigns, including those focussed on the Austrian and Galician parliaments (Reichsrat and Sejm) were, with union activity, the JSDP's

top priority. The campaign for universal and equal suffrage that arose under the influence of the 1905 Russian revolution provided the occasion for the extension of social democratic influence into the countryside of Galicia. New layers of the Polish, Ukrainian/Ruthenian,<sup>77</sup> and — thanks to the activities of the JSDP — of the *shtetlekh* Jewish population were politicized for the first time.<sup>78</sup> The Party coordinated its efforts, as far as possible, with those of the PPSD and the General Austrian Party, and attacked the Zionist proposal for elections on the basis of national curia.<sup>79</sup> This continued despite virulent attacks and denunciations made by Polish socialist leaders.<sup>80</sup> The new Jewish Party devoted a great deal of its efforts to the campaign for universal suffrage in the period from 1905 to 1907. During its first year of existence the Party held fifty-three mass meetings, fifty closed meetings, and issued 80,000 leaflets on the issue.<sup>81</sup> This issue also occupied a great deal of space in the *Social Democrat*.

The attacks from the Polish Party let up only during election campaigns, when it needed JSDP support. In the interests of working class solidarity the JSDP, nevertheless, consistently supported (Polish) social democratic candidates over those of the Zionists and other bourgeois Jewish parties.<sup>82</sup> The agitational work of talented young Jewish social democrats was an important element in the PPSD's successes in the first ballot for the Reichsrat under the new electoral law in 1907. In a number of seats Jewish votes were decisive. The contributions of the JSDP activists could take peculiar forms. One of them, Feliks Gutman recalled that:

At an election meeting in Nowy Sacz, the chairperson introduced me to the audience with the following words: "and now the son of our beloved leader Ignacy will present a talk — comrade Feliks Daszynski." This announcement was greeted with thunderous applause.<sup>83</sup>

### **Cultural Activity**

The Party also undertook important cultural tasks, in view of the financial and intellectual poverty of elementary education in Yiddish. This work involved lectures, libraries, celebrations of important anniversaries (Marx's death, Hersh Lekert's execution, the 1848 revolution in Petersburg), literary evenings with readings of poetry and prose, and the production of plays.<sup>84</sup> The *Social Democrat* published material by the

Yiddish poet Abraham Reizen, who also provided editorial assistance and read his work at literary evenings organized by *Forwards*.<sup>85</sup> The newspaper also published the work of other Yiddish authors, including Mordekai Gebirtig and Sholem Ash.<sup>86</sup> Party members in Krakow produced forty two plays between 1908 and 1910; productions, including a performance of the "Jewish Hamlet," were organized in Lemberg. The work of Yankev Gordin was particularly popular. In the two years before the 1913 JSDP Congress, Party associated groups had presented 380 lectures, seventy-one amateur dramatic productions and 160 literary evenings.<sup>87</sup>

Party libraries existed in the largest towns. With 469 books, the Krakow library had the most to offer members. Apart from leaflets and the very substantial achievement of regularly issuing the *Social Democrat*, the JSDP's own publication program was, however, limited. It issued a pamphlet by Grossman, *Bundizm in Galitsyen (Bundism in Galicia)* in 1907 and subsequently a "*Hagada shel pesach*" (Passover Haggadah) (4,000 copies), a pamphlet on a public inquiry into Jewish poverty (1,800 copies in Polish),<sup>88</sup> and two others on the population census in Yiddish and Polish.<sup>89</sup>

It would be a mistake to see the JSDP's cultural work as separate from its political activities. The two were integrated in the Party's conception of the kind of struggles that were necessary to improve Jewish workers' living conditions, for example in the demands for a Yiddish-speaking union secretary and Yiddish union newspapers. Without the development of a Yiddish workers' culture it would be impossible to relate to and lead workers' whose language was Yiddish. Hence, at its Second Congress in 1906, the Party adopted a resolution calling for national cultural autonomy for the different nations in Austria.<sup>90</sup> The relationship between politics and culture, especially language, was particularly apparent in two major developments. One was the first Yiddish language Conference in Czernowitz in 1908 and the other the campaign over the 1910 population census.

The *Social Democrat* devoted considerable attention to the Yiddish Conference both before and after the event. A "special correspondent" provided a report of its sessions.<sup>91</sup> This included the publication of a short piece by I.L. Peretz, who identified Yiddish as the contemporary language of the Jewish people and the only possible language of a Jewish nation, while Hebrew was the language of their past. The accompanying editorial comment took a hard line in criticizing the

Zionists for confusing the struggle for recognition of Yiddish by the Austrian regime.<sup>92</sup>

This struggle took on a particularly concrete form in relation to the population census of 31 December 1910. The authorities determined that Yiddish was not an acceptable answer to the question about the language people used in daily life (*Umgangssprache*). The JSDP's 1910 Congress decided to initiate a campaign for people to write Yiddish in answer to the question.<sup>93</sup> The Party issued an appeal that identified the connections between the census and social, political, and national demands. It concluded:

Large numbers did precisely this. Many were fined, and some jailed for refusing to pay. Despite the falsification of results, as the authorities arbitrarily changed answers, the campaign played an important role in raising the profile of the issue of the status of Yiddish among Jews and non-Jews alike. Zionists also supported the campaign and, like the JSDP, held large meetings on the question.<sup>95</sup>

The 31 December will be a test of our national consciousness! We recognize that a struggle awaits us, but at the same time recognize that rights are only achieved through struggle. We will not wait out the course of events, passively with folded arms!

Citizens! Workers: we call on you to make a strong protest. We call you into struggle! In the Jewish streets, in the name of the organized Jewish proletariat we raise the slogan: in the census questionnaire state that your language is Yiddish!<sup>94</sup>

## Conclusion

The outbreak of war, in August, 1914, severely disrupted the JSDP. All its publications were shut down, and its political and union activity suppressed. Many activists were conscripted and Galicia soon became a battlefield.<sup>96</sup> Elements of the organization were sustained or rebuilt during the conflict, but the Party was only effectively revived during 1918. The *Social Democrat* reappeared on 17 October 1917, and a Party conference in Krakow over the following two days gave new formal shape to the organization. Given the reemergence of an independent Polish state that promised to include Galicia, the conference decided to seek unity with the Bund. This was achieved at the JSDP's Congress in Krakow on 9 April 1920.<sup>97</sup>



The JSDP and the Yiddish-speaking proletariat remained relatively isolated politically before World War I. The Czech social democrats expressed some sympathy, but this was on an opportunist rather than principled socialist basis. The Czech Party was involved in an essentially nationalist conflict with the dominant German component of the General Party, with which Daszynski and the PPSD had a longstanding alliance of convenience.<sup>98</sup> JSDP-influenced union branches continued to participate in the central Austrian union movement. The small size of the Yiddish-speaking working class meant that, in contrast to the vastly larger Czech union membership, a separate Jewish union movement would hardly have been viable. The JSDP also conducted common campaigns with the Polish and General Austrian Social Democratic Parties. But the efforts of the latter to combat the oppression of the Jewish working class were modest indeed.

This isolation was largely a product of the increasingly nationalist and reformist climate in Austrian social democracy.<sup>99</sup> Two other developments, however, seem to have led the JSDP to give greater emphasis to cultural work in the years immediately before the War. On the one hand, the Bund, which remained a model, was decimated during the reactionary period in Russia after 1907 and increasingly stressed cultural and national issues. On the other hand, the faltering economic circumstances in 1912 and 1913 in Galicia reduced the scope for union struggles. Also of considerable importance was the absence of any significant militant currents in the other social democratic parties which could have been serious allies for the independent Jewish socialist organization in Galicia. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the JSDP militants did not develop a critique of the PPSD's nationalism that identified its roots in the concessions made by the General Austrian Party to nationalism in the combined form of its own federal structure and lack of preparedness to support the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.<sup>100</sup>

In the period before World War I the JSDP did, however, achieve a great deal as an expression of the political needs of Yiddish-speaking workers who had to struggle against both exploitation and oppression. Without its branches, committees, as well as the unions and other associations linked to the Party it is scarcely imaginable that Jewish workers could have sustained such a level of activity over such a range of issues. The JSDP-oriented unions conducted strikes and other economic fights. The Party itself led the Jewish proletariat in political mobilizations

over matters of concern to the whole proletariat, as in the case of electoral reform, and campaigns over issues of specific concern to Yiddish-speaking workers, especially the status of the Yiddish language. General unions and specifically educational associations conducted wide-ranging cultural work. The Party's most significant achievement was expressed in two interrelated developments. First, a large proportion of the (admittedly small) politically active Yiddish-speaking working class identified with the politics of the JSDP rather than with Zionism. Secondly, unlike the German-Austrian, Czech, and Polish Social Democratic Parties, the JSDP did not capitulate to the nationalism of its own bourgeoisie at the outbreak of the War.

## Notes

1 The following account of Galicia's population and economy, unless otherwise indicated, draws on Jozef Buszko, *Zum Wandel der Gesellschaftsstruktur in Galizien und der Bukowina*, Phil. hist. Klasse. Sitzungsberichte, Bd. 343 (Wien: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1978), 15-31.

2 Max Rosenfeld, *Die polnische Judenfrage* (Wien-Berlin: Löwit Verlag, 1918), 68, 74, 81.

3 Jakob Thon, "Die Berufsgliederung der Juden in Galizien," *Zeitschrift für Demographie und Statistik der Juden* 3, no. 8-9 (August-September, 1907): 114-116. The category "Workers" (*Arbeiter*) did not include "Day Laborers" (*Tagelöhner*).

4 Raphael Mahler, "The Economic Background of Jewish Emigration from Galicia to the United States," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 7 (New York: 1952): 258.

5 Thon, "Die Berufsgliederung."

6 The pioneering work of Bross and Kissman were key sources for the following sections: Jakob Bross, "Tsu der geshichte fun der YSDP in Galitsye," *Royte Pinkes* (Warsaw: Kultur Lige, 1924); Joseph Kissman, "Di yiddishe sotsyal-demokratishe bevegung in Galitsye un Bukovine" ("The Jewish social-democratic movement in Galicia and Bukovina"), in G. Aronson et al, eds., *Di Geshikhte fun Bund* vol. 3 (New York: Farlag Unser Tsait, 1966), 337-480. Both were leading members in the Jewish Social Democratic Party (JSDP) before World War I. I have also drawn extensively on primary sources, notably the publications of the JSDP and a range of other secondary materials. Unfortunately I did not have access to a full set of the Party's newspaper, the *Sotsyal Demokrat*, as some important single issues and even whole years are missing from the YIVO holdings on microfilm.

7 Max Zetterbaum, "Klassengegensätze bei den Juden," *Die Neue Zeit* 11, no. 2, issue 28 (1892-93):4-12, and 11, no. 2, issue 29 (1892-93):36-43.

8 Henryk Grossman, *Bundizm in Galitsyen* (Krakow: Publishing House of the *Sotsyal Demokrat*, 1907), 16.

9 The Zürich Congress took place in August 1893; see Ezra Mendelsohn "The Jewish Socialist Movement and the Second International, 1889-1914: The Struggle for Recognition," *Jewish Social Studies* 26, 3 (1964): 135.

10 Ibid, 24; Bross, "Tsu der geshichte," 28; JSDP *An die Sozialdemokraten in Oesterreich!* (Krakow: JSDP, October 1905).

11 Initially as the Workers' Party. At its first conference in 1892 it was renamed the Social Democratic Party of Galicia and in 1899 the PPSD, after the Ukrainian Social Democratic Party was established in Galicia.

12 Grossman *Bundizm in Galitsyen*, 25. Also see 19, 29.

13 Ibid., 41, emphasis in the original.

14 JSDP, *An die Sozialdemokraten in Oesterreich!*

15 Bross, "Tsu der geshichte," 43-44.

16 Max Rosenfeld "Unterrichtsstistik für das Jahr 1910 in Galizien," *Zeitschrift für Demographie und Statistik der Juden* 9, no. 7-8 (July-August, 1913): 110, 113. Also see J. Thon, "Anteil der Juden am Hochschulstudium in Österreich seit dem Jahre 1851," *Zeitschrift für Demographie und Statistik der Juden* 3, no. 3 (March 1907): 37.

17 Buszko, *Zum Wandel der Gesellschaftsstruktur*, 30.

18 Note, I have transliterated people's names from Yiddish only where I was not aware of contemporary versions of their names in the Roman alphabet. These contemporary versions were used in Polish or German.

19 Bross, "Tsu der geshichte," 33.

20 Walentyna Najdus, *Polska Partia Socjalno-Demokratyczna Galicji i Slaska 1890-1919* (Warszawa: Panstwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1983), 392-394; JSDP, *Przed Kongresem (Before the Congress)*, 1905.

21 "Konferencya towarzyszy zydowskich in Lwowie" ("The Conference of Jewish Comrades in Lwow") *Przedswit* 23 no. 6 (June, 1903): 255.

22 Najdus, *Polska Partia Socjalno-Demokratyczna*, 394-95; Jüdische sozial-demokratische Partei in Galizien, "Der Sozialdemokrat," *An die Sozialdemokraten in Oesterreich (To the Social Democrats of Austria)* (Krakau, 1905); Kerstin Jobst, *Zwischen Nationalismus und Internationalismus: Die polnische und ukrainische Sozialdemokratie in Galizien von 1890 bis 1914. Ein Beitrag zur Nationalitätenfrage im Habsburgerreich* (Hamburg: Bölling und Galitz, 1996), 132.

23 Bross, "Tsu der geshichte," 44.

24 For the national question and the PPSD, with a focus on relations with Ukrainian social democracy in Galicia, see Jobst, *Zwischen Nationalismus und Internationalismus*.

25 For the national question in the General Austrian Party see Hans Mommsen, *Die Sozialdemokratie und die Nationalitätenfrage im habsburgischen Vielvölkerstaat* (Wien: Europa-Verlag, 1963).

26 Najdus, *Polska Partia Socjalno-Demokratyczna*, 404, 435.

27 Sobelsohn/Radek was a socialist with a Jewish background from Lemberg and Tarnow in Galicia. For his activities see Jim Tuck, *Engine of Mischief: an Analytic Biography of Karl Radek* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988); Warren Lerner *Karl Radek the Last Internationalist* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970); and Georg W. Strobel *Die Partei Rosa Luxemburgs, Lenin und die SPD* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1974).

28 Bross, "Tsu der geshichte," 44-45; Kissman, "Di yidishe sotsyaldemokratishe bevegung," 365-66. Henryk Grossman provided a justification for the advocates of an autonomous Jewish social democratic organization in a pamphlet, *Proletariat wobec kwestii zydowskiej* (*The Proletariat in Relation to the Jewish Question*) (Krakow: Odbito w Drukarni Wladyslawa Teodorczuka, 1905).

29 Kissman, "Di yiddishe sotsyal-demokratishe bevegung," 366.

30 Bross, "Tsu der geshichte," 45; L. Feyner, "Di bundishe presse in Krakow fun 1905 bis 1930" ("The Bundist Press in Galicia from 1905 to 1930"), *Historisher samlbuch: materialn un dokumentn tsushtayer tsu der geshichte fun algemayner yidishn arbeter-bund* (Warsaw: Farlag "Ring", 1948), 18-23; Kissman, "Di yidishe sotsyal-demokratishe bevegung," 366-67.

31 *Der Yidisher Sotsyal Demokrat* (3 June 1905), 22.

32 Mommsen, *Die Sozialdemokratie*, 314-15, 336.

33 See Grossman, *Proletariat wobec*.

34 JSDP, *Przed Kongresem*; JSDP, *Bericht zum Gesamt-Parteitag der Oesterreichischen Sozialdemokratie in Wien 1905 (1 Mai-23 October 1905)* (*Report to the General Party Congress of the Austrian Social Democratic Party in Vienna 1906 (1 May-23 October 1905)*) (Krakow: JSDP, 1905).

35 *Der Yidisher Sotsyal Demokrat* (3 June 1905), 23-24.

36 Kissman, "Di yiddishe sotsyal-demokratishe bevegung," 369. According to Gutman, the declaration of the JSDP was precipitated by the unauthorized publication of the Party's founding appeal by a group from Lemberg which had been involved in the unsuccessful attempt to set up such an organization in 1902. This disrupted sensitive negotiations over recognition of a Jewish organization with the leadership of the Austrian General Party. Feliks Gutman, "Vegn der grindung un tetikeyt fun 'Galitsyaner Bund'" ("On the Formation and Activity of the 'Galician Bund'"), *Untzer Tsait* (1955): 30-32.

37 The manifesto was written by Grossman, according to Feyner, "Di bundishe presse in Krakow," 18-23.

38 JSDP, *Przed Kongresem*; Gutman, "Vegn der grindung," maintains that the *Yidisher Sotsyal Demokrat* was published by the Lemberg group and not under the authority of the Central Committee.

39 JSDP, *Przed Kongresem*, emphasis in the original.

40 JSDP, *Przed Kongresem*.

41 Hersh Lekert was a Bundist hero executed for attempting to assassinate the Governor of Vilna as retaliation for police violence against demonstrators and political prisoners.

42 *Der Yidisher Sotsyal Demokrat* (3 June 1905), 20.

43 Ibid., 21-27.

44 JSDP, *Czego Chcemy? (What Do We Want?)* (Krakow: JSDP, 1905), 2.

45 JSDP, *Bericht*. As was the case with the PPSD, therefore, union branches also collected Party dues from their members.

46 Kissman, "Di yiddishe sotsyal-demokratishe bevegung," 438.

47 *Sotsyal Demokrat* (2 November 1906).

48 Bund Archive MG7-29 leaflet "Khaveyrim! Yidishe Arbeter!"; *Sotsyal Demokrat* (17 May 1907); Kissman, "Di yiddishe sotsyal-demokratishe bevegung," 383. These events are depicted in a fictionalized form in Christina Stead's short story, "The Azhdnov Tailors," *The Ocean of Story* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1986).

49 Kissman, "Di yiddishe sotsyal-demokratishe bevegung," 396.

50 *Sotsyal Demokrat* (9 August 1907); (16 August 1907).

51 *Sotsyal Demokrat* (8 June 1906); (9 October 1908).

52 *Sotsyal Demokrat* (21 October 1910).

53 Kissman, "Di yiddishe sotsyal-demokratishe bevegung," 433-34, 446, 456, 460. According to Gutman, ninety-five percent of the merged organization came from the JSDP and only five percent from the PPSD's Jewish section, Gutman, "Vegn der grindung."

54 Gutman, "Vegn der grindung"; *Sotsyal Demokrat* (11 October 1907), (15 November 1907) for correspondence from New York.

55 Jobst, *Zwischen Nationalismus und Internationalismus*, 49.

56 Moyshe Papier is a particularly good example. When he first took over as editor of the *Sotsyal Demokrat* at the end of 1905, he was a twenty-two-year-old sign painter, Feyner, "Di bundishe presse in Krakow." Also see Gutman, "Vegn der grindung"; Kissman, 393.

57 By October 1905, an agitator with responsibility for the *shtetleh* of western Galicia was located in Tarnow and another envisaged to organize those in eastern Galicia was to be based in Tarnopol, JSDP, *Bericht zum Gesamt-Parteitag*. The need to establish schools for agitators in the larger towns was again raised at a Party Conference on 3-4 August 1907, *Sotsyal Demokrat* (16 August 1907) and at the 1908 Party Congress *Sotsyal Demokrat* (23 October 1908).

58 Kissman, "Di yiddishe sotsyal-demokratishe bevegung," 392.

59 *Sotsyal Demokrat* (9 October 1908).

60 JSDP, *Bericht zum Gesamt-Parteitag*.

61 *Sotsyal Demokrat* (9 October 1908).

62 Kissman, "Di yiddishe sotsyal-demokratishe bevegung," 460.

63 *Sotsyal Demokrat* (16 October 1908); Bross, "Tsu der geshichte," 28.

64 *Sotsyal Demokrat* (20 May 1910). For an overview of relations between the JSDP led unions on the one hand and the Polish and Central union leaderships on the other, see Kissman, "Di yiddishe sotsyal-demokratishe bevegung," 402, 407-409; Bross, "Tsu der geshichte," 33-34. Developments at the conferences of the central unions in Galicia are reported in *Sotsyal Demokrat* (14 December 1906); (20 May 1910); (27 May 1910). The attitude of the Polish trade union leader Zygmunt Zulawski to *Polish* workers is indicative of the implications of the PPSD's nationalist politics for working class organization. He explained the limited progress made by the Galician union movement not only in terms of the backwardness of Galician industry, but also blamed the lack of political consciousness of workers who were too preoccupied with improving their living standards *Sotsyal Demokrat* (27 May 1910). The conflict between the Central Tailors' Union and its five hundred Jewish members is covered, for example, in *Sotsyal Demokrat* (14 August 1908); (4 September 1908).

65 Kissman, "Di yiddishe sotsyal-demokratishe bevegung," 407.

66 *Sotsyal Demokrat* (11 November 1910).

67 JSDP, *Bericht zum Gesamt-Parteitag*.

68 *Sotsyal Demokrat* (6 October 1905); (27 October 1905).

69 *Sotsyal Demokrat* (8 June 1906).

70 Kissman, "Di yiddishe sotsyal-demokratishe bevegung," 384; *Sotsyal Demokrat* (16 October 1908).

71 *Sotsyal Demokrat* (21 October 1910).

72 JSDP, *An die Sozialdemokraten in Oesterreich!*

73 JSDP, *Bericht zum Gesamt-Parteitag*; *Sotsyal Demokrat* (3 November 1905) a women's union was established in Podgorze at a meeting of one hundred.

74 *Sotsyal Demokrat* (22 June 1906). Later that year the *Sotsyal Demokrat* carried an article by Karl Kautsky, the leading theoretician of the German Social Democratic Party and the Second International, Karl Kautsky, "Women's Right to Vote," *Sotsyal Demokrat* (3 August 1906).

75 JSDP, *Bericht zum Gesamt-Parteitag*; Kissman, "Di yiddishe sotsyal-demokratishe bevegung," 460-61, 467.

76 Feyner, "Di bundishe presse in Krakow," 21-22.

77 Jobst, *Zwischen Nationalismus und Internationalismus*, 149.

78 JSDP, *Bericht zum Gesamt-Parteitag*.

79 See, for example, Grossman's speech to the Second Party Congress in May 1906, *Sotsyal Demokrat* (15 June 1906): 3.

80 JSDP, *Bericht zum Gesamt-Parteitag*.

81 *Sotsyal Demokrat* (8 June 1906).

82 For an example of the JSDP's critique of Zionism see "H.G."

(presumably Henryk Grossman), "Polenklub, Yidenklub un der Tsionistisher sharlotanizmus," *Sotsyal Demokrat* (28 September 1906); "Der bankrot fun'm tsionizm," *Sotsyal Demokrat* (13 July 1908).

83 Gutman, "Vegn der grindung."

84 *Sotsyal Demokrat* (16 October 1908) for an outline of the nature of this kind of activity.

85 For example *Sotsyal Demokrat* (13 October 1905); (3 October 1906); (20 December 1907); (2 October 1908). Reysen edited *Das Yidisher Wort* in Krakow which was advertised in all issues of *Yidisher Sotsyal Demokrat*, possibly providing the young party with some much needed advertising revenue.

86 For example, M. Gebirtig, "Der generalstreyk," *Sotsyal Demokrat* (8 December 1905); Sholem Ash, "Di mushugene mame," *Sotsyal Demokrat* (11 May 1906); (18 May 1906).

87 Kissman, "Di yiddishe sotsyal-demokratishe bevegung," 460.

88 *Sotsyal Demokrat* (16 October 1908); (21 October 1910).

89 Feyner, "Di bundishe presse in Krakow," 21.

90 Bross, "Tsu der geshichte," 46.

91 "A.K.," "Di ershte yidishe shprakh konferentz in Tshernovitz," *Sotsyal Demokrat* (4 September 1908); (11 September 1908).

92 I.L. Peretz, "Vegn der yidisher shprakh;" *Sotsyal Demokrat* (2 October 1908). Also see *Sotsyal Demokrat* (28 August 1908); "L.F." (presumably Leon Feyner), "Nakh der konferenz fun der yidisher sprakh," *Sotsyal Demokrat* (25 September 1908).

93 *Sotsyal Demokrat* (11 November 1910).

94 *Sotsyal Demokrat* (9 December 1910).

95 Kissman, "Di yiddishe sotsyal-demokratishe bevegung," 423-24.

96 Ibid., 22.

97 *Sotsyal Demokrat* (1 May 1920).

98 Jobst, *Zwischen Nationalismus und Internationalismus*, 49, 74-75.

99 Ibid., 137, 146, 189-90.

100 For the formulation of just such a critique see Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), 910-13. Trotsky here contrasts the "Austro-marxists'" attitude to the question of national oppression with Lenin's. It should be noted that the Bund also favored a federal form of organization of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party and did not support the self-determination, to the point of independence, of Poland or other oppressed parts of the Russian empire as a demand which could be used to undermine the stability of the Czarist state.

## On the Jewish Street: Yiddish Culture and the Urban Landscape In Interwar Vilna<sup>\*</sup>

Cecile E. Kuznitz

### I.

In his poem "Vilna," published in 1929, the Yiddish writer Moyshe Kulbak evoked the spirit of the city through its physical fabric:

You are a Book of Psalms spelled out in clay and iron;  
Each stone is a prayer, each wall a hymn,  
When the moon trickles down in your mystical alleys...  
Each stone is a holy book, each wall a parchment.<sup>1</sup>

In the same year, Zalman Schneour commented on a collection of photographs of Vilna: "Here the walls are very heavy. The burden of generations oppresses this alley and this gate." Schneour cited his own Hebrew verses on Vilna: "Every wall absorbs tradition with the scent of Sabbath spices."<sup>2</sup>

Kulbak and Schneour were not alone in using such images. During the interwar period, authors often turned to descriptions of the city itself as the material embodiment of the spirit of Vilna and its Jews. To cite another example, Max Weinreich, one of the founders of the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO), wrote that "every wall in old Vilna, every stone in the *shulhoyf* (synagogue courtyard), on Yidishe Street and on Glezer Street, tells of generations of Jews who lived there."<sup>3</sup> Others linked the city's structures to its vibrant cultural life. According to Yiddish writer



Daniel Charney, "Vilna Jews' exceptional love for and loyalty to Jewish folk culture stamped itself even on the walls and stones of the narrow Vilna streets and alleys. . ." <sup>4</sup> Such picturesque scenes were invoked so often that they became a familiar theme. The distinctive winding byways of Vilna's Jewish quarter, often spanned by arches, thus became the quintessential symbol of Jewish life in the city.

Perhaps the urban landscape of Vilna was invested with such meanings because the city sometimes seemed less an actual than an idealized place. Observers often viewed Vilna as the exemplar of an East European Jewish community, a locale where the rich traditions of the past could serve as the basis of an innovative new culture. As a speaker at the 1930 YIVO conference put it, "for us Vilna is not simply a city, it is an idea."<sup>5</sup> If Vilna occupied such an exalted position, then paradoxically even its most material aspects, its stones and its streets, possessed a kind of holiness and could thus be glorified as the physical embodiment of the "idea" of Vilna. Yet while Vilna could claim to be "the capital of Yiddishland,"<sup>6</sup> that was still a country that existed only in the Jewish imagination. In the interwar period Vilna was becoming increasingly impoverished and marginalized. Such harsh realities could not conquer the mystique of the city, however; if anything, its symbolic weight increased as the conditions of daily life grew harsher.

This mystique was rooted in several factors. The city was renowned for its rabbinic learning, symbolized by the figure of the Vilna Gaon, the intellectual leader of the *misnagdim* (traditionalist opponents of Hasidism). In the nineteenth century it became a center of *haskole* (Enlightenment), and later of both the Zionist movement and the Bund (General Jewish Worker's Union in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia). By the interwar period Vilna proved highly fertile ground for the flourishing of modern Jewish culture, particularly Yiddish culture. Its multi-ethnic population was composed of Poles, Russians, Lithuanians, and Belorussians as well as Jews. This absence of a single dominant non-Jewish culture meant that assimilation was a less tempting option and that Jews could plausibly argue for political and cultural rights as one minority group among many.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the rivalry between Hebraists and Yiddishists was relatively muted, for in interwar Vilna the intellectuals as well as the common folk spoke Yiddish.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, within the broadly-defined category of "secular" or "progressive" Jewry (which excludes the sizable Orthodox population), people divided their allegiances between such competing movements as Bundism, Zionism, and Communism. Yet

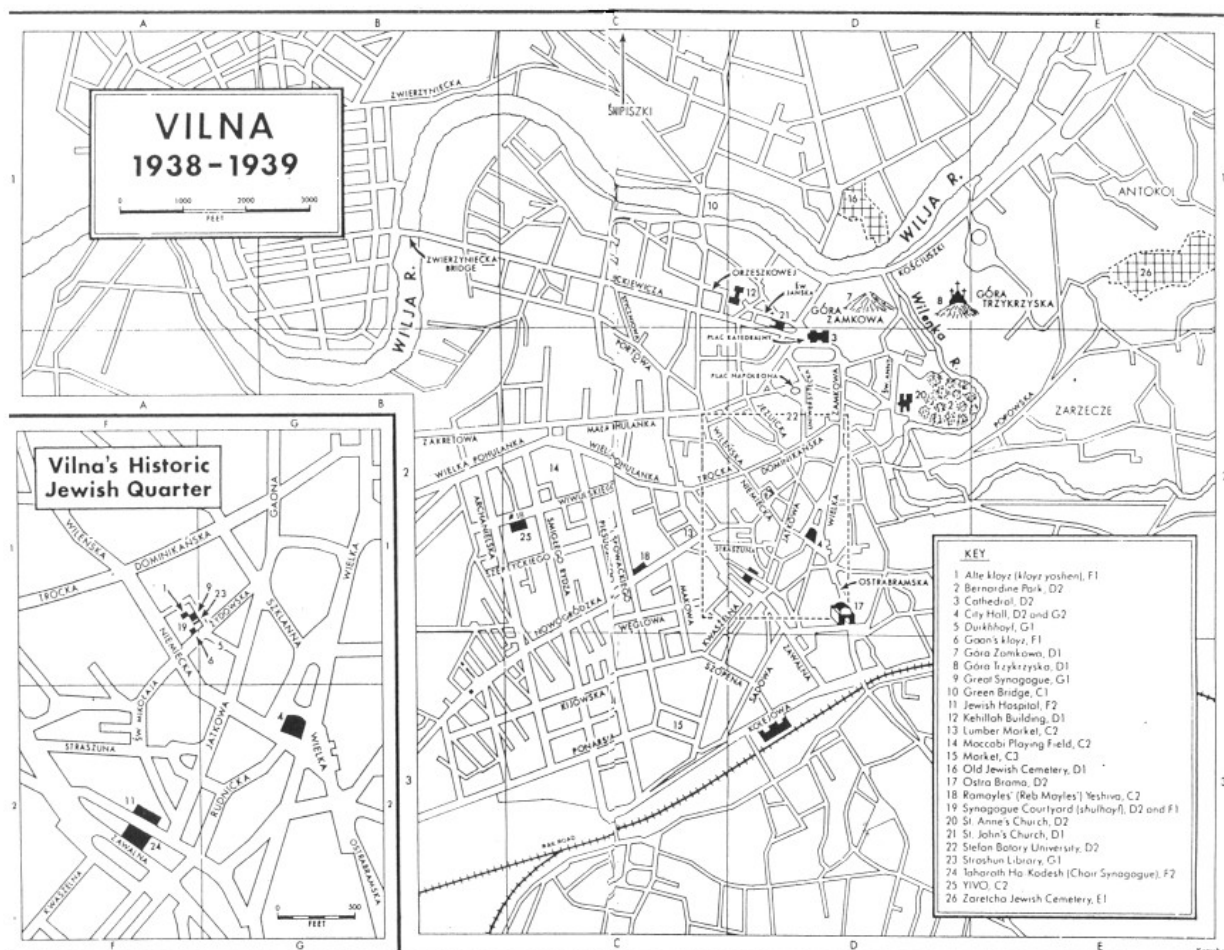
these conflicts were less fractious in Vilna than elsewhere, and the bases of commonality stronger. Thus, there was a relatively high degree of unity within the city's Jewish community, and Yiddish was one of the primary forces behind which Vilna Jews united.<sup>9</sup> Given these factors, it is not surprising that the city's urban landscape reflected the pride of place granted to Yiddish. In the interwar period in particular, the growth of Vilna's institutions of Yiddish culture remade the Jewish street, literally as well as metaphorically.

## II.

Indeed, if Vilna had a specifically Jewish geography, it was largely created through the use of a distinct language. While the city officially changed from Vilna to Wilno to Vilnius, for Jews the city continued to be "*Yerushalayim d'Lite* (the Jerusalem of Lithuania)," a name that never appeared on any official map.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Jewish residents employed their Yiddish vernacular to stake a claim to particular parts of the city, both formally and informally. Just as Jews had their own name for Vilna, certain parts of the city, particularly those in the Jewish quarter, had distinctive Yiddish appellations. Most buildings were organized around courtyards (*hoyfn*) that were called after their owners; for example, the courtyard with an entrance at 7 Yidishe Street was known as *Reb Shaul Shiskes's Hoyf*<sup>11</sup> and 8 Yatkever Street as *Ure-Feygl's Hoyf*.<sup>12</sup> Some streets also had their own names in Yiddish, such as St. Nicholas Street, known to Jewish residents as *Gitke-Toybes Zavulek* (Gitke-Toybe's Alley). Since the designations of thoroughfares changed frequently as successive Russian, German, Lithuanian, and Polish regimes came to power, Jewish street names were sometimes older and better known than their official counterparts.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to such verbal markers, Vilna's topography also offered highly visible signs of the prominent place of its Jewish residents. It thus became contested ground between Jews anxious to assert their role in the city and those segments of the non-Jewish population who sought to displace them. In this regard, a more formal type of recognition of the Jewish character of the city, the official names of streets in the Jewish quarter, became a source of controversy. In 1919, the Historic-Ethnographic Society convinced the city council to rename streets in or near the Jewish quarter in honor of local notables the Vilna Gaon, Matisyahu Strashun, and Shmuel Yosef Finn.<sup>14</sup> Angered by this move,





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some Polish politicians had part of Yatkever Street changed to Klaczko Street, after Julian Klaczko, a well-known writer of Jewish birth who converted to Christianity. The council adopted this proposal over the objections of its Jewish members.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in June 1938, city officials removed a plaque marking the birthplace of the Jewish sculptor Mark Antokolski.<sup>16</sup> In such incidents, the streets of the city became a symbolic battleground where Jewish pride could be both boosted and snubbed.

Another indicator of the Jewish presence in Vilna, particularly in the city's economy, was the use of Yiddish writing on the shop signs of merchants. Jewish observers took pride in Yiddish signage, for they considered it a symbol of the vibrancy of their community. In 1937, a writer in the Vilna Yiddish daily *Der tog* (*The Day*) decried a decline in the number of stores announcing themselves in the Jewish vernacular, since, he argued, "[o]ne of the ways in which Vilna always distinguished itself was the Yiddish sign." The newspaper reported that on Dayshe Street, one of the main commercial thoroughfares of the Jewish quarter, only seventeen out of 129 store signs had Yiddish lettering and that on Yatkever Street, in the heart of the neighborhood, the ratio was twenty-one stores out of fifty. There was an economic incentive to forgo the use of Yiddish, for store owners were required to identify their businesses in Polish and also to pay a tax according to the size of their sign. A bilingual display would be larger and therefore more costly. Yet in the mind of this writer, such added expense was no excuse for merchants' lack of concrete expression of their Jewish solidarity. He advocated shopping only at stores bearing Yiddish lettering. "A Yiddish sign is not simply a caprice of the Yiddishists," he wrote, "but one of the matters that creates links to Jewish culture and gives expression to Jewish Vilna."<sup>17</sup>

The symbolism of such conspicuous manifestations of the Jewish population was not lost on Polish city officials, either. In February 1938, city inspectors ordered shopkeepers to remove all Yiddish writing from their shop fronts although no law restricting the language of signage existed.<sup>18</sup> This action led to a fresh call in the pages of the *Tog* for shopkeepers to assert their Jewish identity by prominently displaying Yiddish lettering, thereby supporting "our national honor and our national interests." Those who fail to do so, the paper editorialized, "do not act like conscious members of the Jewish community." The *Tog* writer accused such Jews of conspiring with antisemitic Poles in the idea that "we must in fact hide ourselves, disappear, that as Jews we have no right to live or work."<sup>19</sup> The people who wished to eliminate Yiddish writing on

storefronts wished to eliminate the economic role of the stores' owners as well. Thus, by putting a distinctive Yiddish stamp on the landscape of Vilna, merchants asserted the integral place of Jews among the city's residents. As the *Tog* writer concluded, "the Yiddish sign is a positive, even a moral, position" for Vilna Jewry.<sup>20</sup>

Government efforts to renew the city center also led to instances of contested public space. In the late 1930s, city officials began a campaign to eliminate street trade from downtown neighborhoods, criticizing it as unsightly and unsanitary. One of their targets was the *durkhhoif* (through-courtyard), where petty merchants, many of them operating illegally, carried on an informal business in old clothes and sometimes in stolen goods.<sup>21</sup> In October, 1937, police forcibly removed the peddlers from the *durkhhoif* and announced that the old clothes trade must move to the more remote Kiev Market. The following year, similar attempts were made to disperse merchants working at the *holtsmark* (wood market), another open-air site of commerce.<sup>22</sup>

City officials justified these actions as attempts to modernize congested and antiquated parts of Vilna, yet Jewish residents often perceived such efforts as attacks upon them. The great majority of itinerant merchants was Jewish, and they were among the poorest and most vulnerable members of the community, often elderly women.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the *durkhhoif* had a certain stature as a time-honored landmark, albeit of the humblest sort. As the *Tog* wrote, "The *durkhhoif* is one of the oldest institutions in the Vilna ghetto . . . grandmothers heard their grandmothers tell about trading in the *durkhhoif*."<sup>24</sup> To many Vilna Jews, therefore, the actions of city officials seemed to have a motivation beyond the issue of urban aesthetics. Thus, while Jewish residents asserted their identity through the use of Yiddish, they also felt threatened by the actions of a sometimes hostile government that opposed a too-visible Jewish element in Vilna's public space. In this way, in the interwar period the urban landscape served as a forum in which to play out conflicts over the place of Jews in the life of the city.

### III.

The attempts of the Polish government to displace Jewish merchants was but one example of the severe pressures that Vilna Jews faced during the interwar period. Although the roots of these troubles lay earlier in the nineteenth century they were greatly exacerbated by the widespread

destruction of World War I, when Vilna was occupied repeatedly by successive invading armies. Once peace came the city found itself in a remote corner of newly-revived Poland, eclipsed by the growing capital, Warsaw, and cut off from former trade routes in what was now the Soviet Union. These factors, coupled with a rising antisemitism that led to boycotts of Jewish-owned shops throughout Poland, meant that many of the city's Jewish residents were displaced and impoverished.<sup>25</sup>

To combat this pervasive sense of decline, Vilna Jews constructed an idealized version of their city's past, promoting nostalgia as an antidote to the troubles of the present day. They looked back to a supposed golden age of economic prosperity, cohesive community ties, and traditional piety. Many residents recalled the years following 1861, when the railroad arrived in Vilna and Jewish residence restrictions were lifted, as the beginning of an auspicious era. They called this the time of "the golden brick," because "so much money was pulled from the walls" then by successful merchants.<sup>26</sup> People also spoke with "a sentimental sigh" of a period when religious norms were still largely unchallenged, men prayed in the *shulhoyf* around the clock, and Jewish children would not dare to act "wantonly (*hefkerdik*)."<sup>27</sup> A proverb recorded in the interwar period echoed the belief that economic conditions had been better in the late nineteenth century despite the decrepit state of the Jewish quarter, where the synagogue courtyard was covered with rotting boards: "When the boards splashed you could make a living; today there is pavement but the living is gone."<sup>28</sup>

The paving of the *shulhoyf* was but one example of a Jewish counterpart to government-sponsored efforts to clean up the dilapidated city center. An article in the *Tog* entitled "They're Tearing Down Old Vilna" noted: "Vilna is slowly changing its appearance. Gradually old buildings are being torn down, the streets are straightened, and new modern buildings appear."<sup>29</sup> In 1937, the Jewish Hospital undertook a renovation of its facility on downtown Zawalna Street, since, as the former hospital director explained, "one couldn't in any way trifle with a large and important building on Zawalna Street in the middle of the city." He considered this work part of a widespread movement to "beautify the city," claiming that "nearly every day people assign great sums to investments and aesthetics."<sup>30</sup> Many Vilna Jews regarded such endeavors with great unease, however, and not only because of the antisemitic taint of the government's initiatives. Their own nostalgic outlook gave them pause. If Vilna's history was somehow contained within the very fabric of

its aged buildings and arched streets, then altering this topography might mean the destruction of some essential quality of the city itself. Thus, even while efforts at modernization were underway, some individuals sought to protect the older elements of Vilna's landscape, elements that they believed embodied its rich history.

Vilna Jews' attempts to improve their neighborhoods, therefore, resembled urban renewal less than historic preservation. The paving of the *shulhoyf*, for example, was accompanied by other measures to better maintain this landmark of Jewish Vilna. In 1938, the *kehile* (Jewish communal authority) replaced the broken lanterns atop the *shulhoyf* gates with metal ornaments in the shape of Stars of David, an element that "served only for artists to paint."<sup>31</sup> This decorative touch shows the iconic significance of the *shulhoyf* by the interwar period, when not only worshippers but also artists and tourists, both Jewish and non-Jewish, visited the site; hence the *kehile's* desire that it present an appropriately picturesque appearance.<sup>32</sup> In another show of concern for local history, a government proposal to raze the Old Jewish Cemetery for a playing field spurred a movement to protect and restore the site. The *kehile*, which had published a book about the burial ground by the historian Israel Klausner,<sup>33</sup> called a meeting to discuss repair work then in progress.<sup>34</sup> In an article entitled "Let's Protect the Old Cemetery," art teacher Ber Zalkind argued for the site's "great historical significance and [its] even greater art historical value" and called on his readers to support its preservation.<sup>35</sup>

Writing about another local landmark, a house at the corner of Trocka and Zawalna Streets that had belonged to the Tishkevitch family, Zalkind returned to the theme of the urban landscape as a repository of common historical memory. Zalkind objected to a proposed alteration of this edifice, advocating instead the retention of all original architectural features. Today people sometimes remove cornices from buildings, he reported, so that they will conform to the modern style of "block and cube architecture." Zalkind protested this concession to the fashions of the day: "The 'beauty' of a city is not its smooth walls, but in walls that tell us about its history, about the periods in which the buildings were built."<sup>36</sup> In his view, structures such as Tishkevitch's house were not simply aesthetic objects, but historical artifacts that reflected the time and place of their construction.

An appreciation of the role of architecture in capturing the identity of a place also motivated Zalman Szyk, the author of *1000 yor vilne (1000 Years of Vilna)*. In this uniquely detailed guidebook, Szyk provided a



street-by-street, often house-by-house survey of the city's history and architecture, frequently referring to its ornate eighteenth-century Classical and Baroque buildings. For example, Szyk concluded his tour of Daytshe Street with the observation that "in the exceptionally ornamented Daytshe Street and in its old houses lies hidden a piece of Vilna's history."<sup>37</sup> Szyk was one of the leaders of the Vilna chapter of the Landkentenish Gezelshaft (Geographical Society), founded in 1930 as a branch of a nation-wide organization with its headquarters in Warsaw. Szyk wrote that this organization's goals were to "[acquaint] people with Vilna's historical antiquities, interesting architectural objects, important communal and cultural organizations, museums, libraries, archives, and especially everything that relates to the Jews." It sponsored excursions around the city and the surrounding countryside as well as lectures and exhibits under the slogan "Get to Know Your Hometown."<sup>38</sup>

Another reflection of this interest in the past was the positive connotations attributed to the terms "ghetto" and "shtetl." Rather than as a symbol of Jewish backwardness or isolation, writers referred to the Jewish quarter as a ghetto with a sense of affirmation and sometimes a tinge of romanticism. One author called the *shulhoyf* the "'ghetto of all ghettos,' a living piece of the Middle Ages" and evoked the image of medieval ghetto gates closing at night, although historically no such gates had existed.<sup>39</sup> As Samuel Rollansky has noted, the term "ghetto" was used proudly by Vilna writers who wished to invoke "traditional *yidishkeyt* (Jewishness)" and affirm Jewish solidarity.<sup>40</sup> In a variation on this theme, parts of the city were envisioned as that other quintessential form of East European Jewish settlement, the shtetl. Zalman Szyk described the *shulhoyf* as "a shtetl unto itself,"<sup>41</sup> while another observer of the Jewish quarter noted that the neighborhood "provides an interesting example of . . . a *kleynshtetldik* (provincial) environment in the center of a city of a quarter of a million people."<sup>42</sup> In an article on one Vilna educational institution, a writer in the *Tog* proudly labeled the Leyzer Gurevitsh School "A Shtetl in the Very Heart of the City." This author praised the school's "warm, intimate atmosphere" and "charm and simplicity," presumably the qualities of shtetl life.<sup>43</sup> These uses of the labels "ghetto" and "shtetl" show the strength of the nostalgic impulse. By employing such categories, Vilna writers revealed both a tendency to idealize traditional Jewish life and a deep disillusionment with the state of their community in the interwar period. In this way, typically Jewish residential patterns were used as positive symbols of *gemeinschaft*, even as Vilna itself bore less and

less resemblance to the ghettos and shtetls of the past.

Nevertheless, writers such as the supporter of the Leyzer Gurevitch School were not merely concerned with eulogizing a lost golden age. Indeed, the same writer who praised this institution's *kleynshtetldik* character also complained that the school's administration was unable to renovate its premises properly because "the supervisors of 'aesthetics and art'" had pronounced the building an "antiquity" that should not be altered. Insisting on the school's vibrant educational activities, he indignantly rejected the label of historical artifact. Although his headline dubbed the school a shtetl, at the same time his subheading proclaimed, "We Are No 'Antiquity.'" <sup>44</sup> Thus, even while drawing on the appeal of nostalgia, such cultural activists saw themselves not as guardians of museum pieces but rather as active participants in the contemporary life of Vilna Jewry.

Indeed, it was often the men and women who did the most to promote nostalgia who were, at the same time, creating new institutions that would transform the Vilna Jewish street. Ironically, these institutions implicitly or explicitly challenged the old forms of community by presenting an alternative to the traditional associations that had long characterized the city's Jewish life. They thus contributed to the very decline of the past that their founders deplored. These new organizations were usually secular and nationalist in orientation, sometimes affiliated with a political movement and often rooted in modern Yiddish culture. With the expansion and modernization of Vilna in the interwar period, the growth of new social and cultural forms paralleled the changing geography of the city itself. In this way, the actual landscape of Vilna reflected the changing landscape of communal life.

#### IV.

Historically, Jewish life in Vilna centered on the so-called Jewish quarter, a triangular-shaped area near the center of the city where Jews had settled since at least 1633. The heart of the neighborhood and the center of religious and communal associations was the *shulhoyf*, or synagogue courtyard, where the Great Synagogue and the majority of *kloyzn* (small prayer rooms or study halls), including the oldest and most prestigious, were located. Other traditionally-oriented institutions were for the most part clustered nearby. The *khevre kadishe* (Burial Society) was located at 6 Strashun Street, the *hakhnoses orkhim* (hospitality for travelers) at 8

Yatkever Street, and the offices of the Orthodox political organization Agudas Yisroel at 3 Daytshe Street.<sup>45</sup> Since historically social, educational, and cultural work were also tied to religious practice, the *shulhoyf* and the surrounding streets were the de facto center of such activities as well.

By the interwar period, however, these time-honored institutions were in decline. The conflict over the ownership of key communal properties illustrates this process. The *tsedoke gedoyle*, Vilna's main charitable organization, was a bastion of the Agudas Yisroel. It ran the Great Synagogue, the Strashun Library, the *mikve* (ritual bath), and the cemeteries. In 1928, the *kehile*, then dominated by Zionist and workers' parties, officially gained authority over the *tsedoke gedoyle* and thus argued that these holdings should pass to its control. The struggle ended in 1931, when the Polish government backed the *kehile* and the *tsedoke gedoyle* was liquidated.<sup>46</sup> In this way, the secularly-oriented *kehile* gained jurisdiction over institutions at the very heart of religious Vilna. These sites thus became physical manifestations of the rivalry between the traditionalists and the secularists, as the former's once unquestioned dominance came increasingly under attack.

The *mikve* located in the *shulhoyf* was one victim of the shifting balance of power within the Jewish community. During the German occupation of World War I, the army opened free baths elsewhere in the city, and so the *mikve* was used only on the Sabbath and holidays.<sup>47</sup> Later, in the interwar years, the American Joint Distribution Committee gave the *kehile* over \$20,000 to repair the facility, but it was again closed due to mismanagement.<sup>48</sup> The state of the bath reflected the new priorities of the period. As one resident remarked:

When the Yiddish theater didn't have its own building, they held meetings, stirred things up, cried out, wrote articles in the newspapers. The world is ending, the Yiddish theater has no building! And that there stands not far away a *mikve* that one can't enjoy because it hasn't been repaired in twenty years — that's nothing, it doesn't matter to anyone.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, both direct challenges and indifference contributed to the weakening of the religious establishment, as reflected in the changing status of the properties that embodied its authority.

Moreover, new types of institutions arose to rival directly the

religious organizations that had long been the pride of Vilna Jewry, seeking to usurp some of the latter's wide-ranging functions. These manifestations of the new secular Jewish culture usually established offices outside of the Jewish quarter, showing their ideological distance from the old way of life in terms of physical separation. In this way, the shift towards more modern facilities mirrored the development of modern forms of communal life. Sometimes several new groups shared a building, thus creating an alternate center of Jewish activity away from the *shulhoyf*. For example, 32 Groys Stefan Street, near the railroad station in the south of the city, housed the offices of the sports club Hapoel, the Vilna Geographical Society, and several Zionist organizations.<sup>50</sup> The *kehile* owned a courtyard at 7 Orzeszkowa Street in which it housed its own offices and rented space to a variety of tenants including the An-ski Historic-Ethnographic Museum, the public health organization TOZ, the Tarbut seminary for Hebrew teachers, the Yarden sports club, the Leyzer Gurevitsh School, and a school for handicapped children.<sup>51</sup> This courtyard, to the north of the Jewish quarter and near elegant Mickiewicz Street, thus became an important address for the Jewish community, one that provided a more modern and spacious setting than could be found within the confines of the Jewish quarter.

Moreover, such groups often located in neighborhoods at some remove from the city center. Most notably, the district of Pohulanka, a newly developed residential area to the west of downtown, served as the site of many educational and cultural organizations. This area, which only a few decades earlier had been entirely unbuilt and surrounded by woods, was now laid out with broad, straight streets and modern housing.<sup>52</sup> At 3 Groys Pohulanka there were the offices of the Central Vilna Jewish Merchants Union, the Jewish Peoples Bank, the relief society Yekopo, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), and other Jewish associations. At 14 Groys Pohulanka three groups of Jewish university students rented space, while further along the same thoroughfare was the Mefitse-Haskole School.<sup>53</sup> A TOZ clinic and a playing field of the Maccabi sports club were also located on adjacent streets.<sup>54</sup> This cluster of organizations within a few blocks of each other made the neighborhood a focal point for the type of activities that characterized progressive Vilna Jewish life. As one author wrote, Pohulanka was "now the center of the entire intellectual life of the city, with all the institutions" located there.<sup>55</sup> The physical differences between this new area and the Jewish quarter underscored the innovations that such institutions represented.

By their choice of location, these groups traded the antiquated buildings of the Jewish quarter for modern, spacious offices located on tree-lined streets. The appeal of such a locale was apparent to all. One writer described the move of the Mefitse-Haskole School to a "beautiful hygienic building . . . roomy, sunny, and airy" in "remote" Pohulanka,<sup>56</sup> while the Esther Rubinstein School boasted of its "big, light classrooms, a recreation room, a beautiful, sunny terrace, and a large play area."<sup>57</sup> Space and fresh air, two things in short supply in the Jewish quarter, made an impression on observers, as did modern facilities. Writers often stressed the contrast between such buildings and the unhealthy conditions that some students encountered at home. One expressed concern that "[t]he old ghetto with its dark courtyards . . . [is] a fruitful place for mental and spiritual backwardness."<sup>58</sup> The antidote was places like the Mefitse-Haskole School, which was "truly a salvation for the children who come from the city center, from the crowded, stale, and dusty streets."<sup>59</sup> This contrast highlighted the fresh ideas that underlay the new institutions.

The transformation of charitable organizations offers a case study of changes in the nature of both communal work itself and the locations in which it was carried out. Traditionally, the needy congregated in the Jewish quarter near the *shulhoyf* and *kloyzn* where they could expect to receive alms from worshippers.<sup>60</sup> Many *kloyzn* also sponsored free loan societies (*gmiles-khsodim*) and other forms of aid. For example, the Khevre Poyelim (Worker's Society) and the Old Kloyz maintained subsidized housing for poor students and families, and the Kloyz "Gmiles-Khesed" (Free Loan Society Kloyz) ran its own pawnshop.<sup>61</sup> By the interwar period, however, such forms of aid were on the wane. The weakening of religious norms meant that the giving of *tsedoke* (charity) could no longer be taken for granted. Moreover, World War I posed new challenges by demanding relief efforts on an unprecedented scale.<sup>62</sup>

At first, aid to war victims followed the established patterns. Early refugees arriving in Vilna were housed temporarily in *kloyzn* in the Jewish quarter, such as the Gravediggers' Kloyz and the Old Kloyz.<sup>63</sup> Charity kitchens began operating informally in courtyards. However, these means soon became inadequate and other spaces throughout the city were sought for such work, first within the Jewish quarter and later in outlying neighborhoods. For example, in December, 1915, the Society for Medical and Food Aid for War Victims opened a clinic at 5 Zawalna Street, one of the main byways on the edge of the Jewish quarter. In May of that year, the clinic moved to a "large new building" at 15 Groys Pohulanka, which

it later shared with a charity kitchen for children.<sup>64</sup> Eventually, organized charitable efforts turned to facilities in even more distant parts of the city, particularly the suburbs. Orphanages were opened in suburban Antokol in 1914 and 1920, and in 1925, TOZ established a summer colony in the wooded area of Zwierzyniec, across the Wilja River.<sup>65</sup>

These outlying areas of Vilna were considered a healthful locale for clinics and dormitories, since they offered more space than the city center and were often in the midst of the woods that surrounded Vilna. Communal activists pointed to such structures equipped with the latest conveniences as a sign of the increasing sophistication and professionalization of their work. One writer proudly noted that the orphanage run by Yekopo featured central heating, electricity, and running water.<sup>66</sup> Another described a similar facility that opened in April 1920 on Letnia Street "in one of the most beautiful buildings in that fine suburban corner of Vilna, Antokol." This two-story structure featured seventeen rooms and was surrounded by pine trees, an orchard, and a garden.<sup>67</sup> With the shift of charitable as well as social and cultural organizations away from the Jewish quarter, the new type of communal activists helped literally to redraw the map of Jewish Vilna.

In a similar vein, comparing the homes and locations of two leading cultural organizations, the Strashun Library and the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO), reveals significant differences between their respective roles in Vilna Jewish life. The Strashun Library, founded in 1892 with the bequest of the scholar Matisyahu Strashun to the Vilna Jewish community, was noted for its collection of rabbinic works. It was housed in the *shulhoyf*, originally in a section of the Great Synagogue and after 1901 in its own adjacent building facing Yidishe Street.<sup>68</sup> Khaykl Lunski, the Strashun's longtime librarian, described it as "the Temple of the spirit, the palace of wisdom, the pride of Vilna"<sup>69</sup> and as "a source of light for all of Russian Jewry, the Yavne, the Holy of Holies of the Jerusalem of Lithuania."<sup>70</sup> As an institution whose prestige was rooted in Vilna's heritage as a city renowned for religious learning, it was a fitting part of the center of traditional Vilna. The literary critic Shmuel Niger wrote that the Strashun found its rightful home among the ancient streets of the Jewish quarter: "One could move from the crowded *shulhoyf* and build a separate building for the richest Jewish library in Lithuania. But . . . an old matron (*baleboste*) doesn't move to new apartments, an old matron doesn't build . . . that's what the upstarts do." Niger characterized the library as a *yoyredte*, a proud but impoverished lady who held on to the

symbols of her former glory.<sup>71</sup>

If the Strashun Library represented Vilna Jewry's rich past, then YIVO represented its hopes for the future. YIVO, founded in 1925 to promote scholarship in Yiddish about Yiddish-speaking Jewry, was described with many of the same images applied to the Strashun. Writers called it "a new Yavne" and "the third Temple in the Jerusalem of Lithuania."<sup>72</sup> Speaking at a YIVO conference, the communal leader and YIVO supporter Tsemakh Szabad said, "We want to build a palace, a Temple, a tower that will light far, far around it."<sup>73</sup> YIVO's first offices were located on Groys Pohulanka, originally in the home of Max Weinreich and later in rented apartments, joining the many other Jewish cultural institutions in that area. In 1930, the institute decided to erect its own edifice, since, as the Building Committee reported, its prestige demanded that it have its own address.<sup>74</sup> Three years later, YIVO moved into its new home on Wiwulski Street, a wide and sparsely developed thoroughfare in Pohulanka that still featured open fields and orchards.<sup>75</sup> The building itself was a renovated freestanding house set back from the street, surrounded by a garden and with a guest house for visiting scholars.<sup>76</sup> YIVO affiliates took pride in its modern, well-organized facilities, which presented a clear contrast to the institutions of the Jewish quarter. At YIVO's World Convention in 1935, the Building Committee reported that the new headquarters featured landscaped grounds, glass display cases, and "roomy, sunny, and airy workrooms, with central heating and all conveniences."<sup>77</sup> The historian Lucy Dawidowicz, who traveled from New York to Vilna to spend a year at YIVO's *aspirantur* (training program), recalled in her memoir:

I had never seen a Jewish institution in so verdant a setting. . . . We entered an enormous vestibule. I gasped with astonished pleasure at its uncluttered spaciousness. . . . The whole place shimmered with the sheen of its highly polished wood floor. . . . This YIVO building was utterly unlike the institutions of the Yiddish world I knew in New York, most of which were housed in cramped, dingy, and dilapidated quarters. Everything about the YIVO — its location, its landscaped setting, its modern design, the gleaming immaculateness of the place — delivered a message. . . . YIVO was no relic of the past; it belonged to the future.<sup>78</sup>

If the Strashun Library was a quiet aristocrat, YIVO's supporters made less modest claims for their brash "upstart." While the Strashun was tucked away in the *shulhoyf*, YIVO was located on top of a hill that Daniel Charney described as the highest point in the city. Charney related how the Russians and the Poles had each sought to construct a church on the spot. Instead, however, the Jews built their "Temple of knowledge" on Wiwulski Street, and thus "[t]he Vilna Jews became closer to the heavens than the Russian Orthodox and the Catholics taken together."<sup>79</sup> Like the Yiddish sign, the YIVO headquarters became the emblem of an assertive Jewish presence in Vilna and, indeed, beyond: "Yes, the small, modest building of YIVO . . . soon truly became the symbol and ornament of our highest cultural achievements in the entire world."<sup>80</sup> This extravagant claim was plausible if one understood YIVO as the foremost institution of the capital city of Yiddishland. While the Strashun might have had greater *yikhes* (lineage), its rather frayed gentility could not compete with the forward-looking image that the YIVO building projected.

Thus did the effort to forge a new culture play itself out in the streets of the city. In the face of decline in the interwar period, Vilna Jews did more than seek refuge in nostalgia. They also created innovative forms of communal and institutional life, often choosing new facilities away from the Jewish quarter that reflected their forward-looking stance. However, it would be wrong to suggest that there was a clear dichotomy between the old and the new, between the Strashun Library in the *shulhoyf* and YIVO on Wiwulski Street. When a group of shoemakers decided to transform their charitable association, the explanation it gave is telling:

In 1925 the organized shoemakers' *kloyz* considered the matter of the *kloyz*'s free loan society and stated that both the forms and the goals of the institution are obsolete and stand in contradiction to the spirit of the times. . . . [T]he free loan society (*gmiles-khesed*) must be changed into a branch of a modern self-help institution and interest-free loan bank (*on protsentike ley-kase*).<sup>81</sup>

These shoemakers did not abandon the religiously-sanctioned *gmiles-khesed*, but rather preserved the basis of this traditional organization in a modern guise. Similarly, the advocates of secular Jewish culture did not reject the past outright. On the contrary, they often praised Vilna's religious legacy at the same time that the new institutions they created contributed to its decline. They saw no contradiction in celebrating



the old forms and challenging them at the same time. In fact, this exaltation of traditional Vilna was a central part of the new culture that they sought to construct.

## V.

Paradoxically, it was often the champions of the forward-looking organizations who did the most to strengthen the stature of Vilna's past. The old ways of life were inevitably dying out, they argued. They were not trying to hasten the end of these established forms, but rather to preserve what was valuable in them and to incorporate it into the new, progressive culture that they envisioned. Far from dismissing Vilna's traditions, therefore, they glorified them as the essence of what made the city great. Such writers and activists often spoke in idealized terms of the *shulhoyf* and the Jewish quarter, the symbols of the "old, eternal Vilna,"<sup>82</sup> as the embodiment of these qualities. They thus contributed their share to the mystique surrounding the city, then co-opted that mystique for their own work. In this way, even while creating new alternatives they could claim the glories of Vilna's heritage as their own.

Those who pioneered the institutions that flourished in Vilna in the interwar period conceived of the culture they sought to construct as a synthesis of old and new, the imagined past and the innovative future. These men and women portrayed the established and the modern institutions not as competing but as complimentary. They did not see themselves as effecting a radical break but as part of a continuum, carrying on the traditions that had made Vilna great in the past in a form suited to the contemporary world. They characterized the city as "old-new Vilna,"<sup>83</sup> a place where "shadows tremble on the boundary between the traditional past and the modern present,"<sup>84</sup> as Zalman Schneour put it. Shmuel Niger described Vilna as "a medieval — and yet one of the most modern Jewish cities," where ancient buildings concealed groundbreaking ideas.<sup>85</sup> The author of one article asked rhetorically what represented the true essence of the city: the rabbi, the *maskil* (advocate of Enlightenment), or the Bundist; the old-fashioned *gmiles-khsodim* or the modern self-help organizations; the "primitive," "dying" *shulhoyf* or the institutions of the "living new Jewish humanist culture." His answer: all are links in the "golden chain" of Vilna Jewish life, all ingredients of "*nusekh vilne* (the Vilna style)."<sup>86</sup> Other writers invoked in one breath "the Vilna of Torah and *haskole* . . . [and] of the Jewish labor movement."<sup>87</sup> In such

formulations, these often starkly opposing influences were synthesized into a seamless whole.

Max Weinreich argued that this synthesis was the necessary basis for creating a modern Yiddish culture. He wrote that YIVO could flourish only in a city such as Vilna, where "the houses and the stones retain a memory" of Jewish history. In Vilna, he continued, "there is paired Jewish tradition and the Jewish present. Only from the two elements together can one build a Jewish cultural future." In Weinreich's view, YIVO's very function was to act as "a bridge from the past to the future."<sup>88</sup> Others took this idea further, arguing that Vilna's heritage in fact sanctioned the changes of the present day. The city's secular, often politically radical activists were merely taking the next logical step in extending what Niger called Vilna's "tradition of *beginning* new things . . . a pioneer tradition": "Even the revolution of the Vilna Jewish street began from building, not from breaking."<sup>89</sup> Thus David Einhorn could write without irony that "[i]n Vilna, the thread between Elijah the prophet and Karl Marx is not broken."<sup>90</sup>

One key aspect of this supposedly harmonious blending of old and new was the equation of the past with the religious piety and scholarship that had characterized Vilna's golden age. The advocates of the modern claimed in particular to be the heirs of Vilna's legacy of religious learning, a legacy that they would carry forward in the interwar period. The Yiddish secular schools and YIVO were, in their view, the contemporary version of the yeshivas and *kloyzn* for which Vilna had been renowned in the past. Visiting a Yiddish school Niger wrote: "in front of my eyes swim the shadows of the Gaon's Kloyz, of Ramayles Yeshiva . . . one learns new, entirely new things, but it's the old sitting and learning, it's the old constancy, it's the Litvak's eternal love for Torah and wisdom."<sup>91</sup> Daniel Charney maintained that in the *real-gimnazie* (academic high school) students studied Yiddish poetry the way their predecessors had poured over the Talmud, while in the Strashun Library and YIVO they followed debates among Yiddish linguists instead of between Beys Hillel and Beys Shammai.<sup>92</sup> "Everything in Vilna has changed, even the Torahs," another writer concurred, "but the soul remained the same!"<sup>93</sup>

If their institutions continued Vilna's tradition of religious learning, then these writers' devotion to the city was the modern equivalent of religious faith. "Just as a pious Jew gets up in the morning with a prayer and goes to sleep with a prayer on his lips, just so I remember Vilna in the morning and at night," wrote one former resident.<sup>94</sup>

In this way, secular Jews used the language of the sacred to bolster the innovations of modern Yiddish culture. Yet while such writers and activists lauded the religious life of the city, they also consigned it to the realm of Vilna's near-mythic past. They could write in admiring tones of the world of piety and Talmudic learning, but only after they had rendered that world irrelevant by its distance in time. In the interwar period, Vilna was still home to many thousands of Orthodox Jews and dozens of religious institutions, yet these observers showed little interest in the activities of their still-traditional neighbors. Such activities did not fit within their conception of modern Jewish culture, and hence could not be part of their vision of contemporary Vilna.

Thus, for all the new ideas that Vilna Jews promoted in the interwar period, they repeatedly turned to their city's traditions as an inspiration for the progressive forms of life they wished to forge. Their nostalgic view of Vilna's past glories allowed them to see beyond the impoverished present and to envision a more satisfactory future. Those aspects of Vilna Jewish life that were not part of that future, such as religious Orthodoxy, they relegated to the realm of history. They could then appropriate the positive aspects of this supposed golden age and combine them with their own innovations to build a new type of Jewish community.

## VI.

In the interwar period, Vilna Jews' concern with both preserving their history and building their future led to efforts to protect the physical evidence of the past in the city's buildings and byways. Yet it manifested itself in other ways too, as cultural activists sought to preserve the historical record on the printed page as well as on the Jewish street. These years also saw the flourishing of a new type of historical writing that often focused on the city itself. World War I sparked this development, galvanizing Vilna Jews' historical self-awareness, for they perceived that they were living through events of great significance. Wishing to record their experiences for future generations and perhaps to make sense of the destruction for themselves as well, they produced a wave of publications chronicling the course of the war and its effects upon the Vilna Jewish community.<sup>95</sup> In 1916 and 1918, with fighting still taking place around them, Tsemakh Szabad and Moyshe Shalit edited two volumes of the *Vilner zamelbukh* (*Vilna Anthology*), collections of articles describing the

hardships wrought by wartime and the variety of Jewish relief organizations created in response. In 1919, the folklorist Sh. An-ski founded the Historic-Ethnographic Society. It was a propitious time to do so, wrote member Shalit, since in these crucial times "nothing must be left out, everything must be recorded."<sup>96</sup> In 1922, another massive collection of articles, *Pinkes far der geshikhte fun vilne in di yorn fun milkhome un okupatsie* (*Record Book of the History of Vilna in the Years of War and Occupation*), edited by Zalman Rejzen, was published.<sup>97</sup>

Vilna Jews felt compelled to record what was taking place around them not only because of these events' intrinsic importance, but also because of a sense that by the war's end something of Vilna Jewish life might be irretrievably lost. Conscious of witnessing a period of great change, they wished to preserve whatever evidence they could of a way of life that they believed to be on the wane. One writer urged the collection of folk culture because "now, in the time of destruction," there was a "holy duty" to save "the remnants [*sheyres-hapleyte*]."<sup>98</sup> In 1918, Khaykl Lunski wrote *Fun vilner geto, geshtaltn un bilder, geshribn in shvere tsaytn* (*From the Vilna Ghetto, Portraits and Pictures Written in Difficult Times*), an elegy to "the old, traditional life of the Vilna *shulhoyf*" on the verge of its extinction.<sup>99</sup> In a deliberately folksy and antiquated style, Lunski created a series of portraits of the quintessential characters of Vilna Jewry as they faced ruin and death as a result of the war. This sense of loss fueled the nostalgia that continued throughout the interwar period, reinforced by worsening economic and political conditions.

These writers sought not only to preserve the wartime experiences of the city, but also to pioneer a new kind of historical writing in the process. In *1000 yor vilne*, Zalman Szyk opened his chapter on "Vilna in Yiddish Literature" by describing the *Vilner zamelbukh*, which he identified as the first work of this genre.<sup>100</sup> In an article entitled "The New Historiography of Vilna," Shalit concurred and then set forth his program for an explicitly modern approach to history. The chroniclers of "old Vilna," he wrote, memorialized only great rabbinical figures and great acts of charity. The new publications, by contrast, would be democratic in their approach, treat contemporary social and political movements, and be written in Yiddish.<sup>101</sup> Such work would be as forward-looking as the rest of Yiddish letters, according to Shalit, for it would be "truly a historiography that proceeds right with the pulse of the time, a history that is written right with the tempo of the event itself."<sup>102</sup> Thus, activists such as Shalit saw their work as a means both to examine the past

and to advance Vilna's innovative cultural developments. Moreover, they believed that this scholarship would not only supersede the older style of historical writing, but would itself contribute to the synthesis of tradition and modernity upon which the new culture rested. In Shalit's words, through this historiography, "[a]s with an outstretched hand, the old Vilna draws towards the new — the past becomes united with the present." <sup>103</sup> In his view, as in Weinreich's explication of YIVO's work, the new history could flourish only as part of a continuum linked to what had preceded it. This desire to celebrate Vilna's heritage while looking towards the future closely parallels the attitudes reflected in the urban landscape, showing that such ideas affected many areas of activity in the period between the two World Wars.

Yet if these attitudes were manifest in other realms of Vilna Jewish life, the urban landscape remained a motif of central importance. It could assume pride of place among the symbols of the city because it carried a particularly deep resonance. While the historical writing of the period was the product of a similar ethos, only Vilna's buildings and streets were a tangible, unavoidable part of residents' day-to-day experience. Moreover, as inanimate objects they were also highly malleable icons. Since the advocates of modern Jewish culture idealized the world of rabbinic learning, they might plausibly have turned to Vilna's still highly visible Orthodox population as a source of inspiration and imagery. This was impractical, however; the traditional Jew on the street, if confronted with the proposition that YIVO was the true heir of the Vilna Gaon's *kloyz*, would most likely have objected vehemently. But the Jewish street itself could not answer back. It could thus freely serve as a touchstone for observers' notions about Vilna Jewish life, what it had been as well as what it should become.

In this way, the arched streets of the Jewish quarter and the woodsy suburbs became crucial elements in the way Vilna Jews imagined their history, their contemporary place in the city, and their possibilities for the future. The leaders of the new social and cultural movements transformed the city's Jewish geography, creating institutions whose location and physical form mirrored the innovative ideas that gave them rise. They sought both to preserve the tangible remnants of Vilna's heritage and to use that heritage to bolster their own efforts to remake Jewish life. In a city as devoted to its own legacy as Vilna, it is perhaps not surprising that the custodians of the past played such a central role in articulating this vision of a modern Jewish culture. For as Shmuel Niger

wrote, "Vilna alone knows that everything, even the future, must in the end fall into the hands of the historians." 104

## Notes

\* Dedicated to the memory of Szloma Kowarski z"l, a proud Vilna native.

געווייזענע דעם אנדענק פֿון  
שלמה קאוואַרסקי ז"ל  
א ווילנער אַ שטאָלצער

1 Irving Howe, Ruth R. Wisse, and Khone Shmeruk, eds., *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987), 406-07.

2 Zalman Schneour, "Rekhov ha-yehudim be-or ve-tsel," introduction to M. Vorobeichic, *Ein Ghetto im Osten (Wilna)* (Zurich: Oreil Fussli Verlag, 1931), 3-4.

3 Max Weinreich, "Der yidisher visnshaflekher institut (yivo)," *Vilne: a zamelbukh gevidmet der shtot vilne*, ed. Yefim Yeshurin (New York: Vilner branch 367 arbeter-ring, 1935), 323.

4 Daniel Chamey, *Vilne (memuarn)*, Dos poylishe yidntum 78 (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-farband fun poylishe yidn in argentine, 1951), 197.

5 *Barikht fun dem konferents fun dem yivo* (Vilna: YIVO, 1930), 28.

6 *Der alveltlekher tsuzamenfor fun yidishn visnshaflekh institut* (Vilna: YIVO, 1936), 107.

7 Samuel Kassow, "Jewish Communal Politics in Transition: The Vilna *Kehile*, 1919-1920," *YIVO Annual* 20 (1991): 62-63. This situation had changed somewhat by the end of the interwar period, by which time Polish culture was firmly established and a generation of residents had come of age knowing Vilna only as a Polish city. Although a stratum of assimilated Jews did develop in Vilna, however, their numbers were fewer then elsewhere in Poland.

8 Kassow, 63; Arcadius Kahan, "Vilna — The Socio-Cultural Anatomy of a Jewish Community in Interwar Poland," *Essays in Jewish Social and Economic History*, ed. Roger Weiss (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

1986), 159. For example, Gavriel Haus, who researched the Jewish quarter of Vilna as an *aspirant* (student) at YIVO during the academic year 1937-8, was raised in a "strongly assimilated" family in Warsaw. In Vilna, he wrote, "[f]or the first time [he] heard intellectual people who speak Yiddish without being ashamed of the language." YIVO Archives, RG 5 (Records of the YIVO Aspirantur), folder 4062: 165254.

9 For the argument that competition among political and cultural movements had a beneficial result for the Jewish community, see Kassow, 86-88; and Kahan, 153-154. On the efforts of Jews to unite behind Yiddish as a political tool, see Kassow, 67-68.

10 As noted in Leyzer Ran, *Yerushalayim de-lita: ilustrirt un dokumentirt*, 3 vols. (New York: Vilner albom-komitet, 1974), 1:18.

11 Zalman Szyk, *1000 yor vilne* (Vilna: Gezelshaft far landkentenish in poyln, vilner opteylung, 1939), 152. Place names are given according to the transliteration of their Yiddish versions; hence Yidishe rather than Zydowska Street. However, where the Yiddish and Polish names are substantially the same, the Polish spelling is used; hence Zawalna rather than Zavalne Street.

12 Gavriel Haus, "Vilner geto baym hayntikn tog," Report for the YIVO Aspirantur, 1937-8, YIVO Archives, RG 5 (Records of the YIVO Aspirantur), folder 3976: 57. As an indication of the antiquity of such names, an elderly resident of this courtyard told a visitor in 1937 that her grandfather had spoken to her of Ure-Feygl, who had lived many years before he was born. Haus, 57.

13 Szyk, *1000 yor vilne*, 303.

14 Khaykl Lunski, "Di yidishe historish-etnografishe gezelshaft," *Pinkes far der geshikhte fun vilne in di yorn fun milkhome un okupatsie*, ed. Zalman Reizen (Vilna: Yidishe historish-etnografishe gezelshaft afn nomen fun sh. an-ski, 1922), 855.

15 Pinkhas Kon, "Fun vilner arkhivn un bibliotekn," *Historishe shriftn*, ed. E. Tscherikower, vol. 1 (Warsaw: Kultur-lige, 1929): 773, footnote 2.

16 Israel Klausner, *Yerushalayim de-litah, dorot akhronim, 1881-1939*, 2 vols. (Israel: Ghetto Fighters' House, 1983), 1:222.

17 "Kof" (Shimshon Kohn), "Yidishe shildn in vilne," *Vilner tog* (31 August 1937), 2-3. Tsemakh Szabad drew a similar connection between an increased number of shop signs in Yiddish and a rise in Jewish national consciousness. Tsemakh Szabad, "Vilne amol un itst," *Der vilner*, ed. Yefim Yeshurin (New York: Vilner branch 367 arbeter-ring, 1929), 14.

18 "Yidishe oyses," *Vilner tog* (25 February 1938), 8; Klausner, 1:222.

19 "Yidish af di shildn!," *Vilner tog* (28 February 1938), 2.

20 Ibid.

21 "Likvidirt dem durkhoyf," *Vilner tog* (12 October 1937), 4. In 1937-8, of approximately thirty stores located in the *durkhoyf* only ten had licenses to operate legally. Haus, 65.

22 Klausner, 1:222-23.

23 Eighty to ninety percent of the peddlers in the *holtsmark* and virtually all in the *durkhoyf* were Jewish. Klausner, 1:222-23; Haus, 66.

24 "Likvidirt dem durkhoyf."

25 On the history of Vilna during World War I, see the sources discussed below in section VI of this article. On the economic situation of Vilna Jewry in the interwar period, see Jacob Lestschinsky, *Afn rand fun opgrunt, fun yidishn lebn in poyln (1927-1933)*, Dos poylishe yidntum 21 (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-farband fun poylishe yidn in argentine, 1947): 166-93.

26 Haus, 10.

27 Haus, 10; Szyk, *1000 yor vilne*, 217; Haus, 121, 27.

28 Haus, 10.

29 "Men rayst arop alt-vilne," *Vilner tog* (21 May 1937), 8.

30 A. Wiszurbski, "Geshikhte fun yidishn shpitol in vilne," *Vilner almanakh*, ed. A.I. Grodzenski (Vilna: Ovnt kurier, 1939; reprint, New York: Moriah Offset, 1992), 61.

31 Szyk, *1000 yor vilne*, 172.

32 Sh. Szarafan, "Di religieze vilne," *Vilner almanakh*, 322. See also Maria and Kazimierz Piechotka, "Dzielnica zydzowska i Wielka Synagoga w Wilnie," *Lithuania* 3 (1991): 77-79.

33 See Israel Klausner, *Korot bet ha-almin ha-yashan be-vilnah* (Vilna: Ha-kehilah ha-ivrit, 1936).

34 "Di geshikhte un konservatsie fun altn feld," *Vilner tog* (19 July 1937), 4.

35 Ber Zalkind, "Lomir aynhitn dem altn beys-oylem," *Vilner tog* (23 July 1937), 6.

36 Ber Zalkind, "Tishkevitsches balvanes," *Vilner tog* (1 July 1938), 2.

37 Szyk, *1000 yor vilne*, 126.

38 Zalman Szyk, "Vilner landkentkenish gezelshaft," *Vilner almanakh*, 287-288.

39 H. Yibin, introduction, in Khaykl Lunski, *Fun vilner geto, geshtaltn un bilder, geshribn in shvere tsaytn* (Vilna: Farlag fun dem farayn fun di yidishe literatn un zshumalistn in vilne, 1920), iii.

40 Samuel Rollansky, ed., *Vilne in der yidisher literatur*, Musterverk fun der yidisher literatur 84 (Buenos-Aires: Literatur-gezelshaft baym yivo in argentine, 1980), 18.

41 Szyk, *1000 yor vilne*, 171.

42 Haus, 58.

43 "A noenter," "Shtetl in same harts fun shtot, oder: mir zaynen nit keyn `altertimelekhkayt' . . .," *Vilner tog* (7 July 1938), 3.

44 Ibid.

45 Szarafan, 327; Szyk, *1000 yor vilne*, 125. For a discussion in English



of the early history of Jewish life in Vilna, see Israel Cohen, *Vilna*, Jewish Community Series (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1943; reprint 1992). For an account of many religious institutions, particularly the *kloyzn*, see Khaykl Lunski, *Vilner kloyzn, di yidishe gas un der shul-hoyf* (Vilna: Farlag fun dem farayn fun di yidishe literatn un zshurnalists in vilne, 1920).

46 Cohen, 396-97; Klausner, 1:227-28.

47 Lunski, *Fun vilner geto*, 67.

48 Szyk, *1000 yor vilne*, 173.

49 Haus, 134.

50 Szyk, *1000 yor vilne*, 119; Sh. Chaikin, "Yedies vegn vilner gezelschaftn," *Vilner almanakh*, 361-2.

51 Szyk, *1000 yor vilne*, 275, 321; "Di hoyfn fun der kehile," *Vilner tog* (6 January 1939), 6.

52 Szabad, "Vilne amol un itst," *Der vilner*, 14.

53 Chaikin, 359-60; Szyk, *1000 yor vilne*, 268.

54 Ran, map insert.

55 Yefim Yeshurin, "Vilne, umfargeslekhe vilne, ikh benk nokh dir," *Der vilner*, 59.

56 Sh. Bastomski, "Der yidish-veltlekher shul-vezn in vilne," *Vilner almanakh*, 206.

57 A.J. Lewin, "Beys seyfer ester rubinshteyn," *Vilner almanakh*, 343.

58 Kh. Pupko, "Vilne, dos vigele fun der yidish-veltlekher shul," *Vilne: a zamelbukh*, 310.

59 Bastomski, 206.

60 Haus, 50, 80-81.

61 Haus, 25; Lunski, *Fun vilner geto*, 67, 65.

62 On the ways in which World War I brought about changes in Jewish charitable work, see Steven J. Zipperstein, "The Politics of Relief: The Transformation of Russian Jewish Communal Life During the First World War," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, ed. Jonathan Frankel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 4:22-40.

63 Lunski, *Fun vilner geto*, 62.

64 Tsemakh Szabad, "Di khevre fun meditsinisher un ernährungs-hilf far di gelitene fun milkhome," *Vilner zamelbukh*, ed. Tsemakh Szabad and Moyshe Shalit, 2 vols. (Vilna: N. Rosental, 1916 and 1918), 2:153; A-R., "Di kinderkih," *Vilner zamelbukh*, 1:26.

65 "Yekopo," *Unzer tog*, 19; A. Kliński and M. Yevzerov, "Yesoymimfarzorgung," *Af di khurves fun milkhomes un mehumes, pinkes fun gegnt-komitet "yekopo" in vilne (1919-1931)*, ed. Moyshe Shalit (Vilna: Yekopo, 1931), 208, 261.

66 "Yekopo," *Unzer tog*, 19.

67 "Zumer kolonies un sanitories," *Af di khurves*, 208.

76 Cohen, 413-14.

77 *Der alveltlekher tsuzamenfor*, 84-86.

78 Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *From That Place and Time: A Memoir 1938-1947* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 77-79.

79 Charney, *Vilne (memuarn)*, 227-8.

80 *Ibid.*, 228.

81 Haus, 135. One member mentioned an additional motivation for the society to sever its ties with the *kloyz*. "We also did it for the sake of comfort," he said. "Imagine that in the summer we had to sit a whole evening. It was terribly hot and we couldn't take off our caps." Haus, 136.

82 Shmuel Niger, "A pinkes fun vilne," *Di Zukunft*, vol. 26, no. 6 (June 1921), 373.

83 Moyshe Shalit, "A mayse-bukh vegn vilne," *Vilner almanakh*, 81.

84 Schneour, 4.

85 Niger, "Vilne," *Vilne: a zamelbukh*, 775.

86 Y. Rukin, "Unzer vilne," *Unzer tog*, 9.

87 Shalit, "A mayse-bukh vegn vilne," *Vilner almanakh*, 81.

88 Weinreich, "Der yidisher visnschaftlekher institut (yivo)," *Vilne: a zamelbukh*, 323.

89 Niger, "Vilne," *Vilne: a zamelbukh*, 778-79.

90 Einhorn, "Yerushalayim dlite," *Vilne: a zamelbukh*, 788.

91 Niger, "Vilne," *Vilne: a zamelbukh*, 773.

92 Daniel Charney, "Eyn kemakh — yesh toyre," *Vilner almanakh*, 151-52.

93 A. Ginzburg, "Di neshome fun yidisher vilne," *Der vilner*, 27.

94 Yeshurin, 58.

95 As David Roskies has written, "The harder the times, the more desperately intellectuals clung to a notion of historical continuity." David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 12. For a discussion of responses to World War I in Yiddish literature, see Roskies, 92-101, 115-121, and 134-141. For an account of the effects of the war on East European Jewry, see Jonathan Frankel, "The Paradoxical Politics of Marginality: Thoughts on the Jewish Situation During the Years 1914-1921," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 4:3-21.

96 "Historish-etnografishe gezelschaft a"n sh. an-ski," *Unzer tog*, 47-48.

97 Another such publication on the history of Vilna during World War I is *Af di khurves fun milkhomes un mehumes*. For examples of writing on the history of the city later in the interwar years, see the journal *Fun noentn over*, ed. Moyshe Shalit (1937-38), and YIVO publications such as *Yivo bleter* (1931-present) and *Historishe shriftn* (1929-1939).

98 "Historish-etnografishe gezelschaft a"n sh. an-ski," *Unzer tog*, 47.

99 Lunski, *Fun vilner geto*, 72.

100 Szyk, *1000 yor vilne*, 456.

101 Moyshe Shalit, "Di naye historiografie fun vilne," *Unzer tog*, 48. Two earlier histories of Vilna were among the first books devoted to an individual East European Jewish community. See Shmuel Yosef Finn, *Kiryah ne'emanah* (Vilna: Rom Press, 1860); and Hillel Noah Magid Steinschneider, *Ir vilnah* (Vilna: Rom Press, 1900).

102 Shalit, "Di naye historiografie fun vilne," *Vilne: a zamelbukh*, 365.

103 Shalit, "Di naye historiografie fun vilne," *Unzer tog*, 48.

104 Niger, "Vilne," *Vilne: a zamelbukh*, 772.

## Equation of Goset: History of Yiddish Theater in the USSR

Vassili Schedrin

The first state Yiddish theater in Soviet Russia was founded as a studio in Petrograd in 1918. By 1920, the Yiddish studio had moved to Moscow where it obtained its permanent place and a status of a state theater. There were about fifteen state, workmen's, peasants', and traveling Yiddish theatrical troupes performing across the vast territory of the country from Lvov to Birobidjan a few years later. However, the Moscow State Yiddish Theater, known by its acronym name GOSET, happened to be an outstanding phenomenon of the time. GOSET was a pioneer enterprise, serving as a "plant" producing innovative ideas of theatrical performance and art. It gave the Yiddish theater dozens of new actors, directors, and even whole troupes. On the eve of its liquidation, GOSET had been the only center of official Yiddish culture in the USSR.

GOSET had come a long way in its transformation from an amateur studio to a leading professional theatrical troupe. Its development has been a topic of multiple scholarly works in the fields of history and art.<sup>1</sup> The rediscovery of archival sources on Jewish history and culture in the former Soviet Union in the past decade has allowed scholars to explore and publish new data on the topic.<sup>2</sup> As a result, a descriptive story of the Soviet Yiddish theater can be considered well documented and complete. Contemporary research more and more concentrates on a systematic critical approach to the data.

This article singles out a number of issues in the research of Yiddish theater in the USSR and proposes a new approach to its history. It attempts

analysis of the topic in the wider context of the history and culture of the epoch.<sup>3</sup> The study is based on recent research in the field of Jewish avant-garde art and on the history of Soviet culture and theater in the 1920s and 1930s.

### Equation of Goset

Traditionally, the history of GOSET has been described by its narrators as an upward path, leading to a "shining peak," and coming abruptly to a bottomless precipice of time. No matter how that path was described, smooth or bumpy, straight or twisting; no matter whether the moment of the "fall" was described as unexpected or predicted, description of that path made up the traditional vision of GOSET's history. These traditional depictions of the history of the theater were approaching it as a single-dimensional linear process. But history has more in common "not with a scheme of 'a stairway leading upward step by step,' but with a scheme of a dramatic play."<sup>4</sup> History may rather be regarded as a mathematical equation that has multiple solutions and a "right answer" — a fact in the history textbooks. The task of a historian is to define the initial components of that equation, to examine multiple ways of its solution, and to explore possibilities of other "answers" of history. The equation of GOSET can be outlined as follows: The State + Yiddish (Jewish) + Theater = "to liquidate since December 1, 1949, due to unprofitability."<sup>5</sup>

### The Doomed Theater

Its status as a state theater played one of the key roles in the history of GOSET. It is widely recognized that political, ideological, and financial support of the state in the 1920s-1930s in the USSR was among the main factors contributing to the booming and flourishing of Yiddishist culture and Yiddish theater in particular. Yiddish was considered the language of the Jewish proletarian masses and had become a weapon in the struggle against the old world of exploitation. Political, scholarly, and cultural organizations (from Evseksiia to GOSET) that advanced the goal of creation of the new proletarian Yiddish culture had obtained the status of state institutions.<sup>6</sup> This sort of recognition and support by the totalitarian state, where nothing independent was allowed, put the culture of the entire people into dependence on a political decision. This decision was made at the end of the 1940s, when, according to the Communist party doctrine,

the development of the national "proletarian" cultures had been finished with creation of the new "supernational" socialist community: the Soviet people. Soviet Yiddish culture promoting the ideas of proletarian internationalism was eliminated as an obstacle to the realization of that ideal.<sup>7</sup>

Was state support the main factor that determined elimination of the Yiddish theater? Let us turn to the history of Yiddish theaters that relied on their own economic and creative resources. The vitality of a theater in a free society is determined by the response and willingness of its audience, while official art in a totalitarian state is self-sufficient as long as it suits and serves the state. Were the national Yiddish theater put under circumstances of ideological independence and freedom of art, would it be able to draw the attention of the Jewish audience? A systematic comparative study of the history of Yiddish theater in the twentieth century gives a negative answer. Here is a brief outline of that study.

Yiddish culture in Eastern Europe and in America between the two world wars was flourishing. The development of literature and visual arts reached its peak. Look at the biographic directory *Lexicon of Yiddish Theater*<sup>8</sup> as the measure of the Yiddish theatrical life of that period. Six bulky volumes of the *Lexicon* are filled with bi-bibliographic articles on Yiddish actors, directors, dramatists, and critics. What else would be an evidence of the diversity and vitality of Yiddish theatrical art and of its audience?! However, none of that theater has become a remarkable phenomenon of the world theatrical scene, none of them came to symbolize the national Jewish theatrical art.<sup>9</sup> The creativity of Yiddish theater in Eastern Europe lay in its ability to capture the tradition of the old Jewish scene and market pressure: entertaining operetta and emotional drama prevailed. Its "wandering stars" were incapable of reaching the level of world art. That theater was an essential part and an ethnographic phenomenon of the vanishing culture of Jewish cities and townlets of Eastern Europe. It disappeared with that culture.

The obvious objection, that the natural continuity was broken by the tragic events of Holocaust, leads scholarly insight to the third main center of Yiddish culture, North America. Yiddish theater in the USA, distinguished in the history of world art by such stars as Maurice Schwarz and Jacob Adler and by troupes like "Artef," was experiencing difficult times in the 1930s and 1940s. The symptoms of crisis had begun appearing even earlier. In 1923 and 1924, prominent figures of Yiddish culture — P. Hirshbein, D. Pinsky, M. Elkin, A. Gideon, and others — established in

New York the Yiddish Theater Society, the Yiddish Drama Guild, and the Yiddish Dramatic School in order to promote professional Yiddish theatrical art in America.

<sup>10</sup> In 1923, one of the Chicago newspapers wrote: "They [the founders] love Yiddish and they are trying to preserve it. Unfortunately, however, the Yiddishists are fighting a hopeless battle, for Yiddish has no future whatever in America. It is indeed a pity that such precious energy should go to waste."<sup>11</sup> Though this judgment might be too harsh, it reflected complicated transformations in the population of East European immigrants to America represented on both sides of the footlight of Yiddish theater. Gradual divergence, assimilation, transformation of social and spiritual values, and other related trends in that society were leading to a decline of the cultural domain of Yiddish theater and to traumatic change in the Jewish spiritual milieu that no longer required Yiddish theater for expression of the national self-consciousness.

### **International Goals of National Art**

Art echoes major trends in human culture.<sup>12</sup> Development of Yiddish culture in the twentieth century placed Yiddish theatrical art in an ambiguous position. On the one hand, the mainstream of world art in the first half of the twentieth century transformed the idea of theater as a performance for the masses into the concept of theater as an elite individualized art for special audiences. The mass performance function went to cinema. On the other hand, the "new" Jewish national art of that time was directed to mass audiences.<sup>13</sup> Yiddish theatrical art had lost, or rather never found, its mass audience.

Origins of another contradiction which influenced the development of Yiddish culture in the twentieth century may be found in the declarations of leaders of the new Jewish art who formulated and applied their program in the early 1920s: "Long live the abstract form which embodies the specific material, because this form is national!" — proclaims the program of a Jewish artistic group in Kiev.<sup>14</sup> On the other end: "The stage doesn't need a Jew, the stage needs a Man. . . . The Jewish theater is first of all the Theater in general sense, the Temple of the Shining Beauty. . . . The Temple where the Jewish language is used for prayers" — declared a brochure of the Yiddish Chamber Theater in Petrograd.<sup>15</sup> These manifestos can be considered as expressions of two distinct approaches within Jewish national art. The opposing nature of these approaches is obvious: the first one proclaimed unconscious abstract form as an essential

part of national creativity, the second declared the universality of art that can be embodied into any national form. The appeal of the new Jewish art to the mass audience, along with the contradictory nature of its principles, influenced the development of the Yiddish theater in the USSR and determined the fate of GOSET.

The program of this new Jewish art had its history. In the middle of the nineteenth century the Haskala (Jewish enlightenment movement) had succeeded in breaking down the homogenous, strictly religious Jewish society of the Pale of Settlement and in creating a secular faction of Jews. The small group of secular Jewish intelligentsia faced the necessity of creating a secular national consciousness and culture.<sup>16</sup> After the liquidation of the Pale in 1917, wider masses of Jewish people faced this problem, mostly young Jews streaming into large Russian cities.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to the central role of literature in the cultural life of the secular Jewish intelligentsia, visual arts and theater in particular played the key role in the cultural transformation of the new secular Jewish masses.<sup>18</sup>

The tasks of this new Jewish art were postulated first by young Jewish artists — M. Chagall, E. Lisitskii, I-B. Rybak, N. Altman and, others — who turned to Jewish folk art with its naive abstract forms as the origins of the national artistic creativity.<sup>19</sup> The Jewish artists brought their program to the newborn Granovskii's theater, experimented with European symbolism, and transformed it. One of the founders of GOSET, A. Efros, underlined the direct connection between the "growing-up" of the theater and the work of its "teachers," the artists who contributed to the theater's work: M. Chagall, N. Altman, I. Rabinovich, R. Falk.<sup>20</sup>

The theater had travelled a long and difficult road from negating its roots in the culture of the shtetl to artistic comprehension and embodiment of the "theatricality" of traditional Jewish life. This approach became more visible in the last years of GOSET when its art, as with all Jewish art of that period, "turns to 'nostalgic' themes featuring details of the vanishing life."<sup>21</sup>

GOSET accepted the "abstract-national" program of the new Jewish art as the central point in its creativity. Vivid depiction of destruction of the old world of shtetls had become the central component in its art. On the face of it is a belief that GOSET did not draw up any positive national program and that the lack of that program determined the choice made by the theater at the end of the 1920s under the influence of dramatic changes in political and social life in the USSR.<sup>22</sup> GOSET chose the path of Soviet theater in Yiddish. To our mind, the influence of external circumstances



just stimulated the internal antagonism inside the Yiddish theater: one concept of national art triumphed over another.<sup>23</sup>

1929 became a watershed year dividing GOSSET into two distinct theaters: the theater of Granovskii and the theater of Mikhoels. GOSSET of Granovskii remained in history as the "Yiddish Chamber Theater."<sup>24</sup> Granovskii as a director of the European school regarded the theater as an elite art. Pure experimental art was an absolute value for GOSSET of Granovskii. That theater did not require mass audience: it needed no audience at all.<sup>25</sup> Primary components in its artistic technique were meticulously-perfected scenic motion and gesture, while the language of the performance was among secondary components. At the same time, Granovskii's theater was a national Yiddish theater that embodied "specific material" in the "abstract national" form (the repertoire of GOSSET from 1918 to 1928 was mostly based on the classics of Yiddish literature). GOSSET of Mikhoels followed the concept of the theater as a "Temple of the Shining Beauty." That theater-temple required mass audience as an addressee of its artistic message loaded with the values of the world culture. Psychological realism, influenced by the Moscow Art Theater of Stanislavskii, became the style of the theater of Mikhoels.<sup>26</sup> Yiddish as a language of performance was the central national component in its creativity as well as the main component of its scenic art. The theater of Granovskii was doomed by the Soviet totalitarian state not as a Jewish theater (which it really was) but as a "left" experimental theater. The theater of Mikhoels found its place in the structure of the totalitarian state; as with the Soviet theater of socialist realism, it represented the Soviet Yiddish culture as a part of the multinational socialist culture of the peoples of the USSR.

An insight into the history of the Soviet theater in the 1920s and 1930s will allow us to comprehend and define the nature of the GOSSET's story.

### **The Theater of the Future<sup>27</sup>**

Two decades in the beginning of the twentieth century (circa 1910-1930), traditionally associated in the history of culture with the "rise and fall" of the art of the Russian avant-garde, featured an incredible number of artistic events, ideas, experiments, controversies, and discoveries. That short period constituted an epoch in world art and influenced radically its further development. Traditional scholarship considered the early 1930s as a tragic end of the cultural experiment, strangled by the totalitarian

method of socialist realism. This approach has undergone a radical revision in the past decade by more dialectical and unbiased historical analysis.<sup>28</sup> The new insight, based on the study of common rather than opposing features of avant-garde and socialist realism, has detected the continuity of the avant-garde experiment even though the realization of that experiment differed from the original avant-garde vision. The avant-garde had been consumed by socialist realism. Avant-garde Utopianism became the ideology of the art of socialist realism that is usually defined as "socialist in content and national in form" and in fact may be regarded as "avant-garde in content and eclectic in form."<sup>29</sup>

The development of GOSET was closely linked with Russian theatrical avant-garde. GOSET went through the stages typical for a "left" avant-garde theater in the 1920s:<sup>30</sup> it was initiated as a symbolic theater, and underwent gradual transformation to a ritual theater (the "Temple" Granovskii wrote about in 1918) and the, to a constructivist theater with its "biomechanics" or "*gesamkunstwerk*" technique and preference for gesture and motion over speech.<sup>31</sup> Even what appeared to be the unique influence of artists on the creativity of the Yiddish national theater reflected the common (for avant-garde theater of that time) phenomenon of "scenographic production."<sup>32</sup>

The artistic program of the "left" theater was also based on two opposite ideas: an elite aesthetic theater and a constructivist theater.<sup>33</sup> The elite aesthetic theater was a "thing in itself," art as an absolute value and independence of individual creativity from the masses were among the main preferences of its art. Constructivist theater was defined by its creators as a "factory of the new man." It was a theater-workshop where the artisans, the director, the actor, and the designer, processed the raw material, the audience, regarded as a faceless homogeneous revolutionary populace.<sup>34</sup> Evidently, GOSET of Granovskii accepted the attitude of the elite aesthetic theater.

1929, the "year of the great change" had summed up the achievements of the "theatrical October."<sup>35</sup> Art experiments of the "left" theater were rejected as harmful, but their ideological content was absorbed by the new totalitarian culture of socialist realism.

The idea of the homogeneous audience perfectly corresponded to the ideological postulate about the homogeneity of the socialist society. This thesis demanded that the theater of socialist realism satisfy the interests of all spectators without exception: "In the circumstances of the state monopoly of theater, that demand led to unification of theatrical

troupes." <sup>36</sup> The realism of the Moscow Art theater became the "state standard" for the stereotyped theatrical art, and a repertoire based on the literature of critical realism and socialist realism was the "state standard" for the stereotyped contents of the performances.

The caste structure of the totalitarian society <sup>37</sup> determined the foundation of the hierarchy of the standardized state theaters. The top of the pyramid was occupied by "academic" theaters representing the highest standard of socialist art; the second layer was formed by theaters devoted to various aspects of that art; and the third rank was allotted to "national" theaters within the multinational Soviet culture. GOSET of Mikhoels was admitted to the third rank of that hierarchy.

Caste hierarchy of the totalitarian society was a static monolith from its very beginning. Internal rigidity guaranteed stability of the whole system of the totalitarian state. This hierarchic structure of the system may be exemplified as a "pyramid" rather than a "stairway." Any movement in the pyramid was regarded as dangerous displacement and led to severe often preventive punishment. <sup>38</sup> Apparently, the system apprehended that appreciation of the highest rank expressed to Mikhoels and GOSET as a part of the short-term political strategy <sup>39</sup> would allow the theater to pretend that it was moving upward to the highest position in the theatrical hierarchy. This fear was counteracted by the totalitarian state. GOSET of Mikhoels was an integral part of the socialist theater since it kept its low profile within the hierarchy as a "national" theater. But when the theater experienced an upward trend (which was most likely not realized even by GOSET and its leaders themselves) to be among the leading troupes in the country, the system reacted immediately by the preventive liquidation of the theater. GOSET was eliminated not as a part of the Jewish national culture, <sup>40</sup> but as a component of the socialist culture suspected of aspiring to violate its internal hierarchy.

### Conclusions and Problems

The equation of GOSET outlined in the beginning of the article: The State + Yiddish (Jewish) + Theater = "to liquidate" is normally given the following solution: GOSET = vulnerability and dependence of the Yiddish theater as a state institution on changes in ideology and politics of the totalitarian state + determined by the cultural and national politics of Stalin the tragic end of: a) Yiddish culture + b) avant-garde art = "to liquidate." As it was shown above, the traditional "linear" solution cannot

be considered as the only correct one, and the correct solution is not that simple.

The status of a state institution could hardly be recognized as the key factor in the destruction of the Yiddish theater. The world history of Yiddish theater bore witness that it was doomed as an ethnographic and art phenomenon. It was due to the inevitable process of transformation, decline, and the vanishing of a Yiddish cultural environment to which the theater served as a form of national self-expression. In contrast, the state support of the Yiddish theater in the USSR promoted its development and determined the highest level of its art.

The program of the new Jewish art was mostly accepted and completed by GOSET. Moreover, the antagonism of that program had been transformed into an internal conflict within GOSET. The conflict divided GOSET into two opposite theaters separated by the concept of art: GOSET of Granovskii and GOSET of Mikhoels.

As a result of the "theatrical October" and of the experiments of the "left" art, the culture of socialist realism had emerged. This culture rejected the elite aesthetic theater of Granovskii; in contrast, GOSET of Mikhoels, as a Soviet theater representing the multinational socialist culture, entered the theatrical hierarchy of the Soviet totalitarian system.

The existence of Yiddish theater did not oppose the totalitarian state so long as GOSET kept itself within its niche in the immovable structure of official art. Once the theater was suspected of striving to change its fixed position in the "pyramid," it was punished by preventive liquidation. The destruction of GOSET would be considered a defensive counteraction of the system to a potential threat of displacements in its structure.

This new approach to the history of GOSET, as a multivariant solution to its "equation," guides scholars to new problems within this topic. Systematic research on the internal conflict that divided GOSET into the theater of Granovskii and the theater of Mikhoels would be the main problem set by the new interpretation of the history of the Yiddish theater. This article touched just briefly on the origins of the conflict and its ramifications. A review of the contents and of the process of formation of artistic and aesthetic concepts of Mikhoels and the history of increasing opposition between Mikhoels and Granovskii in GOSET of 1918-1928 are also among the problems awaiting scholars. It is also important to evaluate the influence on GOSET of prominent figures of Yiddish culture such as A. Efros and M. Chagall, who contributed to the art of the Yiddish theater. The life and art of Aleksei Granovskii, in particular in the period between

his departure from the USSR in 1928 and his death in Paris in 1937, still await an historian.

The presumption of the preventive liquidation of GOSET by the totalitarian state should be carefully examined and documented. This work demands first of all a comparative study of the means used by the totalitarian state in the USSR to control the culture, and of scenarios used in the "case of emergency" for punishment and liquidation of cultural institutions and figures. Furthermore, a revision of the history of GOSET from 1929 to 1948 should be undertaken to explore the changes in attitude of the theater (and in particular of its leader, S. Mikhoels) to its place and role in Soviet culture.

A scholarly analysis of the audience of GOSET still remains "terra incognita" in the history of the Yiddish theater. GOSET had its audience with the approaches of the theaters of both Granovskii and Mikhoels. But the audience changed over time. Accordingly, the question "when" should be added to the essential questions of research on retroactive relations between the theater and its audience: "who, to what, how and why" reacts.

An exploration of other possibilities and paths of realization of ideas of the Jewish national theater and of Jewish state theater would constitute an interesting further direction of research. A comparative study of the history of two Jewish theaters, GOSET as Yiddish theater and Habima as Hebrew theater, could be a subject of that analysis. Some common origins of the art and history of these theaters would determine the significance of the results of the comparative study. Both theaters were growing up in Moscow, "the theatrical capital of the world," in the 1920s; both theaters utilized in their art the most innovative trends in the art of the Russian avant-garde; both theaters were initiated in the search for a new national art as an expression of national identity; both theaters obtained the status of a state institution. In contrast, GOSET was liquidated in 1949, while Habima still exists as the State Theater of Israel. Does this mean that national Jewish theater as an art phenomenon is doomed to elimination, vanishing, and traumatic transformation in the historical dimension of Diaspora, but at the same time remains a vibrant component of national culture in the historical dimension of the Jewish national state? <sup>41</sup> This is just one of the multiple problems that could be set and solved by comparative study.

Further work on the problems of the history of GOSET will require not only the use of a new academic approach to the topic, but also a search

for new facts and source materials, and careful revision of the known and explored facts. The study of the topic would be based on comparative historical analysis. The work that, seemingly, was finished by the annalists of GOSET must be continued on a new level of perception of the topic.

## Notes

1 K. Rudnitskii, ed., *Mikhoels: Statii, besedy, rechi*, 3rd ed. (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1981), a publication of the literary heritage of S. Mikhoels, memoirs and articles about Mikhoels and GOSET; M. Geizer, *Solomon Mikhoels* (Moscow: Prometei, 1990), rich factual material and illustrated by many photographs; F. Burko, "The Soviet Yiddish Theatre in the Twenties" (Ph.D. diss.; Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1978), based on source materials from the archives of the United States and Israel and supplied with an extensive bibliography; *Marc Chagall and the Jewish Theatre*, catalog of the exhibition, Marc Chagall and the Jewish Theatre, introductory article by B. Harshav (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992), it also includes a publication of Chagall's interior design of the GOSET hall in Moscow and an English translation of some texts from the program brochure and scenarios of GOSET.

2 [Editor's note: Because the journals cited in this and following footnotes will not be familiar to many readers, we are listing, where available, their place of publication and sponsors.] See, for example, E. Goltsman, "Likvidirovat v svyazi s nerentabelnostiiu," *Gesher* 2 (Moscow: Tkhia, 1994), a publication of Communist Party documents concerning the liquidation of GOSET from the Russian Center for Preservation and Research of Documents of the Contemporary History in Moscow; L. Gomberg, "Proshchanie," *Gesher* 4 (Moscow: Tkhia, 1995), a survey of the life and work of GOSET's actor G. Liampe and his parents, actors of Yiddish theaters, R. Rufina and M. Liampe; E. Kapitaikin, "O teatre Granovskogo," *Kovcheg* 2 (Moscow/Jerusalem: Khudozhestvennoria literature, Jewish Cultural Association Tarbut, 1991), a short outline of the history of GOSET and of the life and work of its leader, A. Granovski; A. Efros, "Khudozhniki teatra Granovskogo," *Kovcheg* 2 (Moscow/Jerusalem: Khudozhestvennoria literature, Jewish Cultural Association Tarbut, 1991), a reprint of the article about artists of Granovskii's theater. Several scholars are working now on the history of Jewish theater: V. Ivanov, Moscow, researching the history and art of Habima (see, for example, V. Ivanov, "Poetika Metamorfoz," in *Russkii avangard v krugu evropeiskoi kultury*, proceedings of an international conference [Moscow, 1993]); J. Veidlinger, Georgetown

University, studying the history of GOSET as a search for Jewish national and cultural identities in the 1920s (see J. Veidlinger, "Soviet Jewish Cultural Identities in 1920s Theater Art," presentation, at the Annual Convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies [Washington, 1995]).

3 The ambivalent goal of this article is determined by the definition of its subject, Jewish art, that "as an appellation . . . remained vague and elusive, at least a working tool which helped scholars organize their material, but which often generated confusion because of its contradictory uses and because it was felt that the term was applied either too narrowly or too broadly." So A. Kampf, *Jewish Experience in the Art of the 20th Century* (Bergin and Garvey, 1984), 15, quoted in G. Kazovskii, "Evreiskoe iskusstvo v Rossii, 1900-1948, Etapy istorii," *Sovetskoe iskusstvoznanie* 27 (Moscow, 1991): 228.

4 The expression of V.S. Bibler, quoted in T. Kliavina, "Na ruinakh teatralnoi imperii," in *Gorizonty kultury*, collected articles of the Russian Institute for History of Art, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg, 1992), 41.

5 The order of the Committee for the Art Affairs of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, November 14, 1949. Russian Center for Preservation and Research of Documents of the Contemporary History, Moscow. Fond 17, Opis 132, Delo 239, List 25. Quoted in E. Goltsman, "Likvidirovat v sviazi s nerentabelnostiu," *Gesher* 2 (Moscow: Tkhiia, 1994): 27.

6 See: B. Pinkus, *The Jews of the Soviet Union: the History of a National Minority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); A. Greenbaum, ed., *Minority Problems in Eastern Europe between the World Wars* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem), 1988.

7 B. Groys, "From Internationalism to Cosmopolitanism: Artists of Jewish Descent in the Stalin Era," in *Russian Jewish Artists in a Century of Change 1890-1990* (Munich/New York: Prestel, 1995), 86-87.

8 *Leksikon fun Idishnr Teatr/Lexicon of the Yiddish Theatre*, comp. ed. Zalmen Zylbercweig, vols. 1-6 (New York: Farlag Elisheva, 1931-1969).

9 The Yiddish theater of Eastern Europe definitely produced stars like E-R., Kaminskaia (Poland), K. Yung (Romania), and others, but it did not produce troupes comparable in their importance to GOSET.

10 See Mendel Elkin, Papers, Archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, NY, R[ecord] G[rroup] 453. Box 1

11 Clipping from The S[illegible] Chicago, December 7, 1923. Collection of press-cuttings from: Elkin Mendel, Papers.

12 T. Kliavina, "Na ruinakh teatralnoi imperii," 40.

13 According to the declaration of *Kultur-lige*, a public and political organization founded in Kiev in 1917 and intended to lead Yiddish culture: "Kultur-lige is based on three key principles: 1) Jewish people education, 2) Yiddish literature, 3) Jewish art. To let the masses think . . . this is the goal of

Kultur-lige." *Di Grunt-oifgabh fun der Kultur-lige, 1918-1919*, 3. Quoted in G. Kazovskii, "Shagal I evreiskaia khudozhestvennaia programma v Rossii," *Vestnik Evreiskogo universiteta v Moskve* 1 (Moscow/Jerusalem, 1992): 90.

14 B. Aronson, I.B. Rybak, "Di Vegn fun der Idisher Molerai," *Oifgang* 1 (1919): 99. Quoted in Kazovskii, "Shagal I evreiskaia," 91.

15 A. Granovskii, "Nashi tseli i zadachi," in *Evreiskii Kamernyi Teatr: k ego otkrytiiu v iiule 1919 goda* (Petrograd, 1919), 6.

16 See for example G. Kazovskii, "Evreiskie khudozhniki v Rossii na rubezhe vekov. K probleme natsionalnoi samoidentifikatsii v iskusstve," *Vestnik Evreiskogo universiteta v Moskve* 10 (Moscow/Jerusalem, 1995).

17 S. Wolitz, "Experiencing Visibility and Phantom Existence," in *Russian Jewish Artists in a Century of Change, 1890-1990* (Munich/New York: Prestel, 1995), 14.

18 One of the key figures in the official Soviet Yiddish culture, M. Litvakov (the chief editor of *Der Emes*) pointed out that the theater was the only medium for the introduction of revolutionary ideas to Jewish masses, in contrast to the literature contaminated by the spirit of the old Jewish world. See M. Litvakov, *Finf Yor Melukhishe Idisher Kamer-teatr, 1919-1924* (Moscow: Shul un Bukh, 1925), 21. Quoted in J. Veidlinger, "Soviet Jewish Cultural Identities." Litvakov's opinion apparently corresponded to the declaration of the First All-Russian Congress of Workers of Workmen's and Peasants' Theater, that approved revolutionary theatrical performances as a central point in the social life of the Soviet Russia. See L. Kleberg, *Theatre as Action. Soviet Russian Avant-Garde Aesthetics* (London: Houndsmills, Bersingstoke; Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 1993), 63. The use of the universal language of theatrical performance and other visual arts (like political posters) by this new revolutionary art was determined by its main goal, to deliver revolutionary ideas to revolutionary masses. Literature was pushed into the background due either to its incomprehensibility (because of the illiteracy and ignorance of the proletarian masses) or to its ideological contamination (especially for quite literate Jewish masses).

19 See for example H. Kazovskii, "The Art Section of the Kultur Lige," *Jews in Eastern Europe* (Jerusalem, Winter 1993); and Kazovskii, "Shagal I evreiskaia."

20 A. Efros wrote about the influence of Chagall on the formation of the art of GOSET and on its individuality in the early years of the theater: "He [Chagall] did not set any conditions, but he also did not accept any directions. . . . Chagall forced us to pay the most expensive price for the Jewish national form of scenic expression . . . he was the clear and indisputable victor, and, in the end, the young Yiddish theater had struggled because of this victory." Efros, "Khudozhniki teatra Granovskogo," 229-32. After all, Chagall left for the young Yiddish theater the difficult tasks of understanding his images and ideas and



embodying his (Chagall's) "two-and-half" dimensional vision into the multidimensional vision of the theater.

21 Kazovskii, "Evreiskoe iskusstvo v Rossii," 251.

22 "The broken world of the old Jewish shtetl with all its people and smells was brought on stage. This is the theater's strength and its weakness at the same time. The past is broken and Granovskii showed it with a great art. But the present and the future did not yet find their artistic reflection, and Granovskii could not find and show it. His theater is passive. It is not a reproach. Let somebody show where it was not so! It was common for all the other theaters of the Soviet Russia." Efros, "Khudozhniki teatra Granovskogo," 226.

23 Efros wrote at the end of the 1920s describing this situation: "Two centers exist now in GOSSET's internal life: the theater is led by Granovskii, the actors are led by Mikhoels. . . . Granovskii was a creator of performances' style in general, Mikhoels was a creator of actors' play style. Would their lines come together or continue separately?" A. Efros, "Nachalo," in Rudnitskii, *Mikhoels*, 342.

24 The title of GOSSET from 1919-1924.

25 This attitude to the audience was expressed by Chagall who, according to Efros, before the first premiere of GOSSET in Moscow "cried as a child . . . when chairs for spectators were installed in the theater's hall designed by him. He said: 'Those damned Jews will hide my painting, they will touch it with their thick backs and greasy hair.'" Efros, "Khudozhniki teatra Granovskogo," 231.

26 In 1932, one of the reviewers of the production of M. Daniel's play "Yulius" by GOSSET wrote that the actors of the Yiddish theater "looked like the professionals of the Moscow Art theater rather than actors of the old GOSSET . . . mass scenes featured just modesty of 'expression' and lack of gesture uncharacteristic of GOSSET. . . . The strict simplicity was the new difficult victory of the theater." Rozentsveig, "Pered otkrytiem semafora," *Vecherniaia Moskva* (Moscow: January 18, 1932).

27 The title of the brochure by G. Fuchs, German theoretician of theatrical art. The principles laid down by Fuchs influenced the vision of the "left" theater by V. Meierkhold. Quoted in Kleberg, *Theatre as Action*.

28 B. Grois, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

29 Kleberg, *Theatre as Action*, 125.

30 See Kleberg, *Theatre as Action*.

31 The scheme of the development of theatrical art could not be regarded as its straight definition. The nature of this process has little in common with a "linear" evolution: every production would be marked by diverse and even opposite concepts of art. Moreover, it is due to the dynamic character of the whole phenomenon of culture for which "transition is the most natural state." L. Batkin, quoted in Kliavina, "Na ruina kh teatralnoi imperii," 41.

32 "Scenographic production was a style of theater led by an artist [designer]. The artist was a key figure in the production — [as] an author of the performance . . . he determined its concept, scheme . . . even actors' play." E. Strutinskaia, "Ekspressionizm v teatralno-dekoratsionnom iskusstve 1910-1920, i `tsenograficheskaya rezhissura,'" in *Russkii avangard v krugu evropeiskoi kultury*, proceedings of an International conference (Moscow, 1993), 51-52.

33 The idea of an elite aesthetic theater was realized by the Chamber Theater of M. Tairov. The constructivist theater was represented by the Theater of Proletkul (Proletarian Culture) of S. Eizenshtein and by the Theatre of Revolution of V. Meierkhöld. For details see Kleberg, *Theatre as Action*, 58-94.

34 There were exceptions to that general approach. In 1920-21 and 1924-25, the Theater of RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic) number 1 made an attempt to research the audience's responses to its productions. Publication of the results of that study led to polemics concerning the methods of analysis. One of the leading critics in Moscow of that time, M. Zagorskii, concluded that "there is no single spectator . . . who reacts when, how, and to what: this is what we want to know when we talk about audience." M. Zagorskii, "Esche ob izuchenii zritel'ia," *Zhizn iskusstva* 20 (Moscow, 1925), 5-6, quoted in Kleberg, *Theatre as Action*, 96-97. Zagorskii also defined a single unified audience as a fiction and accentuated his analytical approach intended "to explain the concrete nature of a given spectator and the inner meaning of his emotions." M. Zagorskii, "Kak izuchat zritel'ia," *Novyi zritel* 25 (Moscow, 1925), 8, quoted in Kleberg, *Theatre as Action*, 100. Research on the audience of GOSET still awaits scholars, however. It was touched upon once in M. Altshuller, "Teatron Yiddi ve-ha-Tsibbur ha-Yehudi bi-Brit ha-Moatsot," presentation, The International Conference: Shlomo Mikhöels, the Yiddish Theater and Soviet Jewry (Jerusalem, 1990).

35 "Theatrical October": the ideological and political campaign of "left" art, initiated in 1920 by V. Meierkhöld (who was a deputy chairman of the theatrical section of Narkompro [the Commissariat for Enlightenment] in Petrograd). "Theatrical October" was aimed at nationalization (and indeed at monopolization by "left" art) of all theaters in Soviet Russia, and at introducing mandatory revolutionary repertoire and methods to the nationalized theaters. The theatrical revolution, according to its leaders, was intended to destroy old art and to create a new proletarian culture.

36 Kliavina, "Na ruinakh teatralnoi imperii," 37-38.

37 See A. Avtorkhanov, *Imperiia Kremli* (Minsk: Polifakt, 1991); A. Avtorhanov, *Proishozhdeine partokratii* (Frankfurt-Main: Posev, 1973); A. Avtorkhanov, *Tekhnologiia vlasti* (Frankfurt-Main: Posev, 1976). The internal rigidity of the totalitarian state was determined by Marxist-Leninist interpretation of the evolution of society. According to that interpretation, social antagonisms would be eliminated together with the exploiter classes under socialism, and total elimination of class structure would mean the end of the evolution of human

society under communism.

38 The accusation of an intention for a crime rather than of the crime itself was widely used during the Stalin Era against so-called "enemies of the people" and led to punishment of millions of people. Preventive nature of punishment is essential in the reasoning of the totalitarian state.

39 Among the evidence of appreciation by the state for the role of GOSET, for instance, was the increasing degree of confidence between the Party leaders and S. Mikhoels, expressed in his political mission as the chairman of the Jewish Antifascist Committee during the World War II; the highest mark of acknowledgment of the art of GOSET in 1945 when its production of Shneur's *Freilekhs* was awarded the Stalin prize. The leaders of the totalitarian state were afraid that these facts would be regarded by GOSET incorrectly. This fear would be sufficient foundation for suspicion of GOSET's possible claim for an exclusive position in the hierarchy of the Soviet culture.

40 The technique used by the state in liquidation of GOSET (Mikhoels was not formally executed or sentenced in any trial, but murdered in an arranged road incident; the theater was liquidated not as "ideological enemy," but simply closed as "unprofitable") made arguable the widespread belief that elimination of the Yiddish theater was part of the totalitarian crusade against Jewish culture and the anti-semitic campaign launched by Stalin a few years later.

41 Israeli scholar of Habima, A. Sosnovskaya, wrote about it ironically: "The analysis of Habimah's path until its departure from Russia indicates that its original idea of becoming a theater for a broad Jewish public had not been realized. Due to the profound influence of the elite Russian culture in Moscow, Zemach and his colleagues, however, did attain considerable success in creating an original Russian theater in the Hebrew language." A. Sosnovskaya, "Was Habimah a Jewish Theater or a Russian Theater in Hebrew?" *Jews in Eastern Europe* (Jerusalem, Winter 1993): 22.

## Radical Politics, Radical Art: The Case of the Artef\*

Edna Nahshon

The Artef was a New York based Yiddish workers' art theatre which operated within the orbit of American Jewish communism during the Depression decade.<sup>1</sup> The Artef was one of the most artistically accomplished theatrical organizations in the history of the American Yiddish stage. Perhaps more than any other Yiddish theatre in America, its reputation transcended the boundaries of ethnicity, and by the mid 1930s it was unanimously recognized in theatrical circles as one of the primary companies of the American theatre of social consciousness.

The Artef opened its doors as a producing company in December, 1928, yet the ideological and practical efforts leading to its formation date back to the early 1920s. The Artef originally evolved out of a body called "Folks farband far kunst teater" ("People's Art Theatre Alliance"), established, in August, 1923, in New York by a coalition of various organizations representing a combined membership of 200,000 people, all of them associated with the Jewish labor movement. The goal was the establishment of a communally run Yiddish people's theatre that would "represent and serve the Jewish masses" and would be run under the auspices of their mass organizations, namely labor unions, fraternal orders, and cultural clubs.<sup>2</sup> This effort reflected the commitment of the Jewish labor movement to "high" culture in general and to the concept of a serious, "artistic" theatre in particular. It was an approach rooted not only in traditional Jewish respect for literary texts, but also in the European Social-Democratic movement's view that regarded high culture as a

phenomenon that existed beyond social class and to which workers had equal claim.

Though the Farband's ultimate goal was to form a people's theatre, in effect it undertook the immediate task of supporting the Yiddish Art Theatre owned and directed by Maurice Schwartz. In 1922-1923, Schwartz had a particularly bad season and consequently was forced to close his theatre. The labor movement's leadership was prepared to assist Schwartz and through the newly formed Farband raised the necessary funds so that the Yiddish Art Theatre could resume production. Over the next two years, despite some sincere efforts to recruit a theatre company, it became clear that the Farband had reached a standstill and was unable to carry out its mandate to establish a Yiddish people's theatre.

One of the reasons cited for the failure of the Farband was that the energy and resources that could have been invested in cultural work were consumed by the internecine war that raged within the Jewish labor movement between 1923 and 1928. This all-out battle divided the Jewish labor movement into two rival coalitions — the Right, composed of conservative socialists and union democrats, and the Left which consisted of communists, radical socialists, anarchists, syndicalists, progressives and their followers. The struggle was carried on with a vengeance on all fronts: political, industrial, and cultural. As it went on, the Left, led by the communist majority, tried to take over the organizational network of the labor movement as well as to establish its own institutions.

In September, 1925, as the rift between Left and Right became increasingly aggressive, the communists within the Farband arranged a takeover of the organization. Once in control, they changed its name and redefined its mission. The organization, now renamed "Arbeter teater farband" (Workers' Theatrical Alliance), was chartered by its founders — representatives of left-wing organizations aided by sympathetic intellectuals and artists — to promote the concept of a Jewish workers' theatre and to establish the first such institution in America. In addition to the left-wing leadership, some of the best-known supporters of the new venture were theatre people Jacob Ben-Ami, Abraham Taytelboim, non-party writers H. Leivick, David Pinski, and Leon Kobrin, and critics Dr. Alexander Mukdoyni and Sh. Niger.<sup>3</sup> The aim of the future theatre, it was declared, was "to dramatize the life of Jewish American workers" and "to take an active part in their revolutionary struggle."<sup>4</sup>

The Artef, however, had no clear plan about how to achieve this goal either artistically or organizationally. Some of its activists were willing to

recruit as actors rank and file workers who had no prior training. They proposed to put them under the supervision of a professional director and have them begin production right away. Others, on the opposing end of the spectrum, considered it quite in keeping with the concept of a workers' theatre to suggest the recruitment of professional actors whose sympathies lay with the revolutionary camp, in order to form a troupe that would produce "proletarian" plays on a professional commercial basis. There were Artef activists who advocated an a priori commitment to a specific theatrical style, such as Constructivism, Expressionism, or mass performance with audience participation. In addition, the nature of the repertoire of the future workers' theatre was equally muddled. Suggestions for future productions ranged from agitational skits to classical and bourgeois plays. Amid the confusion concerning the nature of proletarian theatre, the Artef was floundering and, like its organizational predecessor, failed to establish the workers' theatre it had been chartered to create.

A definite change occurred in 1927, when the Artef decided to develop an acting company of its own. Conveniently, it found within the Left camp an amateur theatrical workshop named the "Freiheit dramatishe studye" which could assume that role. The Studio, which functioned mostly as a sort of evening drama school, had been formed at about the same time as the Artef organization by young radical immigrants who were influenced by articles concerning proletarian theatre that had appeared in the *Freiheit*, the communist Yiddish daily. Since the Freiheit Studio's aims paralleled those of the Artef's, an agreement was reached in 1927 between the Artef organization and the Freiheit Studio that the latter would become the acting troupe of the future workers' theatre. The Studio members insisted on a policy of delayed production, a continued course of theatre studies, and repeatedly resisting the pressure to begin producing right away. In 1928, they, albeit reluctantly, began to participate in mass spectacles that featured in major events organized by the movement.<sup>5</sup>

In 1928, when the Freiheit Studio was about to present a full-length play as its first formal production, the Artef decided to sponsor the event and to proclaim it as the opening of the long-awaited Yiddish Workers' Theatre. On December 16, 1928, after three years of rigorous theatrical studies, the Studio officially opened its doors as the Artef Theatre Company with a production of *Baym toyer (At the Gate)* by Beynush Shteyman, directed by Jacob Mestel, chief acting teacher of the Studio.

Over the years, the Artef developed a permanent collective of some

twenty-odd Studio-trained actors who gradually shifted to professional status by the latter half of the 1930s. In 1934 the company moved to its own Broadway house. It continued to perform regularly until early February, 1940, with a one-season hiatus during 1938-1939. The Artef continued to maintain an acting studio for young actors. Five classes graduated from these studios. The two best-known graduates, who also participated in some of the Artef productions, were David Opatoshu and Jules Dassin.

All told, the Artef presented twenty-three major productions of full-length plays as well as dozens of skits, mass spectacles, and small-scale concerts prepared for special party-sponsored events. The company's most notable productions were staged in the mid-1930s: in 1934, *Rekrutn (Recruits)*, a Soviet adaptation by Lipe Reznik of Yisroel Aksenfeld's original play; in 1936, *200,000* by Sholem Aleichem; and in 1937, *Boytre gazlen (The Outlaw)*, by Soviet writer Moyshe Kulbak.

The Artef company, organized as an actors' collective, was a unique phenomenon in New York's Yiddish theatre world. From its very outset, it disassociated itself ideologically, artistically, and socially from the commercial Yiddish rialto and rejected the star system that ruled the Yiddish and American stages. The Artef was often compared with Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre and was regarded as the radical camp's alternative to it. In 1932, in an article written for "Workers' Theatre," Nathaniel Buchwald, chief drama critic of the *Freiheit* and the ideologue of the Artef, stated: "The Artef was originally conceived as a proletarian art theatre to counteract the influence of the bourgeois theatre among the Jewish workers." <sup>6</sup> That was a necessary step since:

the traditional reverence on the part of the Jewish workers for the serious drama and the artistic presentation of plays was taken advantage of by the bourgeois Jewish Art Theatre to build up a proletarian following for its thoroughly bourgeois, chauvinistic plays. <sup>7</sup>

Although the Yiddish Art Theatre served as an obvious institution of reference, it is in many ways more accurate to liken the style and ethos of the Artef to those of the two great non-American Jewish theatres: the Moscow Yiddish State Theatre and the Hebrew-language Habima Theatre, both children of the October Revolution.

The reference to the Habima is particularly pertinent in connection with Benno Schneider, who directed most of Artef's productions, and was

the person most responsible for the creation and crystallization of the company's unique style. A former Habima member, he was a disciple of Evgeny Vakhtangov, the legendary director of Habima's production of *The Dybbuk*. Schneider, inspired by his teacher's concept of fantastic realism, sought for the right synthesis of Stanislavsky's quest for truth of feeling and an exciting theatricality of form.

Schneider made his directorial debut with Artef in 1930, with *Ristokratn (Aristocrats)* (figure 1), by Sholem Aleichem. *Ristokratn* was the Artef's first artistic and critical success. In this early work all the elements that would combine to create the distinct Artef style were already present: the sharp juxtapositions of grotesque and realistic characters; graphic plasticity; exaggeration and stylization of details; imaginative use of colors, patterns, shapes and movement; a strong rhythmic quality; and frequent use of music and dance. In addition, Artef productions were renowned for their excellently choreographed mass scenes and the emphasis placed on ensemble acting.

The artistic and organizational life of the Artef was shaped not only by its talented director and enthusiastic acting collective. It is only when seen within the larger context of the movement under the auspices of which the Artef operated that we can understand the company's selection of repertoire and its evolution from a sectarian and amateurish group to a professional Broadway institution. Indeed, it is the contention of this article that only when seen within the framework of American Jewish communism does the history of Artef present itself as a cohesive continuum rather than an episodic series of seemingly unrelated productions.

The life of the Artef consisted of three distinct phases: the studio years (1925-1928), the workers' theatre period (1929-1934), and the Broadway tenure (1934-1940). These three phases corresponded to specific stages in the evolution of Jewish communism in America. I wish to offer some examples that will sustain this thesis.

The company's dependence on the Party's changing fortunes became evident in 1929, shortly after the Artef workers' theatre had officially opened. *Baym toyer*, the company's first major production, received mild reviews and was considered by some as an unfortunate choice for a proletarian class-conscious theatre. The play's messianic theme and poetic symbolism caused discomfort in radical circles, and Jacob Mestel's heavy-handed direction was criticized as ornamental, dictatorial, and uninspired. *Baym toyer* was not followed by another production during the 1928-1929



season, and the future prospects of the company seemed at the time uncertain at best. Historical developments, however, guaranteed the future of the young troupe.

In 1928 the Comintern proclaimed the advent of a new era of capitalist disintegration and revolutionary upheaval which was named the "Third Period."<sup>8</sup> Since the communists believed that they were entering a cataclysmic epoch of capitalist decay, militancy became the order of the day. Even though the application of the Third Period thesis to the United States was slow at first, the stock exchange crash of October 14, 1929, and the onset of the Great Depression seemed the ultimate proof that the new age was indeed in the making. Consequently, American communism, convinced of its approaching victory, became rigidly doctrinaire and militant. William Z. Foster, the Party's presidential candidate, began to speak openly of his vision of a Soviet America.

As the Communist Party moved into the Third Period, Zionism and the Jewish community in Palestine came under increased fire. The Arab revolt that erupted in the summer of 1929 led to riots and killings all over Palestine, culminating in the brutal massacre of over sixty yeshiva students, many of them American, in Hebron on the 23rd of August. This gave the Party an opportunity to demonstrate its anti-Zionist stand. The *Morgn Freiheit* became a mouthpiece for vitriolic anti-Zionist propaganda. Meetings and demonstrations were organized across the country against what the Party labeled "Zionist imperialism." The communist response to the Arab massacre triggered an explosion of angry protest in the American Jewish community. An appeal to boycott the communists made by the *Forverts* and Zionist organizations was widely taken up and was rapidly gaining momentum. The strong anticommunist sentiments had repercussions in the entire communist orbit. Newspaper stands in New York refused to sell the *Morgn Freiheit* for five consecutive days. The paper lost much of its advertisements and suffered a severe blow from the protest resignation of four of its best-known contributors: Avrum Raizin, H. Leivick, David Ignatoff, and Menachem Boraisha. Shortly thereafter, the entire *Freiheit* staff was expelled from the Y.L. Peretz Yiddish Writers Union for anti-Jewish activities.

The Yiddish theatres, always mindful in their handling of the press, joined in the boycott and ceased to advertise in the *Freiheit*. The Hebrew Actors Union issued a special condemnation resolution against the *Freiheit*. Many of the people who had previously been sympathetic to the efforts of the communists to build a workers' theatre actively associated

themselves with the anticommunist bloc. Maurice Schwartz was a major proponent of the Hebrew Actors' Union resolution. Dr. Alexander Mukdoyni, the drama critic of the *Morgn Zhurnal*, previously supportive of the Artef, participated as a witness in a public trial against the *Freiheit* and attacked the communist commitment to Jewish culture as a sham, offering the Artef as an example of a deceitful and manipulative organization.<sup>9</sup>

The sharp division between the two camps led to a sharp demarcation in the cultural domain. The previously largely theoretical issue of proletarian culture became a matter of affiliation. It was reduced to the basic question: Are you with us or against us? The rest no longer mattered, wrote Nathaniel Buchwald, theatre critic of the *Freiheit*.<sup>10</sup>

The anticommunist boycott led to a boycott in reverse. Individuals and organizations associated with the communist camp stopped buying tickets for productions of the "bourgeois" theatres and no longer employed their actors as entertainers for their organizational affairs.

These developments presented the Artef with an unexpected challenge. Overnight it became the theatrical unit of the communist camp and was expected to satisfy the benefit needs of communist organizations as well as to cater to individual theatre goers. Without a theatre of its own, without a repertoire, without experienced actors, without money, and without a competent artistic and administrative leadership, the Artef found itself in a monopolist position for which it had vaguely hoped, yet for which it was poorly prepared.

During the boycott year which encompassed the 1929-1930 season, the Artef presented two productions: *Naftuli Botvin* by Avrum Veviorika, directed by Em Jo Basshe, and *Ristokratn* by Sholem Aleichem, directed by Benno Schneider (figure 1). In addition, it also offered several small-scale productions. The company played in its new home at the American Laboratory Theatre on East 54th Street, performing three to four times a week. It also sent individuals and small groups to entertain at communist-sponsored affairs. Questions concerning the company's future existence that could have been raised a year earlier were simply no longer valid.

Given its unique position and following the success of *Ristokratn*, the Artef began to take steps toward the establishment of a permanent theatre; namely, a professional company whose actors, free from their work in the shops, would be able to perform daily. The permanent theatre lasted barely three months.

By the end of 1930 the anti-*Freiheit* ban had run its course and the

Yiddish theatres began to reinstate their advertisements. This was happily espoused by individuals and organizations of the communist camp as an indication that it was semi-legitimate to resume their patronage of the bourgeois theatres. On the other hand, the Artef was unable to draw audiences from noncommunist circles, as the community's anticommunist hostility surrounded the company like barbed wire.

The dogmas of the Third Period determined the repertoire chosen by the Artef. In the early 1930s the Party intensified its efforts to shed its image as a predominantly foreign organization and to proletarianize itself by expanding its blue-collar base. The corresponding "American" plays produced by the Artef between 1930 and 1933 proved, however, the least successful endeavors of the company. The first in this category was Shin Godiner's *Jim Kooperkop* (1930) (Figure 2), an anticapitalist tract composed in the Soviet Union, a play that bore no likeness to the audience's experience of American reality. *Roysh fun mashinen* (*The Whir of Machines*) (1931) by Fulye Cherner, a New York party activist, was an agitational melodrama that proved to be the biggest flop in the company's history. In the absence of suitable revolutionary American plays, the Artef reverted to translations: *Trikenish (Drought)* (1931) (Figure 3), a Nathaniel Buchwald adaptation of Hallie Flanagan and Margaret Ellen Clifford's *Can You Hear Their Voices?*, and *The Third Parade* (1933) by Charles Walker and Paul Peters, a docudrama depicting the Bonus March. The two translations, like the previous "American" plays, managed to somehow survive only thanks to the company's subscription system.

In the absence of American revolutionary plays, the Artef presented bona fide imports from the Soviet Union (Figure 4). Indeed the theatre's best productions of the period were Aron Kushnirov's *Hirsch Leckert* (1931) and M. Daniel's *Fir teg* (*Four Days*) (1932), both romantic revolutionary dramas that had been previously produced in Russia.

With these two productions the Artef began to attract the attention of critics outside the communist camp. Even though the *Forverts* continued to ignore the Artef, the *Tog* published for the first time since 1929 a review of an Artef production.<sup>11</sup> *Fir teg* also received a short notice in the *New York Times*, in which the critic, clearly unfamiliar with the work of the company, wrote: "This organization reaches unexpected heights. . . [The story] is beautifully narrated and equally well portrayed. The production is admirably staged by Beno Shapiro [*sic*], special treating having gone into the mob scene."<sup>12</sup> The reviewer concluded with what he must have considered a major compliment: "The troupe's first effort ranks well

above the average Yiddish offering for sheer artistry, second only to the production of the Yiddish Art Theatre." <sup>13</sup>

As the Third Period was drawing to its conclusion, the Artef presented its most celebrated Russian import, *Yegor Bulichev* (1934) by Maxim Gorky, a recently finished work which had its American premier on the Artef boards. *Yegor Bulichev* was first produced by the Moscow-based Vakhtangov Theatre in 1932 and quickly became one of the favored plays of the Russian repertoire to this day. *Yegor Bulichev* elicited much interest in the American communist theatre world because it offered a good example for the new artistic policy of socialist realism which originated in Russia late in 1932 in reaction to the "formalist" experimental work of the avant-garde artists. The new dictum which ruled Soviet arts until 1953 required that drama present a positive hero and that it follow the traditional style of psychological realism. American communist writers, struggling to adapt to the new artistic principle, were most thankful to witness a worthy model of the new artistic line.

The highly popular production of *Yegor Bulichev* presented the Artef with an unprecedented situation: it was playing to packed houses and tickets for the play became hard to get. For the first time since 1929, the anticommunist wall that surrounded the company had been shattered. The Jewish public had discovered its "new" art theatre.

In the summer of 1934 it was announced that the Artef had signed a lease for a 48th Street theatre, a 298-seat house formerly known as the Edith Totten. With this move to the heart of New York's Theatre District a new chapter in the history of the Artef was about to begin.

The move to Broadway and the ensuing professionalization of the Artef correlated with the introduction of a new communist line known as the Popular Front. The new policy called for an alignment with the progressive bourgeoisie, which was considered a vital ally in the formation of a mass movement that would battle fascism and support the Soviet Union. The Third Period fundamentalist rigidity and the dream of a Soviet America were quietly put to rest.

In order to legitimize communism as an authentic American movement, the Party presented itself as the spearhead of the nation's democratic forces and as the genuine heir to the democratic traditions of the United States. As the Party finally managed to cast off its image of an alien force — by the end of the 1930s the majority of its members were American-born — it also developed a new positive approach to its ethnic work. Jewish communists seized the opportunity to break out of their



Figure 1

Third act of Sholem Aleichem's *Aristocrats*, directed by Benno Schneider, sets by M. Solotaroff. 1936 revival of original production.



Figure 2

Sixth scene of S. Godiner's *Jim Kooperkop*, directed by Benno Schneider, sets by Boris Aronson, 1930.



Figure 3  
Second act of H. Flanagan's *Drought*, directed by Benno Schneider, sets  
by M. Solotaroff, 1931.



Figure 4  
Fourth act of A. Veviorka's *Diamonds*, directed by Benno Schneider,  
sets by M. Zipporin, 1931.

isolated position in the Jewish community, and in the newly relaxed climate they could approach the community on the chief issues of the Nazi menace to European Jewry and anti-Semitism in America.

The communists also managed to form an alliance with the Yiddishist intelligentsia in the area of cultural activities. When the communists set out to prepare a world congress of Jewish culture, they found the enthusiastic support of notable writers such as H. Leivick, Joseph Opatoshu, Peretz Hirshbein, David Ignatoff, Menachem Boraisha, and Chaim Zhitlovsky, all of whom joined the IKUF (Idisher kultur farband).

The communist courtship of prominent writers and artists became a typical feature of the Popular Front era. The party had abandoned the concept of "artists in uniform" and developed a liberal acceptance of various styles and subject matter. The same non-doctrinaire approach was applied to the theatre of the left. The radical theatre became liberalized, and playwrights were encouraged to address themselves to the democratic ideals of American history and culture.

The Artef, it appears, was happy to espouse the revised perspective of the Popular Front, as the theatre's forte lay in such productions as *Rekrutn*, a typical forerunner of the newly advocated aesthetic of "cultural nationalism." In an article written shortly before the 1936 annual conference of the Artef, Nathaniel Buchwald described the new tasks of a theatre which was now hailed as a genuine Jewish people's theatre:

The Artef must speak now not only to conscious understanding, but also to those masses who come to the theatre for entertainment, and who can be influenced politically only when they are influenced theatrically. It is impossible to communicate with these masses in the lingo of the revolutionary movement and it is impossible to influence them with the ready-made, standard symbols of the class struggle.<sup>14</sup>

The Artef accordingly divested itself of its hammer and sickle logo and was now attracting a cross-section of the Yiddish-speaking population, as well as a segment of second-generation native English speakers who were still eager to enjoy a high-quality Yiddish performance. Louis Hyman of the *Morgn Freiheit* noted with satisfaction that now, when he went to the Artef theatre, he encountered people who did not know him, and whom he did not know.<sup>15</sup> He even took pride in the fact that he saw in the audience some religious spectators who were

wearing their skullcaps during the performance. That, he wrote, was a true indication that the Artef had become a genuine people's theatre.

The Artef also engaged the public support of theatre people who had dissociated themselves from the organization in 1929. Accordingly, in addition to obvious participants such as Moissaye Olgin, the *Freiheit's* editor, Benno Schneider, the theatre's artistic director, and Ben Gold of the communist controlled Furriers' union, the presidium of Artef's tenth jubilee committee included Maurice Schwartz of the Jewish Art Theatre, Dr. Mukdoyni, drama critic of the *Morgn Zhurnal*, and playwright Peretz Hirshbein. The latter three also contributed materials to the special jubilee book *Tsen yor Artef*.<sup>16</sup> The book also included greetings from the Hebrew Actors Union and from an array of notable theatre people, including Boris Tomashevsky. Critics Ben-Zion Goldberg and William Edlin, both of the *Tog*, and writers H. Leivick, Benjamin Ressler, and Joseph Opatoshu — the latter serving also on the editorial board of *Tsen yor Artef* — were admitted with open arms onto the executive board of the Artef jubilee committee. Actors Joseph Buloff, Celia Adler, and Menachem Rubin, none of them previously affiliated with the revolutionary movement, took part in the artistic program of the Artef jubilee celebration, which took place at the 6000-seat Hippodrome on March 13, 1937.

Writers such as Hirshbein, Leivick, and Ressler gave not only their prestige, but also offered their talent. On May 29, 1936, the *Morgn Freiheit* reported that plays by these well-known writers were read and discussed as possibilities for the Artef's 1937-1938 season. All of these plays, according to the newspaper, were especially written for the company. None, however, was ever produced or perhaps even completed. But the support of major dramatists from the Yiddish stage, together with the catholicity of the period, enabled the Artef to expand its repertoire significantly. Of the seven plays that the Artef would produce before its demise, two — *Keytn (Chains)* and *Der East Side Profesor (The East Side Professor)* — were written respectively by H. Leivick and Ossip Dymov, major non-communist playwrights. Two others — *200,000* by Sholem Aleichem and *Boytre gazlen (The Outlaw)* by Moyshe Kulbak — were genuine folk dramas, true to the concept of "cultural nationalism." The other three were *Der braver soldat Shveyk (The Brave Soldier Schweik)* based on Jaroslav Hasek's novel; the classic *Uriel Acosta*, by Karl Gutzkow; and *Clinton Street*, a dramatization of Chaver Paver's novel, the only Artef play of the period by a revolutionary writer.



The last production of the Artef, the classic *Uriel Acosta*, opened on December 27, 1939. It commanded special attention because of two factors: it was directed by Benno Schneider, who had returned to the company after a two-year hiatus, and it featured in the female leading role Helen Beverly, marking the first time the Artef had invited a guest performer to join the company for a particular production.

Although *Uriel Acosta* did not turn out to be one of the Artef's more memorable achievements, it was nevertheless a solid production that was warmly endorsed by the communist press, as well as by William Edlin and several of the English-language reviewers. Still, it was doing so poorly at the box office that the *Daily Worker*, writing less than two weeks after the production opened, urged its readers to rush to see *Acosta*, since the company was "in great danger of having to close this fine production in a few weeks through lack of funds and high overhead." <sup>17</sup>

On February 9, 1940, the *Morgn Freiheit* printed the following news item:

The Artef players have extended themselves in order to perform to the last day of their benefit "bookings." This day is approaching. On February 18, the last performance of *Acosta* will be given. You can see the production either during this or the following weekend — and that is it. <sup>18</sup>

How can one account for this rapid change of the Artef's fortunes? True, the company started the season with inadequate financial reserves, and *Uriel Acosta*, leaning heavily on talk, failed to attract the English-speakers who had flocked to such productions as *Rekrutn*, *200,000*, and *Boytre*. Yet the Artef had never really relied heavily on direct box-office sales, but rather depended on the advance sales of blocks of tickets to organizational theatre parties. The reason for the poor attendance must therefore be found in external developments forceful enough to bring about the end of a company which had been brimming with energy just a few months earlier. These developments go back to the summer of 1939, shortly before the Artef opened its new season.

On August 23, 1939, the Soviet Union signed a nonaggression pact with the Third Reich. On September 1, 1939, the German army invaded Poland. On September 17, the Red Army advanced into Poland to claim its share of the loot.

The Soviet-Nazi pact triggered a particularly strong reaction among American Jews, who became alarmed over the destiny of nine million Jews who lived in Eastern Europe. The response, wrote Melech Epstein, was volcanic: "Jewish Communists were met by their shopmates with the Nazi salute and a 'Heil Hitler!'" <sup>19</sup> Fist fights broke out in the Garment Center. A newly coined label, "Communazis," was haunting Jewish communists in the workplace and on the street. The *Morgn Freiheit* was torn to pieces at newsstands. The notable noncommunist writers who had joined the IKUF: Dr. Chaim Zhitlowsky, H. Leivick, Joseph Opatoshu, Peretz Hirshbein, David Ignatoff, Dr. Alexander Mukdoyni, and Ben-Zion Goldberg immediately resigned from the organization.

Jewish outrage against the communists, who were being denounced by the Yiddish press as enemies of the Jewish people, led to a spontaneous anticommunist boycott, much like the one that took place in 1929. The *Freiheit* lost many of its advertisements, its financial base became shakier than ever, and its fund-raising campaigns were failures. In this depressed state of affairs the Artef stood no chance. There were clearly no prospects for a financial bailout by the Party or the demoralized auxiliaries which provided its economic resources. Moreover, the ideal of creating a proletarian culture had largely dissipated during the Popular Front era, and the preservation of a company whose initial raison d'être was the formation of a revolutionary theatre, by now an outdated goal, did not rank high on the communist agenda. On the other hand, the Artef, which had given up its designation as workers' theatre in favor of the more general mission of a people's theatre, could not escape its communist stigma and the ostracism that came with it during the turbulent pact period.

*Clinton Street*, the first production of the 1939-1940 season, managed to survive the mounting anticommunist resentment because many benefit performances had been ordered and paid for during the summer, shortly before the pact began to take its toll. *Uriel Acosta*, the story of the iconoclast who was ostracized by the Jewish community of Amsterdam, had been doomed even before it opened. With it the story of the Artef had come full circle. The theatre that had been given life by the first anticommunist boycott was given its death blow by the second.

## Notes

\* This article is dedicated to Professor Brooks McNamara with respect and gratitude.

1 Artef is an acronym for Arbeter Teater Farband = Workers' Theatrical Alliance. See now Edna Nashshon, *Yiddish Proletarian Theatre: The Art and Politics of the Artef, 1925-1940* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998).

Transliterations of Yiddish words follow the standard system provided by the YIVO Institute of Jewish Research. In cases of names of people and organizations I adhered to the way they spelled their names in English; for example, "Freiheit" and not "Frayhayt."

Most English translations from Yiddish are the author's. English translations of names of organizations follow the translation of those organizations. For example, Workers' Theatrical Alliance appears on the stationery of Artef. As for titles of plays, I followed the translations that appear in their respective playbills.

2 Kalmen Marmor, "Di far-geshikhte fun Artef" ("The Early History of the Artef"), in *Tsen yor Artef (Ten Years of Artef)* (New York, Artef, 1937), 715.

3 Ibid.

4 Nathaniel Buchwald, *Teater (Theatre)* (New York: Farlag Committee, 1943).

5 The first large scale production in which the Studio participated was *Masn shpil un balet fun der rusisher revolutsye (Mass Play and Ballet of the Russian Revolution)* presented at the Lenin memorial celebration in Madison Square Garden, January 21, 1928. The second was *Strike*, presented on February 26, 1928, at the Central Opera House on the occasion of the dedication of a Party-sponsored cooperative housing project in the Bronx. The third was *Royt-geylshvartz (Red-Yellow-Black)* presented at the celebration of the Freiheit's sixth anniversary on March 3, 1928, at Madison Square Garden. The last production of the Studio during the 1927-1928 season was *Miners*, presented at the Party's May Day celebration at Madison Square Garden.

6 Nathaniel Buchwald, "The Artef," *Workers' Theatre* (March 1932), 4.

7 Ibid.

8 The "First Period" was defined as that of early revolutionary upsurges. The "Second Period," lasting from 1923 to 1928, was defined as a period of capitalist stabilization.

9 *Der Mishpet iber di idishe komunistn un zeyer hoypt-tsaytung "Di Morgn Frayhayt" (The trial of the Jewish communists and their major newspaper, the "Morgn Freiheit")* (New York: Shtet Komitet, Idish natsionaln arbeter farband 1929), 27.

10 Nathaniel Buchwald, "mir darfn an arbeter teater" ("We need a

workers' theatre") *Morgn Freiheit* (29 November 1929).

11 M. Dantsis, "'Hirsh Lekert' geshpilt fun der grupe Artef" ("Hirsch Leckert' played by the Artef group"), *Tog* (5 February 1932).

12 B.I. "Jewish Players Give Superb Play," *New York Times* (21 November 1932).

13 Ibid.

14 Nathaniel Buchwald, "Di folks konferents vegn Artef" ("The Folk Conference Concerning the Artef") *Morgan Freiheit* (24 October 1935).

15 Louis Hyman, "200,000 in Artef" ("200,000 at the Artef"), *Morgn Freiheit* (8 January 1937).

16 Op. Cit.

17 Sylvia Taylor, "Change the World," *Daily Worker* (11 January 1940).

18 "Uriel Acosta vert geshpilt bloyz biz 18tn februar" ("Uriel Acosta will be Performed only until February 18th") *Morgn Freiheit* (9 February 1940).

19 Melech Epstein, *The Jew and Communism* (New York: Trade Union Sponsoring Committee, 1959), 351.

## The Yiddish Theater in Omaha, 1919-1969

Oliver B. Pollak and Leo Greenbaum

I go to the theatre to laugh. Shall I go there and be tormented when life itself is a plague? No give me rather a mad jester or the antics of a spry wench.<sup>1</sup>

What is noteworthy. . . is that groups of fifteen and twenty mutual friends find a common interest in music, in drama, or in reading — enough to bring them together one or two evenings a month.<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

Yiddish theater fused time and space, sound and image, creating a bond between writers, actors, and audiences.<sup>3</sup> Drama evoked nostalgia and social consciousness, depicted against a Jewish background, life crises, and the transition from shtetl to urban America. Entertainment, education, or catharsis, the theater reflected Jewish popular culture.

Hutchins Hapgood's classic *The Spirit of the Ghetto* established the centrality of Yiddish theater in immigrant life.<sup>4</sup> Harold Clurman felt the theater surpassed the lodge and the synagogue as the Jewish community meeting place. Irving Howe declared Yiddish theater provided a forum for values, and, according to David Lifson, the stage followed the press as the most important cultural influence on Jewish immigrant life. Rhoda Helfman Kaufman saw it as a secular ritual, a rite of passage from shtetl to assimilation.<sup>5</sup>

The major published Yiddish theater English-language historians, David S. Lifson and Nahma Sandrow, naturally emphasize New York.<sup>6</sup> The "less fortunate out-of-towners will no doubt be regaled by road shows or, at the very least, by cinematized versions."<sup>7</sup> The "provinces" had a

distinct cultural life. Louis Wirth arrived in Omaha from Germany in 1911 at the age of fourteen; upon graduating from high school he went to the University of Chicago. His study of Chicago Jewry, *The Ghetto*, acknowledged the existence of Yiddish theater west of New York, "the Chicago theater, like the Yiddish press, is for the most part but a sideshow of the New York ghetto. . . the Yiddish theater draw their talent from New York." <sup>8</sup> With the exception of the Yiddish theater in Detroit there was scant coverage of the provinces.<sup>9</sup>

This paper's task is to identify the vitality of local Yiddish theater in Omaha, Nebraska, which appeared in two forms: independent professional touring companies — sometimes sponsored by Omaha Jewish organizations for benefits — and amateur clubs, raising funds for worthy causes.

New York's Yiddish theater exhibited a volatile mix of strong personalities, *patryotn* (fans), and theater economics. Writers and actors moved between New York, Europe, South America, and the American "provinces." Art theater challenged *shund* (trash). Social consciousness challenged nostalgia, comedy, and melodrama. Yiddishists were challenged or ignored by the young, who declined to follow the inherited language. A lively art is not necessarily financially sound.

Several cities had resident professional Yiddish theater companies. In 1927 New York had eleven; Chicago, with the second largest Jewish population, had four; Philadelphia two; and Baltimore, Boston, Cleveland, Detroit, Los Angeles, Newark, and St. Louis had one each.<sup>10</sup>

#### Midwest Jewish Demography<sup>11</sup>

City	1931 Population	1931 Population	Jewish %	1990	Jewish
	Population	Population			
Chicago, IL	3,376,438	305,000	9%		248,000
Kansas City, MO	399,746	22,000	<TD ROWSPAN=5 WIDTH=4		

Reform and Conservative congregation, and several Orthodox *shuln*. Omaha attracted road shows for single performances. Traveling professional Yiddish theater troupes entertained Jews in Omaha, Kansas City, and to a lesser degree Sioux City and Des Moines. They presented plays, poetic drama, melodrama, comedy, folk drama, vaudeville, musical reviews, operettas, and burlesque. It is likely that the restrictive practices of the Hebrew Actors Union caused many Yiddish actors to go on the road to the "hinterlands." <sup>12</sup>

### The National Yiddish Theater Circuit

Our Omaha Yiddish theater story starts in 1919, the year of Omaha's earliest surviving Jewish newspaper. To be sure, Yiddish theater in Omaha predated 1919. For example, The Workmen's Circle presented a drama and concert at the Lyric Theater on April 26, 1908, to a "well filled" house. <sup>13</sup> The ledger of Yaffe Printing in September, 1913, indicates that the Jewish Dramatic Society ordered 600 tickets, 1000 circulars, and 500 programs for a total of \$7.25 and in December, 1913, another 300 tickets for \$1.75 and 150 membership cards for \$3.25. In February, 1914, Yaffe printed 2000 9 x 12 circulars for Madam Thomashevsky's appearance at the Krug Theatre. <sup>14</sup> But it is only from 1919 that a continuous historical record and play list can be reconstructed. <sup>15</sup>

Sol Dickstin ran a booking office for the "provinces," and he, like many in the Yiddish theater, had Rumanian roots. <sup>16</sup> He presented Fannie Thomashevsky in two four-act comedies, *Mazl tov yidelekh* (*Good Luck, Jews*) on Sunday, February 27, 1919, and *Ikh vil a weib* (*I Want a Wife*) on Monday, February 28, 1919, at the Brandeis Theater, located at 17th and Douglas, where most early Yiddish theater appeared. <sup>17</sup> Built in 1910, it seated 1,650. Brandeis built a second theater, the American Music Hall in 1910, at 18th and Douglas Streets, seating 1,600. It became the Strand Theater in 1915. <sup>18</sup> Tickets were 50 cents, 75 cents, one dollar, and \$1.50. Traveling companies included extras from the local Yiddish-speaking community. <sup>19</sup>

D. Rifkin and J. Himmelstein, owners of the Rialto Music Shop through Lemberg, manager of the Columbia Phonograph company, brought Jewish artists and singers of the legitimate stage to Omaha. The Rialto carried their Columbia recordings. On Monday night, December 1, 1919, at the Municipal Auditorium at 15th and Howard, Madame Esther Wallenstein and an all-star cast appeared for a return engagement of the "great comedy-drama," *Gekeyfte libe* (*Bought or Purchased Love*), with ten musical numbers. <sup>20</sup> The accompanying cast included Mrs. Tessie

Morgenbesser, Mrs. Mayerovitz, Mr. Louis Weiss, Louis Kuperschmidt, Mr. Rosen, Mr. J. Greenberg and the comedian Jacob Feinberg. Weiss, born in the Ukraine, toured the midwest extensively and for a while ran a theater in St. Louis.<sup>21</sup> The Rialto Music Shop and the Municipal Auditorium box office sold tickets.<sup>22</sup>

In February, 1920, the Brandeis announced that Sol Goodman, publisher of the *St. Louis Jewish Record*, would bring the "famous St. Louis company of Yiddish players" to perform on Thursday and Friday evenings.<sup>23</sup> They opened with the musical comedy *A True Woman*, and closed with *Bought Love*, which had been performed only two months earlier.<sup>24</sup>

Joseph Kessler appeared as Shylock in the *Merchant of Venice* at the Municipal Auditorium in October, 1921. Kessler planned to present a "repertoire of high grade dramas and musical comedies" twice a month in Omaha, Des Moines, Sioux City, and surrounding cities during the winter months. Kessler felt that Shakespeare "intended that the portrayal of the character be left entirely to the imagination of the actor" and that accounted for the wide diversity of Shylock interpretations. "Playing it in the Yiddish jargon, as I do, I believe I am enabled to invest more of the comic side into the role than is ordinarily given to it."<sup>25</sup>

The English-language *Jewish Press* provided front page coverage of Yiddish theater, including interviews with Maurice Schwartz that extolled the virtues of the Yiddish Art Theater's educating audiences to a higher art form through genuine literature such as *The Dybbuk* (the most widely produced of Yiddish plays), *Empty Inn*, *Green Fields*, and *The Blacksmith's Daughter*.<sup>26</sup> Edward Blumenthal presented Mr. and Mrs. Leon and Anna Gorlenko and Miss Rosetta Levenberg, recently arrived from Russia, in *Orphans of the World*, a four-act melodrama by M. Segalowitz at the Swedish Auditorium, at 1611 Chicago, on Sunday evening, March 5, 1922. It was part of a transcontinental tour from New York to San Francisco, then to the Orient.

The 1923 season at the Brandeis included the New York Yiddish Star Co. performing *The Modern Girl* in early April, followed by *The Seder Night*. The season closed in June with Sarah Adler's appearance at the Brandeis in *The Green Bride* and Jacob Gordin's *Mirele efros* (*The Jewish Queen Lear*).

The Brandeis presented "well-known Jewish Eastern Players" from the Liberty Theater in New York in March, 1924. Jacob Cone, Jeanette Paskowitch, Sadie Schoengold, and Rose Cone appeared in *The Disgraced Bride* on March 27, and on Friday evening, March 28, *The Wild Youth*.<sup>27</sup> Two weeks later Isa Kremer, "The Greatest Singer of Jewish Folk Songs," appeared at the Brandeis.<sup>28</sup> On April 25, the Liberty Theatre players



returned to Omaha to perform in *A World of Sin*. The United Vilna and Odessa Yiddish Players (one of as many as sixteen troupes using the Vilna name) brought *The Devil's Kiss* to the Brandeis on May 25, 1924.

During 1925 Mr. and Mrs. Hyman and Anna Jakubowitz (Yakubovich), accompanied by the New York Liberty Theatre cast, performed *A Night of Love* at the Brandeis on April 27, and, on May 8, *Watch Your Wife*, an operetta with fifteen song numbers. In September the Betty Kenig Co. and a cast of ten performed *Yankele mazik* at the Brandeis, and on Friday evening, October 2, *A Khosene in sibir (Wedding in Siberia)*, followed on Sunday by *Hatzkele kolbonig (Khatoskele, the Jack of All Trades)*. The Jakubowitz's returned in October with twelve assisting artists to present a Friday evening performance of *A Home for a Mother* and a three-act, twenty-two musical number comedy, *The Golden Bride*, which was promoted as a "musical comedy that played all last season in New York and Chicago."<sup>29</sup>

Mr. and Mrs. Elias Elizaroff, Russian artists who had appeared at Karsh's Theatre in Moscow for eight years, performed with their company *The Jewess*, a four-act play, on April 4 at the Swedish auditorium, followed by another four-act play, *The Stylish Woman*, on April 11, 1926.

The most durable performer, Al Harris, appeared in Omaha at least fifteen times between 1927 and 1965 during the January through March touring seasons.<sup>30</sup> Harris, and later Pola Kadison, Ben Bonus, and Mina Bern, regularly toured the Midwest. Harris, born Eliahu Harrash in White Russia in 1892, moved several times and at the age of nine went to his grandfather — a *shames* (beadle, caretaker of synagogue) in Lithuania — for his religious education. He became a shoemaker. A member of the children's bund, he later joined the Socialist Territorial Party. He played Yiddish and Russian roles in a professional touring troupe. When Sholem Aleichem visited Baranovitch, where he became sick, Harris served as one of his body guards. He became so enthused that he dedicated himself to public readings of Sholem Aleichem. Harris arrived in America in 1909, settled in Philadelphia, learned English, and worked as a satchel maker. At the Hebrew Literature Society he refined his theatrical skills under the stage direction of Moishe Katz. In 1913 he played Slavic, Mexican, and Indian types in silent films produced by the Lubin Film Co. He married in 1915, settled in New York, and worked in a women's hat shop.

Harris joined the Shnorrer Association, a literary club. In 1918 he participated with Bertha Kalish, Samuel Goldernburg, and Eliahu Tenenholtz in a Sholem Aleichem *Yahrzeit* (annual memorial for the dead), his readings of Sholem Aleichem's works drawing the attention of Yiddish critics. In 1918 he performed in *Success* at Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre, and he became assistant stage director in Schnitzers New

Yiddish Theater in 1919. He participated in presentations of the *Silent Messiah* and *Samson and Delilah*.

After 1921 Harris organized and performed in tours throughout the United States for the Yiddish National Labor Alliance and other Jewish fraternal organizations, the Workmen's Circle, the Jewish National Welfare Board, and the Farband. The road season lasted from fifteen to twenty weeks and sometimes included Canada. He played the character Zazula in Maurice Schwartz's 1939 production, *Tevya the Milkman*. He performed with Jacob Ben Ami in Leivick's *The Poet is Blind* in 1945. He visited Israel in 1955 acting in thirty-two word concerts (recitations) personifying the heroes of Sholem Aleichem. He performed in 1960 with Maurice Schwartz in Leivick's *Shmates (Rags)*.

The Jewish Community Center (JCC), completed in 1926 at 101 N. 20th Street, had an auditorium that held 586. Harris first appeared in Omaha in January, 1927, at the new Jewish Community Center with Chaim Katilansky, a folk singer. In January, 1929, he performed at a concert with Madame Stramberg, an interpreter of Jewish folk songs, sponsored by Workmen's Circle Branch 173 and 258, at the Labor Lyceum. The building, located at 22nd and Clark, opened in 1922 and seated 250. In February, 1932, Harris performed with Eugenia Erganow (Organoff) in two one-act plays at the Knights of Columbus at 2027 Dodge Street. Following their Omaha appearance, they performed in Sioux City for Workmen's Circle Branch 664.<sup>31</sup>

The New York Yiddish Traveling Co., starring Isadore Hyman, performed *Evil Men* and *Shattered Home* at the JCC in February, 1927. They were followed on March 6 by the Vilna Troupe, performing S. Ansky's *The Dybbuk* as a benefit for the local Hadassah chapter, and on April 7, Gordin's *Mirele efros* at the JCC. The Troupe closed its series with Sholem Aleichem's *Hard to be a Jew* on April 18 at Technical High Auditorium. In November, Sarah Adler performed *Her Great Secret* and *Resurrection* by Leo Tolstoy at the Strand Theatre, followed by *Chaim in America*, a musical comedy with ten numbers.

Jewish religious and secular fund raising is legendary, creative, and continuous. Harry Golden observed that the East Side contributed the "theater party" to American culture, invented by immigrant Jews around the turn of the century. One rarely heard the statement, "I'm going to the theater." Instead one heard, "I'm going to a benefit."<sup>32</sup> Members would solicit advertising for the program. Theater parties continued to be popular fundraisers well into the 1960s.

New Year's day, 1928, saw Leo Makower presenting the Samuel Bendel Yiddish Stock Company performing *From Cradle to Grave* at the JCC. A week later Betty and Samuel Bendel presented *Tserisene neshomes*

(*Torn Souls*). The management urged "parents to bring their children and gives assurance that the performance will be clean and instructive to the children."<sup>33</sup> On January 27 they presented *Divorce* at the Strand Theatre, a benefit performance for Madam Bettie Bendel. As Herman Yablokoff recalled, "a benefit performance always brought with it an air of holiday excitement, not only backstage but in the audience as well."<sup>34</sup>

The Poale Zion Club sponsored a four-act play, *Der vilder mentsh* (*The Wild Man*), at the JCC in October. Founded in 1905 as a labor Zionist political party, it published *Yidisher Kemfer*. The club thought that "Yiddish theater ought to be a name calling forth joy, spiritual gratification, and even national pride," it should provide "education of the masses."<sup>35</sup>

The 1928 season highlight came when H. Zarewsky presented Boris Thomashefsky, Regina Zukerberg, and Harry Thomashefsky in *Back to His People* by Leon Kobrin on Thanksgiving, and on Friday night, *Der Khozn mit der khaznte* (*The Cantor and His Wife*) at the Strand Theatre. The play required a ten-year-old girl who could speak Yiddish, a role filled by Frances Blumkin Batt, local talent.<sup>36</sup> Also performing were Bernice, Al, and Elizabeth Silbert, and Harry Zarewsky. Their Omaha stay closed with *The Lost Paradise*.

Icor (American Association for Jewish Colonization in the Soviet Union) sponsored Mr. A. Pecke, also known as Avigdor Pecker and ultimately as Victor Packer, from Ben Ami's Theatre and W. Barzell, from Schildkraut's Broadway Theatre, doing sketches of Russian Jewish life in February, 1929. Packer had played with the Vilna Art Troupe, appeared periodically in Omaha for several years, and "danced at all weddings." He performed for the Arbeiter Ring, Jewish National Workers Alliance-Farband, and International Workers Organization. The New York Stock Co. put on two performances of *Di Galitsyaner rebetzsin* starring Anna Fishsah and Isadore Hyman, in May, 1929, at the Brandeis. Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre, with a cast of fourteen including Celia Adler, arrived in July on a coast-to-coast tour to perform *The Bloody Laughter* by Ernst Toller at the Brandeis.<sup>37</sup> Tickets were 75 cents, \$1.00, \$1.50, and \$2.00. In November the Brandeis ran the film *Izkor* (*Thou Shalt Remember*) by Harry Sackler, starring Maurice Schwartz, four times in a one-day stay. Adult tickets were 50 cents and children 25 cents.<sup>38</sup> The United Yiddish Players presented A.R. Mason & Co. performing the four-act play, *Heart of a Child* by Jacob Zilbert at the Alhambra Theatre, 1814 N. 24th Street. The season closed on Christmas Eve when Fannie Reinhart performed *Where are my Children?* at the JCC.

The Yiddish Art Theater Players performed at the Knights of Columbus Auditorium on June 18. Among the cast of fourteen were Jacob

Ben Ami, Judith Abarbanel, and Anna Appel. They performed Lion Feuchtwanger's *Jud süß (Power)*.<sup>39</sup>

Nathan Weinstein presented three Yiddish productions to packed audiences at the Omaha JCC in 1930. One of his new stars, Lew N. Richter, had played in *Abie's Irish Rose* in New York and appeared in *Stepmothers* at the Brandeis in November. The cast included Baby Diana Weinstein, promoted as a "twelve-year-old wonder act," as well as Elsie Hurwitz Fogel, whom Nathan Weinstein had seen in a Center Players production when he had been in Omaha earlier. On November 30 they presented *Yente on Broadway* at the JCC.<sup>40</sup>

The 1930 season exhibited unusual instability. "The restriction of immigration and the lure of the movies" took a toll on Yiddish theater.<sup>41</sup> Directors questioned the capacity and sophistication of their audiences. Joseph Buloff, a former Vilna Troupe member who performed with the Maurice Schwartz Company in New York, went to direct the Chicago Yiddish Dramatishe Gesellschaft in 1928. Although Chicago had a substantial Jewish population, Buloff felt they were nonetheless incapable of doing justice to *The Dybbuk*. Instead he put on a revue of Jewish folk songs translated into English. Upon careful consideration Buloff decided to "concentrate more on English."<sup>42</sup>

During 1930, stock company visits declined and none appeared in 1931. The Hebrew Actors Union recommended the creation of an eight-city circuit including Boston, Newark, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Detroit, St. Louis, Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg. Judea Films proposed to establish a national chain of Yiddish talkie movie houses. Yiddish movie houses had been particularly successful with "older Jews who have failed to acquire an extensive knowledge of English."<sup>43</sup>

Schwartz threatened to move the Yiddish Art Theater from New York to Philadelphia's Gibson Theater, and then to the Argentine, and he would not return to the United States "unless he was assured of support for his company." The Adler family in *Millions*, a play by Carl Hoessler based on the Rothschilds, closed after three days. The following year Boris Thomashefsky threatened to leave the Yiddish stage because it "has found itself without a sufficient audience to support its drama." He performed in *The Singing Rabbi* which he wrote, along with Regina Zuckerberg, at New York's Selwyn Theatre. Maurice Schwartz crossed over to Broadway's English language stage where he performed a translation of Sholem Aleichem's *If I Were You* at the Ambassador Theatre.<sup>44</sup>

The Depression and the talkies exacerbated Yiddish theater's problems. By the mid-thirties the golden mauve and purple decades were replaced by the breadline era.<sup>45</sup> Joseph Buloff looked "through the

peephole in the curtain at the dear grandpas and grandmas seated in upholstered comfort at Second Avenue theatres" remembering a time when he "used to run around looking for a chair to accommodate a cabinet minister." The "joyful clamor of student fans" had vanished. The Yiddish theater remained "pale and sickly." <sup>46</sup> The professional Detroit company only managed to struggle on until 1937. Between 1932 and 1936 only touring companies played in Chicago.

Nathan Weinstein brought his company of Yiddish Players to Omaha in January, 1932. On New Year's night they performed *The Golden Bride*, a four-act play by William Siegel, at the Brandeis, featuring Weinstein's thirteen-year-old daughter, Diana Weinstein, the "wonder little girl of the Yiddish stage." Weinstein expected to give weekly performances through June that were "pleasing and entertaining."<sup>47</sup> They played *Cain and Abel* at the Knights of Columbus on Sunday, January 17. Prices were scaled from 50 cents to a dollar. Musical numbers and dances accompanied all performances. The Yiddish Players performed *Forgotten Mothers* in February, 1932, at "Depression prices." All seats were reduced in price to 50 and 75 cents, perhaps an indication of flagging audiences and interest. *A Servant by Her Own Child* played at the Knights of Columbus in February, 1932. They went on to Des Moines, playing Abraham Goldfadden's *The Two Kuni Lemmels* (*The Fanatic* or *Two Clowns*) at the JCC in April.

Max Gabel and a cast of fourteen appeared at the Brandeis on March 6, 1932, in *The Great Love*, which he had written. They then went to the Sioux City Auditorium. *Green Pastures*, Omaha's longest running Jewish thematic production, had a four-day engagement at the Brandeis in March, 1932. It had played 160 consecutive performances in Chicago and 640 performances in New York. The Nathan Weinstein players performed at the German Home at 4206 South 13th Street for Workmen's Circle Branch 173 in June. Mollie Cohn and the Jack Berlin Yiddish Company put on *The Child of Sin* and a musical comedy, *Lyovka* [*Lovka*] *molodyets* (*Go Getter*) at the Brandeis in late July. The Omaha Hebrew Club booked Weinstein to perform *Moishele's Bar Mitzvah* on October 16 at the Brandeis after they toured St. Louis, Kansas City, and Los Angeles.

Benefits played an increasingly important role in bringing Yiddish entertainment to Omaha. These programs were a mix of humor, song, dance, readings, and small plays. The centrality of the play slipped when the program expanded into variety shows whose repertoire included Yiddish songs, dramatic sketches, comedy, and recitations. The Jesters, a group of New York Jewish artists, entertained the Jewish National Workers Alliance, Local Branch 54, on the occasion of their twentieth anniversary on March 1, 1933, at the JCC.<sup>48</sup> The program consisted of

humor, folk songs, and one-act plays. Tickets were 50 cents. Anna and Hyman Jackubowitz returned in October after an eight-year absence and travels to Warsaw, Berlin, and Vienna, to perform *Storm of Life* at the JCC. The year closed with the Jewish Operetta Company performing *Mazl tov Yidelekh* at the JCC on November 19. They were also heard on radio station KICK.

The year 1934 opened with Celia Adler, Jacob Cone, Abe and Dorothy Zwaig, Louis Josephson, Rose Faben, Sarah Pott, and Barney Guss presenting *The Forgotten* at the Knights of Columbus on February, 20. The Workmen's Circle Branch 173, through the National Educational Department of the Workmen's Circle, brought The New York Trio Artists, Victor Packer, tenor Maxim Brodyn, and pianist Zelda Zlatin (who although not advertised, were husband and wife), to the JCC.<sup>49</sup> The tour started in Norfolk, Virginia, on December 31, 1933, and visited Workmen's Circle branches in Richmond, Washington, D.C., Reading, Atlantic City, Philadelphia, Wilkes-Barre, Syracuse, and Gloversville on January 13. The tour resumed on February 23 in Minneapolis, going to St. Paul, Duluth, and Des Moines, and performing in Omaha on March 2. It went on to Sioux City, Lincoln, Kansas City, St. Louis, and arrived in Memphis on March 11.<sup>50</sup>

The Trio's repertoire adapted to changing economic circumstances. The Depression prompted presentations like a one-act comedy, *They Look for a Job*, performed by Packer and Brodyn during their Sioux City-Omaha-Des Moines run between March 1-4, 1934, and a one-act comedy, *Jobless Jews Singing*, by Tunkelen when the Trio returned to Omaha on April 18, 1934. The sixteen-page program contained fifty-four advertisements. There were other workers' songs, an internationalist flavor of Russian, Negro, and Italian songs, and Rudyard Kipling's "Boots" rendered by Aron Kurtz in Yiddish.<sup>51</sup>

Barney Guss returned on Sunday, January 6, 1935, with the Louis Josephson players, comprising Louis, Rose and Jerry Josephson, Abe Burt, and Sam Aronovitz. They performed the three-act comedy, *Greene melamud (The Greenhorn Schoolteacher)*, at the Knights of Columbus.

On February 9, 1936, the New York Trio Art Players performed for the Jewish National Workers Alliance at the Knights of Columbus. The company included Al Harris, Bella Ballerina (who had appeared in Omaha earlier as the lead performer of the Vilna Troupe), and Ben Basenko, a singer of Palestine folk songs. The Trio had a half-hour radio program on KOIL. Ticket sales for the Sioux City performance on February, 10, were marred by weather: "Because of the extremely cold weather, we have been unable to make personal visits to the Jewish homes to sell tickets for this program."<sup>52</sup>

Theater audiences were changing. A Beth El Synagogue building fund benefit at the Muse Theater presented *Green Fields*, with the announcement: "The picture has complete English dialogue titles for the benefit of those who do not understand Yiddish."<sup>53</sup> The New Theatre League, a national organization of social theaters, offered a \$100 prize to uncover talented new playwrights. The judges included Rabbi Jonah B. Wise of New York and Mordecai Soltes, National Director of Education of the Jewish Welfare Board. The script had to deal specifically with Jewish life.<sup>54</sup> The Women's League of the United Synagogue offered \$25 for a new one-act play with Jewish content, not more than one hour's duration, and capable of being performed by their more than 300 Sisterhoods. In 1937 the Alden Alumnae (a twenty-five-year-old Chicago production organization of the Jewish People's Institute Players) reorganized as AJAT, Inc., an Anglo-Jewish Theater. With synagogue and temple cooperation, it planned to produce six productions a season. "The new organization will not produce anything in Yiddish."<sup>55</sup>

The "younger generation [that] remained aloof, due largely to a lack of understanding of the idiom spoken in the Yiddish theater" were almost fatal challenges to the vitality of Yiddish theater.<sup>56</sup> From where would the next generation of Yiddish writers and performers come?<sup>57</sup> Two Omaha writers, raised in deeply Yiddishist homes, Tillie Olsen and her brother Eugene Lerner, achieved acclaim for their writing, but never learned Yiddish. Tillie Olsen, drawing deeply from her Yiddishist background, expressed her art in English.<sup>58</sup>

The University of Nebraska at Lincoln and Omaha University produced evocative scripts. *Passport and Love Cannot Make the Dead Dance* by Mrs. Philip Romonek were premiered in Lincoln in April, 1931. An audience of 400 watched the University of Nebraska Players, directed by W. Zolley Lerner, perform at the JCC in May, 1931. Bernard Szold and Mrs. Herman Jahr commended the new play to the Jewish repertoire. Henry Monsky described the drama as "masterful delineations, colorful presentations of Russian Jewish life of the era of 1890."<sup>59</sup> Ruth Diamond directed *Dictatorship* at Omaha University in 1941. Starring Ahuvah Gershater, it satirized Hitler.<sup>60</sup>

Young talent sought greener pastures. When a bright promising star appeared on the Yiddish stage "Second Avenue — the Yiddish Broadway of New York — soon snatches them off,"<sup>61</sup> or Broadway would "kidnap her, or the film people abduct her to Hollywood."<sup>62</sup>

The Jewish Folk Theater troupe of New York performed at the JCC under the auspices of the International Workers Order (IWO), Branch 126, in March, 1939. The IWO, founded by the American Communist Party in 1930, received about 5000 communist Workmen's Circle

members who broke away from the larger Circle membership of 80,000 in 1929. The 40 cents admission included a one-act play, songs, dances, and recitations. The Jewish Operetta Company visited Omaha in 1934 and again in October, 1939, presenting *Itzig Seeks a Bride* at the JCC with Abe and Dorothy Zwaig, Nellie and Louis Green, and Hymie Birnbaum.<sup>63</sup> The company returned to the JCC in March, 1940, performed the three-act play, *Far der khupe (Before the Marriage Canopy)*, and appeared on KOIL. In May, 1940, the Jewish Operetta Company, sponsored by the Bikur Cholim Society, which was founded by Mrs. Sophie Neveleff in the mid 1920s to bring aid, cheer, and service to the sick and needy, performed *A Home for a Mother*, a three-act melodrama, and *Love and Revenge*, a two-act melodrama with a prologue and epilogue.

The Anglo-Jewish press continued to express interest in Yiddish theater by giving prominent positions to articles. Harry Mendelson, an editor of the *Omaha Jewish Press*, wrote "Peretz — Father of Yiddish Literature" on the twenty-fifth *Yahrzeit* of Isaac Leib Peretz, and the "Sixtieth Birthday of Shalom Asch." Abraham Goldberg wrote "The Father of the Yiddish Theater" on the one-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Abraham Goldfaden.<sup>64</sup>

The Jewish National Workers Alliance, Poale Zion Branch 54, presented the Yiddish motion picture *Fishke der krumer (Fishke the Lame)* by Mendeley Moykher Seferim at the JCC in February, 1941. Al Harris, the "One-Man Theater," was on the same program. Ben Jacob and Miriam Ger, former Maurice Schwartz Art Theater performers, appeared at the Labor Lyceum in July, presenting readings from Sholem Aleichem, Abraham Raisin, Peretz, and others. In October Jacob and Gehr accompanied the Omaha Choir and Dramatic Club production of *White Slaves*, which was also directed by Jacob. Tickets were 55 cents and 83 cents. The Yiddish Variety Players of New York presented *The Golden Heart* in September at the JCC. Performers were Abe Yudhoff, Lillian Schechter, Morris Conrad, and company.

Benjamin Zemach, Michael Price, Sholem Tanin, Sophie Calt, Shifre Lehrer, and Anna Sokolow presented a program of Jewish drama, music, dance, and songs at the JCC in March, 1945. Al Harris, now described as an actor, impersonator, and member of the Jewish Art Theater of New York City, came in June for the Jewish National Workers Alliance-Poale Zion with a special program commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the death of I.L. Peretz. At the end of the war Reuben Guskin, leader of the Hebrew Actors Union for twenty-six years, bemoaned, "Why does Yiddish youth flock to Broadway when we have six wonderful productions in Great New York, to say nothing of three fine vaudeville shows?"<sup>65</sup>

While the year 1919 constitutes the start of Jewish press coverage of



Yiddish theater in Omaha, that date is also proximate to 1918, a year, according to Irving Howe, that "marks a turning point, the beginning of the second and last major upsurge of Yiddish theatre in America," as Maurice Schwartz started serious "art" theater productions at the Irving Place Theatre. Between 1918 and 1941 the Irving Theatre performed 140 different pieces. During the same period touring companies brought about sixty-seven plays to Omaha. *Shund* (low brow) predominated. The touring company performed only four plays which had appeared earlier as part of the Schwartz-Irving Theatre repertoire. <sup>66</sup>

Play/Author	Appeared at Appeared in Troupe		
	Irving Theatre	Omaha	
<i>Mirele efros</i> /J. Gordin	2/21/19	1923	Sarah Adler
<i>The Dybbuk</i> /S. Ansky	9/1/21	1927	Vilna Troupe
<i>Hard To Be a Jew</i> / S. Aleichem	10/1/20	1927	Vilna Troupe
<i>Jud süss</i> /L. feuchtwanger	10/24/29	1930	Yiddish Art Theatre Players, Jacob Ben Ami

From 1919 to 1932 touring companies presented fifty-two performances and local amateur clubs presented twelve. Thereafter a dramatic reversal occurred as the touring companies gave fifteen performances and the local amateurs gave twenty-five. Stated otherwise, the professionals gave 78% percent of the performances between 1919 and 1932, and 22% between 1933 and 1945, while the amateurs gave 32% and 68% percent of their performances in the same time periods. <sup>67</sup>

### The Amateurs

Amateur theatrical clubs date back to at least the 1890s in Lodz. "In towns that went months and months between visits by a professional company, amateur theatricals were a happy source of entertainment." <sup>68</sup> By 1910 the Polish provinces had 360 amateur groups, as well as a number in Warsaw. <sup>69</sup> In America, social clubs produced plays as part of a diversified program for young adults which included sports, dancing, picnics, parties, literary readings, vocal and instrumental musical performances, and skits, all fostering socialization. For theater clubs the stage was their *raison d'être*. In New York after 1926, according to Lifson, "the drama clubs were on the decline." The Workmen's Circle, as early as 1915, had sponsored the Folksbiene, a folk theater after the pattern of the Neighborhood Playhouse. <sup>70</sup>

In Omaha the early amateur theatricals performed by Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association and Thorpeians, a local social and athletic club named after Jim Thorpe, were predominantly in English.<sup>71</sup> The first drama clubs were not formed until the mid 1920s.<sup>72</sup> During the mid 1920s the stages of the Jewish Community Center, Swedish Auditorium, and Labor Lyceum, resonated to the English performances as well as the Yiddish plays of the Auflebung Club and the Jewish Culture League.<sup>73</sup> As touring company appearances declined, the local clubs became the life-blood of Yiddish entertainment.

### Social Clubs and Theater

From 1922 to 1926 the Auflebung Club, "one of the most popular places for immigrants," and the Jewish Culture League flourished as greenhorn or newcomer clubs with Yiddish theater a major part of their programs.<sup>74</sup> Hardly a meeting went by without a one-act play to entertain the members. The combination of club activities and public performances accompanied the rise of little theater in Omaha. On April 13, 1925, the Community Playhouse performed its first production, *The Enchanted Cottage*, and that playhouse continues as Omaha's premiere resident stage organization.<sup>75</sup> Almost contemporaneously, the JCC founded the Little Theater Club in late 1927. The Center Players Guild formed in 1928. Its thirty-five members, aged seventeen to twenty-five, met every two weeks on Tuesday evenings for two-hour sessions. Their first production, Ibsen's *The Doll's House*, appeared in March, 1928. In December, 1928, they performed Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*, directed by Mrs. Herman Jahr.<sup>76</sup>

The Auflebung had three committees: literature, music, and the most popular, drama. When Ben Martin, a South Omaha butcher, took over drama in June, 1924, he promised to knock them dead. His younger brother, Nathan Martin, a South Omaha beautician, served as Auflebung President in 1923. Ben Martin had theatrical experience on the Yiddish and Russian stage in Europe and Harbin, Manchuria, where he resided for eighteen years. Harbin's 13,000 Jews, at the junction of the Siberian and Chinese Eastern Railways, comprised the largest Jewish community in the Far East during the 1920s.<sup>77</sup> Martin directed many plays for the Auflebung, the Jewish Culture League, the Omaha Choir, and Dramatic Club. Literary readings, initially in Yiddish were in Yiddish and English by 1925. Abe Gendler, who arrived in Omaha in the early 1920s, had acted in *The Dybbuk* in Poland in 1920.<sup>78</sup>

A Sunday program would include a reading from a Yiddish author, a violin or piano solo, saxophone, a vocal arrangement, a one-act play, the

appearance of guest artists, musicians, and dancers, with the evening ending with dancing and enjoyment. An amateur variety show would consist of readings, a duet, comedy, and skits or playlets.

The Jewish Culture League, politically somewhat to the left of the Auflebung, also met on Sunday afternoons, which created some problems of dual loyalties. The Culture League criticized Auflebung for not acting like a club. It responded that it gave its membership enjoyment. Some indefatigable thespians, like Morris F. Goodman and Ben Martin, belonged to more than one club and were still actively involved in theater in the 1960s. Goodman, a president and phenomenal ticket seller, later served the Poale Zion Dramatic Section, the Workmen's Circle, Workmen's Circle Dramatic Club, and the Midwest District Committee as late as 1963.<sup>79</sup>

The amateur groups needed scripts, stages, directors, performers, set designers, stage hands, music, funding, publicity, ticket sales, and audiences.<sup>80</sup> The favorite Yiddish authors at Auflebung and the Jewish Culture League were Sholem Aleichem, Sholom Asch, and Avrum Reisen. Two Jewish bookstores, Meyer Cohen and Somits, and the fledgling library provided play scripts.

The Auflebung performed many plays and short pieces called "playlets." Titles such as *Rabbi Chasidim*, *The Chosid*, *The Eternal Law*, *Mazeltov*, and *Yude* resonate with religio-cultural tension and Americanization. Some plays, such as *She Must Marry A Doctor* by Sholem Aleichem, *How the Girl and Boy Get Together* by Sholom Asch, and *Some Groom* by Abraham Raisen, focussed directly on romantic situations within a Jewish setting.

The 1924 fall season moved from the Lyric to the Arthur Building, and once used the Eagles Home. More significantly they used the Labor Lyceum for drama performances because the Arthur Building did not have a good stage. But even the Labor Lyceum stage could not accommodate large performances.

Common venue, the Labor Lyceum, joint memberships, and friendships led to two joint ventures for major productions. The two drama directors, Ben Martin and Joe Morgenstern, and a joint committee of six coordinated the project. Auflebung and the Culture League presented *Broken Hearts (Love and Duty)* by Zalmen Libin at the Swedish Auditorium on March 1, 1925. The play about Jewish life in America dates from 1903 and its stage popularity led to its transformation into film in 1926. Auflebung and Poale Zion jointly performed *Yankele der shmide (Yankel the Smith)*, a four-act play by David Pinski, at the Swedish Auditorium, on April 25, 1926. Proceeds went to the *chalutzim* (Pioneers) in Palestine.

The ideological gap between the leftist Culture League and Poale Zion and the pleasure-seeking Auflebung troubled some Auflebung members who worried that joint productions would lead to merger and loss of identity. The Auflebung guarded its non-ideological independence. The Culture League met at the Labor Lyceum, home of the Workmen's Circle, on principle. The Auflebung met at the most convenient location. Culture League members were *khaverim* ("brothers" or "comrades") and Auflebung members were *fraint* ("friends"). On January 31, 1926, a resolution to put on a four-act play with Poale Zion failed on a vote of 14 to 9. The motion, reconsidered in February, 1926, passed.

Over 500 people attended the performance of *Yankele der shmid*, which got mixed reviews. They raised \$178.20 which, after expenses of \$97.20 left a profit of \$81.00. The actors and committee received \$10 for expenses. The Auflebung debated donating the proceeds to ICOR, Yiddish schools, and the Labor Lyceum, testing their political consciousness and Yiddishkeit as their constitution prohibited giving money to political institutions. They set aside \$30 for a future Yiddish School, and \$16 to buy Jewish books either for the Labor Lyceum Library or for the new Yiddish School.<sup>81</sup>

The Jewish Culture League made its appearance on October 22, 1922, with its first Sunday evening program at the Labor Lyceum at 22nd and Clark. Readings from Yiddish authors (Sholem Aleichem, Shalom Asch, and Avrum Reisen), playlets, performances by local violinists, pianists, and singers were standard fare. Intellectually ambitious, the Culture League discussed literary, religious, and political subjects, and published a monthly, *Baim fayer* (*By the Fire*), of which no known copies survive. Talks on "The Theatre and Drama" and Joe Radinowski's presentation, "Hamlet and Shylock," stirred a "long discussion on the subject." Special programs included a Peretz Memorial Meeting at the Labor Lyceum and a Sholem Aleichem Memorial at the Swedish Auditorium. As many as 150 people attended regular meetings. The Auflebung and Jewish Culture League, newcomer transition clubs, ceased to exist by the late 20s.<sup>82</sup>

### Theater Clubs

Amateur clubs, though shortlived, proliferated from 1927 through the latter 1930s. There is confusion and inconsistency of names. Political and ideological distinctions can only be speculated upon. The Workmen's Circle Dramatic Club and the Omaha Choir and Dramatic Club endured the longest.

In 1927 Elijah Kipnis directed the Yiddish Players of the Center in Abraham Raisin's *Der shpanier*, the first Yiddish play produced in Omaha in which many of the young men and women participating (Gertrude White, Faye Klein, Hymen Shrier, and Joe Levy) did not speak Yiddish.<sup>83</sup> Inability to read Yiddish did not bar performance; Miriam Riselle, niece of Maurice Schwartz, "had to have the script" for *Yankele der shmide* "transliterated and spelled phonetically."<sup>84</sup>

The JCC and the Jewish Federation were committed to assimilation and Americanization without denigrating Yiddish and its instruction.<sup>85</sup> The JCC employed a professional drama director. Eleven dramatic performances were held at the JCC in the 1928-29 season, December, 1928 through October, 1929, an accomplishment that a national survey regarded as "particularly impressive." A typical season had three or four plays in English, often having Jewish authors or themes. Attendance averaged 362. *Lady Windermere's Fan* by Oscar Wilde, *The Romances* by E. Rostand, and the classic Yiddish play, *The Dybbuk* by Ansky, appeared in English translation, performed by the Center Players Guild and featured in a *Jewish Press* editorial, reflecting the authority of the English-speaking power structure.<sup>86</sup> The Council of Jewish Women presented *Peace Payment* by Mrs. Ziegler and Junior Hadassah presented *Overtones* by Gerstenberg.<sup>87</sup>

Six of the eleven plays performed at the JCC were in Yiddish. The Pioneer Women, formed in 1924, which supported the Jewish-Palestinian labor movement, presented the four-act melodrama, *The Jewish Heart* by Moishe Richter on December 30, 1928. The Omaha cast "was acclaimed by many to have surpassed many of the high grade professional performances witnessed in Omaha in recent years."<sup>88</sup> They presented *Herzele meyuchis* (*Hertsele of Good Lineage*) on April 21, 1929. Young Poale Zion did *Di Shkhite* (*Slaughter*) by Jacob Gordin and *Where Are My Children?* by Mandelbaum in February and May, 1929. As a benefit for sufferers in Palestine, *Der dorfs ying*, by Leon Kobrin, was presented by the Jewish Dramatic Organization (also referred to as the Omaha Jewish Dramatic Club) on October 27, 1929. The Omaha Yiddish Dramatic Club, headed by Louis Wolk, performed Gordin's *Der fremder* (*The Stranger*) on March 3, 1929, at the JCC, with proceeds going to Cholutzim Pioneers in Palestine. They performed *His Wife's Husband*, a four-act play, at the Brandeis, in behalf of the City Talmud Torah and the Bikur Cholim Society on June 16, 1929.

The Omaha Jewish Dramatic Club presented the four-act melodrama, *A man zol a mentsh zain* (*One Should Be a Man [Human]*), at the JCC on March 2, 1930. Sioux City experienced a similar rise in local Yiddish productions. In Omaha on June 8, 1930, the Sioux City Dramatic Club

performed the four-act *The Only Way*, written by Sioux City playwright and painter Ary Stillman. Proceeds went to Chaluztim. Sioux City had an active Jewish National Workers Alliance and Poale Zion which sponsored most of the Yiddish programs. In March, 1934, some of these performers appeared at the JCC and on KOIL radio.

The Yiddish Dramatic Circle, formed in December, 1932, presented as its first offering the one-act *The Divorce*, featuring Sarah Taub, Joe Sacs, E. Sellz, George Dolgoff, Irving Soiref, and Gloria Polikov in 1933. The Progressive Hebrew Club presented *Yankl der balagole* (*Yank the Cart Driver*), by Morris (Moishe) Richter, at the JCC in December, 1934, in a benefit for Jewish school children in Poland. Louis Wolk and Mr. and Mrs. J. Raznick had the leading roles.

Mr. Kenyon founded the Progressive Club — not to be confused with the Progressive Hebrew Club — as a choral group with a membership of twelve couples. It became the Omaha Choir and Dramatic Club in the mid 30s. In mid-1935 it presented Sholem Aleichem's one-act play, *Menschen*. In November, 1935, it announced that it would produce Gordin's tragedy, *Chasye the Orphan*, to be directed by Ben Martin, Sam Yaffe, and assisted by Paul Nerenberg. It performed in May, 1936, at the Congregation of Israel at 25th and J Streets in South Omaha. They had a full house and the proceeds went to HIAS, The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.

The Omaha Choir and Dramatic Club performed Zalmen Libin's four-act play, *Broken Hearts*, at the JCC on March 28, 1937. Ben Martin directed and Sam Yaffe coordinated the music. The club met at members' homes. It presented a play for the Chesed Shel Eme benefit, titled *Khasye di yesoime*, a four-act play by Gordin, which was directed by Ben Martin. In September, 1937, Martin directed Gordin's *Chasye the Orphan* at the JCC as a benefit for the Jewish Funeral Home which was located at 19th and Cuming Streets. Martin led rehearsals of Gordin's *The True Power* in February, 1938. It was performed on May 1, 1937, at the JCC; tickets were 45 cents and proceeds went to needy Polish Jews. Prior recipients of productions' proceeds were: the auditorium fund of Congregation of Israel, South Omaha, the Omaha Jewish Philanthropies, the Relief of Polish Jews, Icor, American Federation of Ort, HIAS, Pioneers Club, Goldie Myerson Club, the Jewish Funeral Home, and the Labor Lyceum. The club "expressed its appreciation to those who attended and those who advertised in the program." <sup>89</sup> Membership in 1938 consisted of ten couples with N. Martin as President and B. Martin as dramatic director. During 1939, Sam Lerner, Tillie Olsen's father, served as vice president. HIAS received \$10.50. They rehearsed Richter's four-act melodrama in February, 1939. The play was directed by Martin.

They presented *White Slaves* in October, 1941. Proceeds went to HIAS, Community Chest, Philanthropies, Talmud Torah, Labor Lyceum, and Zionist Organization. In March, 1942, they presented *Main vaibs meshugos (My Wife's Craziiness)*, directed by Paul Nerenberg and Ben Martin, for B'nai Abraham Lodge. Performers included Cantor Sellz and his daughter Shirley. An audience of over two-hundred people were urged to buy defense bonds. The evening closed with Cantor Sellz leading the audience in the singing of "God Bless America" and "Hatikvah." In October they presented *Gelt, libe un shande (Money, Love, and Shame)*. All proceeds went to the American Russian Aid and the W.C. Service Club, an organization that sent gift packages to Jewish men in the armed forces.

In 1944 the Omaha Choir and Dramatic Club created a parallel nontheatrical group, The Friendly Circle, "to cultivate true friendship among the members and to help the members assist each other in every possible way."<sup>90</sup> In May, 1945, Ben Martin directed *Riverside Drive* by Leon Kobrin, which had played for three years in New York. Kobrin, in his 1928 play, incorporated family alienation "by having old characters speak and understand only Yiddish while their grandchildren speak and understand only English."<sup>91</sup> As a "moral as well as financial success," it raised \$700.<sup>92</sup>

In 1945 the club's twenty-four members contributed to the Jewish Institute of New York, Old Peoples Home of Omaha, Father Flanagan's Boys Town, Child Rescue Fund, Jewish War Orphans of Biro-Bidjan, Labor Lyceum, W.C. Service Club, Youth Aliyah, South Omaha Synagogue, American Federation of Polish Jews, and the Children's Memorial Hospital.<sup>93</sup>

The Omaha Hebrew Club formed the Social and Cultural Club on July 1, 1936, soon called the Jewish Drama Unit. It performed Gordin's four-act drama, *Der Fremder*, on January 31, 1937, before an audience of over 250 people at the JCC. Sam Kenyon was chairman and Paul Nerenberg dramatic director. The club held a drawing in November 1938 for sterling candlesticks. The proceeds went to the Jewish National Fund. The club presented Gordin's four-act *Der vilder mentsh* as a benefit for the Bikur Cholim in March, 1939, at the JCC. Paul Nerenberg directed, assisted by Morris Cohen of New York, and the Jewish Community Center's Little Symphony Orchestra provided the music. In November, 1939, the Jewish Drama Unit affiliated with the JCC dramatics program. They performed Boris Thomashefsky's four-act melodrama, *Shlomke and Rickel*, on January 7, 1940, with proceeds going to the Jewish Welfare Federation, and performed again under the auspices of the Omaha Hebrew Club in November, 1940.

The Workmen's Circle Dramatic Club, when organized on April 17, 1937, had thirty-eight members, increasing to forty-two in 1938.<sup>94</sup> It met at the Labor Lyceum every Saturday evening. It proposed "not only to enlighten and entertain its members and the audience . . . but also to contribute financial assistance to those organizations which the Workmen's Circle endorses and supports."<sup>95</sup> Louis Witkin, a mainstay of the Circle theater, had been a rabbinic student in Russia. He became a socialist soon after arriving in New York. He and his wife, Bessie, were constant features in the Circle and Labor Lyceum from the 1920s to the 1960s.<sup>96</sup>

In August, 1937, the Workmen's Circle rehearsed *Koldunye (The Witch)*, a five-act operetta by Goldfaden at the Central Club, formerly Knights of Columbus.<sup>97</sup> Louis Witkin and Hymie Ruderman were in charge of dramatic direction, E. Sellz the musical director, J. Savich the prompter, and Paul Nerenberg the makeup man. Proceeds went to the upkeep of the Labor Lyceum building. The cast of over eighteen performed to a capacity audience. The Board said "Every member of the Workmen's Circle Dramatic Club should feel proud to have achieved such a moral success."<sup>98</sup> They sent \$50 to Jewish sufferers in Europe. They performed Goldfaden's *Bar-Kochba*, directed by Cantor E. Seltz, on June 12, 1938, at the Central Club.

On March 12, 1939, the Circle performed Goldfaden's five-act operetta, *Shulamis*, at the Central Club. They chartered a bus, took the cast of thirty-five, orchestra, costumes, and scenery to perform for the Des Moines Workmen's Circle Branch 406 (which acclaimed it an "outstanding success") at the JCC on April 30, 1939.<sup>99</sup> The Refugee Relief Fund received \$50.50. Following this success they took *Caldunia* with a cast of twenty-eight and a chorus of fourteen to Des Moines on March 24, 1940. Proceeds benefited war refugees.

In April, 1941, the Circle performed *Das pintele yid (The Core of Jewishness)*, a four-act play, and in June, 1942, *Tate's mame's tsores (Father's Mother's Problems)*, a four-act melodrama. In June, 1943, they presented *Khanele di nayerin (Khanele the Seamstress)* at the JCC.

The Singing and Dramatic Organization, founded in early 1937, met every Monday at the homes of its eighteen members. Louis Wolk served as dramatic director and Sam Kenyon as chairman.<sup>100</sup>

The International Worker's Order, Branch 126, formed a cultural and dramatic club under the direction of Ben Martin. The club had twenty members and in October, 1938, rehearsed Sholem Aleichem's three-act play *Tsezait un tsheshprait (Dispersed and Spread Out)*. To celebrate the eightieth anniversary of the birth of Sholem Aleichem, Ben Martin and the Drama Unit presented a comedy by Sholem Aleichem at B'nai Israel



Synagogue of South Omaha for the International Workers Order and Ladies Independent Club in April, 1939. The Jewish Dramatic Club, under Ben Martin's direction, performed Sholem Aleichem's *Die Menschen* for the International Workers Order at B'nai Israel in May, 1940. They postponed the May, 1941, performance of Sholem Aleichem's three-act play, *Tsezait un tseshprait*, because of the sudden illness of director Ben Martin.

Jewish National Workers Alliance and Poale Zion maintained an active Yiddish theater in Sioux City throughout the 1930s and created a National Jewish Dramatic Club in Omaha in July 1943. On October 17 they performed a one-act play, dramatic sketches, and Palestinian songs at the JCC in honor of Succoth. Mrs. Jake Raznick and Mr. Louis Wolk directed the program. Free admission attracted an audience of over 300.

### Post-War Yiddish Theater

The Jewish National Worker's Alliance-Farband (JNWA) was formed in 1910 as a labor Zionist fraternal and mutual benefit association less doctrinaire than Poale Zion.<sup>101</sup> It brought in several variety shows. In March, 1946, Jacob Ben-Ami, Jacob Mostel, and Al Harris did three one-act plays from David Pinski, H. Levick, and Sholem Aleichem, accompanied by concert pianist J. Lubetzky and Palestinian singer Osnath Bat Halevi. From Omaha they went to Sioux City. In April, 1947, JNWA sponsored a local talent show. Joe Radinowski and Max Goldstein produced *The Farmers, Landlady in Imagination*, which WOW radio broadcast on Sunday morning at 10:30.

The Omaha Hebrew Club sponsored Max Romberg's performance of Sholem Aleichem's *Der Yid fun Kasrilewke* (*The Jew from Kasrilevke*) in October, 1946. Romberg had performed the play in Kansas City in November and in Des Moines in December.

In March, 1948, Al Harris and Polish performers Jonas Turkow, Jedido Epstein, Diana Blumenfeld, and composer/pianist Max Lubetzky appeared. The New York Theatrical Troupe of Al Harris and Shoshana Freedman performed at the JCC in April, 1949. In March, 1951, Jacob Frankel, Menachem Rubin, Aline Eiger, and Al Harris performed *A Town Awakes* by Mark Schweid and incidental music by Sholem Secunda.

The JNWA Farband celebrated its fortieth year in 1953. They met monthly at the JCC with average attendance between sixty to seventy-five in 1957. They contributed to the Heart Fund, Community Chest, National Jewish Hospital in Denver, and to the Committee for Labor Israel for Histadruth.<sup>102</sup> The celebratory show in March at the JCC included Yemenite singers, Ben Bonus (who had starred in the Yiddish version of

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*), Al Harris, Jacob Ben-Ami, and Bertha Gersten. Ben Bonus and Mina Bern, husband and wife, became as familiar to Omaha's Yiddish community as Al Harris, appearing between February and April in 1957, 1958, 1959, 1960, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1965, and 1967. Mina Bern recalls driving across the country, with five or six people in the car, stage props and costumes on top of the car.<sup>103</sup> During this period the troupe occasionally included Leon Liebgold, Lili Lilliana, and Pola (Paula) Kadison.

The Workmen's Circle and Workmen's Circle Dramatic Club presented a mix of professional and local amateur offerings. During April, 1946, the club rehearsed two one-act plays, *The Photographer* and *The Shadchan's [Matchmaker's] Daughter*, for presentation in July. The proceeds of \$25 went to the Matzah Fund for the needy in Europe and \$25 to the French Jewish Orphan's Home. In December, 1946, it performed *Mazel tov* by Sholem Aleichem and *Nitgelungen (Lack of Success)* by Morris Levitt. It performed three comedies: *Di Khosene oif probe (Trial Marriage)* by Abraham Raisen, *The Childless* by Libin, and *Nisht Gelungen* by Levitt at the Labor Lyceum in May, 1947. Tickets were 60 cents and, according to Sam Lerner, \$400 went to relief. Sam Kenyon died in August, 1947, at the age of 68. A Workmen's Circle memorial service at the Labor Lyceum followed the funeral and they dedicated the play performed on August 27 to him.

In June, 1949, the Workmen's Circle performed *Shlomke and Rickel*, a four-act play by Boris Thomashefsky, directed by Sam Lerner and Louis Witkin, at the JCC. The Workmen's Circle met weekly on Saturday evening at the Labor Lyceum. Ben Miroff directed the choir. During 1949 the Circle entertained twice at the Dr. Sher Home for the Aged, which had opened in 1948, and received "many invitations from out-of-town Workmen's Circle Branches to entertain at their conferences and banquets."<sup>104</sup> In November, 1949, Yiddish singer and lecturer Leiser Lowenstein entertained at the Labor Lyceum.

In September, 1950, the Workmen's Circle presented *Mazaltov* by Sholem Aleichem and *The Father's Daughter* by Levine, both one-act plays. Under the sponsorship of Pioneer Women they performed *Shlomke and Rickel* in April, 1951. Two one-act comedies by Gordin and Z. Levin were presented on February 3, 1952, at the JCC, with musical accompaniment by Mrs. Harry Lobel. Mascha Benya, Rita Karpinowitch, Pola Kadison, and Israel Welichansky performed a program in honor of the one-hundredth anniversary of I.L. Peretz on February 15 at the JCC.

In April, 1953, the Workmen's Circle produced *The Father's Daughter* and *Landsleit*. In March, 1955, the annual concert at the JCC presented Dora Kalinowna, Shmuel Fisher, and Pola Kadison. In April,

1955, it produced the three-act *A vaib on a loshn* (*A Speechless Wife*); in May, 1957, *Tsipke fayer* by Louis Freiman; in May, 1958, *Lyovke molodyets*; in April, 1959, *The Father's Daughter* and *Landsleit*; and in April, 1960, *A Speechless Wife*. Proceeds went to adopted orphans in Israel. The statement, "The Club has held plays featuring home talent for 32 years" accompanied the announcement of the April, 1962, performance of *Parent's Problems*.<sup>105</sup>

The vitality of Yiddish theater ebbed. Between 1950 and 1960 four plays had been presented twice, and one play three times. Announcements for performances in 1961, 1963, and 1964 simply stated the date, time, and price (75 cents), and not the title. In February, 1964, the Workmen's Circle sponsored a concert featuring baritone Mort Freeman, Mina Bern, Israeli comic Shmuel Fisher, and pianist Renne Solomon.

The Omaha Choir and Dramatic Club (OCDC) in 1944 decided to present a concert, a one-act play, and literary discussions on current social and world problems, led by Nathan Martin, its literary director. Topics in 1946 included: "The G.I. Response to Our Upcoming Election," "The Truth About Czechoslovakia," "Religion in This Day and Age," and "Why Russia and the U.S. Don't Get Along." In 1947 they discussed "Why Russia Agrees with the United States on the Question of Palestine," and in 1948, "What Reason Did Russia Have in Closing Traffic in Berlin?" They sent a resolution to President Truman urging implementation of partition. In June, 1948, they pledged \$25 to Haganah. They closed their 1948 annual report wishing a "happy and prosperous New Year" and hoping it "will bring peace to our brothers in our home, Israel."<sup>106</sup>

In honor of the thirtieth anniversary of the death of Sholem Aleichem the OCDC performed *Der dokter* and *Mentshn* to a filled auditorium in March, 1947, and raised more than \$800. Cantor E. Sellz sung several selections during intermission. In June, 1948, they rehearsed *Tsezait un tsheshprait*, a three-act play by Sholem Aleichem. They presented *Die emise kroft* (True Power) in 1950. The club continued to hold its regular meetings, have banquets, and celebrate birthdays, but its public performances were much less frequent. In March, 1956, the Omaha Choir and Dramatic Club started performing at the Dr. Sher Home. The last mention of any OCDC activity is a presentation to the Sher Home in October, 1957.<sup>107</sup>

### **Communal Coordination and Preservation of Yiddish Entertainment**

Despite the English-speaking assimilationist Jewish Federations'

consideration that Yiddish theatre militated "against the Americanization of the immigrants," when confronted with successful assimilation and America's monolingualism, some concern for Yiddish heritage crystallized. Jewish Community Centers, federations, and rabbis provided venues, structure, and funding for Yiddish programs and translations of Yiddish theatricals into English.<sup>108</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett stated that following the Holocaust "ambivalence" toward the destroyed world of East European Jewish culture "became a desecration on their memory" and a "moral requirement that this world not suffer a double death," the loss of six million and the loss of the culture.<sup>109</sup> Detroit had free Yiddish performances in 1942. The Milwaukee JCC conducted a Jewish Folklore Revue in 1936 and 1941 and produced a Yiddish play in 1938, in English translation. Milwaukee formed the Perhifft players in 1949.<sup>110</sup>

In Omaha the Jewish Community Center became the focal point for community- rather than professional- or club-inspired coordination and booking of live and film Yiddish entertainment in Yiddish and English translation. The JCC performed *The Dybbuk* and Sholem Aleichem's *Shver tsu zain a yid (Hard to be a Jew)* in 1929 and 1933, in English translation. The JCC "in response to numerous demands from the community for Yiddish films" put on about four Yiddish films during every fall or winter from the late 1940s into the 1960s.<sup>111</sup> Under the direction of the Yiddish Culture League, Joe Radinowski, active in the Jewish Culture League in the mid-twenties, and an officer in the local Farband, became the directing spirit for Yiddish entertainment.<sup>112</sup>

The JCC regularly showed Yiddish films. In February, 1948, it presented *The Cantor's Son*, starring Moishe Oysher and announcing that "English subtitles make the film easily understood entertainment for those who do not know the Jewish language." In November, 1948, the Cultural Arts Program presented the first season of Yiddish cultural programming. Israel Welichansky, who had performed for ten years with the Artef Players (which had disbanded in 1940), along with Selma Burnett Snyder, entertained with an evening of English and Yiddish numbers. The following year a Yiddish Programs Advisory Committee presented Boris Thomashefsky's film, *Bar Mitzvah* to a "capacity audience." "While the entire dialogue is Yiddish, English captions are also used so that those who do or do not understand Jewish may enjoy the story."<sup>113</sup> *Where is My Child?* starring Celia Adler followed shortly.

In October, 1950, the Yiddish Council announced that the film series for 1950-51 would include *Tevya*, *The Milkman*, *Laughter Through Tears*, *Children Must Laugh*, *I want to be a Mother*, *Green Fields*, and *The Dybbuk*. The Workmen's Circle, Pioneer Women, JNWA, Poale Zion, Omaha Free Loan Society, and the JCC sold tickets. The Perhifft Players

from Milwaukee, Howard Weinschel, and Isadore Tepper appeared at the JCC in May, 1951, free to the public.

The 1951-52 season featured *Lebedig un frailekh* starring the husband and wife team, Sadie Shoengold (who had first appeared in Omaha in 1924) and Sam Auerbach. Then followed movies: *Motel the Operator*, *The Jewish Melody*, and *The Hazen of Vilna* (also known as *Vilna Balabusil*) and *Overture to Glory* by Ossip Dymow. Season tickets cost \$2.50.

The committee, comprised of Joe Radinowski, Mrs. Herman Bondarin, Max Crounse, Ben Martin, Sam Tarnoff, and Carl Rosenberg, set the 1952-53 season: *Where is My Child?* with Celia Adler, *Her Second Mother*, *The Great Advisor*, *Eli Eli*, and *Love and Sacrifice*. The 1953-54 season included three films: *The Unfortunate Bride* (*Di umgliklikhe kale*, an adaption of *Broken Hearts* by Z. Libin), *The Matchmaker* by Sholem Aleichem, and the 1935 Russian film, *Laughter Through Tears*; sponsored a talk by Dr. Israel Knox; a Workmen's Circle concert; and a Farband Labor Zionist concert. Series tickets were \$2.00. The concert, in March, 1954, *300 Jewish Years in America*, featured Israel Welichansky, Masha Benya, Pola Kadison, and Charlotte Cooper. Two films: *Two Sisters* and *God, Man, and Devil*; and two concerts constituted the 1954-55 season.

*The World of Sholem Aleichem*, an English language production staged by Howard Da Silva, played forty-three weeks on Broadway. Its three one-act plays: *A Tale of Chelm*, *Bontshe shvaig*, and *The High School*, played at the JCC in November, 1955. Harry Halpert, the *Jewish Press* editor, wrote, "Perhaps some of the nuances of humor and pathos were lost in the translation from Yiddish to English but it was compensated for by a clearer understanding for those of us whose Yiddish has become somewhat rusty." <sup>114</sup>

The 1956-57 season included three films: *The Jewish Melody*, *The Power of Life*, and Gordin's *Without a Home*. The Workmen's Circle sponsored a New York troupe performing *Deeds and Dreams*, an Israeli comedy starring David Ellin, Reuben Wendorff, Lea Noemi, Victor Packer, and Sonia Zamina, at the JCC to a full house.

The Farband-Labor Zionist Order sponsored a concert in March, 1957, *The World of Jewish Folklore* with Ben Bonus, Mina Bern, Leon Liebgold, Lili Lilliana, Al Harris, and Sh. Fershko. The Farband tour started in New York in late December and toured over 80 communities in the United States and Canada. Saul Silverman, the Director of the Activities Department of the JCC was informed that the Caravan would arrive four hours prior to the performance. The local props needed were two plain wooden tables, five wooden chairs, one waste basket, a microphone, and a piano to be placed on the floor near the stage. They required a handyman to help the actors with the working of the lights and

curtains. They requested two double rooms at \$5.00 or \$6.00 a room, and two single singles at \$3.00 or \$3.50 a room. The fee for the program was to be paid in cash prior to their departure for the next city. <sup>115</sup>

*Menachem-Mendel in America*, a musical comedy with David Dank, Ravid Ellin, Zisha Gold, and Sonia Zomina appeared in February, 1958. The following month Ben Bonus and Mina Bern were again in Omaha presenting a "trilingual" review.

A series of theatrical celebrations of the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Sholem Aleichem commenced in February, 1959. The Farband Theatrical Caravan brought Bonus, Bern, Harris, Lilliana, Liebgold, and Joe Barash to present *Stage-O-Rama*, a play on the Hollywood phenomena of Cinerama. In March, 1960, the Workmen's Circle sponsored Ben Fenster in *Listen to This* along with Bern, Zisha Gold, Chayelex Luxemburg, and Pola Kadison, directed by Israel Welichansky. One week later the Farband concert presented a trilingual Stage-O-Rama, *The Treasure* from Sholem Aleichem, starring Bonus, Liliana, Liebgold, and Dora Kalinova.

The Dana Players from Dana College in nearby Blair, Nebraska, presented the *World of Sholem Aleichem* in May, 1960. Howard DaSilva returned to Temple Israel the same month to present *An Evening with the Masters — Sholem Aleichem and Peretz*. The biggest production, three performances of *The World of Sholem Aleichem*, appeared in October, 1962, at the Omaha Playhouse. Directed by Elaine Jabenis, it featured an all-Omaha Jewish cast with no former Yiddish theater experience: Sylvia Wagner, Libby Sachs, Joe Hornstein, David Forbes, Earl Katz, Marlene Bernstein, Karen M'lee Jabenis, Beth Novak, and Nancy Venger, with Helen Novak as stage manager.

By the early 1960s other community arenas for theatricals had emerged. The Federation, the temples and synagogues, Israel Bond drives, and community Chanukah celebrations were staging amateur and professional performances. The Jewish Community Center had a Program of the Month sponsored by over a half dozen local groups including congregations, Hadassah, and B'nai B'rith lodges. Israeli entertainment became increasingly popular with theater extolling Israel's present and future rather than nostalgia for an Eastern European Yiddish past.

In March, 1962, the Farband sponsored *Heshel from Ostropol* performed by a cast of seven, including Mina Bern. The Yiddish Culture Series committee at the end of 1962 included Harry Sidman, Chairman of the JCC, Joe Radinowski, and Max Crounse. It planned a Purim treat, a free program for March, 1963, *The Blacksmith's Daughter* by Peretz Hirshbein, starring Bonus, Bern, Liliana, Harris, Kadison, Liebgold, and comedian Sam Goldstein. It presented the film, *God, Man and the Devil*,

with "English subtitles for those not experienced in Yiddish conversation." Theodore Bickel played a benefit *Fiddler* for Hadassah at the City Music Hall in February, 1963.

The 1963-64 program included the films *I Have Sinned* and *The Travels of Benjamin the III* by Mendele Moykher Sforim (April, 1964). Directed by David Licht, it featured Bonus, Licht, Kadison, Miriam Kressyn, Seymour Rechzeit, and Max and Raizel Bozyk.

The 1965 season included the films *The Bar Mitzvah Story* and *Her Second Mother*. The Farband-sponsored Yiddish Theatre Ensemble presented a musical review in March entitled *Tsu zingn un tsu zogn (To Sing and To Say)*. The performers were Bonus, Bern, Harris, Kadison, Charlotte Cooper, Shifra Lehrer, Shmuel Fisher, Maida Feingold, Rene Solomon, and Michael Goldstein.

The Yiddish Culture Committee, coordinated by Max Crounse, the Workmen's Circle, and the JCC, presented Mort Freeman, Shifra Lerer, Hershel Gendel, and Pola Kadison in the playlet, *The Golden Treasure* by Wolf Younin in February, 1966. The last Farband performance included Ben Bonus, Mina Bern, Susan Walters, Bernard Sauer, and Renee Solomon in March, 1967. Although Max Crounse announced that a "program will be presented each month throughout the year to meet the increased interests of the Yiddish-speaking members of the community," only one or two Yiddish films and little-publicized Workmen's Circle Dramatic Club plays (in June) appeared in 1968 and 1969.<sup>116</sup>

## Conclusion

At the height of Jewish mass migration, two decades before legislative curtailment, Hutchins Hapgood, writing in the Preface to the 1909 revised edition of *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, observed the transitory hold of Yiddish theatre on its audience:

In spite of constant fresh immigration, the New has gained over the Old. The theatre has become more "American" . . . the superficial picturesqueness has diminished, and an integral relation to American conditions has been relatively developed.<sup>117</sup>

Declining immigration and increasing assimilation left a vacuum. In Chicago "the Rialto of the ghetto — Maxwell Street" noted Louis Wirth, "is fast passing away."<sup>118</sup> Joseph Buloff lamented the Depression, the aging Yiddish-speaking immigrant population, and reduced Yiddish publishing as the younger American born generation read only English. Joan Micklin Silver captured the flavor of this transition in her film *Hester Street*.

Technology changed America's leisure tastes. Passive replaced participatory entertainment. During the twenties amateur theater and club dancing were entertainment and courtship mainstays. By the 1930s, film was the rage. The Nazi blighting of European Yiddish culture from 1933 to 1945 accelerated the decline.

Despite Leo Weiner's 1899 prophesy and many deathbed scenes, no obituary has been written for Yiddish. After the Second World War, professional touring companies replaced the Yiddish canon with vaudevillian reviews, turning from the theater of *shund* and social consciousness to celebrating cultural remnants. Amateur theater continued to perform the Yiddish classics.

The Workmen's Circle Dramatic Club continued to hold regular meetings into the late 1960s. The minutes report sickness and recovery and celebrations of birthdays and fiftieth and sixty-fifth wedding anniversaries accompanied by "nicely covered tables" set with candles, cakes, ice cream, and schnapps. "Everyone was very well-dressed despite the heat." Louis Witkin remarked that he forgets his bad health when he performs.<sup>119</sup> Although new members joined in 1969 the days of Omaha's Workmen's Circle were numbered.

### Epilogue

Theodore Bikel gave eight performances of Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* at the Orpheum Theater in September, 1995. On Saturday evening, August 24, 1996, the National Council of Jewish Women, celebrating one hundred years of service, staged *A Sentimental Journey* at the refurbished Rose Theater, formerly known as the Astro.<sup>120</sup> Director Joani Jacobsen entertained a full house. One number out of fifteen contained a smattering of comic and bowdlerized Yiddish, *You're Just in Love*. During October, 1996, *From Generation to Generation*, written and produced by Karen Javitch and Elaine Jabenis played at the JCC. Yiddish expressions were explained in a handout accompanying the program. In Lincoln, a Holocaust survivor coached a non-Jewish cast in dialogue and Yiddish for the performance of Barbara Lebow's *A shayna maidel (A Beautiful Girl)*.<sup>121</sup>



## Appendix A

## Yiddish Language Stage Performance in Omaha 1919-1945

Year	#of touring Companies	#of Plays by touring Company	# of Plays	# of Clubs
1919	2	2		
1920	1	1		
1921	1	1		
1922	1	1		
1923	2	3		
1924	2	4		
1925	2	7	1	2* a
1926	1	2	2	2* b
1927	3	6	1	1
1928	2	7	1	1
1929	4	5	6	4
1930	1	3	1	1
1931	-	-	-	-
1932	4	9	1	1
1933	2	3	1	1
1934	2	2	2	2
1935	1	1	1	1
1936	1	1	1	1
1937	-	-	5	3
1938	-	-	3	2
1939	2	2	3	2
1940	1	3	2	2
1941	2	2	3	3
1942	-	-	2	2
1943	-	-	1	1
1944	-	-	-	-
1945	1	1	1	1
Total		67	37	

\* combined venture of two clubs:

\*a Auflebung and Jewish Culture League:

*Broken Hearts* or *Broken Heart* or *Love and Duty*, Zalmen Libin

\*b Auflebung and Poale Zion:

*Yankele der shmid*, David Pinski

## Appendix B

Theatrical Programs of Auflebung and Jewish Culture League, 1922-1926\*

Auflebung

Sholem Aleichem

*The Advice*

*The Future World, Olam ha-ba, The World After You Die*

*Laughter Through Tears* also rendered as *Tragedy Through Fun*

*The Doctor*

*Mazeltov*

*The Enjoyment from Children (Naches from Kinder)*

*Kinehora, No Evil Eye*

*She Must Marry A Doctor*

Mark Arnstein, *My Wife's Craziness*

Sholom Asch, *How the Girl and Boy Get Together*

David Pinski, *The Eternal Law*

Abraham Raisen poem, "A Love Without a Home"

*The Night Good Brothers* or *The Good Brother* (1909) Author undetermined

*Rabbi Chasidim* \*

*The Chosid* \*

*Yude* either *Der Yid* or *Di Yidn*.

*What are you Trying to Tell Me?*

*Father and his Son* \*

*From the Rabbi and the Hassidim* \*

*Ein kleine kind learns how to walk*

*Shmulke mit American* \*

*Yankev Gordon*

*Chaim Yankel*

*The Eternal Love* possibly by Mark Arnstein

*One Joke in One Act*

*Mashugana in Hospital*

Jewish Culture League

Mark ArNSTein, *The Everlasting Song*

Sholom Asch, *With the Flood*

Abraham Raisen, *Some Groom*\* probably *Such a Groom* or *The Marriage*

*Broker's Daughter*

*Ach Mira Chasino*\* probably *Oikh a khosene*

Sholem Aleichem

*Greens oif Shvuos*

*Oic mira Succa*\* probably *Shoin einmol a suke (Build Me a Succah) Agents*

Isaac Dov Berkowitz, *The Landslait*

Author undetermined, *The Probe* or *The Test*, possibly by Raisen

\* indicates spelling or English translation as it appeared in original con temporary sources.

## Notes

1 Henry Roth, *Call it Sleep* (1934; Paterson, NJ: Pageant Books, 1960), 38. Note on spelling and transliteration: we use "theater" unless the quoted source uses "theatre." The Yiddish transliteration preserves some spelling used in the original sources, resulting in some inconsistency in the rendition of several titles.

2 "Good wishes to small clubs," editorial, *Omaha Jewish Press* (hereafter cited as *JP*) (April 19, 1946), 6.

3 Milton Doroshkin, *Yiddish in America, Social and Cultural Foundations* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1966), 77.

4 Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto, Studies of the Jewish Quarter in New York* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1902; revised edition, 1909; reprint, Harry Golden, 1965; Moses Rischin, 1967; Irving Howe, 1976).

5 Harold Clurman, "Ida Kaminska and the Yiddish Theater," *Midstream* (January 1968): 56; David S. Lifson, "Yiddish Theatre," *Ethnic Theatre in the United States*, ed. Maxine Schwartz Seller (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), 562; "The Yiddish Theater in New York and the Immigrant Jewish Community: Theater as Secular Ritual" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1986).

6 David S. Lifson, *The Yiddish Theatre in America* (New York: Thomas

Yoseloff, 1965); Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars, A World History of Yiddish Theater* (New York: Seth Press, 1977).

7 Joshua Bender, "A Peek at Theatricals," *JP* (August 21, 1931), 5.

8 Louis Wirth, *The Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928), 225. Fred Matthews, "Louis Wirth and American Ethnic Studies," in Moses Rischin, ed., *The Jews of North America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 123; and Elizabeth Wirth Marvick, "Louis Wirth: A Biographical Memorandum," in Louis Wirth, *On Cities and Social Life*, ed. Albert J. Reiss, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 333-340.

9 James Miller, *The Detroit Yiddish Theater, 1920 to 1937* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967); Corinne B. Stavish, "There's Nothing Like That Now. The Yiddish Theatre in Chicago — Personal Perspectives" (Master's thesis, Northeastern Illinois University, 1979).

10 Howard M. Sachar, *A History of the Jews in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 213, states that in 1917 there were nearly thirty Yiddish theater companies in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Chicago, and Los Angeles. "Jewish Theatres in the United States, 1927," *American Jewish Year Book, 1929-1930*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1929), 205. Shanghai's isolated Yiddish theater company performed weekly. Israel Cohen, *The Journal of a Jewish Traveller* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1925), 13.

11 The American Jewish Year Book (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1931) 33:279-80.

12 Herman Yablokoff, *Der Payatz, Around the World with Yiddish Theater* (Silver Spring, Maryland: Bartleby Press, 1995), 158, 192; Victor Packer, Ben Basenko, and Herman Yablokoff, all arrived in America in 1924, and went to the "provinces." See also Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 252.

13 *Socialist Herald* (May 6, 1908), 2. I thank my colleague William Pratt for this source. A benefit of symposia is interaction with a critical audience offering overlooked sources, corrections of fact, additional interpretations, and comparisons to other times and places. Sometimes unique, personal anecdotal evidence emerges adding further color, flavor, blood, and meaning to the story. Marilyn Halter, whose essay, "Longings and Belongings: Yiddish Identity and Consumer Culture" appears elsewhere in this volume, relates the following:

My Grandmother, the former Clara Bloom, migrated in 1906, at the age of eighteen, to Omaha after fleeing Russia. One day she went out to see a play put on by a traveling Yiddish theater company in which my grandfather, Sam Medoff, had a starring role. It was love at first sight (But Grandma Clara wouldn't marry Zady Sam unless he gave up the theater for more respectable work.) They moved to Minneapolis a couple of years later.

14 Yaffe Printing Papers, Ledger June 1913 to February 1915, pages 30, 34, 40, 65, 68 and 87. Nebraska Jewish Historical Society Archives.

15 The Broadway theater season started in September and ran for forty weeks. The Chicago Yiddish theater season of forty weeks was later reduced to thirty weeks. Omaha appearances will be treated on a calendar year basis.

16 Zalmen Zylbercweig, *Lexikon*, vol. 1 (1931), col. 565.

17 The Brandeis sponsored the Brandeis Players, a professional company, and occasionally presented ethnic themes such as *Abies's Irish Rose*, which played for two weeks in October 1928.

18 Terry White, "The Story of Omaha's Movie Theaters," (Omaha: typescript, 1995), 24; Charles Allen Tichy, "The First Seventy Years of Legitimate Theatre in Omaha, Nebraska" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1988), 230.

19 Sadie Fried remembers her father, Louis Wolk, performing as an extra at the Brandeis Theater in the early 1920s. Interview, September 25, 1996.

20 Wallenstein, born in Grodna in Polish Lithuania, toured Europe and South America after her arrival in New York. *Lexikon*, vol. 1 (1931).

21 Ibid., vol. 1, col. 694-95.

22 *Omaha Jewish Bulletin* (hereafter cited as *JB*) (November 28, 1919), 1, 3.

23 Various writers have observed "The big occasions... were Friday nights and Saturday matinees, when such performances were being held in contravention of the religious injunctions which prescribed the observance of the Sabbath." Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America, Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 212-13. The audience then criticized the actors for smoking on Shabbos.

24 *JB* (February 20, 1920), 4.

25 *JP* (October 6, 1921), 1.

26 Elbert Aidline Trommer, "The New Jewish Theater, How Maurice Schwartz is Building a Home for Literary Drama in Yiddish," *JP* (March 2, 1922), 1.

27 *JP* (March 20, 1924), 3.

28 Sophie Braslau appeared in 1921 and Yossele Rosenblatt in 1925.

29 *JP* (October 29, 1925), 3.

30 The following information derives from the *Lexicon of Yiddish Theatre*, ed. Zalmen Zylbercweig, vol. 4, (New York, 1963).

31 Jewish theater in Sioux City awaits a chronicler. As late as August 1947, Celia Adler appeared at North Junior High School.

32 Harry Golden in Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, 173; Theo Richmond in *Konin, A Quest* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 17, observes that the *landsmanshaftn* (associations of compatriots) were not just social but organizations to raise money for the needy, and that "dances, and parties, were designed to raise money."

33 *JP* (January 5, 1928), 1.

34 Yablokoff, *Der Payatz*, 217.

35 David Pinski, "The Yiddish Theatre," in *The Communal Register of New York, 1917-1918* (New York, 1918), 576-77.

36 Interview with Frances Blumkin Batt, September 19, 1996.

37 First performed at the Irving Place Theatre on February 24, 1924, Lifson, *Yiddish Theater in America*, 579.

38 *The Bloody Laughter* was first performed at the Irving Street Theatre on February 24, 1924, and *Yizkor* on April 13, 1923, Ibid., 579.

39 For the evocativeness of this play and film see J.J. Steinfeld, "Dancing at the Club Holocaust," (1988) reprinted in *Dancing at the Club Holocaust* (Charlottetown, P.I.E.: Ragweed, 1993).

40 *JP* (November 21 and 28, 1930), 1.

41 Felix Mayrowitz, "The Yiddish Theater in Transition," *The Menorah Journal* 16 (1929): 454.

42 Josef Buloff to Leib Kadison, 1928 in *On Stage, Off Stage, Memories of a Lifetime in the Yiddish Theatre*, Luba Kadison and Joseph Buloff with Irving Genn, (ed.) (Cambridge: Harvard University Library, 1992), 85.

43 *JP* (July 30 and May 29, 1930), 1.

44 *JP* (September 5 and October 17, 1930), 1, and (July 31, 1931), 6.

45 "From Dan Frohman to Clifford Odets," Meyer F. Steinglass, *JP* (September 20, 1935), 7.

46 Joseph Buloff to Sternberg (November 19, 1931) *On Stage, Off Stage*, 102-3.

47 *JP* (December 25, 1931).

48 The JNWA had about thirty members, all men, in 1929. "Jewish Communal Survey of Omaha, Nebraska, November 1929" (New York: Bureau of Jewish Social Research, typescript), 238.

49 I thank Eleanor Gordon Mlotek, YIVO, for pointing out the Brodin Zlatin connection.

50 Victor Packer Papers, YIVO Archives. My colleague, Bruce Garver, indicates that the company could easily have made these connections by the several passenger trains then serving the area.

51 Programs, YIVO Archives, *Iowa Jewish News* (hereafter cited as *IJN*) (February 23, 1934), 1.

52 *JP* (February 7, 1936), 8.

53 *JP* (October 14, 1938) 1.

54 *IJN* (August 28, 1936), 4.

55 *JP* (December 20, 1938), 1; (April 16, 1937), 1.

56 Jack Charash, "A New Era for the Yiddish Theater," *JP* (October 29, 1939), 3.

57 Max W. Grafstein, "Yiddish Theater Lost a Star in Goldenburg," *JP* (September 27, 1946), A14.

58 Eugene Lerner graduated from Central High School and attended Creighton University as a journalism major from 1934-35. In 1935 he went to Chicago and played in the *Dead End Kids* by Sidney Kingsley. Lerner's satire, *Destiny* won the George Washington University Hall of Fame award. His play *Does the Lady Yield?* had its premier in Cragmoor, New York, in 1947. Interview with Gene Lerner, Rome, May 24, 1997.

59 *JP* (April 10, May 22, 1922), 1; (May 29, 1931), 1; W. Zolley Lerner, "The Yiddish Theatre and Drama" (Master's thesis [English], University of Nebraska, 1933), 85, 102. He interviewed Ben Ami in Kansas City in 1925 and corresponded with David Pinski in 1933.

60 Interview with Ruth Diamond Levinson, May 12, 1996; Davida Willman, "An Unsung Pioneer: The Contribution of Ruth Diamond Levinson to Modern Dance" (Master's thesis, New York University, 1984).

61 Wirth, *The Ghetto*, 225.

62 Jack Charash, "Twenty Years of the Yiddish Art Theater," *JP* (November 17, 1939), 3.

63 *JP* (October 27, 1939), 1.

64 *JP* (April 19, 1940), 3; (January 17, 1941), 2; (November 1, 1940), 3; Mark Scherer, "The Many Faces of Harry G. Mendelson," *Memories of the Jewish Midwest* 9 (1994): 8-18.

65 "The Yiddish Stage in the United States," *JP* (October 27, 1944), 3.

66 Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 485; Ilana Bialik, "Audience Response in the Yiddish 'Shund' Theatre," *Theatre Research International* 13 (1988): 97.

67 See Appendix A.

68 Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 211.

69 *Ibid.*, 212, 310.

70 Lifson, *The Yiddish Theater in America*, 212.

71 John Mitchell, "The Thorpeian Athletic Club: A Portrait of Jewish Social and Athletic History in Omaha" (Omaha: University of Nebraska at Omaha, typescript, 1996).

72 Lifson, *The Yiddish Theater*, 212. One of the culprits was radio. See also Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 258.

73 See Appendix B.

74 See Oliver B. Pollak and Leo Greenbaum, "The Marginalization of Yiddish Culture in Omaha, 1922-1926." Quote is from interview with Isadore M. Tretiak, September 19, 1996.

75 Tichy, "The First Seventy Years," 232.

76 In November, 1935, the Sunday Drama Group met at the JCC and Miss Merritt, JCC Dramatic Director, discussed "The Place and Purpose of Amateur Theatricals."

77 *JP* (October 18, 1940), 1. On Harbin see Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 210.

Martin died in 1960 at the age of seventy-five, *JP* (October 28, 1960), 2. I am grateful to Richard M. Martin, son of Nathan Martin, for his recollections, interview, September 16, 1996.

78 Nebraska Jewish Historical Society Archives.

79 Minutes, June 10, 1923, 270; May 31, 1925, 155.

80 Between 1916 and 1929 at least five anthologies of Yiddish plays in English appeared. See for example, *Six Plays of the Yiddish Theatre*, ed. Isaac Goldberg (Boston: John W. Luce & Co., 1916); Etta Block, *One Act Plays from the Yiddish*, Second Series (New York: Bloch Publishing, 1929).

81 Minutes, March 22, 1925, 163; September 13, 1925, 133; October 18, 1925, 131.

82 So.Ed.So., another short-lived club, met at the Labor Lyceum, sponsored by Eugene Konecky, a writer and radio announcer, who had assisted his father on the *Jewish Bulletin*. They performed at least one of his plays, a comedy, *Spooks* in 1925 and produced a bi-monthly magazine, *Once Over*, of which no known copies survive.

83 *JP* (October 13, 1927), 1.

84 Jeffrey Sharlet, "The Last Picture Show," *The Pahn-Treger* 22 (1996): 15. See also Matthew Goodman, "A Shtetl Heroine Long Before Yentl, Folksbiene Reclaims Feminist From the Past," *Forward* (October 18, 1996), 9.

85 "Jewish Communal Survey," 70-72.

86 *JP* (March 29, 1929), 2.

87 "Jewish Communal Survey," 84, 86.

88 *JP* (January 4, 1929), 1.

89 *JP* (June 17, 1938), 1.

90 *JP* (September 23, 1949), D9.

91 Nahma Sandrow, "Yiddish Theater and American Theater," in *From Hester Street to Hollywood, The Jewish-American Stage and Screen*, ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1983), 22.

92 *JP* (September 27, 1946), D6.

93 *JP* (September 7, 1945), C12; (September 27, 1946), D6.

94 Oliver B. Pollak, "The Workmen's Circle and Labor Lyceum in Omaha, 1907-1977," *Nebraska History* 76 (1995): 30-42.

95 *JP* (September 23, 1938), D8.

96 Interview with Anne Lillian Lasher Shenfeld, August 22, 1996 and Esther Dolgoff, August 19, 1996, daughters of Louis and Bessie Witkin. Leon Stein writes that Abraham Cahan, upon arriving in America, "moved from shtetl to city, religious faith to secular commitment, from talmudic studies to Russian literature, from synagogue to socialism." Leon Stein, *The Education of Abraham Cahan* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), vi, translated from *Bleter fun mein lebn* (*Leaves from My Life*).

97 The Knights had built an impressive new structure at 3301 Harney.



- 98 *JP* (November 5, 1937), 1.
- 99 *IJN* (May 5, 1939), 3; *JP* (April 28, 1939).
- 100 *JP* (September 3, 1937), B6.
- 101 Michael N. Dobkowski, ed. *Jewish American Voluntary Organizations* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 305-8.
- 102 *JP* (September 20, 1957), B9.
- 103 Interview, September 19, 1996.
- 104 *JP* (September 23, 1949), D9.
- 105 *JP* (April 13, 1962), 1.
- 106 *JP* (February 27, 1948), 7; (October 1, 1948), D2.
- 107 *JP* (March 9, 1956), 3; (October 11, 1957), 3.
- 108 Judah J. Shapiro, *The Friendly Society, A History of the Workmen's Circle* (New York: Doron, 1970), 124.
- 109 Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, Introduction by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Life is with People* (1952; New York: Schocken Books, 1995), xi.
- 110 Louis J. Swichkow and Lloyd P. Gartner, *The History of the Jews of Milwaukee* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1963), 336; Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 299-300.
- 111 *JP* (October 17, 1947), 1.
- 112 Radinowski attended the United Jewish Appeal conferences in New York (1959) and the National Farband conference (1963). Carl Rosenberg recalls that Radinowski "spoke beautiful Yiddish." Interview, Carl Rosenberg, August 28, 1996.
- 113 *JP* (February 9, 1948), 1; (February 25, 1949), 6.
- 114 *JP* (November 25, 1955), 2.
- 115 Morris Fisher to Saul Silverman, October 31, 1956, and Fisher to Joe Radinowski, Nebraska Jewish Historical Society Archives, Farband-Labor Zionist Order.
- 116 *JP* (November 3, 1967),
- 117 Hapgood, *Spirit of the Ghetto* (1909), 3.
- 118 Wirth, *The Ghetto*, 240.
- 119 Workmen's Circle Dramatic Club Minutes, February 23; August 2, 1964
- 120 Much of the funding for the restoration came from Rose Blumkin, who, along with her eldest daughter, Frances Batt, had performed as amateurs in Yiddish plays in the late 1920s.
- 121 *JP* (October 18, 1996), 14.

## Yiddish "Then and Now": Creativity in Contemporary Hasidic Yiddish

Miriam Isaacs

### Introduction

While we are discussing the conference theme, Yiddish "Then and Now," we can find the most dynamic manifestation of "now" for Yiddish in Hasidic enclaves in Williamsburg and Boro Park, Brooklyn, and Mea Shearim, Jerusalem. In these and other centers, tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of Hasidim (followers of dynastic rabbinic sects) are living in Yiddish. There are also non-Hasidic ultra-orthodox Jews among the Haredim (singular Haredi), some of whom speak Yiddish and many of whom only use Yiddish occasionally or not at all. The present paper presents a few examples of contemporary Hasidic creative expression in Yiddish and places them within a sociolinguistic perspective. Information is drawn from field work in America and Israel, from selected readings of Haredi publications, and from sociolinguistic and ethnographic scholarship.<sup>1</sup>

An outstanding challenge for Yiddishists today is to communicate to a generation that has grown up without Yiddish, its centrality to the vibrancy of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. Jewish college students today are often the children of a generation that only knew Yiddish indirectly. They are three or four generations removed from the immigrants who bore a range of emotions, from affection to ambivalence to outright hostility. In any case, they collectively cast the language behind them in their struggle to assimilate, while Yiddish became a vehicle for humor or nostalgia. But now most Jews no longer relate to Yiddish even at the most minimal level except for a handful of students who have an interest in the language of

their grandparents, would like to be able to understand the language and to understand a world that was left behind.

In sharp contrast, Hasidim are adapting to new environments and seeking to recreate their *shtetl* pasts.<sup>2</sup> They provide a living link to a Yiddish past, however different present re-creations may be from the East European originals. Unlike their non-Hasidic counterparts, they have succeeded in countering the enormous pressures of linguistic and cultural assimilation.

This paper supports the legitimacy of Hasidic Yiddish on its own terms, accepting the fact that Hasidim choose not to honor the various efforts towards standardization or "improvement" of Yiddish. Quite the contrary, Hasidim accept no outside linguistic authority, nor do they purport to be authorities. In their own terms, their contributions merit consideration as instances of creative expression. It is the author's hope that appreciation of Hasidic creative efforts in Yiddish will lower attitudinal barriers or, at the least, be understood notwithstanding general criticism against haredim. The items I present here are not intended to be representative of the full range of cultural expression nor do I make statements with respect to artistic merit. I do wish to present instances of linguistic variety and diversity in terms of form, mode, and idiomatic use of Yiddish.

In the face of popular criticism of Hasidim, especially by the Jewish mainstream, I advocate a tolerant, or at least a value-neutral perspective when approaching Hasidic uses of Yiddish. In sociolinguistic terms, what constitutes legitimacy for Yiddish or for any language or dialect is the group's own system of communication rather than what is imposed on it by outsiders.

Hasidic Yiddish has yet another claim. Those who presently study Yiddish as a foreign language are learning a standardized version that is quite different from what is being used by the largest body of today's Yiddish speakers, who have norms and conventions of their own. Secular Yiddish speakers and Hasidim rarely speak with one another, coexisting in a fraternal relationship, but contending with one another and drawing from radically different traditions. In each tradition Jewish languages have radically different functions and orientations, but still they may look to one another and enrich one another.

### **Vitality: Yiddish Communities**

Hasidim have succeeded in maintaining Yiddish on a sizable scale. Of the worldwide population of Hasidim, a significant proportion uses Yiddish in yeshiva study and as a vernacular. In Mea Shearim and Ramot Polin in Jerusalem, Boro Park and New Square in New York, and smaller centers in America, Europe, and Israel, Yiddish is an in-group language, used in study and in everyday conversation. Because Hasidic Yiddish is open to borrowing, there is a heavy infusion of Ivrit (modern Hebrew) and English. Many Hasidim are raising their children in Yiddish at home and send them to Yiddish language schools in sects like the Satmar, Belz, Boyan, Bobov, Munkatch, Viznitz, Stolin, Toldos Aaron, and Tash.

Hasidic society is multilingual, using Yiddish in its traditional role as one of three languages, where each of the three languages serves a discrete function: *Loshn koydesh* (classical Hebrew-Aramaic) is the holy-language; Yiddish is mainly an oral language used for mundane situations in the home and synagogue, the language in which basic family values are transmitted; and, thirdly, there is a co-territorial, national language. For most Hasidim now, this co-territorial, national language is English or Ivrit.

Supporting language continuity is the commitment on the part of Hasidim to religious communities. Without Hasidim and their investment in community building and education, Yiddish would suffer the fate of other minority languages in America or Israel. Many Hasidim are exerting great effort to keep Yiddish alive because it was the language of their parents, grandparents, and holy rebbes. It is considered homey (*haymish*, in the Hungarian Yiddish pronunciation) and, thereby, integral to the very concept of *Yidishkayt*, almost synonymous with the folk ethos. In Hasidic life, Yiddish has a distinct religious value that is expressed in formal rabbinic declarations that exhort members to use Yiddish in their home spheres.

Augmenting prospects for a future for Yiddish is the extremely high birthrate among Hasidim. Yet neither numbers nor birthrate alone can assure the long-term survival of Yiddish, even among Hasidim. Yiddish, a language that has never had its own country, faces severe competition from local, national languages. The Yiddish language is an important, but not essential component of religious and ethnic continuity. Even within stringent sects like the Satmar Hasidim, who maintain Yiddish on a constant, consistent basis, the women, who are most likely to work among

outsiders, are increasingly turning to the use of outside languages.

For boys, too, Yiddish is imperiled. A columnist in a Hasidic paper, *Der Yid*, pities the thousands of boys and yeshiva students who don't study (religion) in Yiddish, which is traditionally used for translation and discussion. Instead, he claims, they study in English or in the forbidden language of Ivrit. This phenomenon he blames on *maskilim*, Jews who followed the Enlightenment and rejected orthodoxy. He pities the youth because they don't know the pleasure of repeating a "word" (of law) in the original but must translate it like a "born again" Jew:

S'iz nebekh a rakhmones af di file toyzenter yinglekh un yeshive bokhurim vos lernen nisht af Yidish nor gor af English oder gor in Eretz Isrol af di tome shprakh, Ivris . . . un zay vaysn nebekh nisht vi geshmak dos iz, nokhtsuzogn a "vort" originel (un nisht), vi der "baltshuve" hot es gezugt.<sup>3</sup>

Pity the thousands of boys and yeshiva students who don't study in Yiddish but instead in English or, in Israel, even in the forbidden language, Ivrit . . . and they don't, poor dears, know how wonderful it is to repeat a phrase of text in the original and not as the "born again Jew" does it.

A major sect that has lost much of its Yiddish, largely because of its success with "born again Jews," is the Brooklyn-based Lubavitch group, where many still use Yiddish but have largely adopted English or Ivrit. For instance, a Lubavitch couple in Vermont sends their children to school in Montreal, where the boy studies in Yiddish and where the girl studies in French and Yiddish. Lubavitch students memorize, verbatim, large tracts of the rebbe's speeches, speeches that were pointedly in Yiddish. But the language of their home, despite such efforts, is English.<sup>4</sup>

Many view use of Yiddish as a manifestation of a "separatist" stance by a group which guards itself against the outside, especially against secular Jewish influences. Among the many articles on the "death" of Yiddish, the Hasidim often receive only passing mention. An exception to this is a statement by Ruth Wisse that Yiddish is thriving, but her reference to Hasidim is couched in the premise that the demise of Yiddish is not altogether to be deplored because of the dangers of separatism:

Yiddish still flourishes as the spoken language of the so-called "ultra-orthodox" Jews who live apart in order to safeguard what sets them apart. These Jews speak Yiddish for the same reasons the language came into being in the first place as the expression and guarantor of their religious civilization. Their European Jewish language and their traditional clothing help them resist the centripetal attraction of a society much friendlier — and hence more seductive — than Europe's. [Haredim] . . . have no particular interest in the preservation of the Yiddish language as such: secular Yiddish culture is as suspect to them as any other branch of secular culture.<sup>5</sup>

Wisse is correct in holding Yiddish to be a culture-internal, safe language, but it is not entirely the case that Hasidim lack interest in the Yiddish language "as such." On the contrary, although Hasidim do not produce Yiddish grammars or dictionaries, they have strongly invested in the retention and revival of Yiddish in their own ways as evidenced by the choice of Yiddish as mode of instruction in entire schools, not just individual programs or courses. These schools teach children in Yiddish, and teachers in these schools are writing textbooks and actively seeking to extend Yiddish vocabulary.

Yiddish among today's Hasidim is not an immigrant language, but a minority language. As such, it must be consciously nurtured in the context of neighborhoods and community structures such as synagogues, schools, and local kosher shops. Yiddish is a language of cultural continuity as well as a means of social separation. Sources of outside information are heavily censored, and most Hasidim, especially the youngsters, seldom move outside their own circles.<sup>6</sup>

As closed off culturally as they are, Hasidim still have considerable access to the outside world and interest in what is beyond their ordinary reach. Several Hasidic newspapers are being published in Yiddish and used by a readership for whom Yiddish is a native language. Newspapers like the Yiddish language weekly *Der Yid*, which regularly has over a hundred pages, or the slightly smaller *Tsaytung* carry news on world events to their Hasidic readership. In my field work I found that there was a great demand from the women and children for stories, songs, and other educational materials as the numbers of Hasidic Yiddish-speaking students continues to grow. During my visits to Hasidic girls' schools in Israel, young girls and their teachers displayed eagerness for new materials to use

in teaching, including songs and stories in Yiddish. Hasidic mothers often asked for information about the outside world, especially about haredim in America. However, most of what comes to them, and especially what is allowed for the young, must come from culturally sanctioned sources, usually culture-internal sources.

The most notable exception to the rule of avoiding secular and especially Jewish secular texts was the use of a poem by the Israeli poet, Abraham Sutzkever,<sup>7</sup> in a Hasidic girls' school in a class on the Yiddish language, and the Holocaust in particular. Notably, the poet's name was not mentioned but a written copy of the poem with questions and notes on meanings of words was included. This was the one formal study of literature as literature encountered, and the only one that crossed secular-Hasidic lines.

### **Creativity: Limits and Forms of Yiddish**

Because Hasidim are extremely bounded in acceptable forms of cultural expression, they elaborate those few cultural avenues open to them. They also often adapt outside cultural forms selectively and in "deliberate ways," in an interplay between tradition and modernity, a "tension between the desire to maintain a distinct identity and to adapt to the ways of a modern culture."<sup>8</sup> Cultural insulation has led to development of culture-internal forms of expression. Only selected modes of modes of entertainment are permitted and many others are totally forbidden. Within the strict bounds of a strict tradition, those areas of life that do permit creative expression tend to manifest surprising creativity.

Hasidic culture is imbued with the vitality of strong believers, a sense of historical mission and of a collective future. Passion, energy, and devotion are channeled into the perpetuation of institutions needed to build up communities, communities mainly derived from Holocaust survivors who together possess a collective need to rebuild, to instruct, and to repopulate their community with the vitality of Hasidic life. Central to creativity is spiritual life and Torah study. The religious tradition has ascribed the highest form of literary creativity to commentaries, which, according to the greatest historian of Yiddish, Max Weinreich, have historically enriched the language:

Words, phrases, sayings, proverbs from the most diverse areas of life were streaming into the language from the pious books. The imagery of these books was alive in the student.<sup>9</sup>

This religious tradition continues to be the core of creativity. Conscious artistry for its own sake is discouraged. Piety, and not artistic virtuosity, is the motivation for music or the shaping of words. Thus "Art" for the glory of the artist, for entertainment, for reviews or money-making is peripheral to cultural norms. Yet Hasidim, many of whom are adept at narration and sing well, have a secure place within the confines of what is permitted:

Within Judaism there is a continuum of "great" and "small" traditions. Great traditions include rituals, customs, and ideologies shared by all Jews; small traditions encompass those variations which are particular to a Jewish community such as the Hasidim.<sup>10</sup>

Ritualized forms of creative expression have their places in life cycle events and in worship and holidays. There is also place for expression in educational functions like school performances and classroom activities. The following selections of oral and written work in Yiddish demonstrate the variety, range, and idiomatic nature of the uses of Yiddish.

### **Oral Culture and Music**

For Hasidim, Yiddish is basically a spoken language, at its best in oral uses, in discussion (Talmudic and other), storytelling, and humorous monologues, jokes, parables and narratives. Because speakers are multilingual, there are many puns and bilingual word plays.

As part of the oral tradition, music is an extremely important part of Hasidic life. Even without words, traditional and new melodies, *nigunim*, are an essential part of spirituality and of religious devotion.<sup>11</sup> Musical expression includes a wide range of narrative songs. Songs may be musical settings for religious texts in *Loshn koydesh* or in Yiddish narratives that make a moral-religious point, tell a story, or evoke a sentiment. Some songs are exquisitely simple, while others are in the form of lengthy narrative poems.

Despite the fact that Hasidim forbid themselves many public forms of diversion such as television and radio, they do provide their own culture-internal media, eagerly employing modern technology. A flourishing local market has evolved for a variety of cassette and videotape recordings (televisions are allowed to be used in this way) of slide shows for women or in lectures (*shiurim*) and especially in music.



### # 1. *School Songs for Girls*

In the world of Hasidim, song is not only for a few performers or leaders, but for everyone. Singing is taught from an early age and used extensively in education. Song are important for the everyday lives of boys and girls, each in their separate schools, and for men and women. Women are not permitted to sing in the presence of men, and so they sing only within their own social spaces. Girls are taught many songs throughout their schooling, and music is a central educational tool, enhancing rote memorization.

A field recording of a Satmar girls' elementary school in 1990 provides a number of Yiddish songs and poems from a group of fourth grade girls. Here is part of a song they performed. The song is petitionary, the deity addressed directly in the second person familiar and the girls avowing that they have no one else. In their Jewish martyrdom, the song declared that Jews are a mere joke to outsiders. The song is a social reinforcement for descendants of a Holocaust generation:

Ikh vays dokh az di bist inzer Got,  
Mir hobn nisht kaynem, nor dir aynem, in dayn  
nomen iz Hashem Ekhad. . . . far di goyim,  
Mir zenen dokh a gelekhter bay zay.

I know that you are our God.  
We have no one, only you alone, and your name  
is Hashem, the One ... for other nations, "we are a mockery to them."

This kind of song is one of bonding and taking a stance against outsiders.

Girls of the Boyan sect also presented poems about the Hebrew lunar calendary, about the Jewish new year, the days of the week, about duty to one's parents, and the love of Yiddish and *Loshn koydesh*.

### # 2. *Commercial Cassettes: Kol Yeshurun*

A wide range of commercial musical cassettes are sold in haredi specialty and gift shops. A particular example I will bring to this discussion is a commercial recording by an Israel based group of men, called Kol Yeshurun, of the Viznitz Hasidim. They produced a collection of traditional religious songs. These songs are sometimes accompanied by simple instrumentation — most commonly the synthesizer, keyboard, or

accordion.

The first song I'll mention is one that is drawn from an old source. In this song, the Jewish singer first compares the Jewish exile or diaspora (*goles*) to the great forest. Finally the holy spirit (*shekhine*) is praised for its beauty and invoked to join "us" as exile is banished. The mood of the song is evocative, pouring forth a deep longing for redemption:

Gules, gules, vi groys biste,  
Shkhine hak'doyshe, vi vat biste.  
Ven dus gules volt klener geveyn  
Volt di shkhine nenter geveyn.

Gules, gules, vi groys biste.  
Shkhine hak'doyshe, vi shayn biste.  
Gules, gules, ver avekgenomen  
Lomir zikh shoyen bayde tsizamenkimen

Exile, exile how long you are,  
Holy Spirit, how far away you are.  
If our exile were shorter,  
The Spirit would be nearer.

Exile, exile, exile, how vast you are,  
Holy Spirit, how beautiful you are.  
Exile, exile, begone.  
Let us be reunited.

This song is attributed to Rabbi Yitskhok Ayzik Taub of Hungary (1751-1821), who is credited with introducing Hasidism to Hungary. According to legend, the Rabbi heard a shepherd singing a love song and sanctified the song to express Hasidic longings. <sup>12</sup>

On the same cassette, another longer narrative song-poem, "Kabules Toyre" ("Receiving the Torah"), draws an allegory from a well-known midrash. It begins in fairy tale fashion with a king who seeks a husband for his only daughter. She is rejected by a peasant and then by a wealthy person, both of whom fear they won't know what to do with a king's daughter. Finally a Jewish family takes her, and the generous king endows the family with many rewards until the young couple begins to quarrel. Then the king withdraws his rewards until the couple reunites in harmony.

The audience is told that this story is a *moshl* or parable in which the king represents the all powerful one and the daughter is the Torah. This marriage is the marriage of the Torah to the people of Israel. Harmony is achieved at the end when the people accept the Torah at the time of the coming of the Messiah, when the Temple will be rebuilt. The verses are highly structured, rhyming, and divided into two parallel halves, the fulcrum being the explanation of the parable. The overall effect of this song is mesmerizing: The deity characterized as a patient parent.

Yet another sort of narrative song is found in "Az Nisht Kayn" ("Without Any"), which is didactic in nature, repetitively setting a basic teaching formula to a lilting melody. The song is in the form of an acrostic in which the variable words call for the alphabetical insertion of a set of Jewish values. The corresponding line tells us that without each of these values we will have no reason to function or even occupy space on this earth. Each stanza refers to the lack of value for money if one doesn't have [fill in the blank with a value].

Verse 1:

Az nisht kayn emune [begins with an aleph] tsizamen mitn gelt  
Vuszhe toyg dir di gantse velt . . .

If you don't have faith along with your money  
What use is your whole world?

Music is not for mere entertainment or ornament. These songs are highly functional, and are sung in schools and sold on cassette. These examples above are a small sample of an extensive repertoire. Most songs are never recorded or available commercially.

### # 3. *Badkhones* and *Tkhines*: Women's Voices

Two creative forms in Yiddish that are of particular significance toward women are *Badkhones* (monologue poem-songs for brides) and *tkhines* (prayers [women are usually not considered able to pray in *Loshn koydesh*]). *Badkhones* poems are normally sung at a wedding and not for public consumption. An example of a story-poem of recent vintage is the subject of an exploration by Kahane-Newman.<sup>13</sup> In the poem she recorded, there is clearly a creative process at work, one that demonstrates active use of a mix of Yiddish with *Loshn koydesh*. There is even evidence of the

creation of new verbs based on existing Yiddish grammatical mechanisms, drawing heavily from active Hebrew grammatical forms:

*Kale, di vayst dokh fin dir alayn  
 Kayner darf dir dus nisht gebn tsi farshstayn  
 Az yetst ven di tist dem derhoybenem shrut  
 Vi derhoybn iz yede minit.  
 Zay metsamtsem dayne makhshuves in rayones  
 Vayl dir tsi shtern zikht der sutn mit takhbiles shoynes  
 Er lost dir nisht kimen tsim tsil  
 Vayl er vayst az di kenst oyftin fil*

*Oh bride, you know on your own,  
 No one needs to make you understand  
 That when you take this exalted step  
 How exalted is every minute.  
 Limit your thoughts and ideas  
 For Satan tries to waylay you with sundry tricks.  
 He doesn't let you reach your goal  
 Because he knows you can accomplish so much. <sup>14</sup>*

In this segment, the bride, at a vulnerable moment in her life, is instructed by her fellow women to guard against evil thoughts, thus reinforcing societal values. This poem is unusual in that it is the product of a women, to be sung to a women. Usually *Badkhones* singers have been men.

#### **# 4. Purim Plays: Bobover Hasidim**

The Purim play among Bobover Hasidim<sup>15</sup> is an example of how socially acceptable avenues provide an opportunity for an explosion of creativity. The Bobover Hasidim of Boro Park, New York, produce elaborate comedramas that demonstrate considerable creativity. The plays by no means adhere to the biblical story of Esther, but usually involve Jews who are in peril and the ensuing miraculous solutions:

The Bobover meticulously observe a number of activities required by the Jewish code on Purim: the fast of Esther . . . and since there is considerable freedom from the major prohibitions

and the atmosphere is more relaxed than at other occasions during the year, Hasidim have been able to develop their own theology and their own distinct Purim activities.<sup>16</sup>

Performances at Purim plays are well attended and, as an offshoot, cassette tapes of the Purim dramas are sold at local bookshops. The Hasidim are not exposed to drama in other forms and, therefore, are freer to invent their own forms within their traditional framework. Purim plays are readily available in Yiddish on cassette in larger haredi bookshops.

A review of several taped plays reveals certain linguistic patterns that appear to be common devices for characterizing certain stock characters. The plays often contain pious Jews, whose speeches usually take the form of rhyming paired couplets. Speeches of these pious Jews are rich in *Loshn koydesh*. Hostile *goyim* (non-Jews) usually attack, brutalize, beat, or kidnap hapless Hasidim and their children. Villains usually speak a mix of Yiddish and non-Jewish languages, such as Polish or English, and notably use no *Loshn koydesh*. In one of the plays a character who is presented as humorous is a Litvak, a non-Hasidic haredi, whose mock Lithuanian-Yiddish accent is highly exaggerated. The language of the Purim play tapes is richly idiomatic, the acting often exaggerated for comic effect, full of loud wailing and moaning. Pious moments are often marked by synthesizer music in the background and rhyming couplets. The use of language mixing and dialects for the baser characters, along with no rhyme, shows how language functions to depict lofty, clownish, or base character. The differentiation in verbal style of heroes and villains suggests also that the actors have a sense of what type of language is appropriate to the characters. All the actors are male, and female characters are not encountered at all.

The following is an example of humor in *A Seder in Dorf: Purim Play*.<sup>17</sup> the narrator tells of a seder he attended when he was in the old country *esn teg* (that is, when Yeshiva students eat at different sponsors' homes on different days, sometimes going hungry). The hero was eating at the home of the *dayan* (judge), who stingily gave him only challah to dunk in the liquid from the gefilte fish. The student was so hungry he ate the entire challah and sopped up all the fish juice. The judge then told of the parting of the Red Sea, saying that all they needed then were some students like him, who would have sopped up the Red Sea with challah, making the miracle unnecessary.

These taped Purim plays may be listened to year- round and provide a ready-made vehicle for (male) dramatic, musical, or humorous talent.

### Written Creativity in Yiddish

Written Yiddish continues to be extremely limited in Hasidic communities, in keeping with the traditional role of Yiddish. The vernacular role of Yiddish was described (at an important conference in Tsernovits on the fate of Yiddish held almost a century ago) as follows:

[The Yiddish language] was a traditional utilitarian one, and it continues to be evinced primarily by ultra-Orthodox spokesmen to this very day. In accord with this view Yiddish was (and is) to be utilized in print for various moralistic and Halakhic educational purposes because it has long been used in this way, particularly in publications for women, the uneducated and children.<sup>18</sup>

Relatively little is currently being published in Yiddish by the Hasidim in proportion to its vernacular uses. Bookshops for the religious stock very little in Yiddish, and most of what is there is for younger children, who are expected to be able to read and write in Hebrew or English by the time they reach older grades.

Hasidic newspapers, for example *Der Yid* and *News Report/Di Tsaytung*, are weekly publications, produced in New York and distributed worldwide. There is very little that is intended to be literary in these newspapers, but there are some items that have explicit or incidental entertainment as well as educational value.

Yiddish newspapers have, since their inception, provided multiple means of information along with serialized stories, fictional or historical. Present-day examples of such accounts include a serial in *Der Yid* called "Vu iz Yosele," which was provided in dramatic weekly installments. It dramatically narrates the story of an event that took place in the 1960s — the "kidnapping" of a small boy, Yosele Shumakher, to prevent his being raised by his parents, who had strayed from Orthodoxy. Another genre is the recounting of personal and historical experiences, especially from the Holocaust. There are even fictional adventure-style narratives. One such, in *Di Tsaytung*, is about a hidden CIA agent.

The greatest creativity appears to be the avenue of commercial advertisement, which, not being literature, is not as restricted as other

forms of writing. Thus many of the ads are extremely entertaining, more open to flights of the pen. An advertisement for Old Williamsburg Old Sour Mash is a case in point. This advertisement, carried in the *Tzaytung*, creates an image of a pious Jew enjoying great pleasure:

*Nokh dem vos er hot farendigt dos davenen! . . . leygt er tzuzam (dem) tales oyfn knaytsh, kloybt tzuzam dem klayngelt fun unter'n siderl un shtelt es tsurik arayn di linke hand inem linkn arbl fun rekl, zetzt zikh avek baym tish, (velkhe vert momental balagert mit mentshn), nemt dem bronfn glezl in di rekhte hant, un (dem) flash in di linke, un gist zikh on fun dem faynem geshmakh shnaps, un makht hagbah mit'n glezl be'erkh a tofe, un grayt zikh tsum gliklikhn moment ven er zogt mit a fayerdign bren ....*

After he has ended his prayer, he takes loose change from under his prayerbook and places it back in to his left hand and into the left sleeve of his jacket, sits down at the table (which is soon to be full of people), takes the whiskey glass in his right hand and the bottle in his left, and pours himself some of the fine, tasty brandy and prepares for the happy moment when he will say, in a fiery way ....<sup>19</sup>

The text is accompanied by a drawing of an elderly, bearded Hasid holding up a glass in semi-darkness.

Some storytelling has been transcribed by outsiders. Such a case is Yaffa Eliach's collection of miraculous tales set in the Holocaust.<sup>20</sup> There is at least one haredi novel available in print, titled *Geknipt un Gebinden*.<sup>21</sup> And while the literature of the *maskilim* is off bounds, there are even adventure stories, such as a serial story of a CIA mystery that has been running in *Di Tsaytung* newspaper, "Der Gekhapter C.I.A. Farreter" ("The Captured CIA Betrayer").<sup>22</sup> These are signs of haredim drawing from secular sources, albeit cautiously.

### Religious Roots of Haredi Yiddish and the Haskalah

"Then" for Yiddish as a language of Haredim, ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi Jews, covers a span of a thousand years. Hasidim have created songs, prayers, poems, memoirs, and stories in Yiddish for hundreds of years. During this lengthy "then," Yiddish and its sister, *Loshn koydesh* (the

holy language, a mix of Hebrew and Aramaic), were inextricably intertwined. The very origins of Yiddish are traceable to the adaptation of Middle High German to the separate cultural-religious needs of Jewish life. Thus, Judeo-German or "Yiddish" was an outgrowth of what linguist Max Weinreich refers to as "the Way of the ShaS," Talmud constituting the "permanent foundation code; law and custom (that) regulate the life of the Jew. . . ." <sup>23</sup>

The Haskalah (Jewish modernity or Enlightenment) spawned harsh attitudes towards Yiddish. To this day, Haredim are self-protective against such attitudes. Proponents of Haskalah, *maskilim* (singular *maskil*), flung harsh attacks at the language associated with the pious tradition. Their charges included accusations of a lack of linguistic purity on the part of those whom they viewed as backward, religious fanatics. The pious, *maskilim* contended, didn't speak a proper language but a "jargon," were lax in both Yiddish and Hebrew, were inattentive to grammar, were too open to outside elements, and, compounding their sins, "polluted" their German dialect. Such were the accusations articulated by the notable proponent of Haskalah, Solomon Maimon (1753-1800), who spoke of those still in "Talmudic darkness."<sup>24</sup> In his antipathy to Yiddish, Maimon held it to be "full of defects and grammatical inaccuracies." For him, Yiddish was inextricably connected to a rejected and vilified Talmudic world.

A later *maskil* in Russia, Isaac Dov Levinsohn, in the early nineteenth century characterized Yiddish as follows:

This language [Yiddish] which we speak here in this country, which we borrowed from the Germans and which is called Judeo-German, this language is completely corrupted. This corruption is a consequence of the eclectic nature of the language, a mixture of corrupted words taken from Hebrew, Russian, French, Polish as well as from German, and even the German words are mispronounced as slurred. Moreover, this, our language, cannot serve us except for popular usage and simple conversations. If we wish to formulate concepts about higher things, Judeo-German will not suffice.<sup>25</sup>

Levinsohn's vituperative hammering on the word "corrupt" reflects his powerful sense of defilement. His solution was for all Jews to learn their national language perfectly. This is what ultimately came to pass for



the bulk of Jews. Partially in reaction to such attacks, *veltlikhe* (worldly) advocates for Yiddish argued that it too could be adapted to accommodate the demands of modernity as a Jewish national language. They set about creating literary genres for Yiddish, writing a world-class literature, establishing grammatical standards, rules of spelling and pronunciation, limiting borrowings, and creating dictionaries. But those who remained pious scorned such activity and continued in their own vein.

The issue between the very Orthodox and *maskilim* was philosophical and religious. But language became a symbol of this dispute. After all, what does it mean to defile a language and what is language purity? When do people become upset over perceived ignobility in a language? These are, ultimately, social judgments rather than linguistic ones. The more pressing linguistic concerns at present relate to the prospects for language attrition, losses in grammatical forms, diminishing vocabulary, reduction in mechanisms, loss of idioms and related figures of speech, since, in secular Jewish circles, Yiddish is disappearing rapidly. Yet, to the person educated in literary Yiddish, the evidence of Hasidic misspellings and minor dialect variations by Hasidim evokes dismay even though it is, to all intents, only Hasidim who keep the language as a living vernacular.

Dialects and standard forms of languages are a function of the social structure of a community and how they perceive themselves with respect to others:

One of the most solid achievements of linguistics in the twentieth century has been to eliminate the idea (at least among professional linguists) that some languages or dialects are inherently "better" than others. Linguists are willing to recognize that some varieties of language are considered by the layman to be better than others, but they point out that each variety displays characteristics common to all human language, such as being rule governed, and that even the least prestigious language varieties may reveal an impressively complex set of structural patterns.<sup>26</sup>

For the same reason that Scots and Jamaicans speak their versions of English, Hasidim prefer their own forms of Yiddish, and one group's authority on what is acceptable will not have much sway over another. The Academie in Paris cannot dictate how someone in Quebec pronounces French, nor does YIVO, the Yiddish Research Institute, with its origins in Vilna, hold much sway with the Hungarian-Yiddish of the Satmar

Hasidim.

The founders of Yiddish literature took a middle ground, not fully rejecting their traditional, religious roots. Instead, the first generation of Yiddish literati sought to elevate Yiddish to modernity, while keeping their feet planted in tradition. In other words, they looked to the future in a dynamic tension. They did not want to sacrifice Yiddishkeit (the essence of being Yiddish whether it be ethnic, religious, or some combination of the two). Between "then" and "now," a mere century ago, there was a world of activity in Yiddish with eleven million native speakers, only a fraction of whom were Hasidic. Now the balance has shifted, so that Yiddish is mainly in the domain of the strictly pious.

### **Linguistic Openness, Language Mixing, Errors and Standards**

Though the context of the Haskalah has changed, secular Yiddishists and Hasidim periodically attack each other on the form and character of Yiddish. Hasidim are criticized for their linguistic openness, for an apparent sloppiness, for borrowing and language mixing. Indeed, Hasidic attitudes on language purity have not changed: they are still not rigid or burdened with the need to be representative of "high culture," admitting intrusion by other languages and demonstrating considerable variability in spelling and pronunciation.

For the most part, the intrusion of a foreign words, language mixing, and misspellings are not subject to much attention unless they interfere with comprehension, though they do serve to identify the background of the speaker. The community itself is bilingual or multilingual, knowing different languages with different degrees of proficiency. This fact alone might augment tolerance. Speakers are also accustomed to mixing languages. Yiddish language newspapers in New York will advertise a *rum tsu farentn* (a room to rent) and a youth in Antwerp can advise me that to get somewhere *di mist ariberkrosh di strit* (you must cross the street). Hasidic Yiddish, either in spoken form or in writing, is neither random nor without internal norms or standards and holds to a significant extent to literary forms. In spoken Yiddish one will hear various dialects derived mainly from Hungarian, Southern Yiddish, rather than the Lithuanian, northern Yiddish.

Speakers adhere to the basic rules of Yiddish grammar — that is, descriptive rather than prescriptive grammar. Variation in language is not

seen as faulty or fragmentary knowledge of a language. Many Hasidim and other Haredim do have poor or partial knowledge of Yiddish, but social responses are such that making linguistic mistakes will not result in embarrassment or stop communication.

A few Hasidim are troubled by errors in Yiddish and major interference by other languages, especially Ivrit. Israeli schoolteachers in Yiddish schools are concerned about intrusions of Ivrit. In a recent article, Hershl Friedman, a columnist for *Der Yid*, a Hasidic paper published in Brooklyn, mocks Israeli Hasidim who profess to know Yiddish, but who really produce Ivrit with Yiddish words. The example he cites is that Israeli students will say *hayungermanim hayerushalayimim* in Ivrit-Yiddish (for *Yerushalayimdiger yungemener* in actual Yiddish) to mean "young men from Jerusalem." <sup>27</sup>

Transgression of acceptable writing is in terms of sanctity. For an (Israeli) Satmar school principal, the misspelling of words of Hebrew origin was considered the most significant travesty on the part of Soviet Yiddishists, who extended basic phonetic spelling to words from *Loshn koydesh*, meeting anti-religious demands as well as concerns for simplification. Since the Hebrew words are considered sacred, this form of writing is the most important example of where writing conventions do count. <sup>28</sup>

A result of linguistic mixing may well be the augmentation of creativity. If one doesn't have to worry about making mistakes, there may be a greater freedom to innovate. Variation in spelling, pronunciation, grammatical forms such as gender assignment and use of non-standard pronouns signal error and ignorance to those who are attuned to standard Yiddish. But they have little or no significance to those whose orientation towards language is as a reinforcer of identity and means of communication. Because Hasidim have multiple linguistic sources, their creative verbal expression involves considerable punning, bilingual jokes, and general play with language. There is also considerable use of language mixing and dialect variation as a creative rhetorical device. Writers in literary Yiddish drew freely from traditional and religious roots. <sup>29</sup> Not only did this broaden their range of linguistic expression, notably including *Loshn koydesh* alongside the languages of the street, but they could also achieve

remarkable literary effects. Yiddish itself was a language of great plasticity, neither set nor formalized, always in rapid process of growth and dissolution; it was a language intimately reflecting the travail of wandering, exile, dispersion, a language drenched with the idiom. . . . When the first major Yiddish writers appeared toward the end of the nineteenth century, the language did not impose upon them any stylized patterns of expression — which allowed them verbal spontaneity and improvisation but also forced them to create, as it were, the very standards of usage from which they were already deviating. At its peak, however, Yiddish was neither a folk voice nor a sophisticated "literary" language. It was open at both sides, still responsive to the voice of the folk yet beginning to model itself on literary patterns of the West. . . . It is almost inevitable that in speaking of Yiddish literature one should refer to an inner dialectic, a tension of the counterposed elements: the traditional past and the immediate experience, the religious structure and the secular infiltration, the folk voice and the modern literary accent.<sup>30</sup>

Hasidic Yiddish kept producing and creating in its own way, possessing a sense of "historicity" and resisting "standardization and a sense of forming a Jewish national unity."

Language choices are indicative of deep differences between secular and haredi attitudes. The historic ruptures between orthodoxy and modernism still echo in negative attitudes towards Yiddish and towards the Hasidim on the part of many mainstream Jews. This process has resulted in two separate streams of language function. One outcome of modernity and immigration is Judaism in translation. In accepting modernity, Jews inhabit a world in which day-to-day life demands the constant and accurate (translate as upper-class) use of the standard form of the national language. Those who use a minority language or a non-standard dialect, even if they do so bilingually, are often accused of separatism and suffer social consequences. Adhering to a misplaced linguistic and cultural teleology, many believe that traditional religious Jews were replaced by a "higher" level of Yiddish and its attendant literary achievement. Following the destruction of the Holocaust, the paths of secular and orthodox Judaism led in differing directions, divergent ways of life. Each perspective pulls and tugs at the other while at the same time polarizing one another.

Hasidim are not slow to dismiss secular Jews. For example, they

negate, dismiss, and scoff at mainstream Jews in Purim plays and farces. For instance, *Shushanes Yakov* by Yomtov Erlich<sup>31</sup> tells a comic tale of a Jew who goes off to look for Yiddishkeit and wanders into (bizarre) places like Jewish Community Centers and Conservative synagogues where, like a Hasidic Gulliver, he encounters gross distortions of Jewish life.

Hasidic attitudes toward language and art, as Ruth Wisse points out, must be viewed in their own terms:

Members of these communities are devoted to Jewish law, not language; they study and pray in Hebrew, using Yiddish translations when necessary, and speak English when they have to. . . . For these observant Jews, making language into an ideology would constitute a form of idolatry. Language becomes an end in itself only as a poor substitute for God.<sup>32</sup>

Hasidic devotion to both Yiddish and *Loshn koydesh* is expressed in many poems and songs and in active use of the languages (rather than in scholarly work about the languages). Hasidim do pay considerable attention to Yiddish and its creative uses. Indeed, the language is not central nor is it idolized. Yet this is true for the vast run of humanity, who tend to take native languages for granted. There is even a serial column in the Satmar paper, *Der Yid*, in which writer Hershl Friedman honors Yiddish, albeit the honor is a homey one rather than a lofty one and is tempered. He values Yiddish as *mame loshn* (mother tongue), in keeping with the function of Yiddish as the language of the home. It is a language, he claims, requiring no effort: *es redt zikh* (it speaks itself) as an acquired language not given formal, standardized reinforcement. Friedman claims that Yiddish is not like other languages, a common sentiment among Satmar Hasidim, but that it is more than just a *farkrimter Daytsh* (a twisted German). Unlike his secular Yiddishist counterparts, he does allow that by its detractors Yiddish may be termed a *zhargon*, a *tsunomen vos unfarginer hobn tsugeshrin tsu Yidish* (that is, a jargon, a label given by those who will not give Yiddish any value). Friedman accepts the name jargon, at the same time extolling the language for its richness:

. . . ober mir shemen zikh nisht mit dem tsunomen, di maskilim fun Odes oder Tshernovitz hobn zikh geshemt mitn tsutshepenish "zhargon" ober mir shemen zikh nisht damit. Der iyker iz nokh in tokhn . . . raykhe, kraftige un zaftige shprakh. . . .<sup>33</sup>

We are not ashamed of the term. The *maskilim* from Odessa or Tshernovitz were ashamed of the stigma of "jargon" attached to us, but we are not ashamed of it. The essential point is that at bottom (we have) a rich, powerful, and juicy language.

Rather than arguing that Yiddish is a proper language, Friedman states that Hasidim are not ashamed of the appellation "jargon." In the Hasidic framework, Yiddish is not treated as an ordinary language. To do so would remove its status as the language of a Hasidic home in a society where home is as central as synagogue.

Hasidic written Yiddish is not without attention to the form of Yiddish. Written Yiddish does follow some of its own normative standards, but with considerable variability. The apparent carelessness over spelling of words of non-*Loshn koydesh* origins and over the gender of certain nouns is matched by carelessness over spelling in English.

### **Prospects for the Future**

Within the constraints of their cultural framework, Hasidim are continuing to develop the Yiddish language in their new homes in America, Israel, and elsewhere. New poems are being created, while old songs are released as recordings. Books are being published, stories and jokes are being told in Yiddish. There is an ever increasing number of Yiddish speaking children in Hasidic schools reading from Yiddish mimeo sheets and primers.

Hasidim have taken an approach that differs from the remainder of Jewish society in maintaining two minority languages, one for prayer and one for cultural continuity. Of the two, the former is essential and the latter desirable. They take it as a desirable goal to keep Yiddish, not solely as a barrier against the outside but as a tool to keep their young within their culture.

What all this means for non-Hasidic Jews is the acknowledgment that once a culture has lost its language, it takes a far greater effort to restore a sense of identity. Learning a Jewish language purely as a foreign language divorced from a religious or ethnic framework does not have the same effect as creating a language community and using that language as part of a larger, community-oriented framework. Part of establishing a language community is that, in everyday speech, Yiddish and Hebrew expressions function best on their own terms and can be left that way

rather than translated. One can say *yarmulke* rather than skullcap, *rakhmones* instead of pity, and keep a sense of historical continuity.

Finally, if non-haredi Jews can bypass their antipathies towards Hasidim and be open to those positive aspects of their cultural preservation and innovation in Yiddish language (as there has been an openness to Hasidic melodies and stories), there is the potential for mutual cultural enrichment. There has been a generational erosion of basic knowledge of Jewish life moving away from the immigrant generation. For many, now, traditional knowledge is being passed on through books and dictionaries. The time has come to suspend judgment and to continue to learn from one another. Therefore, in praising Yiddish literary achievement one should not, in the same breath, hold up Hasidic Yiddish as substandard, since the great Yiddish writers of an earlier era were spawned within the context of a religious, traditional world.

Concluding with a metaphor, if one views the combination of Yiddish and Hebrew (*Loshn koydesh*) as a fabric, then literature, humor, theater, and song are forms of embroidery. For educators to reconstruct an awareness of Yiddishkeit in translation, without the basic language, is to retrieve the bits of thread, but to mount them on wood or cardboard. Among the larger bits of intact fabric are the various Hasidic communities, functioning in the original languages as a living tapestry of Yiddish.

## Notes

1 The bulk of my information comes from extensive interviews and field observations in Israel between 1986 and 1991 and in the U.S. since 1991. Most of my observations have been of Hasidim of various sects. Published research includes the work of S.C. Heilman, "Sounds of Modern Orthodoxy: The Language of Torah Study," in *Never Say Die: A Thousand Years of Yiddish*, ed. J. Fishman (The Hague: Mouton, 1981); Solomon Poll, "The Role of Yiddish in American Ultra-Orthodox and Hassidic Communities," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Studies* 13 (1965); Janet Belcove-Shalin, ed., *New World Hasidim: Ethnographic Studies of Hasidic Jews in America* (Syracuse: SUNY Press, 1995); L. Glinert and Y. Shilhav, "Holy Land Holy Language: a Study of Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Ideology," *Language and Society* 20 (1992): 59-96; Jerome R. Mintz, *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Simon Sussholtz, "Who Needs Yiddish?" in Fishman, *Never Say Die*.

- 2 Hasidim argue that they are preserving their pasts. A number of studies in Belcove-Shalin, *New World Hasidim*, collectively make a strong case for reconstruction of the past in new ways.
- 3 Hershl Friedman, "Shela Shinui Et Halashon," *Der Yid* (Oct. 11, 1966), 46.
- 4 Personal communication with wife of Lubavitch Hasid in Burlington, Vermont, in 1995.
- 5 Ruth Wisse, "Shul Daze," *New Republic* (May 27, 1966), 16-19.
- 6 Examples of processes are presented in a description of a group of Montreal-area Hasidim in William Shaffir, "Boundaries and Self Preservation among the Hasidim," in Belcove-Shalin, *New World Hasidim*, 31-68.
- 7 Abraham Sutzkever, "Di Blayene Platn Fun Rom Pres," in *Avrom Sutzkever's Poetishe Verk*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv, 1963).
- 8 Janet Belcove-Shalin, "Home in Exile: Hasidim in the New World," in Belcove-Shalin, *New World Hasidim*, 205-236.
- 9 Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, translated by Joshua and Shlomo Noble (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 209.
- 10 Shifra Epstein, "The Bobover Hasidim Piremshpiyl: From Folk Drama for Purim to a Ritual of Transcending the Holocaust," in Belcove-Shalin, *New World Hasidim*, 237-255.
- 11 Ellen Koskoff, "The Language of the Heart: Music in Lubavitcher Life," in Belcove-Shalin, *New World Hasidim*, 87-106.
- 12 This song is on a cassette recording of Kol Yeshurun, *Zmirot Yisroel: nigunei Yerim V'Hasidim B'Yidish*, vols. aleph and bet (Israel, no date). "Gules, gules" is on bet. It is available commercially in shops catering to Hasidim. It stands as an example of the use of secular material for religious purposes by a tsadik. It exemplifies the process of adaptation. For further background information, see A.Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Music in its Historical Development* (New York: Schocken, 1967): 418.
- 13 Zelda K. Kahane-Newman, "Badkhones: A Satmar Poem Sung to a Bride," to appear in *Pious Voices: The Languages of Ultra-orthodox Jews*, edited by L. Glinert and M. Isaacs.
- 14 The performer and writer are women, and the work is original. See Zelda Kahane-Newman, op. cit.
- 15 Epstein, "The Bobover Hasidim Piremshpiyl."
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Y. Follman, *A Seder in Dorf: a Purim Play* (Bobov Hasidim, 1993); Y. Follman, *A Gantze Nakht Shlogt Men Nisht* (Bobov Hasidim, 1994); S. Sandel, *In Gerangel Fun Yeoash: Geshpilt Durkh Haymishe Yingelayt* (Purim 1978).
- 18 J. Fishman, "Attracting a Following to High-Culture Functions for a Language of Everyday Life: The Role of the Tshernovits Language Conference



in the 'Rise of Yiddish,'" *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 24 (1980): 43-73, esp. 45.

19 From a running advertisement for a brand of whiskey in *The News Report (Di Tzaytung)* (Brooklyn, NY: 1995). Variations on standard grammar and pronunciation are in keeping with Hasidic norms for Yiddish.

20 Yaffa Eliach, *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

21 Chava Rosenberg, *Geknipt un Gebindn (Knotted and Bound)* (Brooklyn, NY: Mekor Khayim Pub.). Available in haredi bookshops and especially popular in the US and Israel, this relatively new phenomenon of a novel for Hasidim is perhaps not unlike the appeal for the classic Yiddish tale of errant knights of the fifteenth century, the *Bovo Bukh*, in that it appeals to women especially who want a good story.

22 These are written by P. Royz. The 56th in the series was published in *The News Report (Di Tsaytung)* on Friday, March 28, 1997.

23 Weinreich, *Yiddish Language*, 209.

24 Solomon Maimon, "My Emergence from Talmudic Darkness," in *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, ed. Paul Mendez-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980): 215-218.

25 Isaac Dov Levinsohn, "Yiddish is a Corrupt Jargon," in Mendez-Flohr, *Jew in the Modern World*, 324f. Originally published in Vilna in 1828.

26 R.A. Hudson, *Sociolinguistics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980): 191.

27 Friedman, "Shela Shinui et Haloshon."

28 For a historical discussion of Yiddish in terms of status, see Fishman, "Attracting a Following to High-Culture." In the Hasidic context, "high" and "low" are viewed in radically different terms.

29 These were often tightly intertwined by the first generations of Yiddish literary figures, despite the apparent fighting against religious established order.

30 Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, *Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (New York: Schocken, 1973): 28.

31 Yomtov Erlich is a popular figure among Stoln Karlin and other Hasidim and has produced many tapes of monologues in song form. The one here referred to mocks non-haredi Judaism by having a "real" Jew go out and look for Yiddishkeit in places like Jewish centers and Conservative synagogues. He pokes fun at the ignorance and narrow linguistic scope of modern Jews and leaves the hero to return to his own fold without having found any Yiddishkeit among these others. The cassette is *Shushanes Yakov Fun Yomtov* (Jerusalem: Ehrlikh Galpaz, no date).

32 Wisse, "Shul Daze."

33 Hershl Friedman, "Vi Sheyn un Raykh iz di Yidish Shprakh," *Der Yid* (Oct, 1996), 46. This was in a column on language that ran serially for several months.

## Longings and Belongings: Yiddish Identity and Consumer Culture

Marilyn Halter

Since the 1970s, an ethnic revival has been in motion in the United States, propelling American-born descendants of immigrants to actively reidentify with their respective ethnic heritages. The so-called "roots" phenomenon accounts for such developments as the growth of ethnic celebrations, a zeal for genealogy, increased travel to ancestral homelands, and greater interest in ethnic artifacts, cuisine, music, literature, and, of course, language. This vibrant cultural florescence has evolved, however, within the context of modern consumer capitalism. The following essay seeks to explore the broader questions of the relationship of ethnic identity formation to consumerism through an examination of the dynamics of Yiddish culture in late twentieth-century American life. <sup>1</sup>

Historically, the relationship between human beings and material objects changed significantly with the development of modernity. Whereas in the pre-modern period identities were acquired with the possessions one inherited, in modern times people most often construct their identities through purchase. This has come to include one's ethnic identification as well. Through the consumption of ethnic goods and services, descendants of immigrants modify and signal ethnic identities in social settings no longer organized around ethnic group boundaries. Earlier generations of ethnic Americans had typically defined themselves through compatriot community affiliations. By the late twentieth century in America, the fluidity inherent in such an individualistic society still holding within it large numbers of diverse religious, racial, and nationality

groups has led to a tendency to reflect and create the ethnic components of one's identity through a process of acquisition. Without consumer goods, certain acts of self-definition in this culture would be impossible.

Much has changed in the years since Margaret Mead pronounced in a 1970 essay that "being American is a matter of abstention from foreign ways, foreign food, foreign ideas, foreign accents."<sup>2</sup> Although cultivating a foreign accent may not yet be a sign of true Americanness, relearning one's ancestral tongue, eating ethnic cuisine, displaying ethnic artifacts, fostering a hyphenated identity, even reverse name-changes (back to the old-country original) have become the American way. What some viewed as a passing fad of the 1970s has only intensified as the century draws to a close.

This trend also runs directly counter to much of the general sociological literature that had predicted that the significance of ethnicity would steadily decline with the advance of modernity. Not only has ethnic identification persisted, but recent research demonstrates a correlation between higher socioeconomic status and increased educational levels with stronger rather than weakened expressions of ethnicity. Movement up the social ladder is no longer automatically assumed to be an assimilating force. The ethnic renaissance is a form of voluntary ethnicity that has made any contradictions between being American and asserting a foreign heritage disappear.<sup>3</sup>

Those seeking to reclaim a Yiddish identity are no exception to this pattern. Particularly in the last fifteen years, American Jews have enthusiastically pursued the recovery of the language, literature, and culture of their Yiddish ancestors. The explosion of Yiddishkeit goes well beyond increased enrollments in Yiddish language classes. It encapsulates the resurgence of interest in Yiddish literature buoyed by the energetic recovery, restoration, and distribution of Yiddish books and vintage films as well as a booming revival of Klezmer music and the Yiddish theater. Yiddish clubs, summer institutes, and curricula within Jewish Studies programs are proliferating as well.

What, then, is the relationship of this burgeoning Yiddishkeit to the commercial marketplace? Merely posing this question runs the risk of immediately alienating some readers. Despite the voluminous attention in both popular and scholarly literatures to the permutations of American identity in the twentieth century, in general commentators have shied away from exploring the underlying economic issues involved. The sensibilities surrounding the romance of ethnicity the nostalgia — do not

readily invite an analysis that might be equated with what are often viewed as the crasser elements of such behavior. Yet, in modern societies the one feeds the other, and, whether we like it or not, we are all deeply immersed in a commodity-driven consumer culture that daily shapes who we are and how we define ourselves.

Research reveals, however, that much of the motivation to rejuvenate Yiddish culture stems from a growing *disillusionment* with consumer society. The movement is often strengthened by a sharp critique of commercialism in favor of a more spiritual quest to find meaning and a sense of place through building bridges to a Yiddish past. This is the paradox of the business of ethnicity: The impetus to reclaim roots frequently derives from a critique of commercial culture at the same time that consumers seek to resuscitate ethnic values in the context of the marketplace. Consumerism, in effect, serves to foster greater awareness of ethnicity.

Thus, the relationship of ethnic identity to commercial endeavors becomes much more complicated than a simple linear analysis of the inevitable commodification of culture inherent in a capitalist system. Certainly for many, the ethnic revival represents the search for recognizable or familiar points of reference in a cold and impersonal world. Moreover, they see direct links between the modern life of material plenty and the perception of spiritual poverty. Rather than casting consumerism as invariably dissipating tradition, community, and meaning, however, the argument here is that it can at the same time enhance such identifications. Thus, ethnic identities are continually being reinvented to fulfill our desires to feel anchored to a stable, harmonious, and localized past despite living amidst the vast and chaotic landscapes of consumption that characterize the present.

At one level, many find themselves celebrating and demonstrating their Yiddish identity through conscious choices concerning what they buy and sell — the simple purchase of a gift mug, an apron or T-shirt with Yiddish sayings or attendance at a gathering such as the extension of the Lower East Side Jewish Festival held in June of 1996 and billed as a "voyage of discovery and rediscovery of cultural roots," where the publicity flyer enticingly promises "Hundreds of Vendors" on the premises, and where those in attendance eagerly spend their dollars on Katz's knishes, Guss' pickles or Ratner's kosher ice cream while taking in a performance by Tovah Feldshuh or tapping their feet to the music of the West End Klezmerim Band.

The Yiddish revival has also inspired small business ventures such as the start-up company, called Lasting Refrain, that markets personalized *chupahs* ranging in price from \$125 to \$2000. The company can barely keep up with the demand for orders. Or the cleverly conceived "Mashuga Nuts" label. Inventive as it is, the name doesn't quite carry over to their cookie line, so the manufacturers have included the annotation "Shortbread So Good It'll Make You Crazy" under the imperfect "Mashuga Cookies" logo. Another find for the Yiddish enthusiast is Einstein's toys, collectibles, and "museum with price tags" in downtown Philadelphia. The Jewish owners specialize in ethnic merchandise of all kinds including Russian stacking dolls and African-American toy soldiers as well as rare ethnic artifacts from popular culture such as playbills and posters. These latter items are displayed in ethnically-organized spaces in the second floor gallery — a room for original Russian paintings, a Yiddish room, a wall devoted to Irish collectibles, and so forth. But nothing quite tops the board game designed and produced by the proprietor himself called "Look at the Schmuck on that Camel" with its accompanying cassette, "Goys to Mensch," a take-off on the hugely popular black R & B group from Philadelphia, "Boys II Men." Another item for which there is such great demand that they can't keep enough on the shelf.

But the marketing of Yiddishkeit is not limited to the commercial sector alone. One of the leading non-profit organizations devoted to the preservation and revitalization of Yiddish culture is the National Yiddish Book Center based in western Massachusetts, where a new position of Director of Marketing has just been created to facilitate the shift from an operating budget supported by charitable contributions to one in which two-thirds of the funding results from earned income. As the Executive Director explained:

People no longer give for *Tsedakah* (obligations of charity) alone. They want something for their money — something that appeals to their ethnic identity. People crave products that express their identity. The Book Center is going to try to corner that market, to specialize in challenging intellectual products.<sup>4</sup>

A wonderful new facility is scheduled to open in June of 1997 on the campus of Hampshire College that will include a book repository and processing center, exhibit galleries, an auditorium, outdoor amphitheater, a sound studio, conference meeting rooms, kosher kitchen, storytelling

courtyard, and more. Although from 40,000 to 80,000 people are projected to visit in the first year alone, there will be no admission fee. Instead, the building's entire ongoing operating budget is to be covered by the Visitors' Center book store sales. The shop will be stocked with volumes in Yiddish and English, with posters, cassettes, CDs, and videos, but will also include "as many *chachkas* as they can think of . . . but tasteful." <sup>5</sup> This is not an unrealistic goal. The recently opened Norman Rockwell museum located nearby has a similar-sized gift shop supporting its own operation.

Clearly, at a local level, in business and in the non-profit sector, consumption of Yiddishkeit is flourishing. But the phenomenon reaches beyond grass-roots initiatives and penny entrepreneurship to the world of celebrities, high fashion, and multinational corporations. Even the not-for-profit Yiddish Book Center has managed to capture the imagination and committed participation of such well-known Hollywood stars as Leonard Nimoy, Walter Matthau, Lauren Bacall, Rhea Perlman, and Paul Reiser, each of whom has demonstrated a thirst to find meaning through the rediscovery of his/her Yiddish roots. In the arena of *haute couture*, designer Jean-Paul Gaultier glamorized Hasidism when he introduced his 1993 fall collection and his models stepped onto the runway wearing his startling "Hasidic Chic" creations. The extremes of commodification form the basis of representation in a 1991 commentary on Jewish identity in a mixed media piece by artists Cary Leibowitz and Rhonda Lieberman, titled "Chanel Hanukkah." In this work, the menorah is depicted by nine bright tubes of lipstick sitting atop a glimmering gold Chanel evening bag and accompanied by a gold chain necklace made of Hanukkah gelt. The "real" menorah in the picture (albeit stamped with a Chanel logo) is empty of candles but instead is used to hold bottles of Chanel perfume. <sup>6</sup> Hanukkah gelt just might be the perfect symbol for the marriage of culture and the marketplace.

Perhaps the best example of marketing Yiddish at the corporate level, however, is illustrated by the enormously successful advertising campaign launched in 1995 by AT&T to appeal to emerging ethnic communities in the United States, including not only print ads pitched to Hispanic and new Asian populations but to Irish, Italian, even British Americans. Their promotions aimed at the Jewish-American community include significant Yiddish content, such as their "With 50% Savings You Can Afford to *Kvell* All You Want" ad. Underneath a photo of grandparents *kvelling* at their grandson's Bar Mitzvah is written, "You're so proud you could just

burst. After all, such an occasion you don't celebrate every day. So go ahead and call the whole *mishpocheh*," utilizing not only the Yiddish terms *kvell* and *mishpocheh* (both untranslated) but a Yiddish cadence and syntax. In a promotional brochure put out by the communications company that developed these campaigns for AT&T, *kvell* is defined for the reader in an accompanying note as to "beam with immense pride." *Mishpocheh* is not explained, however.

Another AT&T ad, titled "More Gab, Less *Gelt*" and showing Hanukkah gelt spilling out of two open hands, was obviously, developed for the holiday season. Here we see *gelt* again, but this time, without irony. The accompanying text gives information about how to save money, but does not carry on with the *gelt* theme as does the *kvell* ad, presumably because it is a more universally understood representation that can stand on its own. However, the brochure does make sure to define *gelt* as a term for money and a traditional Hanukkah gift of chocolate coins.

Another in this series that, with the exception of the 800 number to call utilizes only text with Yiddish content, shows a frontal view of a large pig wearing a hat and dark glasses with the phrase "Something Here Just Isn't Kosher" in bold above it. Underneath the pig is written, "*Trayfe Is Trayfe*, No Matter How It's Disguised." In the fine print, it carries on with the "disguising *trafe*" motif by explaining:

Like the claims some other long distance companies have been making. That they are doing you a *mitzva*, telling you how much you can save with them. Or put charts in their ads comparing their prices to AT&T prices. Meanwhile they are comparing their discount rates to AT&T's regular rates. Which is like comparing kugel to knishes. Bagels to bialys. It's just not the same thing. So make sure you always read the fine print. And if another long distance company calls, before they give you the whole *megillah*, just tell them to put their claims in writing. Remember when something sounds too good to be true, it's usually no *metsieh*.

In this case, none of the Yiddish references are defined, not in the ad itself or in the promotional brochure. Plainly, shopping for a Yiddish identity has become big business for contemporary consumer society. At least within the Jewish sector and largely because of the need for kosher products, brand-name advertising such as the recent AT&T campaign does have historical precedents, dating back as far as the early part of the

century when, in 1913, Proctor & Gamble proclaimed that "the Hebrew Race Had Been Waiting 4,000 Years" for the recently invented all-vegetable Crisco shortening. The company continued to promote its product by publishing a cookbook, "Crisco Recipes for the Jewish Housewife," in Yiddish and English. In the mid-1930s, the head of Maxwell House Coffee, in an attempt to expand his consumer base, determined that coffee beans were classified as berries and thus could be declared kosher for Passover. He went on to popularize the brand by distributing Maxwell House Passover Hagadahs free to Jewish customers.<sup>7</sup>

The American kosher market is a rapidly expanding segment of today's food industry with promotional campaigns that draw on sophisticated market research. In every year since 1990, approximately 1,200 new or newly certified items have entered the marketplace. For example, when the results of a survey conducted by Dannon concluded that Jews were particularly fond of yogurt, the company made an all-out effort to get its products upgraded from the "K" for kosher to the more stringent "OU" (Orthodox Union) certification, with impressive results. Dannon increased their sales by more than 25 percent among Jewish customers. Some manufacturers are further capitalizing on related trends among health-conscious consumers, targeting vegetarians to come up with scores of innovative varieties.<sup>8</sup> Fleishmann's exemplifies this approach in its "Dairy with a Difference" campaign that offers dizzying combinations of certified kosher health foods such as its "unsalted, kosher, lactose free, cholesterol free, *parve* margarine." But it is not only kosher dairy that is thriving. In *Boychicks in the Hood*, Robert Eisenberg offers a fascinating portrait of a Lubavitcher family relocated from Crown Heights to the hinterlands of Postville, Iowa, to corner the kosher meat business:

In three short years, entrepreneur Aaron Rubashkin and two of his sons have tapped into the glittering motherlode of the *glatt* kosher market, an industry that is expanding almost exponentially as its traditional customer base continues its demographic explosion. . . .<sup>9</sup>

The rebirth of interest in Yiddish culture has many sources, but one significant aspect of its appeal relates to the skyrocketing rates of intermarriage. Exploring one's Yiddish heritage turns out to be far less threatening and less foreign to non-Jewish partners than the kind of



pressures that invariably arise when dealing with traditional interfaith relationships, particularly when religious conversion is contemplated. The stakes are simply less high: "You discover your roots, I'll discover mine, and the kids can explore both." Acceptance and participation on the part of a non-Jewish mate can be as facile as attending a Klezmer concert or enjoying a dinner of blintzes and herring. This is part of the utilitarian nature of what some have labeled optional ethnicity,<sup>10</sup> but which can also be termed convenience ethnicity. Whether an Ashkenazic Jew or not, one can approach Yiddishkeit from an intellectual curiosity and level of social involvement that does not necessarily require having to renegotiate fundamental questions of faith and spirituality.

The increasingly multi-ethnic make-up of the American population has not escaped the attention of the business world. As the owner of Einstein's put it:

I have discovered that intermarried couples exhibit a compassion, interest and are looking to be educated about one's mate (at least during the inception of the euphoric relationship). Newly intermarrieds are a prime target for cross-cultural and ethnic marketing.<sup>11</sup>

More and more instances of what can be called "blended ethnicity," the amalgamation of two or more ethnic backgrounds, are showing up in the marketplace. There's Ginsberg's Pub located on a busy corner near San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf and featuring Irish-Yiddish Coffee, or Manishevitz's Kosher for Passover Pizza flagged by both a seder plate and a Chef Boyardee-like figure on the eye-catching box design. With inventions on the market such as El Rancho's Jalapeno Rugelach, that bills itself as "The Ultimate Jewish-Mexican Dessert," there can be no doubt that multiethnicity sells.

Another striking example of blended ethnicity is illustrated by one of the workshop offerings at the recent *Mame-Loshn* '96 retreat in Connecticut, sponsored by the Workman's Circle/Arbiter Ring. Titled "Tsi Kenstu Shiatsu?," it promised "a hands-on workshop, with instruction in Yiddish by our certified masseur . . . in the tactile arts of Swedish massage, shiatsu, trigger point, and reflexology" with instructions to "bring your own oils. (Towels too.)" Although many of the retreat workshops were offered in both English and Yiddish, this Judeo-Japanese-Swedish experience was available in Yiddish only.

It is not only the twin factors of the soaring intermarriage and low fertility rates characteristic of Jewish demographics at century's end that challenge the vitality of the community, but analysis of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey confirms that American Jews also demonstrate particularly high levels of geographic mobility. The findings of Sidney and Alice Goldstein's aptly titled volume, *Jews on the Move*, indicate that so much residential dispersion further weakens Jewish community and organizational life.<sup>12</sup> However, the loosening of localized ties and the loss of a sense of place is often offset by reinvented forms of portable ethnicity. Retreats and workshops like *Mame-Loshn* '96 allow for a temporary sense of Yiddish community that fulfills such longings in an intensive, short-term way. Commercial expressions of ethnic Jewishness — whether furnishings, books, foods, or decorative objects — replace institutional and neighborhood affiliations. Mail-order businesses such as *The Source for Everything Jewish* especially thrive among such highly mobile populations.

Such convenience ethnicity has also manifested itself in recent years through the evolution of Yiddish in cyberspace. The emergence of hightech global communications makes it possible for those who remain geographically scattered to no longer be isolated from one another. For the first time in history, ethnic communities are able to stay in daily contact without physical proximity. With the founding in 1993 of the on-line Yiddish Network, followers of Yiddishkeit worldwide are becoming electronically integrated — a global *smoozeleh* without ever having to leave the comfort of home and with minimal logistical demands or personal sacrifice. This is a user-friendly Yiddishkeit that is escalating rapidly. At the first face-to-face TYN — The Yiddish Network — conference held at the University of Maryland, there were 128 delegates. Four years later, in 1996, the number had jumped to 347, and the organization boasted of contacts in all 50 states and in 25 countries.<sup>13</sup> At the *Mame-Loshn* '96 conference, those deciding against massage had the choice of signing up for two different internet workshops that would introduce you either to "Mendele On Line" or to the "Virtual Shtetl" web pages.

Controversy about the efficacy of ethnic identities that are voluntary or optional also informs this discussion. Even those who recognize that ethnicity still matters are likely to assert that it has been steadily eroding into a purely symbolic form, a kind of token ethnicity, that lacks substance and real meaning. The data gathered for this research challenge this position to show instead that, despite commercialization and maybe even

because of it, much of this behavior can still uphold authentic, if ambiguous, ethnic identities. Certainly, a major requirement of convenience ethnicity is a sense of feeling secure enough in this culture to be able to accentuate differences and to distinguish oneself from mass society. As Ruth Weiss, Professor of Yiddish Literature at Harvard, succinctly stated it:

The more comfortable Jews feel in America, the more open they are to reclaiming a culture of exile. This is the paradox of the American diaspora: the wish to feel different *and* at home. Yiddish, with all its complex, contradictory associations, is the language of that desire.<sup>14</sup>

Events such as Yiddish festivals with rows of vendors, artistic creations appealing to the aesthetics of Yiddish homemakers, fund-raising projects to sponsor Yiddish educational programs, all benefit from a highly-evolved consumer society even though, oftentimes, the motivation to initiate such endeavors is in reaction to an overly consumer-oriented culture. The marketplace becomes a point of entry particularly for people from secular families. The values, interests, and activities of the new consumption classes in relation to this more situational ethnicity simultaneously gratify both spiritual and instrumental aims. As the President of the National Foundation for Jewish Campus Life (what used to be called Hillel) explained:

If there is any culture that this generation is familiar with, it's the consumer culture. . . . They know how to shop. Their cultural place is not the town square, it's the mall — with all of both the superficiality and the abundance that that creates and it is here they are looking to be consumers of a life that makes sense.<sup>15</sup>

## Notes

1 This paper is derived from one of the case studies included in my forthcoming book on consumer culture and ethnic identity entitled *The Business of Ethnicity*, Schocken Books.

2 Margaret Mead, "Ethnicity and Anthropology in America," in George

DeVos and Lola Romanucci-Ross, eds. *Ethnic Identity: Cultural Continuities and Change*. (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1975), 189.

3 On the positive correlation of strong ethnic identifications with upward mobility, see Richard Alba, *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); Tom W. Smith "Ethnic Measurement and Identification." *Ethnicity* 7 (1980), 78-95; and Stanley Lieberson, "Unhyphenated Whites in the United States," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 8, no. 1 (1985): 159-80. On the voluntary and symbolic nature of ethnicity, see especially Herbert Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2, no. 1 (1979): 1-20.

4 Interview with Eric Vieland, July 2, 1996.

5 Aaron Lansky, July 4, 1996.

6 Both the Gaultier image and the Chanel Hanukkah piece were part of the New York Jewish Museum's 1996 "Too Jewish?" exhibition and are reprinted in the accompanying volume, Norman Kleeblatt, ed. *Too Jewish?: Challenging Traditional Identities* (The Jewish Museum, New York and Rutgers University Press, 1996), xvii and 141.

7 Joan Nathan, *Jewish Cooking In America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 21-22 and 256; Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 189.

8 *Forward* (16 February, 1996), 11-13.

9 Robert Eisenberg, *Boychicks in the Hood: Travels in the Hasidic Underground* (New York: Harper, 1995), 139.

10 See, for example, Mary Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

11 Interview with Wilbur Pierce, October 9, 1996.

12 Sidney Goldstein and Alice Goldstein, *Jews on the Move: Implications for Jewish Identity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

13 *Forward* (24 May 1996), 6.

14 Quoted in Jonathan Rosen, "A dead language, Yiddish lives — And so does the fight over why," *Times Magazine* (7 July 1996), 26-27.

15 Interview with Richard Joel, December 12, 1995.

## The Metamorphosis of the Matriarchs in Modern Yiddish Poetry

Kathryn Hellerstein

### I

This paper will consider the metamorphosis in Yiddish writings of the Matriarchs from the Hebrew Bible — Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. The Yiddish texts are eighteenth-century *tkhines* (supplicatory prayers for women) and twentieth-century poems. Both the old prayers and the modern poems connect the ancient, biblical characters by analogy to the contemporary, non-biblical situation of the author and reader of the prayers or poems. The analogy draws together the archetypal, mythological characters with an actual, individual woman; the ancient, sacred Hebrew with a vernacular Yiddish text. In these works, the author has two rhetorical purposes in creating this analogy between the Matriarchs and the contemporary woman: 1) to make of the Matriarchs examples of moral or emotional qualities by which the contemporary reader can live; and 2) through the revival of these figures as sympathetic characters, to invoke the Matriarchs as intercessors with God for the author's sake. By contrasting the rhetorical stance taken by the suppliant in a Yiddish *tkhine* with that of the speakers in several modern poems, I will argue that the Matriarchs are a trope for the fragmentation and disruption of modern Jews' relationship to Jewish tradition and belief.

Let us first consider the Matriarchs in Yiddish *tkhines*, supplicatory prayers in the vernacular of Ashkenazic Jews, composed and published for and sometimes by Jewish women. In contrast to the standard liturgy in the

sacred tongue or *loshn-kodesh* of Hebrew and Aramaic, in which most Jewish males, but few females, were literate, the *tkhines* were written in the language of everyday life among the Jewish towns and villages of central and eastern Europe. Collections of *tkhines* were published from the sixteenth century through the end of the nineteenth century in Jewish centers across the map of Europe, from Amsterdam to Warsaw.

While the prayers of the Hebrew liturgy required recitation by men in communal worship three times a day, the *tkhines* were composed for private and voluntary recitation by women upon various occasions, ranging from religious obligation to folk customs. *Tkhines* of religious obligation include Yiddish translations of some Hebrew synagogue prayers, which women recited individually in their separate section of the synagogue, while the men conducted the communal service on the other side of the *mekhitse* or screen. Other *tkhines* of religious obligation amplify the brief Hebrew blessings that women recite upon performing the three positive commandments specific to women — the act of separating a piece of dough from hallah (Sabbath bread), in remembrance of the priestly tithes of Temple worship; the separation of a wife from her husband during menstruation; and the lighting of the Sabbath candles — all observed in the home, rather than in a public setting. There are also *tkhines* to be recited at even more intimate moments of a woman's life — during sexual intercourse and childbirth — and *tkhines* composed for recitation during folk-religious practices, such as visiting ancestors' graves and making candles for Yom Kippur eve.<sup>1</sup>

Across these many different kinds of *tkhines* runs the substratum of "*tkhines* of the Matriarchs." While *tkhines* of the Matriarchs apply to a variety of occasions and are written in styles ranging from simple and sentimental to sophisticated and learned, they all invoke the biblical Matriarchs to serve as examples for the suppliant and to intercede with God for her sake.

The primary mode of the Matriarch *tkhines* establishes an analogy between the speaker of the prayer and the Matriarchs through whom she appeals to God. One example is the 1783 "*Tkhine* of the Matriarchs for the New Moon of Elul" by the Rebbetsin Serel, daughter of the famous preacher in Lithuania, Jacob Halevi Segal of Dubno, and wife of a rabbi and author from Silesia, Poland, Mordechai Katz Rapaport. In her prayer the suppliant appeals to the Matriarch Sarah to protect the exiled Jews, those "sinful homeless children," and in particular, the actual offspring of the women praying.<sup>2</sup>

First, we beseech our mother *sore* that she pray for us at this hour of judgment, so that we may be judged innocent. Since God — praised be He — added the letter *hey* from His name to hers, so must she also have the attribute of mercy. Have mercy, our mother, on your children. Make a special plea that our children not be separated from us. You know full well how bitter it is when a child is taken away from its mother, as happened to you when your son *yitskhok* was taken away from you and you yearned for him.<sup>3</sup>

The woman reciting this *tkhine* appeals to the Matriarch Sarah to intercede on her behalf with God by embroidering upon homilies and commentaries on the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22) and the death of Sarah (Genesis 23:2). The woman then asks the Matriarch Rebecca to safeguard her parents:

You know very well what it is like to yearn for one's father and mother, for when *elozet*, the servant, took you away from your father and mother and brought you to your husband *yitskhok*, you, too, wept very much.<sup>4</sup>

She requests the Matriarch Rachel, who "could not bear to hear the anguish" of Joseph, tormented by the Ishmaelites, to "have mercy on our sorrow and anguish and trembling before the judgment," and pray for a good year.<sup>5</sup> And she beseeches Mother Leah "to plead for us."<sup>6</sup>

Whether a *tkhine* of the Matriarchs was learned and complex or direct and modest, its address to the biblical characters assumed an active analogy between the eternal narrative of the Bible and the immediate life of the woman praying. This assumption of likeness establishes a mutual exchange of emotion between text and life that does not pause at the boundaries set by a modern mind between fiction and fact, sacred and secular. Rather, such analogy is drawn by both the author and the reciter of the prayer in order to resolve a problem in the actual world.

Another, more learned prayer — recovered, translated into English, and annotated by Chava Weissler<sup>7</sup> — is "The *Tkhine* of the Matriarchs," by Sarah Rebecca Rachel Leah, daughter of Jacob Jokel ben Meir Ha-Levi Horowitz (1680-1755). In this *tkhine*, the author whom Weissler calls Leah Horowitz, combines two stories. First, Horowitz invokes the merit of the Matriarch Rebecca by placing in a positive light Rebecca's plot in Genesis 27 to trick her blind husband Isaac so that her favored younger

son, Jacob or Israel, would receive the blessing due his brother Esau. The *tkhine's* traditional emphasis on the "right" outcome justifies Rebecca's dishonesty and Isaac's blindness as the tools by which the Jewish people will be redeemed.

Later in the *tkhine*, Horowitz retells a story from Midrash Lamentations. In this midrash, Rachel, begging God in Heaven to have mercy on the exiled Jewish people, reminds Him that although she and Jacob had planned to subvert her father's plan to substitute her elder sister Leah in the bridal bed, when the time came, she "had compassion for my sister, that she not be exposed to disgrace." Indeed, as Rachel urges God to recall, she not only told Leah the secret signals; she hid under the bed to play ventriloquist for Leah, so that Jacob would not perceive the double deception.<sup>8</sup> Through this example of her sympathy for her sister, Rachel asks God to show even more mercy to the exiled Jews.

The juxtaposition of these two narratives in Horowitz's *tkhine* unifies the Matriarchs Rebecca and Rachel through the repeated pattern of two against one, and stresses the bond of blood over marriage for the sake of God's covenant. By depicting these legendary women as active participants in the fate of the Jewish people and as effective intercedents with God, the *tkhine* presents the woman reciting it with models for her own spiritual participation in Judaism.

A great rift lies between such eighteenth-century devotions and twentieth-century Yiddish poems. The modern poems spring from the rational worldliness of the Jewish Enlightenment and its aftermath, where God is replaced by political action and art. Yet the Yiddish poems I will discuss next, written by three women in eastern Europe between 1922 and 1927, return to the Matriarchs of the *tkhines*.

Before turning to those poems, though, I will note the relative absence of the Matriarchs from Yiddish poetry until the 1920s. Although Yiddish poets from the 1880s onward occasionally allude to the Bible in their secular poems that protest the hardships of the Jewish people or of the working class, they rarely invoke the Matriarchs. In a survey of the collected works of four leading poets of that earlier generation, I found only one title referring to the Matriarchs.<sup>9</sup> Yehoash, pseudonym for Shloyme Bloomgarden (1872-1927), whose Yiddish translation of the Bible appeared in eight volumes between 1926 and 1936, published a poem, "Rokhl's keyver" ("Rachel's Tomb"):

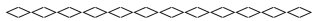


Af di felder fun beys-lekhem  
vu di veg in efrat geyt,  
shoyn fun yorn un fun doyes  
oyfgeboyt a keyver shteyt . . .

un ven als arum is ruik 5  
un es kumt on halbe nakht  
kumt aroys a froyentsimer  
fun der keyver-grub, fartrakht.

tsu dem taykh fun yarden geyt zi, 10  
kukt zi af di velen ayn,  
un fun ire sheyne oygen,  
dortn falt a trer arayn . . .

shtil flist eyn trer nokh der tsveyter 15  
on a krekhts on yamershtim  
falt arop in yarden-vaser  
un tsumisht zikh shtil mit im . . .



On the fields of Bethlehem  
Where the road to Efrat goes,  
A tomb stands. Many years have passed  
And generations, since it arose.

When everything around is peaceful 5  
And the midnight hour draws near,  
Then a woman's form emerges,  
Pensively, out of the grave.

She walks down to the River Jordan, 10  
Gazing long upon the waves,  
And from her lovely eyes, a tear  
Descends and falls upon the waves . . .

One by one, each quiet tear  
Flows, without lament or cry,

Falls into the Jordan's waters,  
And merges with them silently.<sup>10</sup>

15

The poet pointedly attributes this poem to an unnamed Hebrew source, thus grounding the tale of the Matriarch firmly in the classical rather than the vernacular Jewish tradition. This legend of the Matriarch Rachel — who, arising from her tomb on the road between Bethlehem and Efrat, goes to the Jordan River to mingle her tears with its waters — portrays, in an impersonal and stilted narrative voice, a landscape empty of Jews and God. Yehoash's poem may be read as a secular nationalist reclaiming of the biblical Matriarch legend. It also attempts to keep the newly modern Yiddish poetry and the high literary style of his Bible translations free from any echo of those devotions recited in Yiddish by unenlightened Jewish women.

In the early 1920s, three women poets in Poland turned to the Matriarchs in poems that established and then disrupted the analogies between traditional legends and modern speakers. Miriam Ulinover (1890-1944), Kadya Molodowsky (1894-1975), and Rosa Yakubovitsh (1889-1942), independently of one another, wrote poems in which the Matriarchs illuminate the uneasy connection between a modern Jew and traditional Jewish belief. I will touch briefly upon the poems by Ulinover and Molodowsky, on which I have published elsewhere, and discuss Yakubovitsh's at more length.<sup>11</sup>

Both Ulinover's and Molodowsky's poems invoke traditional Yiddish readings of the Matriarchs in order to call into question the analogies of faith. Ulinover's 1922 poem, "Baym taytsh-khumesh" ("Reading the Yiddish Pentateuch"), tells of a group of young girls who, as dusk falls, read the story of the Matriarch Rebecca's courtship by Isaac through Abraham's messenger Eliezer (Genesis 24: 22-27). Through their homiletic, Yiddish translation of the Pentateuch, these girls transform Eliezer into a shtetl *shadkhn* (matchmaker) and thus interpret the biblical story as an analogy for their own hopes and desires. However, the young girl-narrator of Ulinover's poem remains skeptical of and yet nostalgic for that faith. This cautionary speaker mediates between the reader of Ulinover's poem and the innocent readers of the *taytsh-khumesh* that her poem evokes. In contrast to the *tkhine* of the Matriarchs, which drew a direct analogy between the suppliant and the Matriarchs in order to guide the reader in an active spiritual life, Ulinover's poem delineates the distance between the modern reader of poetry and the traditional readers

of devotions.

Molodowsky's 1927 poem, "Froyen-lider VI" ("Women-Poems VI"), follows the general form of a *tkhine* of the Matriarchs, listing each of the four Matriarchs alongside the needs of contemporary women. Although she presents the *tkhine's* timeless problems of women — marriage, poverty, fertility — Molodowsky's focus on their sexuality is decidedly modern, highlighting servant girls, prostitutes, humiliated brides, and barren wives. In the end, the poem's attention to the unloved, weak-eyed Matriarch Leah emphasizes the untenable isolation of a modern woman. By narrating rather than praying, Molodowsky's speaker maintains a distance from the Matriarchs and questions the efficacy of prayer. Both Ulinover's and Molodowsky's poems invoke the traditional Yiddish texts through which women called upon the Matriarchs — the *Taytsh-khumesh* and the *tkhines*. By first citing these texts and then, through the poems' rhetoric, questioning the faith that made them powerful, Ulinover and Molodowsky disrupt the analogy between the Matriarchs and a contemporary woman.

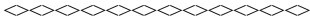
In contrast, Rosa Yakubovitch's poems modernize biblical women. In five poems at the end of her book, *Mayne gezangen* (*My Songs*, Warsaw, 1924),<sup>12</sup> Yakubovitch writes dramatic monologues in the voices of Rachel, Hagar, Ruth, Esther, and Shulames. She imports from European culture, along with the modern poetic form of the dramatic monologue, the literary notion of romantic love. Romantic love — which grew out of the medieval conventions of courtly love, with its assumptions of individual choice, extra-marital sex, and overpowering passions — was foreign to traditional Judaism, where marriages were arranged, adultery condemned, and passion considered the work of the Evil Inclination. By applying the conventions of romantic love to the Matriarch Rachel, Yakubovitch attempts to extend the analogy of sympathetic feelings evoked in the *tkhines* of the Matriarchs, so that it reaches from the devotional into the secular world. When she assumes the voice of Rachel, though, Yakubovitch inadvertently undermines the mode of prayer. Rather than addressing the Matriarch, in her poem "Rokhl" ("Rachel"), the poet impersonates her:

fun palmen un aylbirtn nidern shotns af brunems,  
dort kumen di tekhter bes-lekhem tsu trenken di shof,  
un kern tseshekte, tseblite aheym mit gezangen,  
un vern tseflosn in demerungs-shayn funem tog.

nor leye, mayn aynzame shvester, blaybt zitsn a bleykhe:  
tsu ir vet keyn shaliekh nisht kumen in tunkeln feld,  
es loykht nisht ir shtern in himlisher luft in der veykher,  
o, yankeven libt zi, un er hot di sheynkayt geveylt,  
mikh, rokhlen, di yungste!

o, shvester farrerte, gedenkstu? 10  
vi r'hot tsulib mir funem brunem gekoylert dem shteyn,  
vi r'hot far a knekht zikh farkoyft tsulib mir,  
un er pashet di kemlen fun leyben mit freyd,  
tsulib mir —

haynt shenk ikh im dir!  
ikh shenk dir mayn eyntsik-bashertn, mayn eyntsik bagertn,  
o leye, mayn shvester,  
du veyst nisht, vi groys s'iz mayn korbn, af eybik  
ven kh'shayd mikh fun im,  
du veyst nisht vi groys s'iz mayn korbn,  
ven ikh gey avek fun mayn glik — 20



From palms and olives, shadows descend over wells.  
The daughters of Bethlehem come there to water the sheep  
And fragrant, blossoming, turn homeward with songs,  
Flowing into the twilight glow of day.  
But Leah, my sister, stays seated, alone and pale.

No messenger comes to her in the darkening field,  
Her stars in soft, heavenly air give no light.  
O, she loves Jacob, and he chose beauty,  
Me, Rachel, the youngest!

O, tearful sister, do you remember? 10  
How, for my sake, he rolled the stone from the well,  
How he sold himself as a slave for my sake,  
And he tends the camels of Laban with joy  
For my sake —  
Today I bestow him upon you!  
I bestow upon you the one destined for me, my only desire,  
O, Leah, my sister,  
You don't know how great my offering, forever when I part from him,

You don't know how great my offering  
When I leave my happiness —"

20

This poem joins two separate episodes from Genesis, elaborated upon in the *Tsenerene* (*Tz'enah Ur'enah*, literally, "go forth and behold," the popular Yiddish translation of and commentary on the Pentateuch by Jacob Ashkenazi, first published in Lublin and Cracow before 1622), in which Rachel allows her elder sister Leah to lie with Jacob. The poem's conjoined narrative reveals Rachel's conflicted feelings of rivalry with and sympathy for her sister. The first episode is the story in Genesis 29:14b-30, where Laban tricks the bridegroom by substituting the elder for the younger daughter in the marriage tent. The commentary on these verses in the *Tsenerene* elaborates as follows:

Yaakov had given certain passwords and signs to Rachel so that he should be certain that she would be his bride. When Rachel saw that they were leading Leah to him she realized that her sister would be humiliated in front of everyone because she would not know the passwords. She therefore told her all the signs to enable her to answer Yaakov, and so Yaakov did not recognize her until morning.<sup>13</sup>

Although Leah Horowitz's *tkhine* retold this same story, it followed the lengthier midrash in order to extrapolate from Rachel's kindheartedness a message of Israel's redemption. In contrast, Yakubovitch's poem adapts the *Tsenerene's* abbreviated version of the story in order to plumb the emotions of the character and to dramatize the sympathy between the two sisters.

The second episode on which Yakubovitch's poem draws is Genesis 30:14-21, in which Rachel, the barren and beloved wife, grants Leah, the fruitful and unloved wife, a night with Jacob. Rachel trades her husband's sexual favors for the mandrakes that Leah's son Reuben has found in the field. The *Tsenerene* adapts a midrash to comment on this episode:

Reuven, Yaakov's eldest son, found *dudaim* (mandrakes) in the field (30:14). He brought them to his mother Leah. *Ramban* and R' Bechaye write that this was a type of herb with a fragrant smell. Rachel said to her, "Give me the mandrakes of your son," because

she wanted to have children [and they promoted fertility]. Leah was angered, and answered, "You have taken away my husband; will you take my mandrakes as well?" Rachel answered, "In return for the mandrakes he will lie with you tonight, although he ought to have lain with me." Because she was contemptuous enough to sell marital relations with a *tzaddik*, she was adjudged unworthy of lying next to him in death, in the Cave of Machpelah.<sup>14</sup>

The source of this tale, in *Midrash Rabbah*, emphasizes how the gains and losses of birthright among the tribes of Israel result from the sisters' trade.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, the *Tsenerene* version highlights an angry dialogue between the sisters that reveals their mutual jealousy. As punishment for both the base nature of her exchange and the tenor of the sisterly dialogue, the *Tsenerene* concludes that Rachel was denied eternal union with her husband in death. The last lines of Yakubovitch's poem emphasize this finality, as Rachel protests, "You don't know how great my offering, forever when I part from him."

By casting the poem as a dramatic monologue in Rachel's voice, Yakubovitch characterizes the sisters' relationship with more emotional nuance than in the *Tsenerene* episodes. Rachel's exclamation (lines 8-9) is filled with the contradictory emotions of her empathy for the unrequited Leah and her joy at her own chosenness. Rachel appeals directly to Leah, "O, tearful sister, do you remember?" (line 10) and she recounts the hardships that Jacob chose to endure out of his love for her. Like Jacob, Rachel herself will choose to undergo a trial for love, that is, for love of her sorrowful sister, when she exclaims, "Today I bestow him upon you!" (line 15). This act combines both instances of Rachel's conflicted generosity in the *Tsenerene*.

Yakubovitch's Rachel protests even as she gives. Stating that Jacob is "the one destined for me, my only desire" (*mayn eyntsik bashertn, mayn eyntsik bagertn*, line 16), Rachel divides the sacred purposefulness which the traditional sources attribute to her acts. The very rhyme of *bashertn* (destined one) with *bagertn* (desired one) points out the duality of the poet's vision. In the penultimate line, the poem retains a trace of divine purpose from the midrashic sources: Rachel calls the personal sacrifice that she makes for her sister Leah a *korbn*, a prescribed offering to God (line 20), hinting at the sacred ramifications of the love story. Yakubovitch's Rachel balances the divine control of Jewish history against the individual passions of romantic love.

By collapsing the two *Tsenerene* stories together, Yabukovitsh creates a Rachel divided by a modern ambivalence. This Rachel comforts her unloved sister Leah by sacrificing her own love for Jacob. But she also resents this sacrifice for the sake of her fecundity.<sup>16</sup> This double bind or internal conflict extends beyond the character Rachel to a resounding dissonance between modern individualism and the patriarchal laws of Judaism. Rachel's love for Jacob subverts the law of the first-born, yet her love for her sister reaffirms it. Because she wants to conceive children, Rachel compromises her love for Jacob. Her sons, the fruits of that compromise, will further the covenantal history of the people.

Yakubovitsh draws the dramatic monologue of her secular poem from the analogies of the *tkhines* that address the Matriarchs in prayer, but reverses the roles. Instead of asking the Matriarch to pray to God on her behalf, the poet lets one Matriarch speak to another in the voice of a modern woman. This ventriloquism makes Rachel's ordeals comprehensible not so much to God, as to a reader who has left the traditional world that the Matriarchs represent.

## II

When, in 1935 Warsaw, the Romanian Yiddish poet Itsik Manger (1901-1969) published his second book of poems, *Khumesh lider (Pentateuch Poems)*,<sup>17</sup> he recast the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs in ballad strophes borrowed from Old Yiddish Literature and created what David Roskies calls "a modern Yiddish classic."<sup>18</sup> Scholars agree that Manger's humorous and humane appropriation of the Bible grew from his exposure to the discoveries by Yiddish literary scholars in the 1920s of an apparently secular sixteenth-century literary heritage and his desire to "create the second literary folk epic after Peretz's *Folkshtimlekh geshikhtn*."<sup>19</sup> However, I would like to suggest that perhaps Manger had also read the Matriarch poems by Ulinover, Molodowsky, and Yakubovitsh, which, working from the devotional analogy, refigure biblical characters in a modern light.<sup>20</sup> Whether or not Manger was directly influenced by these poems, I do not know, but the fact is that these women poets had engaged in a parallel literary gesture of reclaiming Jewish tradition for secular Yiddish poetry in the decade before Manger's *Khumesh lider* appeared.

In Manger's *Khumesh lider* the Matriarchs and Patriarchs inhabit a turn-of-the-century shtetl. They wear the clothes, carry the coins in their

pockets, prepare the food, and walk through the landscape of Galicia. Stripping away centuries of religious meaning and symbolism, Manger translates the ancient Near Eastern stories into a world close to his readers. Manger follows upon the impulse to make the Bible contemporary that had sounded so strongly first in the *tkhines* of the Matriarchs and resonated later in the poems of Ulinover, Molodowsky, and Yakubovitch. As in these prayers and poems, Manger makes the biblical figures speak to and for his contemporary eastern European reader. However, unlike the *tkhines*, Manger does not draw analogies between the Matriarchs and the contemporary reader in order to strengthen the reader's prayers and God's mercy. Unlike Ulinover in "Baym taytsh-khumesh," Manger does not question an old-fashioned devotion. And unlike Molodowsky in "Froyenlider VI," Manger does not find the Matriarchs an inadequate response to modern distress. Rather, like Yakubovitch's monologue, "Rokhl," Manger's poems lift the biblical characters off the page and into the world by animating them in dialogue and narrative that are informed by his readings in Old Yiddish devotional literature.

Manger deepens the characters and fills in the narrative gaps in the biblical and midrashic texts (which, like Yakubovitch, he knew from Old Yiddish translations rather than from the Hebrew and Aramaic originals) with details from daily life in the Eastern Europe shtetl. Yakubovitch kept her elaborations of character within the bounds of the traditional sources. Contrastingly, Manger freely elaborates the details of character and reinvents the stories as he goes. Rather than making the Matriarchs speak from a spotlight on the darkened stage implied within Yakubovitch's monologues, Manger gives them voice in dialogues embedded within stories, where time, place, and action are, in the manner of a fanciful realism, made explicit. With this style, Manger creates a coherent world for his characters in a mythological shtetl — a pre-modern world where continuity and harmony preside.

In the following section, I will examine the three poems which place Rachel and Leah centrally: "Rachel Goes to the Well for Water" ("Rokhl geyt tsum brunem nokh vaser") "Rachel and Leah" ("Rokhl un leye"), and "Leah Brings Back Mandrakes from the Field" ("Leye brengt dudimlekh fun feld"). <sup>21</sup>



Rokhl Geyt tsum Brunem nokh Vaser

Rokhl shteyt baym shpigl un flekht  
ire lange shvartse tsep,  
hert zi vi der tate hust  
un sapet af di trep.

Loyft zi gikh tsum alker tsu: 5  
"Leye! Der tate! Shnel!"  
Leye bahalt dem shundroman  
un vayzt zikh af der shvel.

Dos ponem bleykh un oysgetsamt,  
di oygn royt un farveynt. 10  
"Leye, makhst fun di oygn a tel,  
genug shoyn far haynt geleynt."

Un rokhl nemt dem vaserkrug  
un lozt zikh tsum brunem geyn —  
di demerung iz blo un mild, 15  
khotsh nem un khap a veyn.

Zi geyt. Un ibern tunklen feld  
blitst shnel farbay a hoz.  
— Tshirik! — a lamed-vovnikl 20  
tshirket in tifi groz.

Un afn himl shemerirt  
an oyeringl fun gold:  
"Ven s'voltn khotsh gevezn tsvey,  
ay volt ikh zey gevolt."

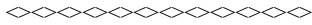
A fayfl fayflt in der noent: 25  
trili, trili, trili —  
un s'shmekt mit demerung un hey  
fun ale shof un ki.

Zi loyft. Shoyn shpet. In khumesh shteyt:  
Baym brunem vart a gast, 30

di kats hot zikh gevashn haynt  
un zi hot haynt gefast.

Zi loyft un s'finklt iber ir  
dos oyringl fun gold:

ven s'voltn khotsh gevezn tsvey,                      35  
ay volt zi zey gevolt.



#### Rachel Goes to the Well for Water

Rachel, at the mirror, braids  
Her shining, long, black hair,  
She hears the way her father coughs,  
Gasping on the stair.

Quickly she runs to the alcove, calls:                      5  
"Leah! It's Father! Hurry!"  
Leah hides her *True Romance*  
And appears in the doorway.

Her face is pale and restrained,  
Her eyes, weepy and red.                      10  
"Leah, you're ruining your eyes,  
Enough for today you've read."

Rachel takes up the water-jug  
And sets out for the well —  
The twilight is so blue and mild,                      15  
It brings on a crying spell.

She walks. Across the darkening fields  
Suddenly flashes a hare.  
Chirrup! A cricket — a hidden saint  
Chirps in deep grass there.                      20



omen — a cat — and Rachel's fasting, as if she were preparing for her wedding.

The metaphor of the moon as an earring in stanzas six and nine elevates Rachel's desires, as she races toward her destiny and projects her sense of beauty onto the heavenly bodies. Paradoxically, at the same time, the metaphor trivializes Rachel's wants: She is greedy for a pair of earring-moons. The *Tsenerene* comments on the fact that Jacob, unlike Isaac's messenger to Rebecca, bears no jewels for his intended bride.<sup>23</sup> If the moon is a sign of Rachel's betrothal to Jacob, then her desire for a twin earring/moon encapsulates her wish for a solution to the dilemma of the two brides that Laban presents to Jacob.

Manger dramatizes this dilemma in the poem, "Rachel and Leah".<sup>24</sup>

Rokhl un Leye

Rokhl shteyt borves af der shvel  
un trilert shtil a lid,  
di shvalbn vos flatern farbay  
shmekn mit friling un tsvit.

Yankev, der likhtiker parshoyn, 5  
iz ir gekumen tsu kholem bay nakht  
un hot ir far zayn harter mi  
dray sheyne matones gebrakht.

A bentsherl un shikhlekh fun lak 10  
un a fingerl fun gold —  
oy, ven di shvalbn voltn gevust,  
vi shtark zi hot im hold!

Zi zshmuret di oygn tsu der zun 15  
un lakht un lakht un kvelt,  
vos ot di eygene groysn zun  
shaynt oykh af im in feld.

A vintl lashtshet ire fis  
un shtift in ire hor  
un roymt ir shtil in oyer ayn:  
"Nokh gants finef yor." 20

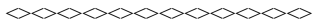
"Rokhl! (di shvester leye ruft)  
 Di kave vert dir kalt."  
 Rokhl tut a tsiter shtil:  
 "Ot teykef, leye! bald!"

Un zi vert troyerik mit a mol, 25  
 zi veyst az leyah veynt  
 af ir geleger yede nakht  
 un zi veyst oykh vos dos meynt . . .

Un s'tut baym hartsn ir a klem 30  
 un zi loyft in alker gikh:  
 "Na dir, leye, shvesterl kroyn,  
 dos bentsherl un di shikh!

Un na dir, leye shvesterl kroyn,  
 dos fingerl fun gold, 35  
 nor loz far mir, far mir aleyn,  
 ot dem vos ikh hob hold."

Un s'otemt fun di shvester sharf  
 di benkschaft un der tsar  
 un ver s'lakt fun zey un shpet, 40  
 iz a roshe un a nar . . .



Rachel and Leah

Rachel stands barefoot in the door,  
 And quietly warbles a song,  
 The swallows that are fluttering past  
 Are fragrant with blossoms and spring.

Jacob, the luminous personage, came 5  
 To her in a dream at night,  
 And to her from his laboring  
 Three lovely presents brought.

A little book of blessings and Two patent leather shoes — A golden ring! How she loves him! If the swallows only knew!	10
She squints her eyes up at the sun And laughs and laughs and beams, Because that very same great sun Shines down in the field, on him.	15
A breeze nestles at her feet And trifles with her hair And mutters softly in her ear: "Another five whole years!"	20
"Rachel! (her sister Leah calls) Your coffee's getting cold." Rachel trembles quietly: "I'm coming, Leah! Now!"	
And all of a sudden she grows sad. She knows that Leah weeps Every night upon her bed And she knows what that means . . . And in her heart she feels a pinch And she hurries into the nook:	25 30
"Here, Leah, my dearest sister, take The shoes and the blessings-book!	
And Leah, dearest sister, take For yourself the golden ring, But leave for me, for me alone, The one I adore — him."	35
And from the sisters sharply breathe Longing and sorrow cruel, And whoever laughs in mockery Is a villain and a fool.	40

The poem is set two years into Jacob's seven years of indentured servitude to Laban for the hand of Rachel and written from Rachel's point of view. Manger makes the exact setting ambiguous: In the first half of the poem, the action may occur during the first seven-year period of anticipatory betrothal (Genesis 29:18), while the second half may be during the second stint of labor, exacted by Laban after Jacob has been tricked with Leah and appeased with Rachel (Genesis 29:27-28). Unlike the Bible and even more than the *Tsenerene*, the poem foregrounds the relationship between the sisters.

In stanzas one through four, during Jacob's first period of servitude, Rachel revels in her love for him. Her emotions are in harmony with the natural world — she is like the swallows and the blossoms of that fragrant season. Jacob is the reason for this happiness, although her contact with this idealized person is indirect — he visits her and bestows his three gifts only in a dream. What unites the betrothed in the waking world is nature itself — the same sun shines on both Rachel and Jacob. But an aspect of that same nature, a breeze, in stanza five also reminds Rachel that she must wait a good many years for a waking fulfillment of their love.

This reminder darkens the second half of the poem, for with the breeze comes the voice of Leah. The mundane message that Leah calls out to her daydreaming sister — "Your coffee's getting cold" — triggers Rachel's sadness and urges her to offer Leah the three gifts of her dream. The blessings book, the patent leather shoes, the golden ring now appear to have materialized, suggesting that the anticipated romantic betrothal has now become the problematic double marriage.

Rachel's sorrow is twofold. On the one hand, Rachel is sad about Leah's tearful nights, caused, we are to understand from traditional lore, by Jacob's greater love for Rachel and even his hatred of Leah (Genesis 29:30, 31). On the other hand, though, Rachel is sad because Leah envies her — a detail made explicit by Manger, but only intimated by the Bible and the *Tsenerene*. Although Genesis 30:1 names and the *Tsenerene* elaborates upon the childless Rachel's envy of the fecund Leah,<sup>25</sup> neither source explores Leah's envy of Rachel. By focusing on romantic love rather than on childbearing, Manger, as did Yakubovitch earlier, brings the sisters' conflict into the light of modern sensibilities. Manger thus recasts Rachel's traditional envy of Leah to place the sisters' relationship at the crux of his story.

He deepens this aspect of the characters to prepare for an unexpected resolution in the final poem, "Leah Brings Mandrake Roots from the Field".<sup>26</sup>

## Leye Brengt Dudimlekh fun Feld

Mit a bintl dudimlekh in hant  
geyt leye fun feld aheym,  
di ovntzun tsefinklt ir gold  
af an oremer khate fun leym.

Loyft ir antkegn a shlanker vint 5  
un er khapt dem otem koym:  
"Leye, di kinder veynen dir  
unter dem grinem nusnboym."

"A veytik der mamen!" — leye loyft 10  
un s'flatert in vint ir kleyd,  
ot shteyt di vintmil afn barg  
mit di fligl oysgeshpreyt,

glaykh zi volt ergets vu gehat 15  
a yankev un kinder vi gold,  
vos veynen unter a nusnboym  
un zi volt tsu zey gevolt . . .

Zi loyft. In dudyeshen baym trakt  
Tsindt men shoyn on a likht,  
ot iz dos grine kloysterl  
un ot iz dos gerikht. 20

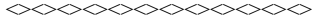
Zi shtelt zikh op un otemt shver,  
ot zet zi, di shvester geyt,  
a zaydn hemdl in der hant  
fun lang shoyn oyfgeneyt . . .

Un leye zagt: "Ze, rukhtshe kroyn, 25  
vos kh'ob far dir gebrakht,  
nem di dudimlekh un leyg  
tsukopns dir bay nakht . . .



In nayn khadoyshim mirtseshem  
vest, shvester, zen tsi neyn . . ."  
Zey shushken zikh un der poet  
ken gornisht mer farshteyn. 30

Iz dreyt er zikh avek diskret  
un khotsh er hot nisht gehert,  
veyst er az dos shushken zikh 35  
iz eybik vi di erd . . .



Leah Brings Mandrakes from the Field

With mandrake roots bunched in her hand,  
Leah walks home from the field,  
The evening sun pours sparkling gold  
Upon a poor cottage of mud.

A lanky wind races toward her, now,  
Breathlessly panting its plea: 5  
"Leah, the children are crying for you  
Beneath the green nut-tree.  
'Woe to their mother!' — and Leah runs,  
Dress fluttering in the wind, 10  
Past the windmill on the hill  
With its outspread wings,

As if the windmill, too, possessed  
Its own Jacob and children like gold  
Crying beneath a green nut-tree, 15  
And would go to them, if it could . . .

She runs. In Dudy's roadside inn  
Someone kindles a light,  
She passes by the small, green church,  
She passes by the Court. 20

She pauses now and, breathing hard,  
 She watches her sister plod,  
 In her hand, a child's silk shirt  
 That long ago she sewed . . .

And Leah says: "See, Rukhtshe dear,                    25  
 Just look at what I've brought,  
 These mandrake roots. Be sure to place them  
 Near your head at night . . .

And, God willing, in nine months,  
 Sister, you'll know for sure . . ."                    30  
 They whisper, and the poet now  
 Can understand no more.

Discreetly, then, he turns away  
 And, although he has not heard,  
 He knows well that this whispering                    35  
 Is eternal as the earth . . .

Like Yakubovitsh in "Rachel," Manger, too, draws upon this episode of the mandrakes in Genesis 30:14-16 and changes the emphasis from the bitter exchange between the sisters, as Rachel demands the mandrakes and Leah exacts her price. Like Yakubovitsh, Manger, too, alters the *Tsenerene's* condemnation of both Leah for her jealousy and Rachel for her contemptuous willingness to sell marital relations with the saintly Jacob.<sup>27</sup> Yakubovitsh created an ambivalent Rachel, torn between her love for her sister and her love for her husband.

Manger, however, takes an entirely different approach to the story. He eliminates both Reuven, Leah's eldest son who finds the mandrakes in the traditional sources, and the seamy bargain between the sisters for Jacob's favors. Instead of framing his poem within the actions of these male characters, Manger presents the concerns of the two women on their own terms, in the framework of the benign natural world. His Leah is both a devoted mother and a loving sister. She has gathered the mandrakes to heal her sister's barrenness, and she worries about her children. Elements of nature — the wind and the tree — help her fulfill her obligations to her family, alerting her, protecting her children. Even as she hurries through the fields and into the village, Leah projects her maternal worries onto her

surroundings: the windmill itself takes on the stance of a worried mother.

The trapped windmill, which would go to its own precious husband and children "if it could" (line 16), helps Leah perceive her sister's predicament. Now, breathless as the wind, Leah notices Rachel carrying the child's garment which has not borne out its promise (lines 21-24). This Leah is a swift reader of signs. Unlike the mean-spirited character of the traditional texts, Manger's Leah responds to Rachel's sorrow with immediate sympathy. She calls Rachel "Rukhtshe," an affectionate Slavic nickname, and before Rachel can even ask, gives her the mandrakes as a cure (lines 25-32).

This poem ties together, in theme and device, the development of character and conflict from the previous two poems about Rachel and Leah. The gust of wind that brings Leah news of her children's needs echoes the personified breeze that reminded Rachel of her long wait for her bridegroom in the first poem. Leah's happy concern for her children shows the maturing of her sentimental tears over the *shundroman* in the first poem and her bitter tears over Jacob's indifference to her in the second poem. Leah's generosity with the mandrakes balances and amplifies Rachel's impulsive, although partial, bequest to Leah of Jacob's three gifts at the end of the second poem. Whereas in the second poem, Rachel's ambivalent sympathy for Leah results in their "longing and sorrow," Leah's offering in this final poem resolves the conflict between the sisters.

The poet himself enters the last six lines of the poem, exposed as an eavesdropper who can no longer hear when the sisters begin to confer in whispers. Manger lifts the curtain on the poet's wizardry at the very moment that the characters appear to resolve their own differences without the machinations of their author. Although a voyeur, the poet is also discreet. He turns away from his characters to give them privacy for their women's talk (lines 33-36). Manger neither censors the women's talk of sexuality and conception, to preserve the traditional modesty required by Jewish Law, nor deems such female problems too low or crass for modern poetry. Rather, as the poet comments, this private sympathy between women has everything to do with poetry: it is as universal and eternal as the earth itself. Manger locates eternity in women's talk and the natural world, a far cry from the eternity of God assumed in the *tikhines* of the Matriarchs and the *Tsenerene*. Subverting the traditional notion of how the sisters' antagonism figures in the sacred history of the Jews, Manger's poems about Rachel and Leah revise their story in secular terms.

By transforming the biblical personages into contemporary dramatic personae, Manger abandons the *tkhine* analogy between the Matriarchs and a contemporary reader and replaces the rhetoric of prayer with the "Poet," who stands within the poem as an observer, orchestrator, and occasional actor. With this metapoetic device, Manger achieves an ironic distance from the biblical characters and creates an illusion of verisimilitude. Such self-conscious layering explicitly disrupts the devotional analogy of the *tkhines*, for the suppliant becomes a narrator who also turns out to be a dramatic persona, the Matriarchs become characters in the narrator's story, and God becomes the reader. Manger's poem seems an artful stage where past and present speak simultaneously. Strangely, though, this modernist breakdown of barriers between story and life requires of the reader a suspension of disbelief, like that of a woman praying for the Matriarch to intercede with God.

In 1949, after the war, Rokhl Korn, a recent refugee-emigrant from Warsaw to Canada, via the Soviet Union, published three poems titled with the names of Biblical women: "Eve," "Rachel," and "Saul's Daughter." <sup>28</sup> In "Rokhl" Korn relates how a memory of hearing the story of the Matriarch Rachel in her mother's recitation of a *tkhine* becomes a springboard for autobiography. Korn merges the Matriarch with her namesake-self to expose and protest her suffering from European anti-Semitism during the war years. The poem juxtaposes historical events with a statement of unfulfilled promises in both the biblical story and in the traditional prayers of Jewish women. In the wake of the Holocaust, Korn's Matriarch poem becomes a means for lamenting personal and communal loss:

Rokhl

Es hobn vaynshl bliende dem himl oyfgeshlosn  
far mayn mames verter borvese un shtile,  
nor s'hot baym eyrev fun mayn ershter trer  
zikh opgeshtelt der nign fun ir tfile.

kh'hob zikh farshemt, vi kh'volt aleyn geshtanen dort,  
in der gliendiker hits fun yankevs yunge oygn,  
un vi s'volt tsu dem brunem unter shvern shteyn  
mayn eygn goyrl di farshmakhete lipn tsugeboygn.

5

Nor s'zenen shoy'n farkhasmet yankevs vartndike yorn  
durkh di gele, shorkhendike bleter fun der tkhine, 10  
un s'kenen zey nisht oysleshn di zibn heyse tren,  
un rokhls troyer kenen nisht farshteln lonkes grine.

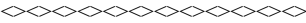
Un s'firt mikh shoy'n mayn mames davnendiker nign  
af beys-lekhms shteynik-harte, viste vegn,  
un kh'ze shoy'n yankevs kop unter dem groem ash, 15  
un vil shoy'n mer nisht hern un darf shoy'n mer nisht fregn.

Nor oyb s'iz take vor, az s'shtarbn yungerheyt  
di, velkhe got aleyn farknast un oysderveylt  
hot durkh a kush in shtern in sho funem geboy'm  
tsu groyser libshaft un tsu groysn layd, 20

dan vil ikh shtarbn oykh azoy, vi yene,  
vos kh'trog ir nomen un es hot eyn goyrl undz gezoygn,  
kh'vil shtarbn ergets afn veg tsu benkschafts-breges vayte,  
nor mit a letstn kush in mayne beyde oygn.

Es ligt shoy'n af der gortnbank mayn mames alte tkhine. 25  
Un ikh shteyn alts nokh vartndik unter dem vaynshl-boym —  
s'iz ful der krug, der laymener mit vaser klor un kil  
un s'beygt im on mayn linke hant tsu lipn funem troy'm.

Nor farvoszshe heyst der pastekh fun mayn tatns shof  
nisht yankev, nor ivan — un fun zayn gartl blitst afir a hak, 30  
un s'ligt shoy'n in zayn buzem ongegreyt  
far mayn mames shabes-kleyd der zak?



Rachel

Blossoming cherries unlocked the sky  
Before my mother's quiet, barefoot, words,  
But the melody of her prayer paused  
At the boundary of my first tear.

I was embarrassed, as if I myself stood  
In the heat glowing from Jacob's young eyes,  
And as if those languid lips were tilting toward  
My destiny in the well beneath the heavy stone.

But Jacob's waiting years have already been sealed  
Through the yellowed, rustling pages of the *tkhine*,      10  
And they cannot extinguish the seven hot tears  
And green meadows cannot hide Rachel's sorrow.

And my mother's praying melody guides me  
Over Bethlehem's stone-hard, desolate roads,  
And now I see Jacob's head under the gray ash,      15  
And I no longer want to hear or need to ask.

But if it's really true, that they die young,  
Whom God himself has betrothed and chosen  
With a kiss on the brow at the hour of birth  
For great love and great suffering, 20  
Then I, too, want to die this way, like them,  
Because I bear her name, and it has nursed us for a single destiny,  
I want to die somewhere on the road to longing's distant shores,  
But with a last kiss on both my eyes.

My mother's old *tkhine*-book lies on the garden bench. 25  
And I'm still waiting under the cherry tree —  
The clay pitcher is full of water, clear and cool  
And my left hand tilts it toward the lips of the dream.

But why, then, is the shepherd of my father's sheep  
Named not Jacob, but Ivan — and from his belt an ax 30  
Flashes, and in his bosom lies a sack  
Ready for my mother's Sabbath dress? 29

Like Yakubovitch's "Rachel," Korn's poem is a dramatic monologue. Where Yakubovitch's poem presented a fictional version of the biblical character in her ancient setting, the speaker in Korn's poem is explicitly autobiographical, and the setting is the familiar landscape of

Korn's girlhood. Beneath a blossoming cherry tree in the Polish countryside, a young girl named Rachel listens as her mother reads aloud a Yiddish *tkhine* of the Matriarchs. She weeps as she listens, for the words of the prayer make her feel as though she inhabited Rachel's place at the well, where Jacob undergoes his first of many trials for her sake.

Although deeply moved by her mother's prayer, the girl herself does not pray; she extracts from the *tkhine* its story, the stuff of secular literature. Those vivid, sensual images that the Yiddish prayer brings to the girl's mind are supplanted by her knowledge that Jacob's fate was long since sealed in the old text printed on yellowing paper. The fact that the prayer is old and often repeated does not diminish Rachel's sorrow, nor do her surroundings — the green meadows of Poland. In stanza 4, the girl listens as her mother's prayer continues, telling the story of Rachel's death in childbirth and her burial by Jacob on the road to Bethlehem (Genesis 35:16-20). Overwhelmed by the sorrow in that story, the girl states that there's nothing more she wants to know or needs to ask. Immediately, though, she draws an analogy between herself and the biblical Rachel, saying that she wants to die like all those "God has betrothed and chosen . . . for great love and for great suffering" (18-20). With this announcement, the speaker shows herself to be both pious and romantic. She is pious, in that she longs to discover that she is among those fated to be especially righteous, like Rachel, the mother of Joseph. She is romantic, in that she wants to die "on the road to longing's distant shores," although not in childbirth like Rachel, but in the arms of her beloved (23-24).

The speaker has reasoned the likeness between the biblical Matriarch and herself through their common name: "Because I bear her name and it has nursed us for a single destiny" (22). This pun, as it were, this double reference to the past and the present, has awakened the consciousness of the young girl, who reflects upon what the future may hold for her. What she knows of the world — her own girlhood, her mother's recitation of prayers in the garden — allows her to succumb to illusion. Now alone in the garden, near the bench where her mother has left her prayerbook, the girl waits for what is to come. More than the analogy of a *tkhine*, her world has merged with that of the biblical story that the prayer brought to life: "The clay pitcher is full of water clear and cool/ And my left hand tilts it toward the lips of the dream" (27-28). What happens next jars violently against that illusion: the shepherd is not Jacob, but Ivan, a pogromist who comes armed and ready to pillage Jewish womanhood, symbolized by the

mother's Sabbath dress.

The poem's speaker has been violently disillusioned by the false promises of nature and Jewish culture: neither prepared her for the political reality of Polish anti-Semitism. The political context in which the persona simultaneously identifies with the autobiographical poet and with the Matriarch breaks down the analogies that the Matriarch *tkhines* established and upon which the first half of the poem drew. Contemporary anti-Semitism makes the differences between the modern woman and the ancient figure stark and insurmountable. The speaker's poignant nostalgia for her mother, the prayers, and Jewish tradition proves both a source of strength and a deceptive blind.

Because they are intertextual, referring to Yiddish devotional prayers and stories, the poems by Ulinover, Molodowsky, Yakubovitch, and Korn appear to maintain the analogue of the *tkhines*, even when they shift into ambivalence, skepticism, and disillusion. Manger's animated recreations of the Matriarchs, though, boldly discard the analogy. One might say that perhaps the women's poems are, in essence, extensions of the devotional literature that their own mothers read. This observation may suggest that these women poets unintentionally slipped into those obsolete modes of devotional writing, even as they attempted to make their way into modern poetry. One might further conclude that Manger's witty reinvention of literary tradition in Yiddish poetry, through the Old Yiddish texts recovered by Yiddish scholarship of the 1920s,<sup>30</sup> places his Matriarch poems within the current of that "higher," "classical" stream of Yiddish belle-lettres into which Yehoash so cautiously dipped with "Rachel's Tomb."<sup>31</sup>

A different turn of thought, though, allows for the notion that Manger's poems are, in fact, indebted to the Matriarch poems of the 1920s by Ulinover, Molodowsky, and Yakubovitch. A decade before Manger, these women writers responded to Peretz's 1910 admonition that Yiddish writers should go "back to the Bible" in order to supply Yiddish literature with "tradition."<sup>32</sup> They went back to the Bible through the Yiddish prayers and readings of their mothers, unafraid of being too closely associated with the "base" materials of women's devotions or compromising the "lofty" purposes of modern literature. Perhaps these writers were best equipped to initiate Yiddish poetry's return to tradition. They knew intimately the habits of mind and the conventions of reading and prayer developed by the preceding generations of women.



## Notes

1 Chava Weissler, "The Traditional Piety of Ashkenazic Women," in *Jewish Spirituality: From Sixteenth Century Revival to the Present*, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 245-75. Also see Tracy Guren Klirs, "Introduction," *The Merit of Our Mothers: A Bilingual Anthology of Jewish Women's Prayers*, ed. Tracy Guren Klirs, trans. Tracy Guren Klirs, et al (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1992), 1-10.

2 "*Tkhine* of the Matriarchs for Rosh Hodesh Elul," composed by Serel bas Jacob Halevi Segal of Dubno, (Frankfurt-am-Oder: 1783), as quoted by Israel Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature*, trans. Bernard Martin, 12 vols. (New York: Hebrew Union College Press and Ktav, 1974), 7:257. In Bernard Martin's translation:

First we beg our mother Sarah that she may pray for us at the hour of judgment, that we may go out free from the judgment. . . . Have mercy, our mother, on your children, and especially pray for our children that they be not separated from us. You know well that it is very bitter when a child is taken away from its mother, how it was with you, how grieved you were when they took your Isaac away from you.

3 Tracy Gruen Klirs, Idah Cohen Selavan, and Gella Schweid Fishman, trans., "*Tkhine* of the Matriarchs for the New Moon of *Elul*," Serel bas Jacob Halevi Segal of Dubno, in *The Merit of Our Mothers: A Bilingual Anthology of Jewish Women's Prayers*, ed. Tracy Guren Klirs (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1992), 64-65. In Genesis 17:5 and 17:15, God adds the letter *hey* to the names of Abram and Sarai as a sign of the covenant and of their yet-unconceived son, Isaac.

4 Klirs, 66.

5 Klirs, 66.

6 Klirs, 66.

7 Chava Weissler, translator and annotator, "'The *Tkhine* of the Matriarchs:' A Work by an Eighteenth-Century Female Kabbalist," 1-7. I refer here to a typescript draft of a forthcoming publication that Chava Weissler generously shared with me and has give me permission to quote (December 12, 1996).

8 Midrash Lamentations Petihta 24:23-25. Translated by Chava Weissler, "The *Tkhine* of the Matriarchs," 23, note 104.

9 I looked through the collected poems of Joseph Bovshover, David Edelstadt, Yehoash (pseudonym for Sh. Bloomgarden), and Morris Rosenfeld.

10 Yehoash (pseud. Sh. Bloomgarden), "Rokhls keyver" ("Rachel's Tomb"), in *Gezamelte lider (Collected Poems)* (New York: Farlag Oyfgang, 1910), 99. Translation by Kathryn Hellerstein.

11 See Kathryn Hellerstein, "'A Word for my Blood': A Reading of

Kadya Molodowsky's *Froyen-lider* (Vilna, 1927)," *AJS Review* 13, nos. 1-2 (1988): 47-79. Also, "The Subordination of Prayer to Narrative in Modern Yiddish Poems," *Parable and Story as Sources of Jewish and Christian Theology*, ed. Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 205-36. And "Songs of Herself: The Lineage of Women Yiddish Poets," *Studies in Jewish-American Literature* (Fall, 1990), 138-50.

12 Roza Yakubovitsh remained within a traditional Jewish context, having been raised in a rabbinical household in the province of Plotsker, in Poland, schooled in Russian and then Polish Jewish government schools, as well as by her father the *rov*, and published in Peretz's collection *Yudish* (Warsaw, 1910). She married and settled in Kalish. Her first book of poems, *Mayne Gezangen*, appeared in Warsaw, 1924. Her second, *Lider tsu Got*, poems from 1924-1939, was lost during the war years. When the Nazis took over Kalish, she fled to Lodz, where she lived with Miriam Ulinover. Later she went to the Warsaw Ghetto, where she perished. Roza Yakubovitsh, in Ezra Korman, *Yidishe Dikhterins: Antologye* (Chicago: Farlag L.M. Stein, 1928) 84-92; Biographical Note, 344. Also, Zalman Reyzen, *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese un filologye* (Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1928), 1:136-37. And *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literature* (New York: Congress for Jewish Culture, 1961), 4:222.

13 *Tz'enah Ur'enah: The Classic Anthology of Torah Lore and Midrashic Comment*, trans. Miriam Stark Zakon, intro. Meir Holder (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications and Jerusalem: Hillel Press, 1984), 1:152.

14 *Tz'enah Ur'enah*, trans. Zakon, 1:156. See also [Yiddish] *Tsenerene* (Brooklyn, NY: Moses Greenfield, 1969), 2:140-44.

15 The source of this tale, in *Midrash Rabbah*, emphasizes how the gains and losses of birthright among the tribes of Israel result from the sisters' trade. *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, trans. Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman (New York: The Soncino Press), 2:663. {*Bareyshis Midrash Rabba* (Vayetze LXXII 3)}. The Midrashic version differs significantly: "THEN RACHEL SAID TO LEAH: GIVE ME, I PRAY THEE OF THY SON'S MANDRAKES, AND SHE SAID UNTO HER: IS IT A SMALL MATTER THAT THOU HAST TAKEN AWAY MY HUSBAND. . ." R. Simeon taught: Because she [Rachel] treated that righteous man [Jacob] so slightly, she was not buried together with him. Thus it says, "THEREFORE HE SHALL LIE WITH THEE TO-NIGHT," hinting: With thee will he lie in death, but not with me. R. Berekiah stated that R. Eleazar and R. Samuel b. Nahman commented on this. R. Eleazar said: Each lost [by the transaction], and each gained. Leah lost the mandrakes and gained the tribes (and the birthright), while Rachel gained the mandrakes and lost the tribes (and the birthright) . . . [Note: the two tribes are Issachar and Zebulun. Commentaries emend: Leah lost the mandrakes and the birthright. . . . Rachel gained the mandrakes and the birthright. . . . The birthright belonged to Reuben, but as a punishment for being the cause of this transaction . . . the birthright was taken from him and given to Joseph. . . .]

16 After this exchange and after Leah bears Issachar, Zebulun, and Dinah, Rachel finally has two sons, Joseph and Benjamin (Genesis 30: 22-24).

17 Khone Shmeruk, "Bibliografishe pratem," *Medresh Itzik* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984), 12.

18 David G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995), 248. See also Chone Shmeruk, "Medresh Itzik and the Problem of Its Literary Traditions," in *Medresh Itzik*, xix-xxii.

19 Roskies, 248. Also, see the two Introductions to Itzik Manger's *Medresh Itzik*, by Chone Shmeruk, "Medresh Itzik and the Problems of Its Literary Tradition," (v-xxix) and Dov Sadan, "A makhloyke un ir videranand," (27-47 in Hebrew numbering).

20 Shmeruk, in his introduction to *Medresh Itzik*, compares Manger's "Khavre brengt odemen dem epl" ("Eve Brings Adam the Apple") with M.L. Halpern's harsh, ironic treatment of Adam and Eve as grotesques in "Di balade fun Kashtakhan" (xxvi-xxviii) to show how radically Manger's complex poetic reconciliation with traditions and sources differed from "the broader background of developments in modern Yiddish poetry" (xxviii). This explanation omits mention of Ulinover, Molodowsky, and Yakubovtish's biblical poems of the 1920s.

21 Itzik Manger, *Medresh Itzik*, 53-54; 59-60; 61-62. The Rachel and Leah poems first appeared in Itzik Manger, *Khumesh lider* (Warsaw: 1935). Also see Itzik Manger, "Rokhl geyt tsum brunem nokh vaser," *Lid un balade* (New York: Itzik Manger Komitet, 1952), 238-239.

22 Itzik Manger, "Rokhl geyt tsum brunem nokh vaser" ("Rachel Goes to the Well for Water"), *Medresh Itzik*, 53-54.

23 *Tz'edah Ur'edah*, trans. Zakon, 148-9.

24 Itzik Manger, "Rokhl un leye," *Medresh Itzik*, 59-60.

25 *Tz'edah Ur'edah*, trans. Zakon, 1:154.

26 Itzik Manger, "Leye brengt dudaimlekh fun feld," *Medresh Itzik* 61-62.

27 *Tz'edah Ur'edah*, trans. Zakon, 156.

28 Rokhl Korn, "Khavre," "Rokhl," and "Shauls tokhter," *Bashertkeyt: Lider 1928-1948* (Montreal: Montreal Committee, 1949), 99-104.

29 Rokhl Korn, "Rokhl," *Bashertkeyt*, 100-101.

30 Shmeruk, "Introduction," *Medresh Itzik*, xii-xix.

31 On Manger's life-long sense of himself as a *klasiker* (classical writer), see Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing*, 230-65.

32 I.L. Peretz, "What Our Literature Needs," trans. Nathan Halper, in *Voices from the Yiddish: Essays, Memoirs, Diaries*, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1972), 25-31.

## Yiddish Literature as Secular Jewish Scripture: The World of Irving Howe

Theodore Weinberger

Beginning in the early 1950s, Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg teamed up to rescue Yiddish literature from oblivion. With the destruction of European Jewry, Howe and Greenberg knew that if the great texts of Yiddish literature were to survive in America, they would have to be translated into English. That Eliezer Greenberg (1896-1977) would embark upon such an undertaking does not require lengthy explanation — Greenberg himself was a Yiddish poet. Irving Howe's decision to do sustained work in the area of Yiddish literature is harder to understand. Howe, already an accomplished critic, risked being dismissed by literary scholars for studying an obscure literature,<sup>1</sup> and Howe begins his work several decades before American scholarship in Jewish studies starts to flourish — academically and remuneratively.<sup>2</sup> Examining Irving Howe's professional relationship with Yiddish literature will enable us to do more than preserve the legacy of one of this century's most beloved Jewish intellectuals: it will allow us to consider how Yiddish literature can function as secular Jewish scripture, and it will also allow us to consider whether such scripture is possible for Jews today.

Howe writes about the beginning of his work in Yiddish literature in his 1982 "intellectual autobiography," *A Margin of Hope*. After serving (as a non-combatant) in the army for almost four years in World War II, Howe became a younger member of an unofficial group known as "the New York intellectuals." Most of these writers, like Howe, were children of immigrant Jews, and, according to Howe, they "come to articulateness

at a moment when there was a strong drive to both break out of the ghetto and leave the bonds of Jewishness entirely."<sup>3</sup> Yet several of the New York intellectuals, including Paul Goodman, Harold Rosenberg, and Clement Greenberg, began to write on Jewish themes in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and Howe says that he read them "with an intensity that suggested they had touched some unresolved personal involvement."<sup>4</sup> According to Howe, the passion stirred up by these Jewish writings "found their first major outlet in a literary activity that for the next few decades would become a significant part of my life — editing the translation of Yiddish stories and poems into English. This wasn't, of course, a very forthright way of confronting my own troubled sense of Jewishness, but that was the way I took. Sometimes you have to make roundabout journeys without quite knowing where they will lead to."<sup>5</sup> So runs Howe's modest account of the start of his professional interest in Yiddish literature.

A much bolder statement about Howe's beginnings in Yiddish literature is made by Edward Alexander. In a 1995 address Alexander says:

In the late forties, Howe's feelings of "Jewishness" were strong but shapeless; in order to lend them coherence, in order to provide for secular Jews a substitute for Torah, he hit upon the idea of establishing what we might call an objective body of sacred texts for the creed of secular Jewishness. These sacred texts would be the stories, poems, and essays of that most secular body of Jewish writing, Yiddish literature.<sup>6</sup>

For Alexander, Howe's work in Yiddish literature is not just fueled by a personal expression of Jewishness, but it is undertaken "in order to provide for secular Jews a substitute for Torah." Now this is a much larger claim than Howe himself made concerning what he was doing in bringing Yiddish short stories and poems to an English-speaking audience. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find such a claim in any of the introductions to the Yiddish literary anthologies that Howe and Greenberg edit. On the contrary, we find, for example, in the introduction to *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (an essay that Alexander calls "a crucial document in [Howe's] intellectual history because it is the first public expression of his 'reconquest' of Jewishness"),<sup>7</sup> Howe and Greenberg writing that

Yiddish literature has not recovered from the Nazi experience, and it is doubtful that it ever will or has any right to. . . . Our concern here is not with the future, not with prophecy. It is with the past, with the life and the warmth that come to us when we turn to the pages of Mendeleyev, at the beginning, and Chaim Grade, at the end.<sup>8</sup>

From Howe's introductions to his Yiddish anthologies it seems that he was engaged in the preservation of literary texts and not in the formation of a holy canon of Jewish writing.

This question of whether or not *Howe thought* that he was "providing for secular Jews a substitute for Torah" is obviously one that cannot be answered definitively (a scholar's motivations for undertaking any given project may be complex and may not be amenable to full discovery). I hone in on this question because it allows us to think about Yiddish literature as secular Jewish scripture. Whatever Howe thought about the possibilities for Yiddish literature in English translation (and this is a point to which we will return), we will want to first consider how it was even *possible* for Yiddish literature to function as secular Jewish scripture in the world that gave birth to it, the world of the East European Jews — and in order to do this we need to back up a little bit more and speak about this unusual concept called secular Judaism.

Scholars classify Judaism variously as an ethnic, natural, or classical-national religious tradition.<sup>9</sup> Participants in this type of religious tradition, besides being tied to one another through religious beliefs and practices, are bound to one another through family, clan, culture, and land of birth. In such a religious tradition there are no sacred and secular spheres. The whole culture is infused with religion; music, art, and dance are integrated into the religious culture. When such a religious culture disintegrates, when religious belief and ethnic ties wane, the secular becomes divorced from the sacred — so that one goes to a concert hall for music, to a museum for art, and to the ballet for dance. When such a religious culture partially collapses, so that religious belief fades but ethnic ties still hold, there is the possibility for a "partially secularized culture"<sup>10</sup> — where cultural endeavors are cordoned off from the religious sphere yet utilize shared memories of a people united in faith. Judaism is a classical-national religious tradition that begins to partially collapse in the eighteenth century,<sup>11</sup> allowing for the possibility of secular Judaism.

Historians point to the Haskalah (the Jewish enlightenment) and to Hasidism as key factors in the break-up of the medieval period and the

beginning of modernity in Judaism. The Haskalah posits two Torahs: the Torah of God, and the Torah of humanity (human learning). With the Haskalah, it becomes just as legitimate to be a scholar of this Torah of humanity (in other words, a secular scholar) as it is to be a rabbinic scholar.<sup>12</sup> Hasidism stresses communion with the divine and the need to recognize the divine in all.<sup>13</sup> With Hasidism, a strict emphasis on study and prayer is rejected. Hasidism is destabilizing to the medieval Jewish community because a new kind of community is created — where the primary loyalty of the community is not to the home but to the *rebbe*. Because of the Haskalah and Hasidism, therefore, it was becoming possible in the eighteenth century for a Jew to be Jewish outside of the Rabbis' influence — which was being limited to the synagogue and to certain religious rituals and customs in the home. A Jew could pursue Jewishness by ethnic identification apart from religious identification — as long as he or she did not adopt a different religious identity. In such a world it is possible for a literature to appear that will be identifiably Jewish, but that is not written to serve the synagogue. Such a world does come together in the nineteenth century;<sup>14</sup> it is the world of Yiddishkeit, which Howe defines as - "that phase of Jewish history during the past two centuries which is marked by the prevalence of Yiddish as the language of the east European Jews and by the growth among them of a culture resting mainly on that language."<sup>15</sup> In this world of Yiddishkeit, the texts that speak to many Jewish lives are not the Bible, the Talmud, or the Rabbinic commentaries, but Yiddish short stories, poems, and novels.

In thinking of Yiddish literature as a secular Jewish literature, we can't help but be struck by the ironic fact that the world of Yiddishkeit is known not for its separation of the sacred and the secular but for its hearty integration of the two:

The world of the East European Jews was a world in which God was a living force, a presence, something more than a name or a desire. He did not rule from on high; He was not a God of magnificence, not an aesthetic God. . . . The relationship to God was social, intimate, critical, and at times seemed to follow, like a series of rationalistic deductions, from the premise of the Chosen People.<sup>16</sup>

Howe also says that "the East European Jews had to abide by the distinction between worldly and other-worldly in order to survive, but they refused to recognize it as just or necessary or inevitable."<sup>17</sup> In explaining how a secular Jewish literature could arise from such a world, we need to remember that emancipation (and modernity) does not come at once to all of the Jews of Europe — it comes to the Jews of Western Europe much earlier than to the Jews of Eastern Europe. In nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, therefore, few Jews beyond the intellectual avant-garde had entered modernity. In effect, the Yiddish writers were drawing their inspiration from a pre-modern world and yet the very act of their writing was a modern one, for they were writing stories and poems and not legal codes or responsa.<sup>18</sup> And according to Howe, "once [the Yiddish writer] began to write in Yiddish, he implicitly acknowledged that his main desire was to communicate with man as well as God" — and we know that evidence of this desire is a hallmark of modernity.<sup>19</sup> So the great irony of Yiddish literature is that "Yiddish reaches its climax of expressive power as the world it portrays begins to come apart."<sup>20</sup> One could say, then, that the very appearance of Yiddish literature presages the end of the world that it chronicles.

We have looked at what it means to speak of secular Judaism and we have, in particular, discussed the appearance of a secular Jewish literature — Yiddish literature. We need now to explain how Yiddish literature functioned as secular Jewish scripture, but before we do so we need to define "scripture." The word "scripture" comes from the Latin *scriptura*, "which refers to the act of writing and to the finished product, sacred writ."<sup>21</sup> When we say that a body of writing serves as scripture, we are doing something different than judging the artistic quality of the work — we are saying that for a particular community this set of writing is holy. For example, Shakespeare's plays are of great literary value, but they do not constitute a holy body of work for an identifiable community of people. What does it mean to treat a work as holy? To see in it ultimate meaning and value. The work in some way provides the reader with answers to the basic existential questions of: "Who am I?" "Why am I here?" and "Where am I going?" We need to distinguish between a text that may attain holiness for a given individual and a body of work that attains holiness for a community of people. Only in the latter case do we have scripture. To propose that Yiddish literature functioned as secular Jewish scripture in the lives of East European Jews is to say that Yiddish literature carved out a meaningful universe for these Jews. It is to say that



a community of Jews found ultimate meaning about their identity in this literature; for these Jews Yiddish literature spoke not with the voice of God, but — perhaps with as holy a voice — the voice of Jewish peoplehood.

We are now in a position to see how and why, according to Irving Howe, Yiddish literature functioned as secular Jewish scripture. We should note at the outset that Howe has problems with this whole notion of secular Judaism and even with the term "Jewishness." Part of Howe is inclined toward a very traditional interpretation of what it means to be a Jew. He implies that "secular Judaism" and "Jewishness" are inferior cultural alternatives to religious Judaism and the God of Israel.<sup>22</sup> Howe thus writes:

When one speaks of Judaism or the Jewish religion, it is to invoke a coherent tradition of belief and custom; when one speaks of "Jewishness," it is to invoke a spectrum of styles and symbols, a range of cultural memories, no longer as ordered or weighty as once they were yet still able to affect experience.<sup>23</sup>

This is why Howe says that the secular Jewish culture of Yiddishkeit "may never have been abstractly defensible."<sup>24</sup> And yet Howe immediately goes on to say: "But then, history doesn't proceed out of a neat submission to first principles. A living culture needs no defense: its very existence constitutes its right to survival."<sup>25</sup> It seems that it is to the post-Yiddishkeit Jewish world that Howe directs his cautionary remarks about the casual use of "secular Judaism" and "Jewishness." For the world of the East European Jews, Howe thought these terms appropriate — and so we may proceed.

The key for Howe in thinking about the function of Yiddish literature for the East European Jews is that it is the literature of the Jew in the diaspora; behind Yiddish literature the trope of *galut* (exile) looms large. Howe says that

Yiddish literature releases a profound yearning for a return not to the supremacy of Hebrew but to those conditions of life that would make possible the supremacy of Hebrew — that is, a yearning for the end of the dispersion and a reintegration of Jewish life.<sup>26</sup>

What Yiddish literature does is maintain peoplehood amongst a people that is without a land and that is drifting away from religion. Utilizing the

words of Yiddish critic B. Rivkin, Howe claims that "Yiddish literature, more through necessity than choice, came to serve as a substitute for a 'would-be territory,' thereby taking over the functions of a nation that did not yet exist. This meant that many of the communal needs which for other peoples were met by the nation had somehow to be satisfied by Yiddish literature."<sup>27</sup> But in order to satisfy these communal needs, Yiddish literature had first to create a niche for itself, since the East European Jews were not practiced in reading texts unconnected to traditional Judaism. (Indeed, the Yiddishist movement comes into being to defend the use of Yiddish as a legitimate Jewish cultural enterprise.)<sup>28</sup> The Yiddish writers sought a traditional framework on which to peg their literature — and this they found in the concept of *galut*. Howe says that the Yiddish writers thought that:

Yiddish literature should focus upon one particular experience, the life of dispersion; that it should release, as only imaginative writing can, the deepest impulses of that life and thereby provide a means of both consecrating and transcending the *shtetl*.<sup>29</sup>

Yiddish literature hooked up with the deeply rooted Judaic notion of *galut*, and it provided Jews with the means to hope for something better. This is why Howe says that Yiddish literature was able to achieve the prominence it did in the world of Yiddishkeit. (As evidence of this prominence, Howe calls attention to the massive funerals of the Yiddish writers Y.L. Peretz and of Sholom Aleichem: "In no other modern culture did the death of its leading writers arouse so intimate a response; in no other modern culture did the leading writers still *matter* so deeply.")<sup>30</sup> Though Howe does not mention the word "scripture" in his discussion of Yiddish literature, he almost defines what we mean by a secular Jewish scripture when he says: "Yiddish literature became a central means of collective expression for the East European Jews, fulfilling some of the functions of both religion and the idea of nationality."<sup>31</sup> It certainly seems to me, then, that for Irving Howe, Yiddish literature functioned in the world of Yiddishkeit as secular Jewish scripture.

We now come back to the question with which we began: what did Howe think he was doing in bringing out those anthologies of Yiddish literature in English? Was he in fact, as Edward Alexander claims, providing "for secular Jews a substitute for Torah?" Did he think that Yiddish literature (mainly in translation) could still serve as secular Jewish scripture? As I have mentioned, one won't find a clear answer to this

question in the actual volumes that Howe and Greenberg edit. Yet by the early 1980s, we do get something substantial. There is clear evidence that Howe (whatever he once thought) felt that Yiddish literature *could not* serve as secular Jewish scripture for future generations of Jews and that there was no possibility of secular Judaism at all — outside of the State of Israel.

The topic of secular Judaism was prominent during the one and only lecture that I was able to hear first-hand from Irving Howe. The date was Friday, December 10, 1982, the last day of class in Arthur Hertzberg's course in American Jewish history at Columbia University. I can still remember sitting in dumbfounded amazement on that day. There was Irving Howe, author of *World of Our Fathers*, and he was saying that that world was dead, and that a Jew who wanted his or her Jewishness to mean something had either to move to Israel or get religion. Earlier that year, Howe was to say something similar in *A Margin of Hope*:

When the writer Hillel Halkin sent from Israel a powerful book arguing that the Jews in the West now had only two long-range choices if they wished to remain Jews — religion and Israel, faith and nationhood — I searched for arguments with which to answer him. But finally I gave it up, since it seemed clear that the perspective from which I lived as "a partial Jew" had reached a historical dead end and there, at ease or not, I would have to remain.<sup>32</sup>

For himself, Howe could identify with being what he called (following Harold Rosenberg) "a partial Jew."<sup>33</sup> He was after all a child of immigrants, with the Yiddish language being his "language of naming."<sup>34</sup> And while Howe claims that it would "be a deception" to say that he "felt entirely at home in the milieu of secular Jewishness," he says that his work in Yiddish literature "helped me get through my time. It made me suppose I was doing something useful in editing English translations of Yiddish literature."<sup>35</sup> But to the next generation as I heard him on that day in December, 1982 (and this was all the more powerful coming on the last day of class), Howe would not hold out the culture of Yiddishkeit as a viable expression of Jewishness. The next American Jewish generation could not be secular Jews — it was either Israel or religion.

But maybe Irving Howe was wrong? There are Yiddish programs at

many universities, there is the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts, and Klezmer music abounds. Maybe it *is* possible for Yiddish literature to once again be secular Jewish scripture — in translation and in the original. I don't think so, and my reason here leads me to a different answer than Edward Alexander's to the question with which we began. The reason why I think Yiddish literature has no chance of sustaining secular Jewish culture as secular Jewish scripture is not because its world, the world of Yiddishkeit, no longer exists — the narratives of the Bible, after all, are from a world that no longer exists and it is sacred scripture. The fact that most Jews would have to approach Yiddish literature in translation is similarly not an insurmountable obstacle to Yiddish literature's assuming the role of scripture for secular Jews — just think about how Aramaic (once the lingua franca for Jews) posed no problem for the Talmud's assuming the mantle of Oral Torah for Orthodox Jews. The obstacle that Yiddish literature cannot surmount is the State of Israel. Yiddish thrives in a Jewish culture that is caught between declining religious belief and unrealized national aspirations. The State of Israel breaks this tension. As Joel Carmichael (whom Howe quotes in *World of Our Fathers*) says:

The concept of *galut* is impossible once it becomes a mere function of an *individual* choice; a Jew who simply declines to return to a restored and reconstituted Zion is obviously not suffering the pangs of exile.<sup>36</sup>

The culture of Yiddishkeit cannot live in the absence of one of its two lodestones.<sup>37</sup>

It is overdoing it to say, therefore, that Howe wanted "to provide for secular Jews a substitute for Torah" when he began work with Eliezer Greenberg in the early 1950s. With the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, Howe would certainly have been able to recognize that the "life of dispersion" had been eclipsed. Howe began translating and editing in order to preserve the texts of a Jewish culture that was drawing to its close, texts that arguably served this culture as scripture.<sup>38</sup> Though Howe might have thought and hoped that these texts would live on for English-speaking Jews (and non-Jews) in generations to come, he would have known that these texts would not be able to rely on the canonization that scripture affords, but would have to stand on their own as great literature.<sup>39</sup>

Irving Howe died on May 5, 1993, a month short of his seventy-third

birthday. The culture of Yiddishkeit (including Yiddish literature as secular Jewish scripture) preceded Howe in death — and Howe publicly said Kaddish over it. <sup>40</sup> Six weeks before he died, Howe delivered an endowed lecture at Hunter College (a school where he taught for many years) entitled "The End of Jewish Secularism." Howe says of Yiddishkeit:

The sad truth — to me endlessly sad — is that this culture is reaching its end. . . . For some thoughtful Jews, those who want to remain "Jewish Jews" but in all seriousness cannot yield themselves to religion, the result is a sense of profound discomfort, perhaps desperation. I think that those of us committed to the secular Jewish outlook must admit that we are reaching a dead-end.<sup>41</sup>

Irving Howe leaves diaspora Jewry with a challenging, troubling message.

## Notes

1 Indeed, the renowned literary critic Lionel Trilling once told Howe, "I suspect Yiddish literature," and Howe says of Trilling's remark: "This hurt and angered me deeply, and I never forgave him for it, since he didn't know a damned thing about it — though we did become friends." Quoted in Edward Alexander, "Irving Howe and Secular Jewishness: An Elegy" (Cincinnati: Judaic Studies Program, University of Cincinnati, 1995), 2. Henceforth cited as Alexander. Also see Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope: An Intellectual Autobiography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 265. Henceforth cited as *Margin*.

2 The Association for Jewish Studies was not even founded until the late 1960s.

3 *Margin*, 137.

4 *Margin*, 260.

5 *Margin*, 260.

6 Alexander, 8.

7 Alexander, 9.

8 Mendeleyev Mocher Sforim (1836-1917), literally "Mendeleyev the Bookseller," is the pen name of Sholom Jacob Abramovitz; he is considered to be the father of Yiddish literature. Chaim Grade (1910-1982) is the last writer to be included in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*. See Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, eds., *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (New York: Schocken, 1973 [1953]), 70, 71. Henceforth cited as *Stories*.

9 See Roger Schmidt, *Exploring Religion*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1988), 50-53, 308-312. Henceforth cited as Schmidt.

10 Irving Howe, Ruth R. Wisse, and Khone Shmeruk, eds., *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987), 2. In his introduction to this anthology, Howe uses this term to speak of Yiddish culture; later on we will see that it is indeed apposite.

11 Though in the year 70 CE, with the destruction of the Second Jerusalem Temple, there was a major permanent shift in the cultic activity in Judaism from animal sacrifice to prayer, the religious culture of Rabbinic Judaism (which takes over) is similarly an all-encompassing religious culture.

12 Howe writes that "it may be said that the major contribution of the Haskalah to Yiddish literature was not ideological at all, but simply the *idea* of writing — that is, the idea that a secular career as a writer was worthy of a mature Jewish intelligence" (*Stories*, 25).

13 Howe draws attention to the special importance of Hasidism for Yiddish: "Hasidism helped prepare the way for modern Yiddish writing by validating the language, by raising it to a plane of esteem as the companion of Hebrew within the Jewish world." See Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, eds., *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 7-8.

14 Yiddish literature, to be sure, did not suddenly appear in the nineteenth century. Yet, according to Howe, it is the nineteenth century that witnesses "an imposing renaissance of the Yiddish literary imagination" (*Stories*, 24).

15 Howe goes on to say here: "The culture of *Yiddishkeit* is no longer strictly that of traditional Orthodoxy, yet it retains strong ties to the religious past. It takes on an increasingly secular character yet is by no means confined to the secularist elements among Yiddish-speaking Jews. It refers to a way of life, a shared experience, which goes beyond opinion or ideology." See Irving Howe, *World Of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 16n. Henceforth cited as *World*.

16 *Stories*, 8, 9.

17 *Stories*, 3.

18 Howe speaks of it in this way: Yiddish literature's "moment of 'classicism' in the late nineteenth century occurred when the folk materials were still alive to the literary imagination, yet the idea of craft and composition, in the literal meanings of those words, had begun to fascinate writers" (*Stories*, 25).

19 *Stories*, 44.

20 *Stories*, 28.

21 Schmidt, 208.

22 It should be noted too that Howe refused to consider subjective emotional experience as religious experience. He writes: "One might still have one's rare moments of sublimity, fragments of surprise in a starry night or when

calmly at sea or even dozing over a book. One might shyly near an emotion of transcendence. But surely religious belief came to more than fragile epiphanies, surely it came to a persuasion of strength" (*Margin*, 279). For Howe, in order to believe as a religious Jew, one had to have more than the occasional "peak" experience — one had to know that the God of Israel existed.

23 Irving Howe, ed., *Jewish American Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 10.

24 Irving Howe, "The End of Jewish Secularism" (New York: Hunter College of The City University of New York, 1995), 3. Henceforth cited as "End."

25 "End," 3.

26 *Stories*, 29.

27 *Stories*, 30.

28 Howe says of this unusual situation: "How astonishing it now seems — a movement designed to 'defend' a language spoken by millions of people, the very people to whom the writers addressed themselves with such assurance and warmth; a movement that felt obliged to justify the existence of a flourishing culture at a time when it needed not apologetics but air, space, and time" (*Stories*, 31-32).

29 *Stories*, 31.

30 *Stories*, 63.

31 *Stories*, 30.

32 *Margin*, 281. See Hillel Halkin, *Letters to an American Jewish Friend: A Zionist's Polemic* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1977). The problem for the secular Jew is all the more pressing for Howe because he rules out assimilation as an intellectually defensible option, speaking of it as "sterile" (*Margin*, 280).

33 *Margin*, 281. Howe draws upon the following two of Rosenberg's essays in the chapter titled "Jewish Quandaries" in *A Margin of Hope*: "Does The Jew Exist? Sartre's Morality Play About Anti-Semitism," *Commentary* 7 (1949): 8-18; and "Jewish Identity In A Free Society: On Current Efforts to Enforce 'Total Commitment,'" *Commentary* 9 (1950): 508-514.

34 *Margin*, 269.

35 *Margin*, 280, 281.

36 Quoted in *World*, 629. Joel Carmichael's statement originally appeared in his "The Meaning of *Galut* in America Today," *Midstream* (March, 1963): 9.

37 This is why Howe saw such bleak prospects for the secular Jew in America: "Jews will continue to make significant contributions to American culture, but that is hardly the same as creating a distinctively Jewish culture. That, I believe, can occur only if based upon a Jewish community using a Jewish language — which today limits the possibility to Israel" ("End" 13).

38 Clearly, though, this project was key to Howe's own Jewishness.

Alexander thus says that "we cannot doubt" that Howe was able to "derive strength and identity from that faith [the Jewish tradition] by reading the Yiddish writers" (Alexander, 13).

39 That the world had ignored these great texts and these great writers was deeply disturbing to Howe (and he obviously hoped that his own work in Yiddish literature would do something to rectify this situation). Of the Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein (1896-1971), Howe wrote: "Glatstein knew — he had every right to — that he was a distinguished poet who, if he wrote in any other language, would be famous, the recipient of prizes, and the subject of critical studies. It was hard for me to explain . . . the utter indifference of American literary circles to the presence of a vibrant Yiddish culture that could be found, literally and symbolically, a few blocks away" (*Margin*, 265).

40 Alexander in fact concludes his essay on Howe by saying that secular Jewishness's "most brilliant expositor, the man who endowed it with a special twilight beauty, ceased to believe in it long before he died" (Alexander, 17).

41 "End," 10.



## Reflections on Yiddish Archetypes in Jewish American Literature: Fiction by Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud

S. Lillian Kremer

An abundance of remarkable folkloric characters from Yiddish literature have been incorporated and transmogrified in Jewish American fiction. Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud have each created a body of fiction incorporating stock figures from Yiddish literature and folklore — recasting them, reclothing them in modern dress — to explore themes of spiritual crisis. *T'shuvah*, turning to God or the right moral path, central to the Jewish principle of redemption, is a fundamental concept in affirmative works of fiction by each author. Bernard Malamud's "The Last Mohican" and "The Magic Barrel" and Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*, widely anthologized works, each evidence derivative Yiddish character constructs enacting Jewish themes. Although readers of twentieth-century American literature have passing acquaintance with the *shadchan* and *schnorrer* and have become conversant with the *schlemiel*,<sup>1</sup> the righteous figure known as the *tzaddik*, and the variant *lamed vov tzaddik*, generally elude critical scrutiny and contemporary versions remain detached from their literary precursors in critical commentaries.

According to Jewish legend, as Philip Birnbaum explains, the *lamed vov tzaddikim*, thirty-six anonymous righteous men who inhabit the world in each generation, are described as being extremely modest, "concealing their identity behind a mask of ignorance and poverty and earning their livelihood by the sweat of their brow."<sup>2</sup> Also known as *nistarim* (concealed) in the folk tales, these figures emerge from their self-imposed

concealment to avert threatened disasters perpetrated against the Jewish people and then return to anonymity in the Jewish community as soon as their tasks are accomplished. Each is unknown and independent of the other, and when one dies another appears in his place. While the persona has been used in twentieth-century prose in its traditional form for the prize-winning French novel, *The Last of the Just*, in Jewish American fiction the transformed character plays on an intimate stage of personal/spiritual drama. Paralleling the traditional hidden saints, the American incarnations are common men, boorish, yet verbally adept, materializing when needed, whether or not their presence is desired. They are relentless until success is achieved, and they then depart as mysteriously as they appeared.

The ancient Jewish paradigm of the teacher-pupil relationship is decisive to these stories in which the quester and guide often function as dual protagonists. During a period when much of American literature has been transfixed by self-absorption and self-reflexivity, the mentors who populate fiction by Bellow and Malamud transmit the usable Jewish past, its rich store of ethical wisdom and collective historic memory, and offer moral and aesthetic guidance to spiritually troubled or misguided novices or questers, cast as *schlemiels* — the fools and bunglers of Yiddish folklore, comic figures who seem to be victims, but redefine their worlds and emerge as moral victors.

Contributing a level of ambiguity to the modern morality drama are the novelists' folkloric appropriation and fusion of the *tzaddik* figure with the more accessible *schnorrer*, the mendicant who often goads his benefactors to charitable action, and the *shadchan*, the marriage broker, who similarly perturbs his clients into action. Like many *schnorrers* of popular Eastern European Yiddish literature, those of Bellow and Malamud provide the Jew with the opportunity to fulfill charitable obligations while mercilessly lecturing him. The *shadchan*, initially and traditionally an important Jewish communal functionary whose role was performed for love of God and perpetuation of the Jewish family, has metamorphosed into a comic figure, the butt of satiric humor, guilty of embellishing the physical, intellectual, and social attributes of his clients. Both the *schnorrer* and *shadchan* are highly visible and agonizingly articulate when they choose to be, and vexingly evasive when it suits them to reverse the roles of pursuer and pursued. Limited to the *schnorrer* and *shadchan* roles, Bellow's Tamkin, and Malamud's Susskind and Salzman would be no more than droll and amusing irritants to their fictional

disciples and readers. They gain spiritual stature, however, from their correspondence to the *tzaddik*.

Shimon Susskind, a comic moral guru, is an engaging, infuriating composite figure, alternately acting as *schnorrer* and *tzaddik*, Malamud's most improbable redemptive guide. "The Last Mohican," Holocaust survivor and refugee from many lands, plays *schnorrer* on the tale's narrative level, and *lamed vov tzaddik* on the thematic level. He is spiritual guide to an American *schlemiel*, Arthur Fidelman, a "self-confessed failure as a painter,"<sup>3</sup> self-proclaimed art historian and critic engaged on a journey of self-discovery. Upon Fidelman's arrival in Italy to write a critical study of Giotto, he is excited by "all that history."<sup>4</sup> Yet, he is negligent of his own people's ancient and recent history. A man who recognizes him as a Jew, and whom Fidelman recognizes as a fellow Jew, presents himself as a needy refugee and tour guide. Although Fidelman gives the beggar a modest donation in lieu of the suit he requests, he extends charity in a manner contrary to Jewish tradition, grudgingly, humiliating the recipient. Susskind therefore undertakes Fidelman's education and literally guides him in the charitable code of Maimonides and in Holocaust history; coincidentally, he teaches him something about art. Modeled on the traditional *schnorrer* of Yiddish literature, who is characterized by folklorist Nathan Ausubel, as having "next to his adroitness in fleecing the philanthropic sheep . . . his *chutzpah*, his unmitigated impudence,"<sup>5</sup> Susskind appears, uninvited, at Fidelman's hotel and restaurant to engage the American in moral debate. He is, as Sidney Richman aptly notes, "one who fastens to the tormented [hero] like a spiritual cannibal and does not release his hold until the younger man submits to the terrors of rebirth."<sup>6</sup> To Fidelman's outraged query regarding the necessity for his responsibility to the beggar, Susskind replies directly, citing a widely honored Jewish concept of communal responsibility: "Who else? . . . 'You are responsible because you are a man. Because you are a Jew, aren't you?'"<sup>7</sup>

To understand the meaning of Giotto, Sidney Richman contends, Fidelman must comprehend "that the way to the self is paradoxically through another."<sup>8</sup> Because Fidelman resists Susskind's instruction, the beggar adopts a radical teaching style resulting in role reversal, having the pursued become the pursuer. To that end, he steals Fidelman's briefcase containing the manuscript on Giotto. Plagued by the loss of his work, Fidelman is paralyzed. He can neither rewrite the missing chapter nor create another. On the night of the theft, he dreams of chasing the refugee

in Jewish catacombs under the ancient Appian Way while threatening to strike him with "a seven flamed candelabrum."<sup>9</sup> The dream reflects his anxiety and foreshadows his pursuit of Susskind. The transgressing American's use of the religious artifact as weapon signifies how far removed Fidelman is from spiritual health.

Malamud adds comic inversion to the self-discovery journey motif as Fidelman now rushes around Rome in search of Susskind. His pursuit courses through a series of real and imagined transformative encounters, from the pathways of the art world to the labyrinthine maze of Jewish history — away from church, museum, and art library to synagogue, Jewish ghetto, and cemetery. While most Jewish American writers were exploring the possibilities of the movement of Jews out of the ghettos and into the suburbs, Malamud, as Ezra Greenspan argues, "reversed the process by sending Fidelman back to the ghetto — and one of the oldest ones, at that — to discover the true nature of his identity."<sup>10</sup> As he tracks down his prey on the banks of the Tiber, Fidelman enters a Sephardic synagogue and, untrue to his surname, deceptively imitates the devotional form of the ritually purified worshippers who "touched with loose fingers their brows, mouths, and breasts as they bowed to the Ark."<sup>11</sup> Another Holocaust survivor, one still mourning a son killed by the Nazis, directs Fidelman to the Jewish cemetery where Susskind is occasionally employed to pray for the dead. In the presence of headstones testifying to the Nazi slaughter of Italian Jews, the art pilgrim, elated by Italian history, is brought into proximity with Jewish history — a history from which he is still divorced as evidenced by his reflection that he was in the presence of memorials for "those who, *for one reason or another* [italics added], had died in the late large war."<sup>12</sup> The headstones inscribe the deaths more accurately as Holocaust losses, victims of a calculated plan to annihilate European Jewry and not as some by-product of a larger war. Illustrative is the stone engraved "Betrayed by the damned Fascists/Murdered at Auschwitz by the barbarous Nazis."<sup>13</sup> This inscription removes the deaths from the sphere of warfare between belligerent armies and places them in the Holocaust context.

When he finally locates Susskind, Fidelman conducts a fruitless search of his room, which inspires a second graveyard dream. In this reverie, Fidelman, led by "Virgilio Susskind," finds himself lying beneath a Giotto fresco of St. Francis giving his gold cloak to an old knight. Rising from an empty grave to engage the critic in a dialogue on the meaning and purpose of art, the spiritual guide leads the novice to discovery of Giotto's

meaning in the context of Judaic ethics — Judaism's insistence on human responsibility. The dream lesson, expressed in visual form, is the moral lesson which the *schnorrer* had earlier sought to impart verbally. Signifying his spiritual metamorphosis, Fidelman voluntarily honors the commandments by giving his suit to Susskind, with the wish that the old man wear it in good health. He has learned that charity must come from the heart as well as the wallet. In the guise of a beggar, the redemptive agent has taught the American art critic what rabbis teach: Jews and all human beings are responsible for each other. That is the essence of being human and at the heart of Judaic ethics and the charitable code, which insists that compassion must be linked to social justice and that *zedakah* (charity) signifies "righteousness" and "justice," not mere alms-giving.

From the "Last Mohican," a survivor of the near-extinct Eastern European Jews, a survivor of man's ultimate inhumanity to man, Fidelman learns the importance of the human bond and the connection between ethics and aesthetics. Only after he accepts the moral imperative of universal human responsibility can the art critic reform, understand Giotto's interpretation of suffering humanity, and progress toward spiritual redemption and affinity with his name by exhibiting his fidelity to the charitable principles of Judaism. As Fidelman laments the loss of his manuscript, the departing Susskind, "light as the wind in his marvelous knickers, his green coattails flying," <sup>14</sup> shouts back, "Have mercy, . . . I did you a favor."<sup>15</sup> Having travelled to Italy to study the work of a Christian painter, Fidelman has been introduced to Jewish ethics and become immersed in Jewish history, leading to his "triumphant insight," an epiphanal understanding in which he affirms the truth of the *tzaddik's* parting words, that he acted generously by destroying a chapter in which "the words were there but the spirit was missing."<sup>16</sup> Having completed the task of directing the *schlemiel* to self-awareness and communal responsibility, Malamud's enigmatic spiritual guide, compound of the commonplace and mysterious, disappears, destined to keep on running, as the *lamed vov tzaddik* is to venture forth where he is needed.

While the unconventional moral guide plays a secondary role in "The Last Mohican," where the central focus is on Fidelman's transformation, the moral mentor of "The Magic Barrel" claims a dominant role. One of Malamud's best loved stories, "The Magic Barrel" has also been the object of sharply divergent critical interpretation. It is a tale of spiritual turning that derives its power from the relationship of rabbinical student, Leo Finkle, and matchmaker, Pinye Salzman, cast as spiritual novice and

hidden saint. Advised that marriage would enhance his chances for congregational employment, Leo enlists the services of a traditional marriage broker. Malamud draws this *shadchan* in broad comic strokes. A talkative humbug, with a genius for glossing over the physical and character defects of his clients, Salzman is conceived in the traditional satiric mode, as lively, impudent, given to exaggeration and banter.<sup>17</sup> Yet, he is also touched with comic pathos, characteristic of the long suffering Jews who populate Malamud's fictional world. Undergirding Salzman's *shadchan* role, which has received ample treatment in the critical literature, is the motivation of the *lamed vov tzaddik*. To facilitate his role as hidden saint, Salzman appears as the boorish, fish-smelling dweller of dingy tenements, the brash, aggressive matrimonial entrepreneur, deftly employing evasion and assertion to lead Leo on, to transform the supplicant to pursuer as did Shimon Susskind in "The Last Mohican."

A bridal candidate's misreading of Leo's spiritual ardor serves as catalyst for his identity crisis. Her misinterpretation engenders Leo's epiphanal discovery that aside from his parents, he has never loved anyone, that he did not choose his profession for love of God, and "that he did not love God so well as he might, because he had not loved man."<sup>18</sup> This realization plunges the protagonist into an emotional crisis. At his lowest point, he retrieves the photographs Salzman had left with him and is attracted to one woman because her eyes suggest that she "had lived . . . had somehow deeply suffered."<sup>19</sup> Despite Salzman's efforts to dissuade Leo from meeting this woman, whom he identifies as his errant daughter and claims is an inappropriate wife for a rabbi, Leo insists on meeting Stella, hoping to be of service, "to convert her to goodness, himself to God."<sup>20</sup> In a relationship with Stella, Leo anticipates a chance to attain the wisdom arising from love and pain. So transformed is Leo by this decision that he pursues Salzman. The elder perceives Finkle's eyes "weighted with wisdom"<sup>21</sup> and consents: "If you can love her, then you can love anybody."<sup>22</sup>

Predictably, the concluding scene of "desperate innocence," coupled with implied corruption and Salzman's "prayers for the dead,"<sup>23</sup> has generated much debate. One reading posits the view that the matchmaker is a manipulator who has consciously foisted his impure daughter on the naive rabbinical student, intending, from the outset, to trap him. A second argues that Salzman is truly chagrined at his blunder, that he regards Finkle as spiritually lost and that when he chants the prayer for the dead, it is meant for the suitor. Perceiving Salzman as "both cynic and innocent,"

Sam Bluefarb concludes that the marriage broker is unsympathetic to Leo's quest for love and that the tale's irony "is that the cynical, calloused marriage broker who deals in dreams isn't able to surmount . . . his own level as a dealer, or better, a trafficker, in dreams."<sup>24</sup> In contrast, Sheldon Hershinow posits the view that:

the reader is left with the illogical vaguely unsettling but deeply moving impression that Pinye's mourning chant somehow captures the pain, suffering, and loneliness of life while also welcoming the possibility of spiritual growth.<sup>25</sup>

Lawrence Dessner offers an engaging interpretation of Salzman's "metaphysical status" that veers toward a supernatural element, citing textual passages that tempt "us to imagine the matchmaker literally 'appearing' . . . materializing out of spirit into the semblance of flesh."<sup>26</sup> Repeatedly, Salzman is said to "appear," "reappear," and "disappear" "as if on the wings of the wind."<sup>27</sup> Salzman's wife refers to him as a *luftmensch*, another suggestion of his supernatural status and an allusion to a figure in Yiddish folklore who, without an occupation to sustain him, "lives on air." Dessner asks the crucial question about Pinye Salzman, albeit misplacing him in a fairy tale mode. Is he

in keeping with the fairy-tale convention and with the suggestions of supernatural powers that often accompany him . . . some sort of ministering angel or fairy godfather, chuckling to himself about his projected course of action, his strategy for redeeming the strayed man of God? Or is Salzman closer to the satanic model, leading Leo to destruction?<sup>28</sup>

An alternative reading, one that is consistent with Malamud's affirmative philosophy, suggests that the *tzaddik*/ matchmaker knowingly introduces Leo to bridal candidates who will help bring him to self-recognition. The women function as diametrical opposites: Lily, the upstanding citizen and virtuous woman of good repute; Stella the fallen sister. Just as Salzman is waiting at a distance in the concluding scene, Leo suspected his nearby presence in the first meeting with Lily Hirshchorn. Lily's questions about Finkle's religious ardor deliver the spiritual initiate to the path of self-realization; compassion and love for Stella will lead him to redemption. Stella appears in the stereotypical guise of the prostitute,

standing beneath a lamppost and smoking. Yet, her image is enigmatic for she is emblematically clad in white dress and red shoes and she waits "uneasily and shyly . . . her eyes . . . filled with desperate innocence." <sup>29</sup> Salzman's chanting of the *Kaddish*, the Aramaic/Hebrew doxology praising God, augurs a positive denouement. Although this prayer has been appropriated by mourners, it is an integral element of the Sabbath liturgy. Referring neither to the dead nor limited to mourning, it is a hopeful prayer, one exalting the divine attributes of mercy and justice. Salzman has ample reason to praise God in thanksgiving for the redemption of two souls. Given the red and white imagery of the concluding scene, the comforting and inspiring words of the *Kaddish*, and a celebratory vision of "violins and lit candles revolv[ing] in the sky," <sup>30</sup> evocative of a painting by Marc Chagall, an affirmative interpretation of the meeting of Leo and Stella is appropriate and in keeping with Malamud's persistent incorporation of the *t'shuvah* theme of spiritual return.

Leo's metamorphosis from ascetic student to compassionate wise man has been achieved through Salzman's machinations. The matchmaker's manipulation leads directly to Leo's self-assessment that he will love God better through loving mankind better. As he approached Stella, "he pictured in her, his own redemption." <sup>31</sup> However comic and crass Salzman's manner, we must remember the attention Malamud paid to his eyes, eyes that "revealed a depth of sadness"; "mournful eyes"; and "haunted eyes." <sup>32</sup> These are eyes of the *tzaddik* who knows the pain of the human condition. And Leo senses in Stella's eyes her father's sensitivity to redemptive suffering. Salzman's intentionality is consistent with the recurrent redemptive themes and character constructs in Malamud's fiction during this period. Reading Salzman in the *lamed vov* tradition explains his boorish manner and accounts for his efforts to unite an intellectual, who needs to experience love, and his errant daughter, who needs love, as a means of enabling each to achieve spiritual return. Rather than viewing Salzman as a cynic, too calloused to believe in redemption, he should be recognized as redemption's facilitator. He acts honorably, if unconventionally, fulfilling the role of hidden saint. The comic *shadchan* guise allows Malamud to keep sentimentality at bay by permitting Salzman to operate according to his subject's need, as Susskind's role as *schnorrer* advanced his ability to influence Fidelman's unsentimental spiritual return. Although Malamud read neither Hebrew nor Yiddish, he understood spoken Yiddish, attended Yiddish theater, and, in an interview



with Curt Leviant, acknowledged that he had read classical Yiddish and Hebrew writers in translation, among them Mendeleyev, Sholem Aleichem, I.L. Peretz, Sholem Asch, and I.B. Singer of the Yiddish writers; and S.Y. Agnon, Amos Oz, Mati Meggid, Aharon Megged, and other Israeli moderns.<sup>33</sup> It is likely that Malamud would have encountered the *lamed vov tzaddik* in his readings.

Readings of Susskind and Salzman as concealed saints lie in the realm of conjecture. In contrast, Saul Bellow's corresponding and disparate folkloric characters are not merely objectified as *schlemiel*, *schnorrer*, and spiritual mentor and allusively rendered, but textually acknowledged derivatives from a nineteenth-century epistolary satire by Joseph Perl.<sup>34</sup> *Seize the Day* is a tale of spiritual redemption, set in the Yom Kippur season. The novella's deceptively simple plot encompasses a day in the life of Tommy Wilhelm, an ordinary middle-aged man, who visits his father at his residence hotel seeking emotional and financial assistance in coping with a series of personal and business failures. Rebuffed, he turns to Dr. Tamkin, psychologist manque, who willingly assumes the guise of emotional healer and financial consultant to enact his real role as spiritual guide.

Requisite to unraveling Bellow's allegory is recognition of his incorporation, secularization, and enigmatic combination of historic models and stock characters from Yiddish folklore: the *schlemiel* penitent in Tommy Wilhelm and paradoxical dissolute and faithful *schnorrer tzaddik* in Dr. Tamkin. As *schlemiel*, Tommy is an awkward bungler, behaving in a foolhardy manner, accumulating mishaps as he drifts through life. His long career of errors has delivered Tommy to a point of seeking reversal. College dropout, failed actor, unemployed salesman, separated from his wife and children, estranged from his mistress, Tommy experiences a life epitomized in pitfalls as he repeatedly sabotages his chances for success and happiness.

The translator of I.B. Singer's "Gimpel the Fool,"<sup>35</sup> Bellow is attuned to the character construct of the saintly fool. Gimpel, who was gullible and appeared to be the village buffoon, had a measure of dignity stemming from the purity of his motives. Bellow enhances the character of his *schlemiel* by endowing Tommy with a spiritual quest. Despite its composition in vernacular slang, Tommy's Yom Kippur season supplication addresses traditional elements of worship: contrition for past error, petition for forgiveness and mercy, and expression of hope:

"Oh God," [he] prayed. "Let me out of my trouble. Let me out of my thoughts, and let me do something better with myself. For all the time I have wasted I am very sorry. Let me out of this clutch and into a different life. . . . I am all balled up. Have mercy." <sup>36</sup>

Paralleling the naive protagonist is a flawed, but proficient and triumphant mentor. Consistent with the contemporary American setting, Bellow secularizes and modernizes the Hasidic spiritual healer as psychologist manqué and folkloric *schnorrer* as financial advisor. Thus, the enigmatic Dr. Tamkin lures his unsuspecting disciple into the futures market, which serves as catalyst for spiritual testing. The professional beggar of Jewish literature, as represented in Israel Zangwill's *King of the Schnorrers*,<sup>37</sup> lived by his facility for repartée and an ability to unburden the fortunate of their wealth. He was versed in biblical and Talmudic law pertaining to charity and ably engaged his benefactor in religious discourse. Since the mendicant contributed to the ethical well-being of the community by helping his co-religionists discharge the commandments related to charity, he did not demean himself, cringe, cower, or beg apologetically. He demanded his due, as does Tamkin. A secularized *schnorrer*, Tamkin replaces religious debate with economic counsel and psychological jargon. Dazzled by Tamkin's apparent good will, Tommy entrusts him with power of attorney and invests his last \$700, more than twice Tamkin's share, in what was to have been an equal venture. In the guise of a charlatan leading Tommy to financial ruin, Tamkin is in reality a revealer of metaphysical truths. By divesting Tommy not only of his meager fortune, but also of his remaining illusions, he prepares the novice to accept the spiritual guidance that leads to death of his pretender soul and to the rebirth of his real soul.

Complementing the role of *schnorrer*, which allows him to hide behind a mask of boorishness, is that of pretender-psychologist, facilitating the preparation his patient's spiritual recovery. Tamkin departs from standard psychiatric practice by disclosing his own traumatic experiences and the case histories of his patients; by pursuing clients rather than allowing them to seek him; by disclaiming interest in financial compensation for his advice; and by beguiling Tommy to grant him the power of attorney and then bilking him of his savings. Claiming to be "a radical in the profession,"<sup>38</sup> Tamkin asserts the views of the Hasidic *tzaddik*.<sup>39</sup> He insists that he belongs to humanity, that he shares the wounds and suffering of his patients, that charitable behavior toward others is its

instructs via parable and anecdote rather than modern psychiatric clinical method and evidences more concern for his client's ethical conduct than do psychologists. Offering counsel in accord with Judaic ethics on the obligation to discharge charity and social justice sooner rather than later, and on the religious import of one's deeds, he advises Tommy about the necessity for postponing personal gratification in order to exercise his moral obligation to others.

Despite Tamkin's chicanery, Tommy recognizes that he is a wise man who "understands so well what gives" <sup>40</sup> and thus, speaks "of things that mattered." <sup>41</sup> As *Hasidictzaddik*, Tamkin celebrates the holiness of life, the here and now. He advises Tommy to abandon his pretender soul constructed in society's materialistic mold and exhorts him to be true to his real soul, to "seize the day." He composes a doggerel poem incorporating diction evocative of the prose of Martin Buber, the foremost modern interpreter of Hasidic philosophy, to celebrate the sanctity of the individual. Buber states: "Every single man's foremost task is the actualization of his unique, unprecedented and never-recurring potentialities." <sup>42</sup> Buber's assertion of the individual's responsibility to develop his potential spiritual being reverberates in Tamkin's praise of individuality. Buber contends that Hasidim believe "what a man does *now and here* [emphasis added] with holy intent is no less important, no less true . . . link with the divine being than the life in the world to come." <sup>43</sup> Tamkin reverses the master's word order in advising his disciple to live a holy life in the present:

You should try some of my "here and now" mental exercises . . . . You must go along with the actual, the *Here and Now* [emphasis added], the glory. . . . Be in the present. Grasp the hour, the moment, the instant. <sup>44</sup>

I concur with critics who view Dr. Tamkin, the novella's holy conman, as an ambiguous character. <sup>45</sup> Albeit persuasive and intriguing, these analyses uniformly neglect the significant derivative nature of Tamkin's character that is essential to Bellow's comic rendition of the sinner-saint. Bellow's brilliantly complex portrait is founded on his appropriation of Joseph Perl's anti-Hasidic satire <sup>46</sup> and on his unconventional coalescence of historic antagonists. He consolidates the venerated *Hasidic* saint (whose authority issues not from ordination, but from his followers who believe in his mystical communion with God) with

parodic caricatures devised by Hasidism's detractors: the incompetent scholar of orthodox *mitnagdic*<sup>47</sup> criticism and the fraudulent *tzaddik* of progressive *maskilic*<sup>48</sup> hermeneutics. The satiric vein of Tamkin's portrait may be ascribed to Bellow's superb adaptation of Joseph Perl's *Megallé Temirin* (*Revealer of Secrets*), a devastating anti-Hasidic parody presented in the form of Hasidic and rabbinic letters following a mock-scholarly apparatus, all reflecting the early cultural wars between proponents of the Jewish Enlightenment and their Hasidic antagonists.<sup>49</sup> Juxtaposed with Tommy's alternating admiration and denigration of Tamkin is consistent disparaging censure by Dr. Adler and his associate, Mr. Perls, whose qualms regarding Dr. Tamkin's medical credentials parallel orthodox reservations about the religious legitimacy and scholarship of Hasidic leaders. The correspondence of the fictional Perls to the historic Enlightenment era satirist is found both in Bellow's appropriation of the name *Perl* and in physical attributes suggesting his character's critical function: sharp teeth, which are compared to stainless steel; sharp voice and heavy cane, accouterments evocative of the acerbic and mordant wit of the skeptical *maskil*. Furthermore, Tamkin's stock brokerage acquaintance, Mr. Rappaport, corresponds to the historic Solomon Judah Leib Rapaport,<sup>50</sup> a colleague of Joseph Perl who, according to Israel Davidson, commented on the authenticity of Perl's Hasidic portraits and to whom Perl's work was for a time erroneously attributed.<sup>51</sup> Evoking progressive censure of Hasidic leaders, the fictional Perls and Rappaport disparage Tamkin as a charlatan, a psychiatrist manqué.

Parallels to Perl's parody attacking the institution of the Hasidic *tzaddik* are evident in the content and style of Bellow's allegoric novella. They hone its thematic tensions, endow its character constructs, and demystify the Tamkin enigma. Although Bellow transmogrifies Tamkin by replacing nineteenth-century religious discourse with twentieth-century psychological and economic jargon, he pays homage to Perl's satiric method by producing fractured English syntax and poetic doggerel to characterize Tamkin that is evocative of the imperfect Hebrew and lax grammar of the model text's Hasidic correspondence. Similarly, in a passage reflective of Enlightenment proponents' denunciation of wonderworking Hasidic mystics, the fictional Perls ridicules Tamkin's design of an underwater suit for escape from nuclear attack. Another comparably modified appropriation appears in Bellow's evocation of manipulative invisibility to stage a psychological investigation. Joseph Perl's fictional

editor, a *maskil* masquerading as an ardent *Hasid* to gain access to the spiritual leaders, makes himself invisible in order to spy on Hasidim, the better to convey their behavior, collect their letters, and thereby "reveal to the public secret things that are of paramount concern."<sup>52</sup> As Dov Taylor argues, invention of the fictional editor/narrator empowered with magical ability allows Joseph Perl "to strengthen the credibility of his hoax that [*Revealer of Secrets*] was actually an authentic hasidic work."<sup>53</sup> In similar fashion, Dr. Tamkin clandestinely watches Tommy to gain evidence that will convince the patient of the accuracy of his diagnosis. Discovering that he is the object of Tamkin's secret surveillance, Tommy angrily declares "No one could have secrets from him"<sup>54</sup> — an allusion to Perl's title, *Revealer of Secrets*, which is itself derived from sources in the Bible and the Zohar.<sup>55</sup>

Whereas Joseph Perl cleverly reveals and reviles what he pretends to revere, Saul Bellow skillfully reverses the pattern and pretends to revile that which he reveres. This is accomplished by constructing Tamkin's character as an amalgam of contradictory traits and introducing intimations of *anti-Hasidic* satire to expose the shallow bias of Tamkin's detractors. Despite the comically dubious character traits that create an aura of modern ambiguity surrounding the novella's spiritual guide, it is dramatically consistent and thematically logical that Dr. Tamkin lead Tommy to spiritual recovery. Despite the allusive satire that confounds Tamkin's character, his positive Hasidic and hidden saint traits prevail. Bellow creates sympathy for the rogue-mentor by accentuating the mitigating circumstances of his strange conduct, demeaning his critics, and rendering his apologists sympathetically. Tamkin's role as an unorthodox spiritual guide justifies ridding the novice of his material obsession as requisite to self-realization and spiritual repair. Tamkin's comedic self-assurance accounts for Tommy's capacity to trust him as surrogate father when his own father rejects his pleas for help. Immediately following a quarrel with Dr. Adler, Tommy prays for a fatherly intercessor. As if in response to his plea, Tamkin, identified as "someone in a straw hat with a wide cocoa-colored band,"<sup>56</sup> addresses the petitioner and Tommy finds "himself flowing into another channel."<sup>57</sup> Later, harried by his losses and contemplating new direction, Tommy "looked for the singular face under the dark gray, fashionable hatbrim."<sup>58</sup> That Bellow means to evoke the skullcap worn by observant Jewish males is evident, since Tamkin wears the hat in each of the novel's redemptive scenes and conversely removes the hat when entering the brokerage

office, the temple of mammon. The progress of Tommy's quest after several sessions with Tamkin is suggested in a scene evocative of Wordsworthian recollection in tranquillity. He relives the joy he recently experienced when he chanced to read subway graffiti evocative of the ancient Hebraic commandments and experienced an outpouring of love for the strangers in his midst. While considering advice about attending Yom Kippur services, Tommy thrice repeats the phrase "life to come" in a single paragraph focusing on *t'shuva*, spiritual return, the principal Yom Kippur theme. In the concluding section Tommy is swept up in a funeral crowd while pursuing the hat he believes to be Tamkin's and is led from the street into the chapel. Having fulfilled his mediatory function and guided Tommy to an understanding of his real soul, the holiness of life, and the sanctity of the individual, Tamkin delivers his disciple to a Jewish chapel and, in the manner of the hidden saint, he disappears. Tommy's self-rebuke on his "day of reckoning" is appropriate to his role as *schlemiel*-penitent. In the Yom Kippur spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation, he exclaims: "You had to forgive. First to forgive yourself, and then general forgiveness." <sup>59</sup> In the Yom Kippur tradition of contrition and spiritual return, Tommy prays beneath the Star of David, in worship evocative of Hasidic intensity and devotion, "toward the consummation of his heart's ultimate need." <sup>60</sup>

Bellow and Malamud have written fiction that is permeated by Jewish themes, characters, and history; fiction that has transmitted Judaic concepts and Yiddish literary influences to American literature. *Seize the Day* is significantly broadened by its incorporation of stock characters from Yiddish literature and by its direct borrowings from Joseph Perl, an influence Bellow reveals through narrative structure, character parallels, allusions to the historic Perl and Rapaport, and satiric tone. Inverting Perl's method of borrowing from the European literary tradition and Judaizing the material, Bellow secularizes stock characters from the Judaic literary canon to write a contemporary drama of spiritual reversal undergirded by Judaic principles, but universal in its appeal. And Malamud, as David Zucker reminds us, writes as a *midrashic melamed*, writing biblical, historical, and ethical *aggodot* (illustrative stories, parables, allegories). <sup>61</sup> Like the representative great poets Harold Bloom cites in *Anxiety of Influence*, <sup>62</sup> Bellow and Malamud engage in synchronous embrace and departure from their literary forbearers, achieve artistic originality by "swerving" from precursors in ways that embrace and extend the traditions of Yiddish literature and folklore in

modern secular fiction.

## Notes

1 The *schlemiel* has garnered substantial fictional treatment and critical analysis in books like Ruth Wisse's *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* and Sanford Pinsker's *The Schlemiel as Metaphor*.

2 Philip Birnbaum, *A Book of Jewish Concepts*, rev. ed. (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1975), 306.

3 Bernard Malamud, "The Last Mohican," *The Magic Barrel* (New York: Avon Books, 1980), 138.

4 Ibid.

5 Nathan Ausubel, ed., *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore* (New York: Crown, 1948), 267.

6 Sidney Richman, *Bernard Malamud* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1966), 115.

7 Malamud, "The Last Mohican," 147.

8 Sidney Richman, 115.

9 Malamud, "The Last Mohican," 152.

10 Ezra Greenspan, *The Schlemiel Comes to America* (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1983), 151.

11 Malamud, "The Last Mohican," 155.

12 Ibid., 157.

13 Ibid.,

14 Ibid., 162.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Match-making has a respected tradition in Jewish society. It had an honorable tradition for many generations and was originally regarded not as a business enterprise, but as a pious calling devoted to the love of God and perpetuation of the Jewish people. Folklorist Nathan Ausubel describes the figure as an:

important functionary in the Jewish community following the large scale massacres of the Crusades and constant flights of persecuted Jewish communities that made normal social life impossible. In such circumstances, the *shadchan* became an important instrument preserving contact among scattered remnants of the population as he traveled from town to town. In time, with the growth and permanency of Jewish settlements in

ghetto towns, the traditional integrity of the *shadchan* began to waver. By the end of the sixteenth-century, there were already . . . moralistic writings critical of venal marriage brokers, for those who were guilty of greed and misrepresentation. Ausubel, 413.

18 Bernard Malamud, "The Magic Barrel," *The Magic Barrel*, 183.

19 Ibid., 186.

20 Ibid., 190.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 191.

24 Sam Bluefarb, "Bernard Malamud: The Scope of Caricature," *The English Journal* 53:5 (May 1964): 325.

25 Sheldon Hershinow, *Bernard Malamud* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980), 131.

26 Lawrence Jay Dessner, "The Playfulness of Bernard Malamud's 'The Magic Barrel,'" *Essays in Literature*, vol. 15, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 87-101; rpt. in *Short Story Criticism*, vol. 15, ed. Dan Siegal (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1994), 232.

27 Malamud, "The Magic Barrel," 185.

28 Dessner, 232.

29 Malamud, "The Magic Barrel," 191.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 172, 172, 184.

33 Bernard Malamud interview with Curt Leviant in *Hadassah Magazine* 55 (June 1974): 18-19; excerpt rpt. in *Short Story Criticism*, 15:188-190.

34 For a complete discussion of the *Hasidic* and anti-*Hasidic* aspects of *Seize the Day*, see S. Lillian Kremer, "Seize the Day: Intimations of Anti-Hasidic Satire," *Modern Jewish Studies Annual (Yiddish)* 4:4 (1982): 32-40.

35 I.B. Singer, "Gimpel the Fool," *Great Jewish Short Stories*. Ed. Saul Bellow (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1963).

36 Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1956), 26.

37 Israel Zangwell, *The King of the Schnorrers* (New York: Dover, 1965).

38 Bellow, 72.

39 I am indebted to Ralph Ciancio, who identified the *Hasid*-disciple relationship between Wilhelm and Tamkin. Ralph Ciancio, "The Achievement of Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*," *Literature and Theology*, ed. Thomas F. Staley and Lester F. Zimmerman (Tulsa, OK: Univ. of Tulsa Press, 1969), 49-80.

40 Bellow, 108.

41 Bellow, 90.



42 Martin Buber, *Hasidim and the Modern Man*, ed. and trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Horizon Press, 1958), 140.

43 Buber, 174.

44 Bellow, 97-98.

45 Literary critics have speculated at length on the perplexing nature of Bellow's holy con man. Addressing Dr. Tamkin's ambiguous role, Ralph Ciancio argues that "he is both raven and dove, deceiver and savior — the novella's central irony." Ciancio, "The Achievement of Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*," 76. Clinton Trowbridge agrees that there is duality in Tamkin's role, characterizing him as one of Bellow's strongly ambivalent seers, both "savior and destroyer." Despite Tamkin's assistance to the protagonist, Trowbridge views him essentially as "a destroyer of the soul, a false image of salvation." Clinton Trowbridge, "Water Imagery in *Seize the Day*," *Critique* 9 (Summer 1967): 69, 68. Sarah Blacher Cohen contends that Tamkin fulfills his spiritual function as a "trained comedian of ideas . . . whereas his secular function remains that of "diabolic confidence man whose physical characteristics immediately suggest that he may be the devil in disguise." Sarah Blacher Cohen, *Saul Bellow's Enigmatic Laughter* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1974), 103, 105. At worst, Tamkin is perceived by J.C. Levenson as "an extraordinary villain . . . [a] purveyor of all the false or questionable or merely specious cures for what ails Wilhelm." J.C. Levenson, "Bellow's Dangling Men," *Critique* 3 (Summer 1960): 9.

46 The first English translation of Joseph Perl's *Revealer of Secrets* (hereafter: Perl) by Dov Taylor became available in 1997. Taylor's translation is accompanied by his comprehensive introduction elucidating the historic circumstances of Perl's anti-Hasidic satire, the non-fictional source for the epistolary novel in Perl's own unpublished polemic work, *On the Nature of the Hasidic Sect, Drawn From Their Own Writings*, and an exhaustive analysis of Perl's satiric mode. Dov Taylor, *Joseph Perl's Revealer of Secrets: The First Hebrew Novel* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997).

47 The *mitnagdim* (sing. *mitnagid*) were opponents of Hasidism which they viewed as a serious threat to Jewish life. As members of the orthodox establishment, they were opposed to the Hasidic belief in the authority of the saintly leader (*tzaddik*) irrespective of his religious education and scholarship, their use of Sephardic liturgy, and establishment of separate houses of worship.

48 The *maskilim* (sing. *maskil*) were followers of the *Haskalah*, the movement of enlightenment, intellectual emancipation, and secular education among Jews. Under the influence of the philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn, the "enlightened ones" sought to replace exclusive religious education of Jews with the introduction of modern secular subjects as a means of erasing Jewish distinctiveness which they viewed as a bar to Jewish social and political equality. These activists were responsible for the revival of Hebrew as a living language and channelling Jews into the ferment of contemporary ideas, literature, and

political liberalism.

49 Joseph Perl (1774-1839), an Enlightenment figure, was convinced that only intellectual enlightenment, exposure to non-sacred Western thought, could change the difficult position of European ghetto Jews. In opposition to *Hasidim* who revered mystical intuition in its charismatic rebe-saints, encouraged religious fervor in its adherents, and communicated in Yiddish, the proponents of the Jewish Enlightenment valued science, rationalism, a broad secular education, and use of vernacular languages. Having abandoned his youthful infatuation with *Hasidism*, Joseph Perl became a ardent opponent of the movement. In an effort to counteract *Hasidim*, who maintained separation from others, Perl was active in religious and social reform. In addition to *Megallé Temirim*, which was published under a pseudonym, Perl also published "Dibre Zaddikim" and "Bohen Zaddik," both in the satiric vein. For descriptions of Perl's satire see Israel Davidson, *Parody in Jewish Literature*, Columbia University Oriental Studies, no. 2 (New York: AMS Press, 1966); Taylor.

50 Solomon Judah Leib Rapaport (1790-1867), (whose name appears in different forms, as Judah Lob Rapaport in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, as Solomon Judah Leib Rapaport in *Everyman's Judaica*, and Solomon Rapaport in Taylor's book) was an Austrian rabbi who published scholarly articles, translations, criticism, and poems. In 1837, Rapaport was appointed rabbi of Tarnapol through the efforts of Joseph Perl and his associates among the *maskilim*. The first literary critique of *Revealer of Secrets* was written by Rapaport in 1831 who praised it as "a wonderful book, where everything depends on a coherent plan and serves a single purpose." (quoted by Taylor, lxi)

51 Davidson, 62.

52 Perl, 15

53 Taylor, xxix

54 Bellow, 80

55 Taylor, 254-255.

56 Bellow, 63.

57 Ibid., 64.

58 Ibid., 125.

59 Ibid., 30.

60 Ibid., 128.

61 David Zucker, "Malamud as Midrash," *Judaism* 43:2 (spring, 1994): 159-72.

62 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

## A Theology of Yiddish Prayer: Yiddish as a Creative Lashon Haqodesh (Holy Language)

Richard A. Freund

My own interest in the use of Yiddish in prayer comes from listening to my grandmother praying by heart the prayer: *Got fun Avrohom*. At Havdalah time, I found her audibly praying:

*Got fun Avrohom, fun Yitzchov, un fun Yankev* — God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, protect your people Israel from all evil for your praise's sake as the beloved, Holy Sabbath, leaves. May the coming week, month, and year arrive to bring perfect faith. Faith in scholars, love of friends, attachment to the Creator, blessed be He. Faith in your Thirteen Principles, and in the complete and close redemption, speedily in our days, in the resurrection of the dead, and in the prophecy of our teacher Moses, peace be upon him. *Ribono Shel olam* — Master of the Universe, since you are the one who gives strength to the tired, give your beloved Jewish children the strength to praise you and to serve only you and no other. May this week, this month, and this year arrive for good health, good fortune, blessing, success, and kindness and for children, life and sustenance, for help from above, for us and for all Israel, Amen.

I thought at the time that it was a beautiful composition by a woman who was nearly illiterate. She told me that she thought it was part of the Siddur and that she had been taught it by her mother. It was only later that I discovered it was still being published in some Orthodox siddurim in the Havdalah service with a commentary which indicates an important

pedigree.<sup>1</sup> The Rabbinical Council of America (Orthodox) includes the following commentary with the prayer:

Today many women maintain the custom of reciting *Gott fun Avrohom* before Havdalah. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, traditionally recognized as the author of this prayer, however, wrote that it should be recited three times by men, women and children, and that this recitation would help assure success in the ensuing week.

It surprised me that the editors included the pronouncement of Rabbi Levi since it confirms one of the major defining points which I will stress in this paper: i.e., that Yiddish prayer was not just for women. It was an expression of commitment to the tradition of Jewish theology, belief, and prayer and was a form of religious expression which is much overlooked both in studies of Jewish theology and prayer and Yiddish language.<sup>2</sup>

Most scholarly attention on Yiddish literature has focused upon Yiddish's role as a vehicle for the expression of secular/cultural elements in daily Jewish life. This paper will examine the historical importance of Yiddish as a vehicle for the expression of the religious life of the Jews. A study of this type could include the present-day use of Yiddish as a vehicle of explanation in religious study or "lernin" among groups from Europe, Israel or the U.S.<sup>3</sup> or even the use of Yiddish as the language of preference in the taking of official evidence in Rabbinic courts from the sixteenth-nineteenth centuries.<sup>4</sup> For some investigators, the question of Yiddish prayer appears to be a modern one which *suddenly* begins with the rise of Hasidism in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century. In this view, Hasidism is apparently seen as an almost unprecedented and revolutionary movement which used Yiddish in new and innovative religious ways. Instead, this paper will have as a central focus the use of Yiddish as a vehicle for religious expression and prayer (and some of the actual texts of religious study, the Bible, for example) before the rise of Hasidism and will trace how examples of Hasidic prayer are just extensions of the earlier traditions.

In its earliest expressions in Alt Yiddish (Old Yiddish period) of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, commentaries and paraphrases on/of the Bible, prayers, and sermons demonstrate that Yiddish played a key role in developing a creative and dynamic religious life and language in Europe. This seems to parallel a similar role occupied by Judeo-Aramaic, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Spanish, and Judeo-Italian in different periods and places of Jewish history. The role of Yiddish as a religious medium for Judaism may have diminished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century

because of debates over the use of Hebrew (or any "special" Jewish language) as *the* religious and national language of the Jews among European Jews, but certainly Yiddish continues among the Hasidim as a language of religious expression both in religious education and Torah study up to the present time.

Three elements affected the Yiddish prayer traditions and our ability in the latter part of the twentieth century to recover an objective view of their importance. First, the vast majority of those who used Yiddish prayer traditions and would have been expected to preserve them died in the Holocaust. With the consolidation of religious/orthodox Judaism into a much smaller "normative grouping" in the post Holocaust era, variations which existed in the pre-Holocaust era are now not appropriately represented in the smaller groups. In fact, efforts towards standardization of religious expressions and traditions exercised in the pre- and post-Holocaust era by Hasidic and orthodox groups (principally in order to preserve them) have effectively eliminated significant variations in religious expressions. Various prayer manuals and prayerbooks and collections, versions of Hasidic tales and stories, available in the end of the nineteenth century in manuscript and printed form have given way to standardized (read: officially sanctioned) works and translations into Hebrew by the end of the twentieth century. Second, in the early twentieth century (following a strategy which had begun in the nineteenth century) battles between secular Yiddishists and secular Hebraists skewed the understanding of the religious values of the languages in general. These battles focused primarily upon the role of these languages as cultural/secular communication vehicles in Jewish nationalism debates which were related to early Zionism and Jewish identity questions. Even after Hebrew became the dominant language in this debate (and before the Holocaust), Yiddishists continued to emphasize the cultural aspects of the language over its religious elements as a counterbalance to the developing emphasis on Hebrew as "the official language of the Jewish people." Finally, nineteenth-century liberal reforms of religious Judaism in Western Europe may have indirectly doomed the Yiddish prayer traditions in the wake of more radical attempts at reforming the prayer traditions of Judaism. The Reform and nineteenth-century Western European Wissenschaft scholars (historians, primarily) in general developed a rather negative view towards Yiddish and therefore did not adequately investigate it. Together with many other issues, the unique religious language of Yiddish did not receive sufficient independent and scholarly attention from modern Jewish historians from H. Graetz to S. Baron or their successors so many potential sources today simply don't exist.

This paper will primarily concentrate on the period of Yiddish activity

from the thirteenth to nineteenth centuries and will investigate the use of Yiddish as a creative religious language by comparing some of the translations with Hebrew originals and the underlying theological messages in both. In the case of the eighteenth-century prayer, *Gott fun Avrohom*, for example, it is clear that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was attempting to mimic the beginning of the *Shemoneh Esreh* prayer in a shortened fashion: "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, and God our forefathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob. . . ."

This lends the prayer greater authority and the suppliant is led to feel that this prayer is connected with the thousands of years of tradition of Hebrew prayers. While it attempts this, the Yiddish prayer ignores the main parts of the eighteen or nineteen prayers of the *Shemoneh Esreh* and instead focuses on:

1. *Emuneh Sheleimeh* (perfect faith)
2. *Emunas Hachumim* (faith in sages)
3. *Ahavas VeDeebuq Haverim Tovim* (love and attachment to good friends)
4. *Sheloshu Asar Iqarim* (the Thirteen Principles) <sup>5</sup> including the elements which are listed in specifics:
  - a. complete and close redemption (#11 of Maimonides)
  - b. resurrection of dead (#12)
  - c. prophecy of Moses (#7).

On the one hand, these can be seen to add up to the approximately eighteen or nineteen<sup>6</sup> blessings found in the original in an unusual shorthand form, but they are only vaguely similar to the eighteen or nineteen blessings. Since there does exist an abridged rabbinically approved version of the *Shemoneh Esreh* (used after the Sabbath evening prayer),<sup>7</sup> it seems that this "abridged" translation did have some precedent within the prayer tradition. The full *Shemoneh Esreh* is systematically divided into sections devoted to praise, thanksgiving and petition, while most of the *Gott fun Avrohom* falls into the two latter categories without a section of praise. Theologically, the eighteen or nineteen blessings of the *Shemoneh Esreh* focus on different theological elements than the *Gott fun Avrohom* and, more importantly, they are not any less "complex" although the inclusion of "love and attachment to good friends" smacks of a more popularist religious idea. Most often, Yiddish prayer is not really a translation, but rather an original creation which represents unique Jewish theological thought.

## I. The Meaning of Jewish Prayer

Two general types of Jewish prayer have developed (and been documented) in the past two thousand years: (a) formal, fixed prayer established for regular recitation, and (b) spontaneous, more popular — often personally motivated — petitions.

While many categories can be created to understand these types of prayers, one finds that they break down into prayers of supplications, entreaties, praise, thanksgiving and a desire for general spiritual fulfillment. In Jewish tradition, prayer is intrinsically linked to study. The simple reading and discussion of holy texts (such as, but not limited to, the Bible, Talmudim, commentaries on both, mystical and legalistic tracts) is held to be a part of the entire redemptive scheme of prayer.<sup>8</sup> The theological utility of prayer (traditionally: Is prayer answered?) in Jewish tradition can be divided into three separate views of the Divine:

a. prayer to the Divine can actually cause the Divine to effect a change in human destiny;

b. prayer is a contemplative and introspective exercise which may or may not directly cause the Divine to effect a change in the human sphere. In this category, prayer can be seen as having a net effect upon the human and facilitating indirect communication with an Active (read Divine) Intellect.

c. prayer is an act of total self-judgement and one can neither know nor expect any outside change in one's destiny because of the act of prayer. This is, strangely enough, both a totally fatalist position (all-powerful, all knowing Divine with total predestination unaffected by human devotions) and a more process theological view (a limited Divine subject to the processes of the universe of which the Divine is a part unaffected by human devotions).

All three of these attitudes are found in Jewish writings on prayer in the past 2500 years and find expression in Yiddish prayers of the past 800 years. Traditional (pre-modern) Yiddish prayer theology almost always falls in the first two categories with the first being predominant.

Two modern Jewish thinkers heavily influenced by Yiddish prayers and thought have found ways of expressing the theology of Yiddish prayer (especially points "a" and "b" above) for moderns in an extremely succinct and philosophical manner. Martin Buber's "Ich und Du" theology is an indirect result of his contact with Hasidic Judaism. He holds to a close interactive experience between the supplicant and God in prayer. The activity of prayer is spiritual when its purpose is directed towards the

transcendent experience of the participant,<sup>9</sup> but the "Du" is also affected by the "Ich." Abraham Joshua Heschel's concept of a "Divine Pathos" is a direct result of the theology of Yiddish prayer. He held that the Divine can be intimately affected by a prayer. He expressed his views in a series of different works derived from his own Hasidic background. For Heschel, the spiritual purpose of prayer is to provide a means for the so-called "numinous" to encompass the participant, and a feeling of shared interaction and dialogue takes place between God and the supplicant.<sup>10</sup> This is the basis for much Yiddish prayer: A spoken dialogue between God and the supplicant.

## II. The Historical Development of Jewish Prayer

Jewish prayer can be traced back to the earliest part of the intimate language of the Bible and personal petitions from the Patriarchs and Matriarchs to the Judges, Prophets, Priests, and Kings. The vast majority of prayers in the early medieval rabbinic Siddur (lit. "order") prayerbook are based on biblical readings, with the largest source being the book of Psalms. But because of their themes these writings themselves do not constitute a "spiritual" activity. Nor is the reading/study of Psalms or prayers in and of itself necessarily a "spiritual" activity. One could sit and analyze prayers in a classroom or a literature course at a secular state university to determine issues of theology, language development, historical data and names present in certain allusions/metaphors, meter, style, etc., without its being a spiritual experience.

Although one can point to the canonical biblical text as a basis for Jewish prayer, the post-biblical Hebrew and Aramaic language traditions continued to provide the form and content of Jewish prayer. The experiences of the Babylonian Exile and the Return under Ezra and Nehemiah brought a totally different form of Jewish prayer and introduced new language skills and formulations into biblical prayers. The Hellenistic and early Roman period as well contributed greatly to the Jewish self-understanding of how communication takes place between an individual and the Creator of the Universe. While we know that Aramaic became an important contributing language source for Jewish prayer, it is not clear how important Greek was in this continuing process. With the onset of Christianity and the Eastern Church's emphasis upon the Greek language, it is clear that the use of Hebrew and Aramaic became a self-defining point for Jews in the Eastern empire. By the time of the rabbis in the first to third centuries CE, short and long blessings, eulogies, and standardized forms in Jewish worship had evolved, often in direct contradiction to Christian prayer in Greek of the same period. As L. Hoffman puts it:



by the end of the tannaitic period, a relatively fixed synagogue service had been achieved, in the sense that certain persons attended certain institutions at certain times to recite certain prayers.<sup>11</sup>

But the language of these prayers was not as fixed one might think. There is evidence that the older Biblical Hebrew was in competition with a simplified Mishnaic Hebrew and the albeit semitic but still foreign, Aramaic. Even Jewish liturgical Greek was not unheard of as witnessed from rabbinic literature.<sup>12</sup> The fact that Rabbi Yehudah Ha Nasi, the codifier of the Mishnah, was involved in a discussion about whether the *Shema* and the *Shemoneh Esreh* could be recited in any tongue understood by the worshipper or must be rendered in the Hebrew original demonstrates that the issue was far from settled in the third century CE.<sup>13</sup>

Another layer was added by Babylonian commentaries on Jewish worship and by an even more sophisticated and creative prayer form, the *piyyutim*, composed in the seventh century CE, and then added to the liturgy. Perhaps propelled or paralleled by the growth of Islamic prayer and writing, the next period of Jewish prayer brought greater standardization than had heretofore existed. The extremely developed Judaeo-Arabic, so well-documented in the writings of Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed*, was periodically used for statutory prayers in the period of the ninth and tenth centuries.<sup>14</sup> By the time the Geonim began to formalize the prayer book in the eighth to eleventh centuries CE, it was clear that the process of prayer writing and recitation was understood by scholar and laity to be both ancient and contemporary, daily and fixed, formal and spontaneous, tradition-bound and changing.

Unlike the process of canonization and ancient retrojection which "official" rabbinic tradition gives to the Bible and even the Oral Law, prayer has been seen as an unfolding process upon a basic "platform" that was viewed as ancient. Jewish prayer is, therefore, the result of a readily acknowledged, highly edited long-term effort, representing thousands of years of Jewish editors and composers. It is seen as unfinished and, if not easily added to, more easily altered than other holy texts. The development of prayer, the religious poem or *piyyut*, and a new genre, translations of religious books used in ritual settings, was much more flexible than the canonization process in Medieval Rabbinic Judaism that had occurred in the case of the Bible or the Talmudim. Writers such as Solomon Ibn Gabirol and Meshulam ben Qalonimos kept the religious poetry alive in Hebrew while admitting that only a fraction of the population understood the nature of formal Jewish prayer and their own *piyyutim*.<sup>15</sup>

The "production" of Jewish prayer books itself contributed in no small way in the Medieval period to the evolution of oral, non-formal "rites" of prayer among Jews. At precisely the time when the formal prayer book was being closed to further inclusions (approximately the fifteenth to sixteenth century), the beginnings of informal Yiddish collections seem to have begun. The last major traditional inclusions were the prayer collections of the sixteenth century Safed mystics, which became known as the Qabbalat Shabbat service, and some of the introductions to prayers beginning with *hineni* and *yehi ratzon*.<sup>16</sup>

This entire process is often ignored or romanticized in standard "histories" of Jewish prayer.<sup>17</sup> In the otherwise comprehensive history of Jewish liturgy by Ismar Elbogen, for example, little or no mention of the translation of prayer into Yiddish and other European languages is found. When relating to the phenomenon of translation of prayer, his treatment jumps from Aramaic translations of the classical rabbinic period to the modern reform movement in the nineteenth century. Two sentences betray a simplistic approach to a subject which was apparently more wide spread than the constructs of western European Jewish scholarship wished to acknowledge. He states in the section "The First Reforms in the Synagogue Service":

Translations of the traditional prayers also gradually became more widespread, making an understandable liturgy accessible to those who did not know Hebrew. Among the Portuguese and Italian Jews, translations of the prayers had been common for centuries, with no one objecting to this practice. In the realm of the Ashkenazic-Polish rite, a Yiddish translation had long been available, but translation into the vernacular was prohibited whenever the Polish rabbis were in authority. . . . Except for the most extreme circles of Hasidim, who to this day maintain that Yiddish is the only permitted and legitimate vernacular of the Jews, no one has again come out in opposition to translation into the vernacular.<sup>18</sup>

Elbogen and others give the impression that translation of prayer was an ancient issue (Aramaic), a pre-modern issue (in the case of the ex-Marranos), and a modern issue (with the rise of Reform Judaism). Nothing could be further from the state of Yiddish research in the medieval period. Since presumably only a few members of the congregation had a prayer book, more informal prayer and rote repetition of prayer became necessary. The role of the *Hazzan* (cantor), or *Shaliach Tzibbur* (prayer leader) became formalized and elevated in this period.<sup>19</sup>

In this historical setting, in the period known as AltYiddish, the beginnings of ritual Yiddish were forged.

### III. Prayer and the Origins of Altyiddish: Leshon Hedyot and Leshon Qodesh

It is extremely symbolic that the first documented Yiddish is found in a prayerbook, *Mahzor* from Worms, which is now in the Hebrew University in Jerusalem <sup>20</sup> and reads: "*Gut Taq, eem Btaga, S'vayr dis Mahzor in Bes Kenesses traga . . .*" translated as: "A good day will happen to the person who brings this Mahzor to the synagogue." The *Mahzor* is dated 1272, and the Yiddish was inscribed inside of the words *BeDaato* (literally: "in his understanding") of a prayer on page 92a. While it is true that it is not a Yiddish prayer, the fact that it is written in a prayer book in the word for "in his understanding" gets at the heart of the matter of prayer in Yiddish. AltYiddish is the beginning of what originated as a spoken and perhaps commercial language of the Jews and eventually (between 1250+-1500+) produced one of the largest corpora of Medieval literature. The most famous pronouncement of the Medieval European context on translation was the thirteenth-century *Sefer Hasidim*.<sup>21</sup>

If a Jew who does not understand Hebrew but is a pious man and wishes to pray with devotion [*qavanah*] comes to you, or a Jewess who certainly does not understand Hebrew comes, you shall tell them to pray in the language they understand, for prayer is the petition of the heart, and if the heart does not know what the lips say, of what avail can such a prayer be? Hence it is better that every man should pray in the language that he understands.

In the period (thirteenth century) in which the *Sefer Hasidim* was written, Yiddish began to display three major innovations. The first innovation was the creation of a semi-religious body of Yiddish work consisting of Bible glossaries and translations in Yiddish of Bible stories and books. These were loosely presented in *Derush* (sermon) form. Ultimately, there appeared *Spielmenner* (living books/tellers/entertainers) who could produce, reproduce, and perform new and even more innovative works of this sort. Like the court jesters of old, the *spielmenner* performed in the local dialect — Yiddish in the fourteenth and fifteenth century.

The second innovation was the creation of a non-religious Jewish literature. By the fifteenth century, Jews were reading about non-Jewish

characters and events in Yiddish translation or often a crude form of transliteration. Some of the most well-known Yiddish books of the Middle Ages, *Kenig Artus Hof* and the *Bove Buch* (or later *Bove Mayses*), for example, became so famous that the latter's name (although not its content) became the standard term in Yiddish (*bove mayseh*) for fantastic stories. The third innovation was the creation of a Yiddish prayer literature.

#### IV. For Whom Was Yiddish Prayer Written?

The debate over Yiddish prayer is not whether it existed, but for whom it was written. Researchers such as Max Grünbaum, Samuel Niger, and even Max Weinreich concluded that the early literature was primarily for women.<sup>22</sup> Israel Zinberg concludes that there are just too many references "to men" as the intended audience in the introductions, title pages, prefaces, etc., of these early prayer and study collections to call it a "women's literature." Unlike the majority of modern views which prefer to relegate Yiddish prayer only to women, this paper argues that it was for a much larger and diverse population of men and women. This point is extremely important in examining the Hasidic prayer of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, since such a prayer was not so much a revolution but a reflection of the period. During the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries, the Old and Middle Yiddish literary tradition flourished in Eastern Europe alongside the traditional Hebrew rabbinic literature. The two literatures are marked by a number of important differences. As I. Zinberg states in his twelve volume *A History of Jewish Literature* concerning this literature:

We noted earlier that the Old-Yiddish literature is not as some German-Jewish scholars wished to demonstrate, a special "women's literature" but a genuine "folk-literature" which addresses itself to a broad strata of people. On the other hand, there is very clearly discernible in the style and character of this literature the tender and womanly, the typically feminine, in which feeling and the emotive mood obtain dominance over the logically intellectual and aridly abstract.<sup>23</sup>

The oldest recognized, surviving printed work from the Middle Yiddish period is the *Mirkeves Hamishne*, a type of concordance to the Bible, published in Cracow in 1534. By the sixteenth century, the development of Yiddish allowed for a new genre of books to become prominent. A call for books whose substantive content was Jewish (and not

just a translation of a Medieval novel) represents the most pronounced category of Yiddish books in this period. Another early book of this period is the *Sefer HaMidos* from 1542. The appearance of Yosef bar Yokor's prayer book in Yiddish in Ichenhausen in 1544 marks a major development in this religious Yiddish genre. He states in his introduction to the prayer book: "I have not invented this translation, but chose one from among several, which seemed best to me. . . ." He later goes on to write: "I consider them but fools who insist upon praying in Hebrew, yet understand not a word of that language. I should like to know what measure of devotion such prayer carries with it." <sup>24</sup>

The first printed *Techinos* book was printed in Prague in 1590. The *Techinos* (supplicatory prayers) are both translations of already existing prayers in Hebrew and original creations of individual writers. The number of printed *Techinos* editions from the sixteenth to eighteenth century is enormous and rivals prayer book editions of the same period. Its unique language and allowance for insertions of particular names make the *techine loshn* a "parasacred" literature — almost *Lashon Qodesh*. <sup>25</sup> Although most are composed for women, some were composed especially for men. Some *Techinos* are Hebrew prayers which were translated/transformed and given a new context in the *Techinos* books.

Apart from the *Techinos* books, there were other secular and semi-religious books which became popular in the Middle Yiddish period. Again, the main question is who was reading this literature in the period of Middle Yiddish from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. These volumes include the *Shmiel-buch*, *Paris und Viene*, and a series of other books which were produced into the seventeenth century and read by a variety of audiences (men and women). In the sixteenth century, the well-known printer Cornelius Adelkind states in his forward to the printing of a translation of Psalms:

In my youth I helped print many precious and large books and directed all my endeavors thereto, as one may easily see in all the books that have been published at Daniel Bomberg's Press in which my signature is to be found in the front or at the back. Now that I have come to old age, I reflected that I had done nothing for the pious maidens and for all the householders who did not have time to study in their youth or thereafter. These would gladly spend their time on the Sabbath or on festivals in reading godly stories and not *Dietrich von Bern* or *Der schönen Glück*. . . ." <sup>26</sup>

The *Shmiel buch* contained very popular biblical stories about David

and Samuel told in paraphrase. The ultimate result of this genre of biblical paraphrase is the *Tzenah Urenah* for women's prayer and study. The seventeenth century *Tzenah Urenah*<sup>27</sup> was extremely popular. Despite modern categorization as a "women's bible" it was not intended by its author to be exclusively for women. In the title page, Jacob ben Isaac of Janov, the translator (or author) of this paraphrased work on the Prophets and Writings, states:

Thus we have translated the entire Prophets and Writings so that no person be in need of an exponent to expound to him these works . . . and named the book *Sefer Hamagid*.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, the seventeenth century *Lev Tov* by Isaac ben Eliakim of Posen states:

a poor man that cannot afford to pay for the services of a teacher should read the Pentateuch, or the Psalms, or other pious works in the vernacular . . . therefore it is necessary that everyone understand the prayer he utters. . . . He who does not understand Hebrew should pray in a language that he understands. Better a few prayers with the proper devotion than many unintelligible prayers.<sup>29</sup>

This same view is more prominently presented in Rabbi Yechiel Michal Epstein's 1703 book, *Derech HaYashar LeOlam HaBa* (literally: *The Correct Road to the World to Come*):

So also, in the case of study; everyone is obligated to study according to his understanding. When someone who does not understand Hebrew and studies every day, in a Yiddish book, the laws regarding how a man should conduct himself, or in other books that have been made, such as *Lev Tov*, the Yiddish Pentateuch . . . such study is accepted by God as much as when the scholar studies his Hebrew books according to his understanding.<sup>30</sup>

And in chapter 31, referring to prayer he states:

In this chapter, is stated that it is far better for one who does not understand Hebrew that he recite his prayers in the language that he does understand. . . . Therefore my good friends, see that our ancestors translated all our prayers or Psalms or other petitions and everything into Yiddish. The whole order of prayers was

made into Yiddish; also the Psalms and the *selichot* (penitential prayers) and *yotzerot* (prayer-poems) of all the festivals and some of the *Mahzorim* (holiday prayer books) have been printed [in Yiddish], as well as *maamados* (priestly rotation prayers) and all *Techinos* and *baqashot* (petitionary prayers). . . . Even in the case of the [regular] prayers, the Yiddish was printed alongside them for many years. And as for the statement to the effect that the angels do not understand Yiddish, our ancestors took a great deal of trouble to translate everything so that persons who do not understand the holy language should say everything in Yiddish. For what one understands goes to the heart. This is certainly done with complete concentration and inner intention. So their prayer is definitely accepted.<sup>31</sup>

Although most of this literature and prayer in Yiddish was written by men, some of the works in the Middle Yiddish period were composed by women. From the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, a number of women wrote works that were preserved and published in several editions. The earliest woman writers of this group were Rebeka bas Meir Tiktiner and Roizl Fishels, whose published poems and translations of biblical and religious literature are distinctive, but also characteristic of the type of Yiddish literature published by men in the same period.

*The Memoirs* of Glückel of Hameln are outstanding both in their scope (seven volumes) and information about life of men and women in seventeenth to eighteenth-century Germany.<sup>32</sup> Her tone and citations from moralizing literature of the period reveal much about why women's literature was so unique in this period. She writes:

Dear children, I may not expatiate on this, for otherwise I would enter too deeply into it and ten books would not suffice. Read in the Yiddish *Brantshpigl*, in *Lev Tov*, or — he who can do so — in the morality books. You will find everything there. Therefore, I beg you, my dear children, be patient. If the Holy One Blessed Be He sends you some punishment, accept everything patiently and do not cease to pray. Perhaps He will have mercy. And who knows what is good for us sinful people — whether it is good for us to live in this world in great wealth and comfort and spend all our time in this transient world in pleasure and enjoyment, or whether it is better for us that our Heavenly Father always keeps us under the rod of His correction in this sinful world, so that we may always have our eyes directed toward Heaven and ever call upon our gracious Father with our whole heart and with our hot tears?<sup>33</sup>

Glückel's *Memoirs* was only one of the many works written by women and published in the eighteenth century. Sara Bas Tovim's works and Serel bat Jacob's *Techinos* (supplications) books in particular deserve distinction because they provide a link to the explosion of women's literature and participation in the religious movement which began in the eighteenth century — Hasidism. The so-called "women's literature" also contained *musar* (morality) literature, with Hebrew names translated/transformed into Yiddish, such as *Lev Tov*, or a version in Yiddish of *Sefer HaYirah* called *Hayyei Olam, Brantshpigl* as *Sefer HaMareh*, and *Roisen-Gartn* as *Sefer HaGan*. But it was not read only by women. It had followers among the non-learned, schooled householders, and children being taught at home.

The next logical step was the development of a formal Yiddish prayerbook. One example of this is the early eighteenth-century siddur of Aaron ben Shemuel of Hergershausen (just south of Frankfurt on Main), who produced a siddur aptly named *Libliche Tefila* "... for children, adults, *lantzman un amcha* (literally: native folk and "simple" people), as well as women." His siddur is not a translation, but practically a new book of prayers. It included unique versions of Psalms and biblical passages as well as new folk prayers composed as "a devotion for a man who is not a scholar," "a prayer for children," and "a prayer for the domestic felicity of husband and wife." This siddur is different from much of the earlier prayer collections in Yiddish in that it did not use the customary *vaybertaysh* (literally: "women's translation") font. Perhaps as a concession to rabbinic concerns, many of the Yiddish prayer and study works were printed in a typeface different than the standard square typeface used in the publication of Hebrew volumes. In ben Shemuel's work, he announces on the title page: "Dear brethren, buy this delightful prayer book, which never appeared in such Yiddish typeface as long as the world exists." This declaration, coupled with its unique translations and the atmosphere of suspicion concerning apostasy in this period, may have doomed the siddur from the start.

Rabbinic prohibitions concerning the book seem to coincide with the rise of a number of different Jewish groups advocating radical changes in Europe at the time.<sup>34</sup> The translation of the *Zohar*, the primary text of medieval Jewish mysticism, in 1711, along with new semi-mystical movements which advocated a change in rabbinic authority and structure (including the post-Shabbatei Tzvi and Jacob Frank movements as well as the rise of a new, more popular group advocating a still more liberal use of Yiddish in ritual settings, the Hasidim) threatened the rabbinic hierarchy of Europe.<sup>35</sup> The reaction against these groups by the rabbinic hierarchy of



Europe was negative and strong. The vehicle of Yiddish as a religious language both flourished and became embattled in this period. By the time the *Shulchan Aruch*, the Jewish law compendium compiled in the sixteenth century, finally appeared at the end of the eighteenth century in Yiddish, the rabbis ordered the edition to be burnt.<sup>36</sup> Abridged versions continued to be allowed in Yiddish, but not the entire work.<sup>37</sup>

The official objections to the Yiddish siddur were related to a series of different issues. The category of new and additional blessings was an extremely sore point among European rabbinic decisors (even before the rise of Reform Judaism). After Shabbatei Tzvi, Jacob Frank, and the Doenmeh followers had constructed prayer books (many in translation) which were published in many editions in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, European rabbis were reluctant to allow "new" translations of the siddur.<sup>38</sup> Some of these new prayer books were published in Latin characters with Spanish or Polish translations, but others were in Hebrew and Aramaic. While most were published in Constantinople and Amsterdam, some were printed in Frankfort on Main.<sup>39</sup> The Frankfort on Main publishing house was important because at nearly the same time that other new translations appeared, Aaron ben Shemuel of Hergershausen (just south of Frankfurt on Main) produced the siddur *Libliche Tefila*.

There are some significant Jewish legal (halachic) questions surrounding the issue of "fulfilling one's religious obligation" of prayer in translation, but also regarding a whole series of problems related to the interjecting of non-Hebrew prayers and petitions in the midst of standardized prescribed prayers. Although one could make a case that new or additional blessings (or even prayers which were interruptions, such as prayers in the vernacular) are in the category of *Berachah LeVatalah* (literally a "wasted" or profane blessing; or better, unauthorized), the whole category of introductions and additions of blessings was historically one which seems to be in flux (at least in Hebrew liturgy) until the pre-modern period. As long as the prayers did not diminish the already existing core of blessings or prayers, the additions were often looked at (by certain rabbinic authorities) as being in the category of "*hidur mitzvah*" — the beautification of a prescribed mitzvah.

Women, who historically had not been obligated to perform those commandments specifically regulated by a time (which may or may not include many prescribed prayer sessions), had more flexibility in the area of prayer than their male counterparts. The halachic flexibility granted to women in the area of prayer may have been the pretext for the creation of the entire category of rabbinically "permitted" Yiddish prayer, but it is clear that the category was de facto more widely used among men than was

previously acknowledged. This de facto acceptance of Yiddish prayer (alongside Hebrew prayer) for non-scholars among the Jewish male population and women may have continued to co-exist within the Jewish community as long as it did not represent a major challenge to rabbinic authority. The problem appears to be the challenge to rabbinic authority and extreme attempts at liturgical adaptation which began in the seventeenth century.

## V. Rabbinic Yiddish Prayer for the Masses?

Rashi, the eleventh century medieval commentator, states that in many communities only the hazzanim had prayer books, while the congregation listened to the prayers without books in their hands.<sup>40</sup> The Mahzor Vitry also informs us that certain passages of the Bible, the Megillat Esther, the Passover Haggadah, and various prayers were translated into the vernacular for "women and children and read aloud."<sup>41</sup> The Passover Haggadah, in particular, which was only "canonized" late in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (and then allowed additions through the sixteenth century), became an important vehicle for ritual Yiddish. Some of the oldest printed Haggadot (1526) included a Yiddish song (*Almechtiker Got*), and the fifteenth-century rabbi known as the MaHaRIL took the unusual step of translating (and publishing) the Aramaic ritual formula for the annulment of Hametz ("*Kol Hamire*") for a widow who did not understand the Aramaic.<sup>42</sup> Although the question of prayer in the vernacular is usually set in the context of women and children (as noted above), this appears to have been a rabbinic euphemism for the vast majority of the Jewish public. In S. Reif's *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer*, he states:

Those who went to the considerable trouble of utilizing Jewish versions of the local French, German, and Italian vernaculars to compose translations of the prayers clearly felt that their exercise was a worthwhile one for those, among them no doubt women, youngsters, and less Hebraically educated men, who were linguistically denied access to what they must have regarded as one of Judaism's spiritual jewels.<sup>43</sup>

It is not just women who were included in these injunctions, but probably the vast majority of Jewish male non-scholars who obviously were counted on to perform their obligatory duties, but who did not have sufficient knowledge to actively participate in Hebrew prayer. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the *Korban Minche* prayer

book, an attempt to deal with many of these issues, was published. Below the Hebrew text of the prayers could be found a running Yiddish translation or commentary which allowed one to scan the Yiddish text as one "prayed" the Hebrew (or vice-versa).<sup>44</sup> There is some discussion in rabbinic responsa of the Middle Ages as to whether someone who does not at all understand Hebrew could actually be counted as part of the quorum in general. Necessity dictated that all Jewish males were theoretically eligible for participation in prayer, but the problem remained. In the Middle Ages, this situation was somewhat remedied by some rabbinic injunctions which allowed translators or interpreters in key places in the religious services, but in general it was only a small elite who could fully participate in the services.<sup>45</sup>

## VI. The Rise of Hasidism: Three Masters and Their Prayers

It is clear that Yiddish was one of the main vehicles for Hasidic life from its inception in the seventeenth century through the modern period. The Baal Shem Tov makes this clear in a number of the collected sayings sources.<sup>46</sup> He says: "At times, one prays even by speaking corporeal words with his friends."<sup>47</sup> Further: "Not only through holy speech but also through common speech, through plain, everyday words that one exchanges with his comrade in the street, can he raise himself to the exalted divine levels."<sup>48</sup> The large masses of Eastern European Jewry who seem to have been drawn to the folk movement of Hasidism included both men and women. Being Yiddish speakers, they could take advantage of the Yiddish works which became part of the literature of early Hasidism. It was not Yiddish prayer and religious literature per se that were the problems for early Hasidism, but they did generate some small controversy because men and women were more easily accessing this literature (apparently in neglect of Hebrew prayer and traditional religious literature).

One of the main combatants against Hasidism was Rabbi Elijah bar Solomon Zalmon, the man simply known as the Gaon of Vilna. He was born at the time of the rise of Hasidism. And although he favored Yiddish as the medium for women to study scripture and other religious literature, he was an extreme advocate of rigorous Hebrew study and prayer for men.<sup>49</sup> His famous edicts of excommunications in the 1790s created a precedent which subsequent *misnagdim* (anti-Hasidic leaders) and other rabbinic figures followed through the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>50</sup> To be sure, some of the animosity directed towards the Hasidic movement was the result of two seventeenth and eighteenth century groups (the Sabbateians and the Frankists, respectively) who had advocated a major

departure from rabbinic standards of the period. One of the major complaints against the Hasidim, one which seems to have caused the eighteenth century excommunications and tractates by Eastern and Western European rabbis had to do with Hasidic prayer customs. The *Zemir Aritzim*, written by Rabbi David of Makov and published in 1798, states:

The book *Zemir Aritzim* [*The Cutting Down of the Vicious*]: to cut out all the thorns and thorn-bushes that have arisen in the community of Jews, a sect who call themselves by the name of Hasidim; they became thorns and schismatics, their righteousness was like a filthy cloth; their prayers were with thunder and lightning, filled with violence and the treachery of deceivers. They are more rapacious than wolves of night, charlatans and worthless healers, tearing and devouring like locusts. They have changed the order of worship in every word, without reason or cause, without direction and without any path. . . .<sup>51</sup>

Some of these claims are true. The use of a variation on the Sephardic (Oriental) Isaac Luria prayer book became the norm among Hasidic circles, despite the fact that the Ashkenazic prayer book had been in use for many centuries in these regions.<sup>52</sup> Second, the Hasidic use of new melodies; popular Yiddish introductions to prayers; and even the introduction of newly-written prayers into the daily, Sabbath, and holiday liturgy raised important halachic questions. In the daily category, Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk held that one should accustom oneself to say the *Modeh Ani* as soon as he wakes up, even in Yiddish.<sup>53</sup> The Hasidic masters would interject, for example, as they prayed in the statutory *Shemoneh Esreh* prayer, different Yiddish words and phrases such as: *Foter in Himl*, *Hartziger Foter*, *Eibershter*, *Derbarimdiker* ("Father in Heaven," "Supreme One," "Merciful Father," "The Merciful One") despite the fact that any interruption at all was forbidden during the recitation of the *Shemoneh Esreh*.

Moreover, many of the medieval Hebrew piyyutim which were common in both the Ashkenazic and Sephardic prayer books were regularly ignored during Hasidic prayers.<sup>54</sup> Reb Nahman of Bratzlav is an example of the latter phenomenon. His prayers were sometimes not the canonized ones from the Lurianic Sephardic Siddur, but improvised in plain Yiddish. Later he actually taught his disciples that one should pray to God in Leshon Ashkenaz (Yiddish).<sup>55</sup> He is well known for reciting every possible prayer in Yiddish, printed in any volume he could find.<sup>56</sup> Even more important, he seems to have made his lessons into prayers.<sup>57</sup> He

taught that a prayer which comes from the heart is in the category of "*hitgalus malchuso*" (revelation of his kingdom) — apparently the means for true personal revelation.<sup>58</sup> Some Hasidic masters even addressed God in Polish during prayer.<sup>59</sup> More well known still was the use of Yiddish prayer by Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (known as the "Berditchever" by followers). He would interrupt the Musaf service of Rosh HaShanah at a certain point to explain the meaning of the words: "And your throne will be established in mercy and you shall sit upon it in truth." In so doing, he would address himself directly to God. So it is related that he prayed in Yiddish:

O Lord, if you want the throne of your glory to be established so that you may sit upon it in that glory which alone is fitting for the King of Kings, then deal mercifully with your children and issue decrees for their salvation and consolation. But if you deal with us harshly and issue harsh decrees, Heaven forbid, then your throne will not be established and you will not sit upon it in truth. For the *Tzaddikim* (Righteous) of the generation will not permit you to sit upon your throne. . . .<sup>60</sup>

His was a theology of conflict, of reward and punishment for both the human being and God. The actions of humans affected God just as God's decisions affected human beings. In another prayer offered during the Yom Kippur services he states:

Master of the Universe, I have several complaints — four in number — to register against the legal decisions of your court, for I am a Rabbi in Israel and am acquainted with your laws. . . . Since the above are the accusers and we below are the accused, let the Heavenly Judges come down to us and render judgement in our courts of justice according to the law.<sup>61</sup>

His three most famous prayer pieces — the *Dudele* (You), *Ribono Shel Olam* (Master of the Universe), and *Kaddish* (literally: "Holy" — Prayer for the Dead) — were recited by him (and perhaps by others), but it is reported that his unique recitation was performed (and permitted) when he acted as the *hazan* (cantor) on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur.<sup>62</sup> The theological view of these three prayers is not totally systematic, but it is consistent. The Divine is all powerful and all knowing, controlling every action and result, therefore, the Divine is capable of changing any apparently free will human action from a result of tragedy and suffering into a good and pleasurable experience — if the Divine so wishes. These

prayers are also the means to changing the Divine decree. Various forms of the *Kaddish* separate major sections of the prayer service and also constitute a recognition of the Divine's power (and thus one form is the "Prayer for the Dead"). The more expanded form of the Berditchever includes the following unique theological concepts:

*Gut morgen Dir, Ribbono Shel Olom, Ich, Levi Yitzchoq ben Soroh miBerditchev, Bin tzu Dir gekoomen mit a Din Torah far Dein Folk Yisrael* — I come to you for a Din Torah/resolution of a dispute for your people Israel. What do you want of your people Israel? What have you demanded of your people Israel? *Tatenyu. Kamo umos ba'olam?* Our sweet father. How many nations are there in the world? Persians, Babylonians, Edomites. The Prussians, what do they say? That their King is King. And the English, what do they say? That our kingdom is the kingdom. And I, Levi Yitzchoq, son of Soroh of Berditchev, say: *Yisgadal, v'Yisqdash, shmei Rabbah* — Magnified and sanctified is your great name. And I, Levi Yitchoq, son of Soroh of Berditchev, say: From my stand, I will not waver, and from my place I shall not move until there be an end to all of this. *Yisgadal, v'Yisqdash, shmei Rabbah* — Magnified and sanctified is your great name.<sup>63</sup>

The *Dudele* also represents a specific piece of Yiddish theology:

Lord of the Universe! Where can I find you and where can I not find you? The heavens — you, the earth — you, east-you, west-you, north — you, south-you. If things are well for me-you, if something hurts me — you, and if you-then everything is good. Only you! Always you. you, you, you.<sup>64</sup>

The unique theological point which appears throughout Yiddish prayer is the power of giving oneself over entirely to an all-powerful Divine being who is totally responsible for the suffering (and the pleasure) which we experience. This borders on a Jewishly defined Augustinian view of theodicy. For the Berditchever, as for Saint Augustine, "all evil is either sin or punishment for sin."<sup>65</sup>

This view, which is found in a number of different manifestations in Jewish theology,<sup>66</sup> is one of a number of approaches to this question found in Jewish theology. Among the others are:

- a. Humans cannot understand the Divine's ways (Job).
- b. Evil is the result of human freedom, of self-willed action being

exercised, and of Divine allowance for the human suffering which may follow (to protect human free will) (Maimonides).<sup>67</sup>

c. Humans are crude creations which are en route to perfection (Irenaeus<sup>68</sup> and Zohar).<sup>69</sup>

The idea, however, permeates much of the Hasidic masters' thought and especially the three who composed independent Yiddish prayers: Reb Nahman, Rabbi Elimelech, and Rabbi Levi Yitzhaq.

### VIII. The Nineteenth Century

When creative prayer is considered in the modern period, usually Hasidic creations are thought of. In the nineteenth century, however, the book firm of Eisenstadt and Shapiro had the idea of building upon the cultural Haskalah and the Yeshivah settings of Vilna and Zhitomir for another form of Yiddish prayer and study books. They employed a rather popular author of prose of the period, Shloyme Yaakov Abromovitz — born in the shtetl of Kopyl near Minsk, traditionally educated in Cheder and Yeshivah, and extremely well versed in the Haskalah love of Hebrew — to perform the trial translations. Test marketing of his Psalms proved successful. He proceeded with translations of the Shabbat prayers and hymns; they were published in 1875 in Zhitomir.<sup>70</sup> Although the entire project was never completed and was undermined by the Romm publishing company of Vilna (a major publisher of Hebrew and Yiddish books), who continued to produce the *Tichinesbuch* as the standard for Yiddish prayers, the effort is noteworthy because of the style employed and the importance of Abromovitz in modern secular Yiddish literature. He is generally acknowledged as the "grandfather of modern Yiddish literature" and is better known by his name Mendelev Mokher Sforim.<sup>71</sup> The proposed Abromovitz prayer book was done at the height of his writing powers — before "The Travels of Benjamin the Third" (1878), but in the same period as "Fiskhe the Lame" (1869), "Yudl" (1875) and "The Nag" (1873). From the company and tutelage of S. Ettinger, I. Aksenfeld, and A.B. Gottlober, all mid-nineteenth century *Maskil* (Enlightenment) Yiddishists,<sup>72</sup> Abromovitz excelled in short stories and longer narratives, and his prayer book held great promise for attracting Yiddish speakers of many religious observance levels. In the Sabbath prayers, for example, he provided a distinctive text in which simple hymns with abstract content were expanded to many times their size to include contemporary *Maskil* commentaries on these hymns with theological ideas current in the period. This could have been yet another turn in the theology of Yiddish prayer which unfortunately was not destined to reach fruition.

which unfortunately was not destined to reach fruition.

## IX. Conclusions

A major question arises from this research. If Yiddish prayer was such a large and well-established phenomenon, why is it that we do not have significant information on the subject in most histories of Jewish liturgy? First, if one major conclusion arises from this work it is that Yiddish prayer was an extremely wide spread phenomenon in the period of Alt and Middle Yiddish. A second major conclusion about Yiddish prayer is that it was doomed by forces which were out of its control and not by the poverty of its creative force. M. Weinreich argues that "... without the high degree of standardization Yiddish could not have become a language of prayer. . . ." <sup>73</sup> He discounts the literature assembled here as a sort of non-systematic anomaly in the history of Yiddish and prayer. The fact that Yiddish liturgy did not have a standardized language was probably its greatest advantage as it responded to a variety of new and meaningful parts of the Jewish experience in different areas of Europe. It is not a sufficient reason for discounting its importance as a major force in Medieval and pre-modern Jewish life. Unfortunately, Weinreich also seems to have an overly romanticized view of the development of Hebrew prayer. The high degree of standardization in Hebrew as a "dead language" before its revival in the late nineteenth century only gave Hebrew an advantage of form (perhaps for rote repetition) but not content.

Second, the tensions within religious Judaism which exploded in the seventeenth and eighteenth century into antinomian movements threatening the structures of rabbinic Judaism were eclipsed by the even greater tensions caused by the reforms within Judaism in the nineteenth century. There is here a paradox of sorts regarding Yiddish prayer. Because of tensions caused by these movements, Yiddish (religious) speakers who might have otherwise continued to use Yiddish as a language of prayer were forced into using standardized Hebrew prayer in order to demonstrate their loyalty to the traditional, rabbinically authorized versions of the prayer book — at the expense of Yiddish prayer.

Third, the Holocaust and its aftermath created the single greatest challenge to the ongoing literary traditions of Yiddish, including Yiddish prayer. In addition, the Jewish theological setting of the United States, for example, was much different from the Jewish theological setting of Europe. The theological leaning of Yiddish prayer for an all-powerful, all-knowing Divine power capable of hearing the prayers of supplicants and changing Divine will was not the predominant view of the Reform, Conservative and Orthodox movements in the United States. The use of Yiddish as a spoken language (as well as a religious language) by second



and third generation immigrant families severely impacted the possibility of using Yiddish prayer as well. Without the critical mass of Yiddish speakers from all spectrums and backgrounds in the original folk settings of its creation, Yiddish prayer has become only a footnote for the ultra-Orthodox Yiddish speaker and perhaps the history of women's prayer. Resembling only a shell of its former self, Yiddish prayer was left *nishte hin und nishte her*, a spiritual and historical orphan.

## Notes

1 *Artscroll Siddur* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1987), 620.

2 In recent publications on the development of Jewish liturgy, for example: E.D. Goldschmidt, *On Jewish Liturgy* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1978); L. Hoffman, *The Canonization of the Synagogue Service* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1979); J.J. Petuchowski, *Understanding Jewish Prayer* (New York: Ktav, 1972); S. Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer* (Cambridge: University Press, 1993); and the still classic I. Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, trans. R.P. Scheindlin, (1931, [German], newly updated bibliography and translation Philadelphia: JPS, 1993). Yiddish prayer is given little space before the rise of Hasidism. In some of the most recent studies of the development of Jewish liturgy, it is either not mentioned or mentioned in passing as part of the modern phenomenon which began with the nineteenth century reform movement. This paper will show that it is part of the natural development of Jewish liturgy from a very early period and in fact one of the ways to gauge how formal prayer in general is a function of the two main forces of fixed, statutory prayer and more spontaneous, popular prayer. The rise of prayer in Yiddish in Hasidism is not an anomaly, but rather a more easily documentable part of a much longer and complex history of Yiddish prayer.

3 M. Weinreich, 'Yiddishkayt and Yiddish: On the Impact of Religion on Language in Ashkenazic Jewry,' in *Reading in the Sociology of Language*, ed. J. Fishman (The Hague: Mouton, 1968); and S.C. Heilman, *Synagogue Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

4 Y. Rivkind, "The Rights of Yiddish in Suits in Rabbinic Courts," in *Never Say Die*, ed. J. Fishman (The Hague: Mouton, 1981).

5 Which demonstrates the sources used by R. Levi Yitzchak. By the thirteenth century, Maimonides had formulated Thirteen Principles of Jewish faith in his *Commentary to the Mishnah* Sanhedrin, chapt. 10, which were more fully developed and continue to be used in the synagogue in the Yigdal prayer and the *Ani Maamin* prayers incorporated into the morning synagogue service (*Ani Maamin* follows — in most traditional prayerbooks — the morning service and *Yigdal* appears in the beginning of the daily morning service).

6 Thirteen Principles plus six explicit concepts (although three of these are part of the thirteen).

7 *Artscroll Siddur*, 346 ff. ("The Seven Faceted Blessing").

8 Maimonides *Guide to the Perplexed*, 3.51. The same could be said of acts of loving kindness as well, but for the purposes of this paper this is not relevant.

9 A.J. Heschel, *Man's Quest for God* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 513.

10 M. Buber, *Eclipse of God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 126.

11 *The Canonization of the Synagogue Service* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press 1979), 4.

12 Mishnah Megillah 1.8, Sotah 7.1, PT Sotah 21b-c, and BT Sotah 32a-33a.

13 BT Sotah 32a-33a. Mishnah, Sotah: "The following may be recited in any language: the section concerning the 'suspected woman,' the confession made at the presentation of the tithe, the Shema, the Shemoneh Esreh, the Grace after Meals, the oath concerning testimony, and the oath concerning a deposit." The Gemara (interpretation) continues: "THE SHEMA. Whence have we it that this [may be recited in any language]? As it is written: Hear, O Israel — in any language you understand." In addition, the follow up on the top of page 33a asks: "It is possible to say that Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] holds that the whole Torah may be read in any language!" The discussion then passes to the other major prayers: "THE PRAYER. [The Eighteen Benedictions — it may be recited in any language because] it is only supplication, and one may pray in any language he wishes. But may the 'prayer' be recited in any language? Behold Rab Judah has said: A man should never pray for his needs in Aramaic. For R. Johanan declared: If anyone prays for his needs in Aramaic, the Ministering Angels do not pay attention to him, because they do not understand that language! — There is no contradiction, one referring to [the prayer] of an individual and the other to that of a Congregation."

14 Reif, 386, note 31.

15 I. Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature*, Vol. 7 (New York: Ktav, 1975), 7-8.

16 Reif., 247.

17 See note #2 above. Also A.Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy and its Development* (New York: Holt, 1932); R. Posner, U. Kaploun, S. Cohn, eds. *Jewish Liturgy* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975); A. Millgram, *Jewish Worship* (Philadelphia: JPSA, 1971), among others.

18 Elbogen, 299.

19 Rabbi Isaac bar Sheshet Perfet, Sheelot and Teshuvot, #37. Mahzor Vitry #323.

20 Kh. Shmeruk, *Sifrut Yiddish: Peraqim LeToldoteha*, (Yiddish

- Literature: Aspects of Its History*), Hebrew (Tel Aviv: The Porter Institute for Poetics & Semiotics, Tel Aviv University, 1978), 9-11.
- 21 #588 and 785.
- 22 M. Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 276-77.
- 23 Volume 7:132.
- 24 Cited in I. Zinberg, "A Defence of Yiddish in Old Yiddish Literature," in J.A. Fishman, *Never Say Die!* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1981), 164.
- 25 Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, 258.
- 26 Cited in Zinberg, *History*, 96.
- 27 Ibid., 133. Its popularity is attested by the extant thirty-four printed editions from 1622-1732. The later editions even included a special typeface of the Hebrew alphabet which became known as a "women's alphabet."
- 28 Ibid., 110.
- 29 Cited in Zinberg, "A Defence," 166.
- 30 Cited in Zinberg, *History*, 219.
- 31 Cited in Zinberg, Ibid., 219-20. The translation of the word "Tatysh" (literally "German") has been substituted for the word "Yiddish" since this was the historical designation in these works for Yiddish language. (London: East and West Library, 1962).
- 32 *Life of Glückel of Hameln, Written by Herself*.
- 33 Cited in Zinberg, *History*, 245.
- 34 Cited in Zinberg, "A Defence," 170.
- 35 G. Scholem's chapter "The Crisis of Tradition in Jewish Messianism" in his *The Messianic Idea in Judaism, and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Press, 1971), 49-77.
- 36 Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, 266.
- 37 Ibid., 267.
- 38 See the references in G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, trans. R.J.Z. Werblowsky (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 290-97, 524-29, bibliography of printings: 936-39; and G. Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Meridian, 1978), 305-06, 330.
- 39 Scholem, *Sabbati Sevi*, 938.
- 40 *Mahzor Vitry* #323.
- 41 II, #295, *Hilchot Haggadah Shel Pesah*.
- 42 Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, 266-67.
- 43 Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer*, 222.
- 44 Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, 259.
- 45 Yehudah ben Benyamin, *Shibolei HaLeqet* #78, Yonah Gerondi in *Sefer HaYirah* on the Torah reading: "twice in Hebrew and once in Targum, and if he has no Targum, he shall read twice in Hebrew and once in the vernacular."

- 46 The most complete and first collection in English is found in Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome Mintz's trans. and eds., *In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970).
- 47 *Toledot Yaaqov Yosef*, Toledot, 29.
- 48 Keter Shem Tov, II, 23 as cited in Zinberg, *History*, Vol. 9, 43.
- 49 Zinberg, *History*, Vol. 6, 223.
- 50 Ibid., 231.
- 51 Cited in M. Wilensky, "The Polemic of Rabbi David of Makow Against Hasidism," *American Academy for Jewish Research: Proceedings*, XXV (1956), 137-56; for a more general overview of the question, see H.M. Sachar, *The Course of Modern Jewish History* (New York: Dell, 1958), 78ff.
- 52 A. Wertheim, *Law and Custom in Hasidism* (New York: Ktav, 1992), 144-149.
- 53 *Naom Elimelech*, Chapter 8.
- 54 This is especially true of Habad Hasidism. Wertheim, 150, note 63.
- 55 *Liqutei Moharan*, II, No. 25; Magid Sichot 72.
- 56 *Rabbi Nahman's Wisdom (Shevachay HaRan Sichot HaRan)*, trans. A. Kaplan (New York: Breslov Research Institute, 1973), 11.
- 57 Ibid., 283; *Liqutei Tefilos*, ed. Rabbi Nathan. Reb Nahman's main translator and scribe first published this in 1835.
- 58 *Liqutei Moharan* I, no. 49.
- 59 The Maggid of Kuznitz, Wertheim, 156.
- 60 S.H. Dresner, *Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev* (Bridgeport: Hartmore, 1974), 81.
- 61 Ibid., 82-83.
- 62 Ibid., 154-155.
- 63 Ibid., 85-89.
- 64 Ibid., 107.
- 65 *De Genesi Ad Litteram*, Imperfectus liber, 1.3.
- 66 Found throughout classical rabbinic literature in, for example, BT Berachot 5a, 7a, and Shabbat 55a.
- 67 *Guide to the Perplexed*, 3:5, 10, 15, 51.
- 68 *Against Heresies*, Book IV, Chapters 37-38.
- 69 Hayim Vital as cited in G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1961), 269.
- 70 L. Weiner, *The History of Yiddish Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Hermon, 1972), 96-97.
- 71 S. Liptzin, *A History of Yiddish Literature* (Middle Village: Jonathan David, 1985), 39 ff.
- 72 Ibid., 42.
- 73 Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, 262.

## Bringing Home the Gospel: Yiddish Bibles, Bible Societies, and the Jews

Leonard J. Greenspoon

The British and Foreign Bible Society (hereafter, BFBS) was established in London on March 7, 1804, the first of more than ten dozen national Bible societies founded later in the nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century. An outgrowth of the eighteenth century evangelical revival that led to worldwide missionary societies producing literally millions of inexpensive printed bibles in numerous European, African, and Asian languages, the BFBS provided the necessary organizational and financial supports to place such efforts on a sure footing. Some twelve years later, on May 8, 1816, the American Bible Society (ABS) was organized in New York City. Although a number of other national bible societies followed in quick succession, it was these two that dominated international efforts to mass produce and distribute Bibles throughout the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. The United Bible Societies, with which most of us are familiar today, is a product of the post-World War II period (it was established in England in 1946), although its roots go back several decades earlier.<sup>1</sup>

The primary purpose of the BFBS or, for that matter, any other Bible society is to make the Bible available to the largest number of people at the smallest cost. To this purpose, societies may sponsor translations; in many cases, these translations represented the first written literature in a given language or dialect. On other occasions, the Society found satisfactory editions already existent in a given language. In either case, arrangements were made to print and distribute versions in inexpensive editions without any of the notes or comments that had caused such dissension in, for example, early English versions of the Bible.<sup>2</sup>

In this sense, the work of the BFBS or the ABS could have been

considered ecumenical, if the term "ecumenical" was understood to encompass major Protestant denominations and thought. Active Roman Catholic participation in Bible societies did not commence until the mid-twentieth century, followed even later by an Orthodox (Christian) presence.

For the most part, Jews were thought of more as a potential audience for Bible society products than as producers of such items. There were exceptions, primarily in the category of converted Jews, some of whom (most notably Christian Ginsburg) achieved the highest possible level of recognition in Bible society circles. Cooperation between Bible societies and practicing Jews is, I might note, a much more recent phenomenon, involving older scholars like Harry M. Orlinsky on a personal basis and the current generation, such as myself, at a formal level.

Bible societies may appear to be little more than missionary groups who emphasize Scripture as the primary means of proselytizing.<sup>3</sup> There is, however, what I would term a unique element that distinguishes, for example, the BFBS or the ABS from other groups. I refer to their tradition of scholarship, which is rich in theoretical as well as practical implications. Especially, but not exclusively, in more recent years there has been widespread discussion in Bible society circles about the best way to "communicate" the narratives and teachings of the Bible in cultures far removed from even the basic presuppositions of the biblical world. Concepts such as dynamic or functional equivalence have gained wide currency, influencing not only the ABS-sponsored Good News Bible and Contemporary English Version, but also having significant influence on the New Jewish Version, especially in its Torah portion.<sup>4</sup> Such linguistic scholarship complements textual work and technological advances, all in the service of Bible translation, interpretation, and distribution. I have met more than one "old timer," who judges that the Bible societies have gone soft or lost their way because of these scientific pursuits. But they are in fact integral both to the work of the major Bible societies and to the present paper.

It is not unexpected, as noted earlier, that Bible societies, in this case the BFBS, sponsored and distributed versions aimed at Jews, for the purpose of their education and ultimately their conversion. For this paper, I will first review the published material dealing primarily with Yiddish Bible translations (but also other versions aimed at a Jewish audience), in order to provide a broader context in which to place the necessarily more laconic, even cryptic references in committee minutes, etc. The result is,

in my opinion, a fascinating if incomplete picture of Yiddish as a sacred language — when viewed from the outside in.

An early "Summary of Versions of the Scriptures Printed by the Society" is dated June 30, 1851.<sup>5</sup> Although no texts in Yiddish are mentioned, the following "Jewish" versions are listed: Judaeo Spanish Old Testaments and New Testaments, total printed 3,000; German with Hebrew Old Testament, number printed 30,395; Hebrew Old and New Testaments, total printed 140,519; Judaeo Arabic, Four Books of New Testament (without specifying which four books), number printed 2,020; Judaeo Persic, Four Gospels, 1,000. Several observations are in order here: (1) With fine bureaucratic precision the BFBS kept and published very detailed records, which can be a great boost (but also a considerable burden) to researchers; (2) the numbers reported for the various "Jewish" versions are quite substantial, given other figures contained in this 1851 listing; (3) recorded here are only versions printed by the Society; excluded (as we shall see) are versions printed elsewhere, but distributed by the BFBS.

By 1882 (as recorded in the Bible Society's *Monthly Reporter* for May of that year) the BFBS had considerably expanded the scope and number of its "various editions of the Bible specially prepared for dissemination among the Jews." It "had printed or purchased for circulation, three-quarters of a million of copies of the Scriptures in the Hebrew language."<sup>6</sup> This number included both Old and New Testaments, but the Society was especially proud of its Hebrew New Testament, the fourth edition of which, by Franz Delitzsch, had recently been published. "The Society had not confined itself to circulating the Old and New Testaments in Hebrew by itself, but in two other ways," we learn, "it had shown a great interest in the Jew, and it had also provided a practical channel through which his hearers could show their interest in that venerable people":

The first of those two ways was by printing the Hebrew along with some other modern language . . . Hebrew and English, Hebrew and French, Hebrew and German, Hebrew and Hungarian, Hebrew and Italian, Hebrew and Polish, Hebrew and Russ, Hebrew and Turkish, and Hebrew and Judaeo-German. The second way in which the Society had sought to present the Scriptures to the Jews in the most acceptable manner was by printing the Word in various languages but expressed in the

Hebrew character. Thus the Judaeo-German meant the Scriptures in the German language printed in Hebrew letters. . . . There were also copies in Judaeo-Polish and Judaeo-Spanish.<sup>7</sup>

The use of the term "Judaeo-German" in two related, but presumably distinguishable, categories may occasion some confusion. What appears to be the case is that the first category groups together modern translations of the Hebrew Bible that appear as diglots with the ancient Hebrew text, while the second category involves only New Testament versions (note: the capital W in "word"). "Judaeo-German" in both cases refers to Yiddish.

This understanding is borne out by an article some three decades later, titled "The Yiddish Version of the New Testament." This article begins with an extended discussion of major historical and geographical developments in the Yiddish language. After introducing the term Yiddish, the article's author A.S. Geden (on whom, see below) writes: "More recently also the language [i.e., Yiddish] has passed under various names, as 'Judaeo-German,' 'Judaeo-Spanish,' or 'Judaeo-Polish,' according to the country in which it was spoken, or the extent to which a foreign element had given to it a racial or a dialectic colour."<sup>8</sup> Arguing against what must have been a popular (mis)conception, Geden continues:

Yiddish . . . is by no means a jargon, if the term be used in the somewhat slighting or contemptuous sense in which it has often been applied. In utilizing and assimilating elements derived from many sources, it has but followed the example of most other languages, notably of English itself; and the breaking down of grammatical distinctions characteristic of later Yiddish speech and the obliteration of niceties of idiom have certainly not proceeded further than in similar instances of languages with an equally long history behind them.<sup>9</sup>

After a fairly sophisticated discussion of dialectical differences and widely variant orthographic practices, Geden — who was prominently involved in the production of the Yiddish New Testament of 1913 — observes:



To a large extent, therefore, the Committee of revision had to feel its way, and to endeavour in each instance to ascertain the prevailing usage — with the ultimate hope of producing a version which might be generally accepted by all Yiddish-speaking Jews, might help to unify the varieties of dialect, and might furnish a standard both of orthography and of grammar. Time and experience alone can show how far those who have been engaged on this task have achieved success.<sup>10</sup>

Although the description just read might well fit a purely academic project, we are quickly returned to the reality that for the BFBS, such "scientific" endeavors are a means to an end, not an end unto themselves:

For the evangelization and enlightenment of the Jews generally throughout the world, Yiddish is the only available medium; and consequently there is no work more important than that of supplying them with the Scriptures in a form which they will appreciate and may be led to study. . . . They have a strong claim . . . on Christian sympathy, and there is an urgent need that the truth of the Gospel should be presented and brought home to them in a form they can appreciate and understand.<sup>11</sup>

Although the number of Yiddish-speaking Jews at any given time was a matter of widely varying conjecture, the BFBS did not shrink from providing estimates. Thus, the article just cited refers to "150,000 Yiddish-speaking Jews in East London" alone.<sup>12</sup> In the following year (1914) the potential market for the New Testament in Yiddish, which had been revised "very carefully . . . with a view to its being intelligible to Jews generally," was estimated at nearly 12,000,000.<sup>13</sup> On a more localized level, earlier in the century the Amsterdam agent of the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews reported "a deepening of interest among the emigrant Jews who pass through Rotterdam . . . the majority are more decidedly bent on knowing as much as possible about Christ."<sup>14</sup> Copies of the BFBS Yiddish New Testament are judged to be valuable tools in the work of this society, often referred to simply as the London Jews Society. As recounted in BFBS minutes (to which we turn more fully later): "Jewish emigrants from Russia and Roumania on their way to America are regularly visited on board in Rotterdam, and have the Gospel preached to them in Yiddish with the sanction of the authorities.

They sometimes fight for a N.T. in Yiddish." <sup>15</sup>

The first Yiddish New Testament distributed by the BFBS was published by the London Jews Society in 1821; the translator was Benjamin Nehemiah Solomon, "a convert from Judaism, who [had come] over to England from Poland." In 1872 the Bible Society hired P.I. Hershon to prepare a newer Yiddish edition of the New Testament. It took him six years to revise Solomon's 1821 version. His translation was "in the Galician form of Yiddish, and was frequently reprinted." In 1901 three individuals, including a J. Rabinowitz, issued a Bible Society-sponsored revision of Hershon. Its primary goal was to combine "the three main forms of Yiddish — Bessarabian, Lithuanian, and Galician." From 1909-1913 a further, major revision took place under the supervision of A.S. Geden, the Rev. Mordecai Samuel Bergmann, the Rev. Samuel Hinds Wilkinson, the BFBS Editorial Superintendent, and the London Jews Society's Rev. Aaron Bernstein. <sup>16</sup> Repeated revision and high-powered representation (for example, from the Editorial Superintendent) are two indicators of how prominently the Yiddish New Testament figured in the multifaceted activities of the BFBS during this period. <sup>17</sup>

As several of the translators' or revisers' names make clear, even when there is no explicit statement to this effect, converted Jews were very active, in fact probably indispensable, in the production of Yiddish New Testaments. It is telling that, from the BFBS perspective, Bergmann and Bernstein could (continue to) be called "Jewish members of the Committee" and that reference could be made to "their consecrated desire to give this Message back to Israel" <sup>18</sup>

By 1917, according to the BFBS's own accounting, somewhat more than 700,000 copies of a Yiddish New Testament (in its entirety or in part) had been published, a not negligible number, to say the least. But this represents only about one-fourth of the "more than THREE MILLION copies of the Scriptures [primarily in Hebrew] in forms which appeal specially to Jews." <sup>19</sup>

The earliest BFBS "Yiddish-related" (for want of a better term) Old Testament dates to 1858: "a diglot edition with the Hebrew text, side by side with Luther's German version slightly modified and transliterated into Hebrew characters." A "somewhat similar edition" was printed in 1876. <sup>20</sup>

It was not until 1898 that there appeared a BFBS Yiddish Old Testament, by the Revs. Bergmann and Bernstein mentioned above. As revised in 1908, this version was distributed by the BFBS first in a "free-standing" edition and later (1912) as a diglot together with the Hebrew

text.<sup>21</sup> It was not, however, until 1928 that the BFBS could report with delight "that the Old Testament in Yiddish, Revised Union Version, has at last been published."<sup>22</sup> Although not unimportant, an Old Testament in Yiddish was clearly not as high a priority for the Bible Society as was its Yiddish New Testament, to say nothing of its Hebrew New Testament.

In addition to rather cut-and-dry reports, BFBS publications contain a number of narratives and personal testimonials. An early representative of this "genre" in relation to the Jews appeared in a March, 1885, article titled "The Religious Awakening Among the Jews." One M. Rabinowitch is identified as a leader of a Southern Russian movement springing up among the Jews: "We cannot doubt that this movement, with the outspoken recognition . . . of Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah of the Jews, is `of God, and cannot be overthrown.'" Caught up in this movement, an insurance agent, who also taught Jewish children, "respectfully request[ed] a Hebrew Old Testament and also a New Testament in Hebrew, with the German and Polish translation." With these and other tools, he assures the BFBS, "I will unveil the new hidden light gradually to my scholars, and may the Eternal One in Heaven be with the Society and its supporters."<sup>23</sup>

Far more dramatic are the narratives contained in "The Power of the New Testament Amongst the Jews" from the following year, 1886. One "learned Jew" is reported to have admitted: "There is something in that New Testament of theirs which I do not like; it is a dangerous book." Indeed, we are assured, "it often happens . . . that the Jew reads the New Testament with no other end in view than to controvert the Missionary; but often, instead of overthrowing the truth, he is overcome by it. The Rabbis know this well, and therefore say that a Jew can commit no greater sin than reading the New Testament." Further: "A poor [Jewish] widow, when asked if she would like to read the New Testament, answered, `Read it? Who would not read such heavenly words, which are so comforting to a widow's heart?'" And another: "A Jewish teacher in ill health frequently confessed that it was entirely owing to his perfect belief in the Old and New Testaments that he could bear, with patience and humble submission to his Lord's will, the cross which He was pleased to put upon his shoulders." A poor Jew, to whom a missionary had lent a New Testament to read, grasped it, saying, "That Book, sir — that Book has brought peace to my troubled soul." "I have read the New Testament," said a Jew, in the presence of a Rabbi, "and there is not a more interesting Book." "You are known as a sinner in Israel," growled the Rabbi, "and we expect you will

soon be baptized." On the whole — the article concludes — "rabbinism has deprived the Jewish people of the Old Testament as Romanism has deprived Papists of the Bible."<sup>24</sup>

Such episodes, referring to anonymous figures among the Jewish masses, were typical. There were also accounts concerned with well-known individuals, like Heinrich Heine, "a German Jew, who had received Christian baptism in his youth without much conviction." But "his views of the Bible changed" in later years. So he wrote five years before his death: "For the revival of my religious feeling I have to thank the Bible, that holy book." He could refer to himself as a "shipwrecked metaphysician cling[ing] fast to the Bible."<sup>25</sup>

Other stories, such as the one narrated in "How a Polish Jew was led to Christ,"<sup>26</sup> and other prominent individuals, none more revered in Bible Society circles than Christian Ginsburg, fleshed out (as it were) the impersonal counts of Bibles published or distributed and the equally unemotional accounts of translations or revisions. We will also attempt to flesh out counts and accounts through a look, albeit a brief, one at some of the internal records of the BFBS.

The Yiddish translation and revision committee minutes that I have reviewed stretch from 1900-1946. As early as December, 1900, the question was being raised about the proper designation of the language of the 1901 revision — and presumably also of earlier and subsequent "Yiddish" editions of the New and Old Testaments. A variety of designations were considered and discarded before adopting the term "Judeo-German (Yiddish)" in contemporary catalogues. Among these were Judeo-Polish, Jargon, Hebrew-German, Mamalushon, Lishon Ashkenazy, B'laz (meaning "a foreign tongue"), Rashi German, and Women's German. Decisive support for such action also came from Jews themselves: "A day or two ago, I was shown a note from the Chief Rabbi of London, Dr. Adler, in which he promised to write in 'Yiddish' something to be printed."<sup>27</sup>

In considering the establishment of a committee to revise the 1901 "Yiddish" New Testament, the mixture of motives I spoke of earlier becomes apparent. For example, in 1907 attention was called to the "great missionary" value of "a complete translation of the Bible into Yiddish." There was no question about the need for some "Hebrew Christian brethren," but the Translation Committee itself must be "presided over by a Christian-born Theologian with a University Degree." A "religious requirement" does not seem inappropriate in the context of a

BFBS-sponsored project, but the educational requirement may appear, at first glance, to be odd. That is really not the case, however, since (according to the minutes) the three earlier revisers were "unscholarly, strangers to philology and not students of grammar in any language."<sup>28</sup> The committee that A.S. Geden — Dr. A.S. Geden D.D. — oversaw thus had both proselytizing and philologizing on its plate.

We noted earlier that the Revs. Bergmann and Bernstein were involved in the production of both Old and New Testaments in Yiddish. Some controversy arose when an edition of this version was set to appear in a "free-standing" format with Messianic passages and apparently others "specially marked" (how is not indicated). Holding fast to its policy of producing only note-free editions, the BFBS did not approve of such an innovation. In any case, the ABS was apparently eager to circulate such an edition, to which the BFBS agreed — so long as it circulated only in the United States. There was also discussion of a Hebrew-Yiddish diglot, which did in fact appear in 1912, but without any "emphasized passages."<sup>29</sup>

As we remarked earlier, it was not until 1928 that the definitive BFBS version of the Old Testament in Yiddish finally appeared. The minutes for that year record many words of praise and at least one "warm eulogy" for this version.<sup>30</sup> The minutes also indicate why, as late as 1920, not a single portion of this Old Testament had "yet been published or [even] tested."<sup>31</sup> The Rev. Bernstein had died and Bergmann was no longer actively involved. The task of revision then fell to a single individual, Rev. S.H. Wilkinson, who in addition to revising also reported travelling to Russia for "relief-work among Jewish war-refugees" and to Palestine, Egypt, and Eastern Europe, presumably on work related to the Mildmay Mission to the Jews, with which he was associated.<sup>32</sup> We may also wonder whether the issue of priorities played a role: in spite of some published statements to the contrary, the Old Testament in Yiddish, while undoubtedly important, was not deemed the highest priority in competition with more pressing needs.

Two other notices from this period attract our attention. One is about a Rabbi Weiss, Jewish convert being prepared for baptism. Although his offers to translate the Old Testament are not acted upon favorably (he "is still too much under the influence of Jewish expositors"), the baptism of Rabbi Weiss (for so he is still identified) is a significant enough event to be noted in the generally laconic BFBS minutes.<sup>33</sup> There is also a report that the ABS is planning a "Conference on a revision of Yiddish Scriptures." The Advisory Committee includes, among others, the Revs. Resnick,

Levy, Einspouch, and Greenbaum, who are also revisers.<sup>34</sup> A private communication some four years later (1925) from the ABS assures their BFBS counterparts that "it is not the desire of the A.B.S. to bring out a Yiddish translation to take the place of any versions existing at present, but to see if there is an American Yiddish which needs to be considered in what may become the standard Yiddish N.T. later on."<sup>35</sup>

This reference to "standard Yiddish" serves as a prelude to the following remarks from 1933 by a member of the International Missionary Council:

During his travels in Europe and America he has received many complaints about the Yiddish Bible. Says that there is a classic Yiddish. The League of Nations publishes pamphlets in it, and he asks whether it is not possible to provide a good translation of the Bible for the 8,000,000 Jews who use Yiddish as their language. Points out that a new interest among Jews in our Lord makes it the more desirable that the Scriptures should be acceptable to them as regards literary form.<sup>36</sup>

In a memo the Editorial Superintendent responded: "Great difficulty has always been caused by the fluctuating character of Yiddish. None of the versions in which the Bible Society has been concerned for the last thirty years seems to have given complete satisfaction."<sup>37</sup> I sense that this level of dissatisfaction, although not unknown with other versions, is particularly characteristic of the BFBS's experience with the Yiddish language.

Was the BFBS at all familiar with "indigenous" Jewish versions of the Old Testament in Yiddish? Yes it was, as is evident from these references to the work of Yehoash:

Yehoash's version . . . is the best O.T. translation in Yiddish (the work was completed before the poet's death, and will be published). Of course, this is the work of one man, and reflects rather strongly the Messianic interpretations of Yehoash, which limit its use for Christian Jews.<sup>38</sup>

Elsewhere, there appears an "extract" of an extended laudable report, dated April 30, 1935, from "The Sentinel, Chicago Jewish Weekly":

New York Jewry held recently a celebration in honour of the issuance from the press of the concluding volumes of the late Solomon Bloomgarden's [Yehoash] translation of the Bible in Yiddish . . . [With reference to the philanthropists who make this publication possible, it continues]. We Jews undoubtedly have materialists in our midst, but be it said to our everlasting credit that there is still not dearth of genuine idealists among us.<sup>39</sup>

Later comments by the Bible societies themselves extol this work even further. However, no matter how laudatory Jehoash's efforts may have been, they did not deter at least one other converted Jew, a Dr. D. Mowshowitch, from commencing a new draft of a Yiddish version of the Old Testament. On the basis of his Isaiah, he "thinks he has improved on Jehoash." And so it goes . . . or at least, so it went until the mid-forties.<sup>40</sup>

My remarks could quite naturally be expanded in several directions: (1) A far more extensive comparison of BFBS-Jewish activities with similar efforts by the ABS; (2) a more extended comparison of BFBS efforts to prepare Yiddish translations with their efforts in other languages; and, most especially, (3) a detailed comparison of BFBS efforts with similar intra-Jewish publications. Viewed in this light, that is in terms of providing comparative data, my work has — I hope — some value.

But this paper should also be viewed on its own terms: "Bringing Home the Gospel" was no simple task. As Bible Society personnel learned (or perhaps failed to learn fully) preparing Scriptures for the Jewish community involved the recognition that there were many communities, linguistically, culturally, religiously. And preparing Scriptures for the Jewish community required that Christians — whether born in or converted to Christianity — come to grips with their own relationship to still-practicing Jews. And, for the BFBS and other Bible societies, it additionally necessitated balancing the several goals they wished to achieve. In the end, it is hard to know how many Jews were actually converted to Christianity on the basis of reading or hearing the Old or New Testament in Yiddish. But we can be sure that the Bible Society never wavered in its belief that "the truth of the Gospel" must be "brought home" to Jews in forms "they can appreciate and understand."

## Notes

1 For a fine overview of the material contained in this paragraph, see Laton E. Holmgren, "Bible Societies," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 80-82. For a detailed study of the BFBS from its founding through the 1860s, see Leslie Howsam, *Cheap Bibles: Nineteenth-Century Publishing and the British and Foreign Bible Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). For an equally fascinating account of the ABS, see Peter J. Wosh, *Spreading the Word: The Bible Business in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). These monographs are essential for constructing a proper context in which to understand and appreciate the particular activities we recount below.

2 See, for example, the following remarks by Howsam, "Cheap Bibles," 6:

The "fundamental principle" of the new Society [i.e., the BFBS] was the distribution of the scriptures, *without note or comment*, a rule which the founders hoped would avoid doctrinal disputes by organizing Christians around their common acceptance of the canonical books of the Bible. Prefaces and explanatory notes, interpreting the text according to the doctrines of particular creeds or of individual theologians, were explicitly forbidden.

3 As Howsam correctly points out, the BFBS per se was not a missionary organization. Its primary business was publishing Bibles; in the process it revolutionized the printing industry in Great Britain and indeed throughout the world. However, it is clear that most of the organizations for which and with which the BFBS published Bibles were in fact in the business of proselytizing. For a considerable number of such groups, converting Jews was the or at least a main goal. Many of the major contributors to the BFBS and a number of its leaders were likewise motivated by missionary zeal. Howsam can then speak of "the tension between these two aspects" (Howsam, "Cheap Bibles," 203), a tension that she illuminates with erudition and insight.

My remarks, as should become immediately clear, speak to a different sort of tension that can be detected in the activities of the BFBS. It is also the case that I deal with a period later than the initial decades of the BFBS that Howsam so effectively explores.

4 Those interested in learning more about such projects can with confidence consult the following two works, which are quite accessible to the general reader: Jan de Waard and Eugene A. Nida, *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986); Harry M. Orlinsky and Robert G. Bratcher, *A History of Bible Translation and the North American Contribution* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991).



5 As published in *Monthly Extracts from the Correspondence of the BFBS* of that date, pp. 29-30.

6 "The Bible for the Jews," *The Monthly Reporter of the British and Foreign Bible Society* (May, 1882): 76.

7 Ibid., 77.

8 A.S. Geden, "The Yiddish Version of the New Testament," *The Bible in the World* 9 (1913): 143.

9 Ibid., 143-144.

10 Ibid., 144.

11 Ibid., 144-145.

12 Ibid., 145. For a fascinating account of how Christian proselytizing looked from the point of view of at least some of these Jewish East Enders, see W. J. Fishman, *East End 1888: A Year in a London borough among the labouring poor* (London: Duckworth, 1988). So, for example, Fishman writes of the newcomer who was:

the focus of attention by Christian missionaries embarked on an evangelical crusade among the Chosen People. What a prize they held out for the true believer! A few had previously succumbed and were employed to carry on the good work among their fellow Yiddish speakers, for they preached in the vernacular. . . . The community fought back. . . . Charles Booth, in his contemporary survey, joined in the chorus of disapproval in the strongest terms. . . . (Fishman, "East End," 170, 172).

I thank Edna Nahshon for calling my attention to Fishman's work.

13 "Editorial Echoes: Yiddish," *The Bible in the World* 10 (1914): 115.

14 "Jewish Emigrants," *The Monthly Reporter of the BFBS* (February, 1903): 35.

15 British and Foreign Bible Society, Editorial Subcommittee Minute Cards, vol. 8: Yiddish (including Judaeo-German).

16 This information on the Yiddish New Testament comes from "Note on earlier versions for the Jews," *The Bible in the World* 9 (1913): 146.

17 Committee minutes serve to provide details of the care lavished on this Yiddish version, which nonetheless still ranked a notch below the Hebrew New Testament; see, for example, the following article primarily on Delitzsch, which notes, among other points: "No version published by this Society has been the subject of so much labour as [the] Hebrew New Testament" (W. Wright, "Versions on the Anvil. — III," *The Monthly Reporter of the BFBS* [1892]: 43).

18 "The Old Testament in Yiddish," *The Bible in the World* 24 (1920): 121.

19 "Jews and the Bible Society," *The Bible in the World* 13 (1917): 43.

20 "Earlier versions for the Jews," 146.

21 "Earlier versions for the Jews," 146.

22 "Old Testament in Yiddish," 121.

23 "The Religious Awakening Among the Jews," *The Monthly Reporter of the BFBS* 14, no. 3 (March, 1885): 33-34.

24 All of these accounts are found in "The Power of the New Testament Amongst the Jews," *The Monthly Reporter of the BFBS* (December, 1886): 207-209.

25 "Heinrich Heine and the Bible," *The Monthly Reporter of the BFBS* (1895): 216.

26 "How a Polish Jew was led to Christ," *The Bible in the World* 19 (1923) 73-74.

27 Minutes of the British and Foreign Bible Society Editorial/Translation Department, vol. V, part 5: Yiddish, as reported in early 1901.

28 BFBS Minutes, Yiddish, as reported in mid-1907.

29 These matters are discussed sporadically in BFBS Minutes, Yiddish, from 1909 to 1912.

30 BFBS Minutes, Yiddish, fall 1928.

31 BFBS Minutes, Yiddish, spring 1920.

32 As reported in BFBS Minutes, Yiddish, from 1915 on.

33 As reported in BFBS Minutes, Yiddish, for 1921.

34 BFBS Minutes, Yiddish, late fall 1921.

35 As quoted in BFBS Minutes, Yiddish, for September, 1925.

36 As quoted in BFBS Minutes, Yiddish, for May, 1933.

37 This memo by the Editorial Superintendent is dated April 25, 1933, and quoted in BFBS Minutes, Yiddish, for May of that year.

38 BFBS Minutes, Yiddish, late 1934.

39 Quoted in BFBS Minutes, Yiddish, fall 1935. Harry M. Orlinsky provided a characteristically lively account of Yehoash in his "Yehoash's Yiddish Translation of the Bible," in *Essays in Biblical Culture and Bible Translation* (New York: KTAV, 1974), 418-422.

40 BFBS Minutes, Yiddish, from the same period as the material quoted just above.

## Food in Yiddish and Slavic Folk Culture: A Comparative/Contrastive View

Halina Rothstein and Robert A. Rothstein

East European Jews and their Slavic neighbors shared the same territory and had many aspects of material and non-material culture in common. Various elements of this "cultural condominium" (the term belongs to the Polish sociologist Joseph Obrebski) are reflected in Yiddish and Slavic proverbs.<sup>1</sup> In the present paper we examine the reflection of food lore and food habits in Yiddish proverbs, noting particularly the symbolic values manifested by specific foods and dishes (as geographical and socioeconomic markers and as sexual metaphor). Comparison with Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian proverb material reveals both areas of convergence and areas of marked difference between Jewish and Slavic culture. Other genres of folk and popular culture provide additional evidence.

It is important to note that for the sake of simplicity we refer to Jews and Slavs as if these were monolithic, perfectly homogeneous groups, and set aside the significant differences that exist among Jews from various regions, and even more so among their Slavic neighbors: Poles, Ukrainians, Belorussians, Russians. We also ignore possible chronological differences, since our sources rarely if ever indicate when a proverb arose or was current.

Generally speaking, there are two areas where Jewish and Slavic proverbs reflect significantly different food habits and values. One results from the Jewish laws of ritual purity (*kashruth*), which prohibit the use of pork (and of other ritually unclean animals: squirrels, hares, etc.) — this

in a geographical area where pork was much favored. The second comes from the fact that the values represented in Jewish society are non-agricultural, mercantile ones, while the values of Slavic society are derived from peasant culture, which is closely connected to working the land.

We will return to these areas later in the paper, but first let us examine areas of overlapping and shared values. There is little evidence that Jews used foods and spices that were markedly different from native, traditional staples. To be sure we do find in festive East European Jewish cuisine some echos of mediterranean tastes: cinnamon, raisins, almonds; dishes that combine fresh or dried fruit and meats. There are also dishes specifically associated with Jews such as *tsholnt*, *tsimes*, or *karp po zydowsku* (*carp à la juive*), in addition to ritual foods and foods associated with specific Jewish holidays, e.g., matzo or hamantashen. By and large, however, everyday Jewish cuisine shows that the Jews settled on Slavic lands adapted to local conditions and used the same staples as their neighbors: potatoes, grains, especially buckwheat, radishes, etc. They also prepared similar dishes: borscht, kasha, blintzes, etc. References to these common staples and dishes permeate both Yiddish and Slavic proverbs.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps even more telling, among Slavic proverbs characterizing Jews there is hardly any mention of specifically Jewish staples, except for the obvious references to pork and foods associated with Jewish ritual. The Polish proverb that mentions kugel (potato or noodle pudding) as a dish favored by Jews is a rarity:

1) *Wtedy Zydek wyskakuje, kiedy kugel w piecu czuje.*<sup>3</sup> The Jew jumps up when he smells the kugel in the oven.

More common are proverbial references that associate Jews with excessive use of onion and garlic:

2) *Smierdzieć, jak żyd czosnkiem.*<sup>4</sup> To stink like a Jew of garlic.

3) *Smaruj Żyda fiołkami, a jego i tak czuć będzie cebul.*<sup>5</sup> You can smear a Jew with violets and he'll still smell of onions.

The Jewish prohibition against pork is used to taunt or deride Jews:

4) *Zydzie, swinia za toba idzie!*<sup>6</sup> Jew, there's a pig following you!<sup>7</sup>

Just as the Slavic proverbs do not generally associate particular foods with Jews, so too if we examine Yiddish proverbs (other than those referring to religious ritual), we find few references to staples, dishes, or practices that were peculiarly Jewish and uncommon among Slavic neighbors. The common foods and staples are judged according to a similar scale of desirability. For both Slavs and Jews meat was preferable to fish or non-meat in general, meat-eating days to Lent or fast, thick soups to thin gruel. Fat and salt were especially prized:

5) *S'iz on shmalts, on zalts.*<sup>8</sup> It's without fat, without salt [i.e., tasteless].

6) *Iak by ia buv tsarem, to salo b iv, salo piv.*<sup>9</sup> If I were tsar, I would eat fat and drink fat.

7) *Kashu maslom ne isportish'.*<sup>10</sup> You can't spoil cereal with butter.

At the less desirable end of the scale we find the same foods associated with poverty in the Slavic and Yiddish material, e.g., herring or borsht. Compare:

8) *I na sledzia mu nie staje.*<sup>11</sup> He cannot even afford a herring [i.e., he is very poor].

9) *Bilik vi borsht.*<sup>12</sup> *Tanio jak barszcz.*<sup>13</sup> As cheap as borsht.<sup>14</sup>

This brings us to the metonymic use of food terms to signal economic status, either by reference to particular items connected with abundance or poverty or by explicit contrast. The latter is illustrated in the folk song "Lomir ale zingen" ("Let's All Sing"), in which a father answers his child's questions about the meanings of the Hebrew words for bread, meat, fish, and dessert. The third stanza, for example, reads:

10) — *Zog zhe mir, tatenyu, vos iz dogim?*  
— *Bay di groyse negidim iz dogim a hekhtele,*  
*ober bay undz, kabtsanim, oy dalfonim,*  
*iz dogim an oysgeveykter hering, nebekh.*<sup>15</sup>

"Tell me, father, what is fish?"  
"For the rich, fish is trout,

But for us paupers,  
It is a watery herring."

We could expand the list of contrasts to include soups. Traditionally the rich eat chicken soup (consommé — *yoykh*) while the poor eat gruel (*kulish* or *krupnik*) or vegetable soup (*borsht*). Here we must explain that the clear beet soup that is denoted by the English term "borscht" is only one variety of what Yiddish calls *borsht* (or, for that matter, what Russian and Ukrainian call *borshch* or Polish, *barszcz*). The Yiddish culinary lexicon includes *kroyt-borsht* (made from cabbage), *shchav-borsht* (from sorrel), *knobl-borsht* (from garlic), and even *klayen-borsht* (with bran used as a thickening agent). It has been suggested that the last kind lies behind the proverbial comparison *bilik vi borsht* "as cheap as borscht."<sup>16</sup> What we have translated as "gruel" (*kulish/krupnik*) is a watery soup containing barley or other grains. The explicit contrast of consommé and other soups is present in proverbs like the following:

11) *Dem oreman kost zayn kulish tayerer, vi dem noged zayn yoykh.*<sup>17</sup> The poor man's gruel costs him more than the rich man's chicken soup.

12) *Esn hineryoykh mit hiltserne lefl iz nit aztsu shver vi krupnik mit zilberne lefl.*<sup>18</sup> It's not as hard to eat chicken soup with wooden spoons as [it is to eat] gruel with silver spoons.

Note also the play on two meanings of the word *perl*: "pearl" (as a gem) and "pearl barley":

13) *Di gantse velt zorget: di zorget, vos di perl zenen ir tsu shiter, un di andere zorget, vos di perl-grits iz ir tsu shiter.*<sup>19</sup> The whole world worries: one woman worries that she has too few pearls, and the other worries that she has too little barley in her soup.

The adjective *shiter*, applied here both to pearls and pearl barley, means "thin, sparse" and is often associated with a poor family's food. Thus something very much diluted is *shiter vi dem oreman's yoykh* "as thin as a poor man's chicken soup." Normally the poor family cannot afford the chicken to make soup:

14) *Az an oreman est a hun, iz oder er iz krank, oder di hun.*<sup>20</sup> When a poor man eats a chicken, either he is sick or the chicken is.

For the rich household, on the other hand, chicken soup, indeed fat chicken soup (with globules of fat floating on the surface), symbolizes the good life. Fat foods were generally viewed positively. A noodle or potato pudding dripping with fat is a source of pleasure:

15) *Der kugl veynt — un mir kveln.*<sup>21</sup> The pudding is crying [tears of fat] and we beam.

Poor Jews, of course, could not often afford to buy meat, so there is an association between poverty and dairy dishes:

16) *Der milkhiker tepl baym oreman vert keyn mol nit fleyshik.*<sup>22</sup> The poor man's dairy pot never becomes [contaminated with meat] [i.e., he has no problems observing the Jewish dietary laws about not mixing milk and meat].

Note the sardonic reference to eating things other than meat:

17) *Az me est kartofl, vert men klug (un men farshteyt az fleysh iz beser).*<sup>23</sup> When you eat potatoes, you get smart (and you understand that meat is better).

A Polish proverb recorded as early as 1675 makes a similar point:

18) *Kaszka fraszka, jarzyna perzyna, chleb trawa, mieso potrawa.*<sup>24</sup> Cereal is not worth talking about; vegetables are [like] ashes; bread is [like] grass; meat is food.

In Yiddish culture, as in others, food and eating also have sexual connotations. Thus a womanizer can be called a *hinerfreser*, literally "a chicken-eater."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, a "semi-retired" promiscuous woman is described in a proverb as follows:

19) *In der yugnt a freserin, oyf der elter a nasherin.*<sup>26</sup> In her youth an eater, in her old age a nosher.

For the Yiddish speaker the sexual symbolism of food is connected in particular with the oppositions meat vs. dairy and kosher vs. non-kosher (*treyf*). While meat, as we have seen, has positive associations with abundance and affluence, it also has connotations of impurity since its kosher status is more often at issue. If someone gets into some dirty business and cannot get out of it, one says of him that

20) *Er hot zikh shoyrn fleyshik gemakht.*<sup>27</sup> He's already made himself *fleyshik*.

That is, he's put himself in the meat category or "contaminated" himself with meat. (According to Jewish dietary law, after eating meat one cannot eat any milk products for several hours.) Compare the Polish idiom *rzucac miesem* "to use vulgar language" (lit. "to throw meat").

Note also the slightly cynical proverb that suggests the sensual character of eating forbidden (and fat or greasy) food:

21) *Az men est khazer, zol es shoyrn rinen ibern moyl.*<sup>28</sup> If you eat pork, your mouth should run over.<sup>29</sup>

Dairy foods, on the other hand, are associated with purity. In a popular song by Adolf King, "Oy, iz dos a rebetsn" ("Oy, Is That a Rabbi's Wife!"), for example, the rabbi's wife is compared to such non-meat dishes as a Purim cake, a noodle pudding, and a dairy blintze (*a milkhedike blintsele*).<sup>30</sup> But in a proverb included in Ignaz Bernstein's 1908 collection of "licentious and coarse (*oysgelasene un grobe*) proverbs," we are told that "a meat pie is better than a dairy dumpling":

22) *Beser a fleyshiker pireg eyder a milkhediker varenik.*<sup>31</sup>

The explanation is that *pireg*, like its Russian and Polish cognates *pirog/pieróg* (or *pirozhok/pierozek*), is a slang term for the female genitalia.<sup>32</sup> Thus also:

23) *A pireg iz nit keyn krepl — er vert keyn mol nit farmiest.*<sup>33</sup> A [meat] pie is no dumpling; it never loses its appeal.

So sex is even better than that favorite Jewish food, *kreplekh* "dumplings," since:



24) *Kreplekh esn zikh oykh tsu.*<sup>34</sup> One can even get tired of *kreplekh*.<sup>35</sup>

The sexual associations of the pair meat/dairy provide the answer to the modern Jewish joke that asks why a woman's two-piece bathing suit is kosher, whereas a one-piece suit is not: the former (but not the latter) separates the *milkhiks* "dairy food" from the *fleyshiks* "meat food."<sup>36</sup> The same associations lie at the base of the older proverb:

25) *Di beste fleyshiks fun ale milkhiks iz di goye vos melkt di beheyme.*<sup>37</sup> The best meat dish of all dairy dishes is the peasant girl who milks the cow.

Note also the Old Polish euphemism for having sex: *zapuscic kota do miesa* (lit. "letting the cat get at the meat.")<sup>38</sup>

Both Russian and Polish use food metaphors for male genitalia: *kusok miasa* "piece of meat," *seledochka* "herring," *morkovka/marchewka* "carrot," *kolbasa/kielbasa* "sausage," etc.<sup>39</sup> We have, however, found almost no such metaphors in the Yiddish material, if we leave aside the use of the term *eyer* "eggs" for testicles, a usage that is common in other European languages. The only other example is a variant of the bathing suit joke cited above, in which the *gartl*, the belt worn by orthodox Jews during prayer, is explained as "the strap they wore around the waist to separate the *milkhiks* from the *fleyshiks*."<sup>40</sup> The sexual double standard is also seen in a proverb like:

26) *A manspershoyn iz vi a gloz, a nekeyve vi a top.*<sup>41</sup> A man is like a glass, a woman like a clay pot.

Bernstein's explanation is that a man who has committed adultery is like a glass that can be washed clean, while a adulteress is like a pot that has become *treyf* and cannot be made kosher again. A similar view of female virginity is expressed in the proverb:

27) *Iber an ongehoynener khale iz nit gut keyn hamoytsi tsu makhn.*<sup>42</sup> It's not good to make the blessing over a challah that has been started.<sup>43</sup>

Let us turn now to the differences reflected in Yiddish and Slavic

proverbs dealing with food. The Slavic material reveals an important characteristic of Slavic peasant culture: in that culture food, in particular bread, has a moral value. Bread is an important link in a closed circle: God's will, land, work, bread, the individual, and the community. God provides man with the means to sustain himself by giving him the land. Man has to work the land to receive bread, the fruit of his labor. To till the land is to do God's will. Man has an obligation to share bread with others:

28) *Kto na chleb pracuje, ten Bogu chwali.*<sup>44</sup> He who works for his bread praises God.

29) *Bog bez pracy nic nie daje.*<sup>45</sup> God gives nothing without labor.

30) *Na vsiakuiu dushu Bog zarozhdaet.*<sup>46</sup> God gives a harvest for every soul.

31) *Rodis' chelovek i kraiushka khleba gotova.*<sup>47</sup> All a person has to do is to be born and a piece of bread is ready. —

32) *Na rabochego delo naidetsia, na golodnogo kus syshchetsia.*<sup>48</sup> Work can be found for every worker and a bite for every hungry person.

In peasant society the well-being of the community and of the individual is secured not through the accumulation of money, but through the availability of land. Payment for work is often in kind. In this community there is a direct link between physical labor in the fields and food on the table, between eating and work. Bread is not manna from heaven; it has to be earned. It is God's will that man survive through his labor, and this labor in turn endows man with the moral right to claim food. This is enshrined in the famous proverb:

33) *Kto ne rabotaet, tot ne est.*<sup>49</sup> He who does not work does not eat.

— which became a rousing slogan during the October Revolution.<sup>50</sup> The proverb means not only that one cannot eat, but that one may not eat, is not entitled to food, unless one works. The reverse:

34) *Khto ne ests', toi i ne robits'.*<sup>51</sup> He who does not eat does not work.

— was no less important:

35) *Piznaty robotnyka po idy*.<sup>52</sup> You can recognize a worker by his food.

36) *Chto ukusish', to i potianiesh'*.<sup>53</sup> Whatever you eat, that's what you can do.

37) *Legko poel, legko i sdelal*.<sup>54</sup> He ate lightly and worked lightly.

38) *Khto mala ests', toi i kepska robots'*.<sup>55</sup> He who eats little works poorly.

39) *Jaki do roboty, taki do miski*.<sup>56</sup> As one works, so does one eat.

In an economy in which food is used to pay for labor, it is not surprising to find that food, not money, serves as the incentive for better performance:

40) *Kali na stale hus' i parasia — vot rabota kharasha*.<sup>57</sup> When there's a goose and a pig on the table, then the work is also good.

Food and prosperity obtained literally by the sweat of one's brow taste especially sweet and noble:

41) *Po gotovoi rabote vkusen obed*.<sup>58</sup> After work is finished dinner is tasty.

42) *Rabota luchshyi privarok*.<sup>59</sup> Work is the best appetizer.

43) *Najlepiej smakuje, co sie zapracuje*.<sup>60</sup> What is earned tastes best.

In contrast Yiddish proverbs show a weak link between food and work and land. There are, to be sure, biblical references connecting work in the fields with food:

44) *Oveyd admoso yisba-lokhem* (Proverbs 12, 11). He that tills his land shall have his fill of bread.

There are also Yiddish proverbs calqued or modelled after Slavic ones:

45) *Az du vest nit horeven vestu nit esn.*<sup>61</sup> If you do not work, you will not eat.

46) *A balmelokhe arbet farn esn, un est farn arbet.*<sup>62</sup> A craftsman works to eat and eats before he works.

47) *Der shuster baym kapul, un der top iz ful.*<sup>63</sup> The shoemaker is at his last and the pot is full.

Yiddish proverbs, however, normally praise the work of the skilled laborer, not the land-tiller, and establish a link between work and money:

48) *Vi di arbet azoy di loyn.*<sup>64</sup> As the work, so the pay.

49) *Gebentsht iz der groshn vos er iz mit shveys bagosn.*<sup>65</sup> Blessed is the *groshen* that is drenched with sweat.

The last example is particularly telling, for in the Slavic context it would be unthinkable to refer to money as "blessed." This is reserved for bread, which has a singular importance in Slavic culture. Bread in Slavic proverbs is an object of reverence. Bread by itself occupies a unique position as food sanctified by God, hence references to *swiety chleb* "holy bread" or

50) *Khleb dar bozhyi, otets, kormilets.*<sup>66</sup> Bread is God's gift, a father, a nourisher.

51) *Khleb vsemu golova.*<sup>67</sup> Bread is the head of everything.

In combination with salt it is God-given food, the symbol of hospitality and prosperity. When water is added to this combination, the result can be different. While bread, salt, and water can signify the minimum necessity or prosperity, bread and water frequently stand for want, for a near-starvation diet.

Another difference in the Yiddish and Slavic approach to food is the way in which food serves as a boundary marker to distinguish groups. Jewish foods are central to Jewish self-identification, whether religious or other. This is clear, e.g., from the following proverb, which suggests that the only essential function of a rabbi is to answer questions regarding dietary laws — whether a certain food or utensil is kosher:

52) *Az men hot a hunt un a teper in shtot, darf men keyn rov nit hobn.*<sup>68</sup> If the town has a dog and a potter, there's no need for a

rabbi.

The dog will eat any food that may have become *treyf* and the potter will replace a *treyf* pot, so there is no need for a rabbi to answer questions. Another proverbial expression uses a favorite Jewish dish to describe someone who looks Jewish:

53) *Der kugl ligt im oyfn ponim.*<sup>69</sup> [Noodle/Potato] pudding is in his face.

(Compare with the English expression "The map of Ireland is in his/her face.") Kugel is also associated with the central element of the Jewish religious calendar, the sabbath:

54) *A shabes on kugl iz vi a foygl on fligl.*<sup>70</sup> A sabbath without kugel is like a bird without wings.<sup>71</sup>

Jews lived across a wide territory in Eastern Europe, and while some Jewish foods (like kugel) were more or less universal, others were more localized and could therefore serve as markers of local identification. Aaron Lebedeff, one of the greatest stars of the Yiddish theater in America, used this device in his parody of a folk song about a cantor coming to lead sabbath services in a small town ("A khazn oyf shabes"). In the original version three local citizens (a tailor, a blacksmith, and a coachman) comment on his singing; each uses images from his own profession. In Lebedeff's parody ("A khazndl in Amerike") the commentators are three restaurateurs: a *litvak* (a Jew from Lithuania/Belorussia), a *galitsianer* (one from Austro-Hungarian Galicia, i.e., southeastern Poland or southwestern Ukraine), and an *amerikanerl* (i.e., an American-born Jew). In addition to the linguistic differences (e.g., *oy vey* for the Litvak vs. *ay vay* for the Galitsianer and "my God, gee whiz, holy Moses" for the American), Lebedeff makes use of food preferences, e.g., black bread with radishes and herring with potatoes for the Litvak, barley soup with a marrow bone for the Galitsianer, and for the American — ham and eggs and chop suey with chow mein.<sup>72</sup>

In what is perhaps the most famous of Lebedeff's songs — one that is part and parcel of today's "klezmer revival" — reminiscences of Romania are presented almost exclusively in terms of food (and wine): *a mameligele* (from Romanian *mamaliga* "commeal mush"), *a pastramele* (from *pastrama* "salted and smoked meat"), *a karnatsele* (from *cîrnat*

"sausage"), *kashtaval* (from *cascaval* "pressed sheep cheese"), *brinze* (from *brinza* "cheese"), etc. <sup>73</sup>

Among Slavs, on the other hand, bread, salt, and water in combination with a few other staples (kasha, cabbage, sometimes potatoes) are used as markers defining what is part of peasant local culture (*nash*) and non-peasant (*ne nash*), what is appropriate for peasant consumption and what is only for "them":

55) *Khleb da voda — krest'ianskaia eda*.<sup>74</sup> Bread and water is peasant food.

56) *Shchi da kasha pishcha nasha*.<sup>75</sup> Cabbage soup and cereal is our food.

57) *Grechnevaia kasha — matushka nasha, a khlebets rzhanoi — otets rodnoi*.<sup>76</sup> Buckwheat groats is our mother, and rye bread is our father.

Peasant food is coarse and plain; refined or exotic food is not for "us":

58) *Ne nasha eda limony, est' ikh inomu*.<sup>77</sup> Lemons are not our food; someone else should eat them.

Coarse bread is associated with strength, a full stomach, a ruddy complexion; white bread with pallor, lack of strength, weak muscles:

59) *S kalacha litso beleet, a s syty krasneet*.<sup>78</sup> From white bread your face turns white, while from dark bread it turns red.

60) *S kalachika lichiko khot' driablo da belo, a so rzhanukhi — slovno dublenoe*.<sup>79</sup> From white bread your face is flabby and white, while from rye bread it is as if weatherbeaten.

In general foods lacking nutrients and low in calories are seen as appropriate only for non-peasants and are viewed with some contempt:

61) *Sladko vishen'e, da barsko kushan'e*.<sup>80</sup> Cherries are sweet, but are aristocratic food.

62) *Iagodu ne vidal sorok dva goda, a khot' by i vek, tak nuzhdy net*.<sup>81</sup> I haven't seen berries in forty-two years, but even if [I lived] a century, I wouldn't need them.

63) *Dvorianskoe kushani'e — dva gribka na tarelochke.*<sup>82</sup> Aristocratic food — two mushrooms on a plate.

As long as there was bread and cabbage or kasha one could not complain of hunger:

64) *Khlib bat'ko, voda (kasha) maty ne dadut' zahybaty.*<sup>83</sup> Our father, bread, and our mother, water (kasha), won't let us perish.

This was the minimum that often was also the maximum:

65) *Koly khlib na stoli, to stil — prestil, a koly khliba ni kusochka, tody stil lish hola doshka.*<sup>84</sup> When there's bread on the table, then the table is a throne, but when there's not a piece of bread, the table is only a bare board.

66) *De khlib i voda, tam nema holoda.*<sup>85</sup> Where there is bread and water there is no hunger.

67) *Kwasny barszcz i swieta ziemia czlowieka utrzyma.*<sup>86</sup> Sour borsht [cabbage] and holy earth support a man.

But the threat of hunger and starvation was ever present, and this condition is poignantly reflected in Slavic proverbs, where this subject occupies a prominent place. Hunger, an empty stomach, is a cruel master that turns men from good and pushes them onto the path of evil:

68) *Jak to glodny, to i ojca ugryzie.*<sup>87</sup> A hungry man will even bite his own father.

The subject of hunger is less prominent in Yiddish proverbs, which have more to do with poverty or insufficiency than with outright starvation. Even so, both Jews and Slavs knew hunger and speak of it in strikingly similar terms:

69) *Az men darf broyt, farzetst men di slikhe.*<sup>88</sup> When you need bread, you pawn the prayer book.

70) *lak ne pid'esy, to i sviatykh prodasy.*<sup>89</sup> If you can't eat, then you even sell the icons.

God's grace and the moral force of food are revealed in food-sharing:

helping the needy, the beggar, the orphan, the elderly, and in sharing food with a friend. Slavic hospitality is well-known and is reflected in many sayings, positive and negative:

71) *Gosc w dom, Bóg w dom.*<sup>90</sup> [To let] a guest into your house is [to let] God into your house.

But:

72) *Gosc i ryba trzeciego dnia cuchna.*<sup>91</sup> A guest and a fish stink on the third day.

Yiddish proverbs also express both positive and negative sentiments about guests. See, for example:

73) *Vu tsvey esn fun eyn shisl ken zikh der driter onesn a bisl.*<sup>92</sup> Where two people are eating from one plate a third person can also have a bite.

74) *Az men freyt zikh mit a guter vetshere trogt der tayvl on a gast.*<sup>93</sup> When one is enjoying a good supper the devil brings a guest.

Note also the ironic comment about a Jewish housewife's hospitality in the proverb:

75) *Zi vil mekayem zayn far eyn mol ale dray mitsves: hakhnoses orkhim, bikur kholim un halvoyes hameys.*<sup>94</sup> She wants to satisfy all three commandments at the same time [by serving spoiled food]: hospitality to guests, visiting the sick, and giving the dead a funeral.

There is a similar ambivalence with respect to the needy. On the one hand we find positive attitudes reflected in proverbs like:

76) *Co zjem to wiem, a co ubogiemu dam, to przed Bogiem mam.*<sup>95</sup> What I eat, I know, and what I give to a poor person, I have before God.

77) *Kto ubogim daje, to Bogu pozycza.*<sup>96</sup> He who gives to poor people makes a loan to God.



78) *Gdzie jest sierota, tam chleba nie zabraknie.*<sup>97</sup> Where there is an orphan, bread will not be lacking.

79) *Ubogiemu kawał chleba, to most do nieba.*<sup>98</sup> A piece of bread to a poor person is a bridge to heaven.

80) *Za gołodnogo Bog zaplati.*<sup>99</sup> God pays for the hungry person.

Alongside of such sentiments of hospitality and charity, on the other hand, there are numerous examples of resentment and outright hostility towards the needy:

81) *W drodze nie można jeść za dziadami, w domu za dziećmi.*<sup>100</sup> On the road you can't eat because of the beggars, and at home because of the children.

82) *Sierota — uwiązać ją u płota, a bić jak kota.*<sup>101</sup> An orphan should be tied to the fence and beaten like a cat.

83) *Ubohaha (startsja) kii kormits'.*<sup>102</sup> A stick can feed a poor person (an old man).

The fear of hunger and the fear of being resented are reflected in such proverbs as:

84) *Hirkyi chuzhyi khlib.*<sup>103</sup> Other people's bread is bitter.

85) *Chuzhoi khleb rot deret.*<sup>104</sup> Other people's bread tears your mouth.

Compare the Yiddish:

86) *Fremds ligt shver in mogn.*<sup>105</sup> Other people's [food] lies heavy in the stomach.

Proverbs dealing with food are revealing not only of attitudes toward food. Let us consider just one such area, but one that again shows a difference between Slavic and Jewish cultures. The proverb material confirms what we know from other sources; namely, that among peasants, wife-beating was an accepted practice:

87) *Bei zheni bol'nei, budut shchi vkusnei.*<sup>106</sup> If you beat your wife harder, the cabbage soup will be tastier.

88) *Bei zheni k obedu, a k uzhinu opiat', chtob shchi byli goriachie, kasha maslianaia, samazh laskovaia.*<sup>107</sup> Beat your wife before dinner and again before supper so that the cabbage soup will be hot, the kasha with butter and so that she will be affectionate.

By contrast there was a widespread feeling that Jewish women fared better than their peasant counterparts. Jewish tradition does not condone physical abuse — when it happens it is a hidden evil, a cause of shame: to beat one's wife, to drink away one's last penny was viewed as non-Jewish, as being like "them." This feeling was shared by peasants, who viewed wife beating as a feature of peasant life and one that distinguished "us" from "them":

89) *Liakh spivaie, iak isty khoche, a muzhyk zhinku b'ie, a zhyd borukhy vidmovliaie.*<sup>108</sup> A Pole sings when he wants to eat, a [Ukrainian] peasant beats his wife, and a Jew says blessings.

90) *Gdy Polak glodny, swiszczce, a Rusin zone bije.*<sup>109</sup> When a Pole is hungry, he whistles, while a Ukrainian beats his wife.

In Yiddish proverbs, to be sure, irony and biting humor can express hostility toward women, as in

91) *Ale vayber hobn yerushe fun zeyer muter Khave.*<sup>110</sup> All wives have an inheritance from their mother Eve [i.e., all women are curious].

92) *Der ruekh nemt ales tsu, nor a shlekht vayb nemt er nit.*<sup>111</sup> The devil takes everything except a bad wife.

References to wife-beating, however, are almost non-existent; we have found only two proverbs on the subject, one apparently serious, one seeming less so:

93) *A shemedik vayb iz gut tsu shlogn.*<sup>112</sup> A shy wife is good to beat [since she will not tell anyone].

94) *Ven me shlogt est men kreplekh: az men shlogt kapores, az men shlogt heshaynes un az men shlogt homenen. Un az der man*

*shlogt di vayb, esn zey beyde kreplekh.*<sup>113</sup> When one beats something, one eats *kreplekh*: before Yom Kippur, at Sukkos, and at Purim. [All involve rituals designated by expressions with the verb *shlogn* "beat."] And when a husband beats his wife, then they both eat *kreplekh*.

In Slavic peasant culture proverbs represented, among other things, a kind of moral codex, a body of precepts that defined the moral life. Food imagery played a role, as we have seen, with the major element of that imagery being bread — bread as the fruit of labor, as the antonym of hunger, as something to be shared with those worse off. In East European Jewish culture, which was more urbanized, mercantile, and literate, moral precepts were to be found in the books: the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud, the rabbinic commentaries. Yiddish proverbs also offered moral guidance, but there was no reluctance to parody or play with the traditional sources:

95) *Odem yesoydoy meyofof vesoyfof leyofor — beyne-leveyne iz gut a gebrotn gendzl (a fete aveyre).*<sup>114</sup> Man comes from dust and returns to dust — in the meantime a roast goose (a juicy sin) is not bad.

The mingling of the sacred and the profane that is illustrated in this last proverb is typical of Yiddish verbal genres that play on allusions and direct references to elements of religious practice and to traditional religious texts, whether from the Bible, the Talmud and rabbinical commentaries, religious legends, or the liturgy. For example, one ironic commentary on the Passover seder, at which the story of the exodus from Egypt is recounted, says that

96) *Di beste fun di eser-makes zenen di kneydlekh mit yoykh.*<sup>115</sup> The best of the ten plagues are the matzo balls and chicken soup.

Similarly, one says of someone who always keeps the practical goal in mind that

97) *Men meynt nit di hagode, nor di kneydlekh.*<sup>116</sup> One is thinking of the matzo balls and not the haggadah [the text of the Passover service].

Another proverb, used to characterize someone who is little

concerned about the world to come and more interested in earthly pleasures, mentions the Leviathan, the legendary sea creature whose meat is to be served to the righteous when the Messiah comes:

98) *Vos darfikh dem levyosn? Ikh hob a bonde mit gezaltsenem hering!*<sup>117</sup> What do I need the Leviathan for? I have a barrel of salted herring.

The Leviathan also appears in the expression *hobn a tam vi levyosn mit khreyn*,<sup>118</sup> "to taste like Leviathan with horseradish."<sup>119</sup>

While the reference to the Leviathan may be clear to almost all speakers of Yiddish, the religious text alluded to in a Yiddish proverb may require deeper knowledge of the sources. An example is the Hebrew expression *motso o motse*, which one Yiddish-speaking man can use to ask another whether he is happy with his wife. The word *o* means "or"; the word *motso* alludes to Proverbs 18:22 (*Motso isho motso tov* "He who finds a wife finds a good thing"), while *motse* refers to Ecclesiastes 7:26 (*Motse ani mar mimoves es-hoisho* "I find the woman more bitter than death"). A variant on this proverbial expression meaning "good wife or bad wife" adds a punning third answer:

99) — *Motso o motse?*

— *S'iz gor "matse": oysgedart, shvarts un geshtuplt vi a matse.*<sup>120</sup> "Is she a good wife or a bad wife?" "She's just matzo: thin, dark and speckled like a matzo."

The use of such proverbs puts a twist on one of the general functions of proverbs: to build up the speaker's authority by citing the wisdom of the ages. In the Yiddish case authority comes less from the weight of the canonical text and more from the speaker's ability to draw a connection — often a humorous one — between the canonical text and the situation of the moment.<sup>121</sup>

While humor is an important ingredient in Slavic proverbs, the Yiddish kind of parody of canonical texts does not seem to appear in the Slavic material. Nor do Slavic proverbs pay as much attention to particular foods, and to the pleasures of eating them, as do Yiddish proverbs. Note the many examples cited above or the following one:

100) *Tsores mit yoykh iz gringer tsu fartrogn vi tsores on yoykh.*<sup>122</sup> Troubles are easier to bear with chicken soup than without it.

We thus see that the proverbs of Slavs and of East European Jews, peoples inhabiting the same territories and eating many of the same foods, often reveal quite different attitudes to those foods and to the elements of everyday life that they serve to symbolize.

## Notes

1. Obrebski (as he was known in America; the Polish form of his name is Józef Obrebski) used the term in an unpublished manuscript, "Polesie archaiczne" ("Archaic Polesie"), which is part of the Obrebski collection at the W.E.B. Du Bois Library of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Polesie is a territory that was in eastern Poland before World War II and is now split between Ukraine and Belarus. Obrebski was interested in questions of national identity among its ethnically heterogeneous population.
2. It is the reliance on local staples that differentiates Ashkenazic from Sephardic traditions: in the potato-based East European culture it is rice and legumes that are forbidden for Passover, while they are permissible for Sephardim. Ashkenazic Jews use apples and honey for *khoreses*, the Passover dish that symbolizes the mortar used by the Jewish slaves in Egypt, instead of the earlier dates and wine. Grated potato pancakes are used to celebrate Hanukkah instead of fried dough, etc.
3. Julian Krzyzanowski, ed., *Nowa księga przysłów i wyrażen przysłowiowych polskich* (Warsaw: PIW, 1969-78), 3:986.
4. Krzyzanowski, 3:988.
5. Krzyzanowski, 3:988.
6. Krzyzanowski, 3:990
7. This food-based caricature was less prevalent in Russia, in part because Jews did not begin to live outside of the Pale of Settlement in significant numbers until the early twentieth century. Another reason might have been that prohibition of certain foods and the notion of clean food was not so foreign to the Russian peasant. A very significant segment of the peasant community, known as Old Believers (*raskol'niki*), observed strict rules of purity, as can be observed in the following proverbs: i) *Chto slepym roditsia, to v sned' ne goditsia*. (What is born blind is not fit for food.) ii) *Mandagorovy iabloki greshno est'*. (It is a sin to eat mandagore apples [i.e., potatoes].) Vladimir Ivanovich Dal', *Poslovitsy russkogo naroda* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1984 [1862]), 2:261. iii) *Ne vse v zhivot, chto zhivet..* (Not everything that lives is fit for the stomach.) Dal', 2:260
8. Yehude Elzet, *Yidishe maykholim* (Warsaw, 1920), 100.

9. N. Nomys, *Ukraińs'ki prykazky, prysliv'ia i take inshe* (Kiev: Lybid', 1993 [1864]), 542.
10. Dal', 2:256.
11. Krzyzanowski, 3:430.
12. Nahum Stutchkoff, comp., *Der oytser fun der yidisher shprakh* (New York: YIVO, 1950), 540.
13. Krzyzanowski, 3:502.
14. This last example also illustrates the phenomenon of Yiddish proverbs that are calques of Slavic originals. Slavic indebtedness to Jewish proverb tradition is less direct. The examples are frequently quotations from the Hebrew Bible which came into popular use through Christian sources, e.g. *Rzuc chleb i sól poza siebie, a zawsze przed toba będzie*. (Throw bread and salt beyond you, and there will always be some before you.) This echoes "cast your bread upon the waters..." (Ecclesiastes 11:1). Krzyzanowski, 1:257.
15. Eleanor Gordon Mlotek, *Mir trogn a gezang* (New York: Workmen's Circle Education Department, 1977), 156.
16. Wolf Younin, "Shprakhvinkl," *Forverts* (May 16, 1977): 2-3.
17. Ignaz Bernstein, *Yidishe shprikhverter un rednsartn*, ed. Hans Peter Althaus (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1969 [1908]), 23.
18. Sholem-Zisl Beylin, "Sprichwörter und Redensarten aus Russland," *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für jüdische Volkskunde* 4 (1899): 135.
19. Bernstein, 96.
20. Bernstein, 22.
21. Stutchkoff, 229.
22. Yudel Mark, "Shprikhverter vos es iz keday zey tsu nitsn," *Yidishe shprakh* 3 (1943): 91.
23. Iosif Cherniak, "Yidishe shprikhverter." *Yidishe shprakh* 23 (1963): 43.
24. Krzyzanowski, 2:468.
25. The word *hiner* "chickens, hens" is perhaps a euphemism for *hintn* "buttocks." *Freser* "eater" is derived from the verb that denotes eating like an animal: *fresn* vs. the normal *esn*.
26. Shimen Eynhorn, "Mishley-am," *Reshumot* 4 (1947): 185.
27. Elzet, 83.
28. Bernstein, 105.
29. A variant: *Az esn khazer, iz khotsh fete*. (If you're going to eat pork, it should at least be fat.) Shimen Eynhorn, "Mishley-am," *Reshumot* 5 (1927): 344.
30. The song, also known as "Sha, sha, der rebe geyt" ("Sh-sh, the Rabbi is Coming"), was published in sheet music by Saul Schenker in New York in 1924.
31. Bernstein, 338.

32. D.A. Drummond and G. Perkins, *Dictionary of Russian Obscenities*, 3rd. ed. (Oakland, CA.: Scythian Books, 1987), 62; Dantsik Sergeevich Baldaev, et al., *Slovar' tiuremno-lagerno-blatnogo zhargona* (Moscow: Kraia Moskvyy, 1992), 175; Anna Dabrowska, *Eufemizmy współczesnego języka polskiego* (Wrocław: Wyd. Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1994), 209.
33. Bernstein, 337.
34. Elzet, 121.
35. Cf. a variant with the same meaning: *Kreplekh vern oykh nimes* (Bernstein 249).
36. The late Jacob Parzen, conversation with H.R. See also the reference below to a related joke cited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett.
37. Eynhorn, *Reshumot* 5 (1927): 345.
38. Dabrowska, 249.
39. A.L. Toporkov, *Russkii eroticheskiy fol'klor* (Moscow: Lodomir, 1995), 639-40; Dabrowska, 203-204.
40. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Culture Shock and Narrative Creativity," *Folklore in the Modern World*, ed. Richard M. Dorson (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), 119.
41. Bernstein, 151.
42. Bernstein, 108.
43. Cf. the more general recommendation against premarital sex: *Men tor nit esn di khale far der hamoytse*. (You shouldn't eat the challah before the blessing.) Bernstein, 108.
44. Krzyzanowski, 1:253.
45. Krzyzanowski, 2:1050.
46. Dal', 2:249.
47. Dal', 2:249.
48. Dal', 2:249.
49. A. Zhigulev, *Russkie narodnye poslovitsy i pogovorki* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1958), 182.
50. The proverb can be traced back at least to 2 Thessalonians 3:10.
51. M. Ia. Hrynblat, comp., *Prykazki i prymauki u dzviukh knihakh* (Minsk: Navuka i tekhnika, 1976) #182.
52. Mykhailo Mykhailovych Paziak, comp., *Prysliv'ia ta prykazky: Pryroda. Hospodars'ka diial'nist' liudyny* (Kiev: Naukova dumka, 1989), 284.
53. Dal', 2:249.
54. Dal', 2:13.
55. Hrynblat, 1:181.
56. Krzyzanowski, 3:53.
57. Hrynblat, 1:182.

58. Dal', 2:17.
59. Dal', 2:17.
60. Krzyzanowski, 3:258.
61. Stutchkoff, 436.
62. Bernstein, 35.
63. Stutchkoff, 436.
64. Stutchkoff, 436.
65. Stutchkoff, 436.
66. Dal', 2:255.
67. Dal', 2:249.
68. Bernstein, 252.
69. Bernstein, 232.
70. Bernstein, 263.
71. There may also be a certain irony connected with this proverb since after eating Jewish potato or noodle pudding, one can barely move, let alone fly: *Az men est shabes kugl, iz men di gantse vokh zat.* (When you eat kugel on the sabbath, you're full all week.) Bernstein, 263.
72. The folk song can be found in Mlotek, 108. Lebedeff's parody is included in his recorded collection, *Aaron Lebedeff Sings Fifteen Favorites of the Yiddish Theatre*, The Greater Recording Company GRC 46 (1964).
73. Lebedeff was himself not from Romania. A Litvak, he may not have known the proverb that Bessarabian Jews used to mock his fellow countrymen: *A litvak koylet oyf shabes a hering.* (A Litvak kills a herring for the sabbath.) Eynhorn, 1945:206. Shimen Eynhorn, who recorded this proverb, explains that Bessarabian gluttons used it to make fun of the abstemious (or perhaps stingy) Litvaks, who serve herring instead of a chicken dinner.
74. Dal', 2:255.
75. Vlas Petrovich Zhukov, *Slovar' russkikh poslovits i pogovorok*, 4th ed. (Moscow: Russkii iazyk, 1991), 367.
76. Dal', 2:256.
77. Dal', 2:255.
78. Dal', 2:256.
79. Dal', 2:256.
80. Dal', 2:258.
81. Dal', 2:258.
82. Dal', 2:258.
83. Paziak, 315.
84. Paziak, 311.
85. Paziak, 310.
86. Krzyzanowski, 1:63.



87. Krzyzanowski, 1:634.
88. Stutchkoff, 436.
89. Nomys, 532.
90. Krzyzanowski, 1:717.
91. Krzyzanowski, 1:715-16.
92. Stutchkoff, 629.
93. Stutchkoff, 629.
94. Sholem-Zisl Beylin, "Jüdische Schwänke, Scherzfragen und Wortspiele aus Russland," *Mitteilungen zur jüdischer Volkskunde* 36 (1910): 143.
95. Krzyzanowski, 1:849.
96. Krzyzanowski, 3:559.
97. Krzyzanowski, 3:189.
98. Krzyzanowski, 2:589.
99. Dal', 2:252.
100. Krzyzanowski, 1:858.
101. Krzyzanowski, 3:190.
102. Hrynblat, 1:416.
103. Paziak, 310.
104. Dal', 2:103.
105. Bernstein, 217.
106. I.I. Illiustrov, *Zhizn' russkogo naroda v ego poslovitsakh i pogovorkakh*, 3rd ed. (Moscow, 1915), 177.
107. Illiustrov, 177.
108. Nomys, 533.
109. Krzyzanowski, 2:1006.
110. Bernstein, 89.
111. Bernstein, 255.
112. Bernstein, 89.
113. Eynhorn, *Reshumot* 2 (1947): 203.
114. Judah A. Joffe, and Yudel Mark, eds. *Groyser verterbukh fun der yidisher shprakh*, vol. 1 (New York: Yiddish Dictionary Committee, 1961): 43.
115. Bernstein, 195.
116. Bernstein, 74.
117. Yudel Mark, "Shprikhverter vos es iz keday zey tsu nitsn," *Yidishe shprakh* 10 (1950): 60.
118. Yudel Mark, "Shprikhverter vos es iz keday zey tsu nitsn," *Yidishe shprakh* 5 (1945): 119.
119. Wolf Younin included this expression in a list of idiomatic ways to describe tasty food ("Shprakhvinkl," *Forverts* [January 31, 1977]: 5), but it can also be understood as an ironic compliment.

120. Elzet, 121.

121. Arewa and Dundes speak of the "impersonal power of proverbs": "A child knows that the proverb used by the scolding parent was not made up by that parent. It is a proverb from the cultural past whose voice speaks truth in traditional terms." They go on to characterize the use of proverbs in African judicial processes, in which "the participants argue with proverbs intended to serve as past precedents for present actions. . . . The case usually will be won, not by the man who knows the most proverbs, but by the man who knows best how to apply the proverbs he knows to the problem at hand." E. Ojo Arewa and Alan Dundes, "Proverbs and the Ethnography of Speaking Folklore," *American Anthropologist* 66, no. 6 (1964): pt. 2, 70.

122. Stutchkoff, 532.

122. Stutchkoff, 532.