

FROM KABBALAH TO CLASS STRUGGLE



Expressionism,
Marxism, and
Yiddish Literature
in the
Life and Work
of
Meir Wiener

Mikhail Krutikov



STANFORD STUDIES IN JEWISH HISTORY AND CULTURE



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EDITED BY *Aron Rodrigue and Steven J. Zipperstein*

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Yiddish Literature in the
Life and Work of Meir Wiener*

Mikhail Krutikov

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A Note on Transliteration

For Yiddish, I have used the YIVO transliteration system; for Hebrew, I have used a simplified transliteration system without diacritics; for Russian, I have used the Library of Congress transliteration system. For personal names, I used more common English or German spelling (Wiener instead of Viner, Vogel instead of Fogel) where such forms were used by the person himself or herself, except in the bibliographical references and citations. For geographical names, I also used established English names (Cracow instead of Kraków).

Abbreviations

JNUL	Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem
TsAGM	Tsentral'nyi Arkhiv Goroda Moskvyy (Central Archives of the City of Moscow)
TsGAVOU	Tsentral'nyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Vysshikh Organov Vlasti Ukrainy (Central State Archives of Highest Institutions of Ukraine)

From Kabbalah to Class Struggle

Introduction Why Meir Wiener?

In a utopian alternative history, where the Jews of Eastern Europe were spared the Holocaust and the Stalinist terror, Meir Wiener might have become one of the celebrated Jewish intellectuals of modernity along with Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, and Gershom Scholem. His studies of Yiddish literary history would have been taught in universities, his fiction would have provoked debates among Yiddish intellectuals, and his life story would have served as a source of pride and inspiration for later generations of Yiddish scholars and writers.

In the real world, however, Wiener's name is remembered only by a small circle of Yiddish scholars, and mostly for his studies of nineteenth-century Yiddish literature. His fiction is nearly forgotten, and his magnum opus, the 450-page novel set in post-World War I Vienna and Berlin, remains unfinished and unpublished. Yet there was probably no other Jewish intellectual in interwar Europe with such a wide and diverse circle of contacts as Wiener. He personally knew Lenin and Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, Martin Buber and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Hayim Nahman Bialik and Walter Benjamin; he was close friends with the Soviet Yiddish writers Leyb Kvitko, Der Nister, and Perets Markish, as well as with the Hebrew authors David Vogel and Avraham Ben Yitzhak (Sonne); he engaged in polemics with Gershom Scholem, Max Weinreich, and Georg Lukács. Wiener wrote and published his works in German, Hebrew, Yiddish, and Russian, dealing with a wide range of topics, from mystical poetry and its interpretation to the theory of socialist realism. ¹

The events of the mid-twentieth century have fundamentally changed not only the course of Jewish history, but also the way in which it is

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interpreted. As the historian Moshe Rosman observed in his insightful analysis of current Jewish historiography, “the modern period of Jewish history ended some time ago. We are now in a new period that began in the wake of the Shoah and the establishment of Israel.”¹ Today, in the age that Rosman describes as “post-modern,” our vision of Jewish modernity is largely shaped by the perspectives of American and Israeli scholars, most of whom are children or grandchildren of European immigrants. The voices of pre-war European Jews, especially those who wrote in languages other than English, German, or Hebrew, have been moderated by, and adapted to, various ideological and intellectual agendas, and sometimes silenced altogether. As a result, our picture of the past has become fragmented, with past connections and relationships severed, and the separate pieces being reassembled into different, and often conflicting, narratives.

To understand and appreciate Meir Wiener’s achievements, we must take a mental leap into the world before the Holocaust and Israel, where millions of Jews in Eastern and Central Europe were having to cope with the pressing issues of their day: the rise of anti-Semitism, the fierce ideological battles both inside and outside the Jewish community, and the increasingly volatile political and military situation in the region. But all their problems, conflicts, and differences notwithstanding, the Jews of Eastern and Central Europe formed a community that shared a common cultural background, historical memory, and linguistic repertoire. In that world, a communist, a Zionist, and a traditional religious Jew had more in common with each other than with their respective soul mates of our “post-modern” age.

We can attain a deeper understanding of that world if we listen carefully not only to those voices that are in tune with contemporary agendas, but also to those who speak differently. One of the aims of this study is to question the accepted truth that, due to the Stalinist regime, Soviet Jewry lived in intellectual and cultural isolation from the rest of the world.² The Cold War belief that communism and *Yidishkeyt* (“Jewishness” in the broader cultural, rather than the narrower religious, sense) are mutually exclusive has recently been revised by the younger generation of scholars, who avail themselves of previously inaccessible archival and oral history sources.³ These works tend to focus on the

social aspects of Soviet Jewish culture, such as institutions, publishing, and education, leaving to one side the theoretical discourse. They rightly point out that the centralization and consolidation of the Soviet party-state during the 1930s sapped the ideological and institutional strength of the Soviet Jewish intelligentsia.⁴

However, these works do not address the issues of literary theory and aesthetics. Any attentive reader of Soviet Yiddish writing, such as Wiener's studies of nineteenth-century Yiddish literature or Der Nister's magisterial novel *Di mishpokhe Mashber* (*The Family Mashber*, 1939–41), will be impressed by the originality of their ideas, the depth of their knowledge of Jewish culture, and the power of their artistic imagination. Was it possible, after all, to be a loyal Soviet citizen, even a card-carrying communist, and an original Jewish thinker or artist at the same time? Were these figures "internal émigrés" who tried to resist the dominant ideological paradigm or, perhaps, "bipolar" personalities split between their loyalties to communism and Judaism; or were they committed to a larger cultural project of creating a new Jewish culture within the Soviet Marxist framework as they interpreted it? As I hope to demonstrate, using Meir Wiener's work as a case study, Soviet Jewish intellectuals and writers were as much a part of Jewish modernity as their counterparts in Europe, America, and Palestine; and their ideas and artistic taste were rooted in the same European Jewish discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This does not mean that Soviet Jewish intellectuals shared many (or indeed any) views with their colleagues abroad. Here, again, Meir Wiener's case is exemplary. Anything but a timid personality, he often expressed his views in the most abrasive terms and engaged in the most aggressive polemics against his ideological opponents both in the Soviet Union and abroad. His sincere and enthusiastic embrace of the Soviet ideology would certainly appear excessive today even to most radical leftist intellectuals. Some conservative critics might even label him a "self-hating Jew" because of his radical rejection of nationalism in any form. But this raises an interesting question: how could Wiener and his Soviet colleagues conceptualize Yiddish culture other than in terms of cultural nationalism, an ideology so popular in interwar Eastern and Central Europe?

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As I interpret Wiener's intellectual evolution, it was his rejection of post-World War I nationalist politics that drove him from the orientalist utopia of the cultural Zionism of Ahad Ha'am and Martin Buber to the Marxist-Leninist internationalist utopia of communism—and from Austria to the Soviet Union. His reading of the political situation in interwar Europe convinced him that the only way for Jews to avoid the danger of the total “nationalization” of Jewish culture—a process he believed was well under way in many Central European countries—was to come under the protective wing of the Soviet multinational “affirmative action empire,” to use Terry Martin's term. In some respects the Soviet Union could even have reminded Wiener of the old Habsburg Empire, which required loyalty to the Emperor but not to any particular nation. Moreover, the course of events during the 1930s convinced him that any form of nationalism would eventually deteriorate into fascism, as had happened in Germany and to various degrees in Romania, Hungary, and Austria, and that Jews were not immune to this either.

To understand better the thinking of Soviet Yiddish intellectuals, it is useful to keep in mind the semantic difference between the English words “people” and “nation” and the Yiddish *folk*, which is close to, but also different from, the German *Volk* and the Russian *narod*. For Wiener, as for many East European Jewish intellectuals, *folk* was a category *both* material and ideal. It consisted of the working masses—as opposed to the middle and upper classes—but it also had a transcendental meaning, as the indestructible eternal core of any form of historical existence of the Jews. From this point of view, the concept of a uniform political nation—which took shape in Central Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and was also adopted by political Zionists—was a danger to the Jewish *folk*, because it implied the subordination of the East European working masses to the interests of the Western capitalist elite. This subordination, not the elite, threatened the transcendental, eternal essence of that *folk*. Wiener's concept of *folk* is clearly contradictory. On the one hand, as a Marxist, he believed that the working class was the primary motivating force of historical progress, and the Jewish masses of Eastern Europe played as great a role in the class struggle as those of other peoples. On the other hand, he regarded the Jewish *folk* as a Kantian transcendental thing-in-itself, contrary to the Hegelian

notion, in its materialistic Marxist guise, of a nation as an agent of historical action. It was the *folk*, not the nation, that took part in the class struggle—and yet the *folk* also transcended historical reality.

With hindsight, of course, it is easy to see the theoretical inconsistency and practical implausibility of attempts to reconcile Jewish cultural folkism with Soviet Marxism-Leninism in its Stalinist form. Yet if we make an effort to look at the world through the eyes of Soviet Yiddish intellectuals of the interwar period, we can not only gain a better sense of the reality of that time, but also learn some important lessons. Although the deterministic Marxist notion of class struggle as the driving force of the historical development of the Jewish people is not shared by mainstream contemporary scholarship, social historians today do pay increasingly more attention to all kinds of conflicts, contradictions, and tensions within the Jewish community at different historical moments. An important, but rather neglected, tool of such analysis is the critical reading of literature along the lines suggested by Wiener and other Soviet scholars, who explored the texts of the major Yiddish authors as a reflection of the socio-economic dynamics.

Parts of Wiener's analysis, of course, now seem outdated. Indeed, he himself would sometimes renounce his earlier views and provide a different interpretation of the same text. His Marxist rhetoric was often bombastic, his arguments one-sided, and his conclusions unbalanced, particularly in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Living as he did under Stalin, Wiener naturally refrained from sharing his true thoughts even with his closest friends, let alone commit them to paper, and we do not know the extent to which he, despite his sincere commitment to Marxism, had to censor his views to conform to the official doctrine of the day. But Wiener also left a substantial corpus of fiction, some of it unpublished, which, as I suggest, reflected his mood and his view of the world, and might therefore offer clues as to what he actually thought and felt about his age.

Reading Wiener's ironic, gloomy prose—preoccupied with fate, violence, and death—against the story of his own life, one cannot help seeing parallels between fiction and reality. It seems that Wiener foretold his own death more than once in his own works—or, perhaps he tailored the final chapter of his life story to the mood of his fiction. As

a volunteer in the Soviet Writers' Battalion, aged forty-seven, and devoid of military experience, he had no real chance of surviving the fierce battles in the autumn of 1941. And yet the death he chose for himself was probably the best that was possible under the circumstances. Had he survived the war, he most certainly would have been persecuted during the anti-Semitic campaign of 1948–53 that destroyed Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union. As a war hero, his name was spared posthumous defamation, and his family was left in peace.

This book is an attempt to explore Meir Wiener's thought and imagination in all its depth and complexity. It analyzes, sometimes in great detail, various aspects of his intellectual and artistic creativity and places them within the relevant intellectual, cultural, and political contexts of interwar Central and Eastern Europe. As I hope to demonstrate, Wiener can be seen as a link between cultural movements and phenomena that from our perspective might seem antithetical or even mutually exclusive, such as Yiddish and Hebrew, Soviet Marxism and German expressionism, Kabbalah and Haskalah. The structure of the book largely follows Wiener's biographical timeline, each chapter dealing with a certain period of Wiener's life, as well as with the theoretical and artistic issues that preoccupied his imagination during that period.

Chapter 1 tells the story of Wiener's youth and education in Cracow, Vienna, and Switzerland and analyzes his changing attitude to expressionism and Jewish writing in German. Chapter 2 focuses on his political and scholarly ideas during the early 1920s, looking at his Zionist polemics, his studies of medieval Hebrew literature, and his philosophical essays in the context of Viennese Jewish culture in the aftermath of World War I. Chapter 3 turns to the Yiddish literary scene in Vienna, Berlin, and Kiev during the same period and establishes some connections between those cultural centers by analyzing modernist poetry and criticism, thus setting Wiener's early Yiddish writing in its relevant contexts. Chapter 4 follows Wiener to the Soviet Union and focuses on his adjustment to Soviet conditions in Kiev. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 analyze in some depth Wiener's historical and critical studies on Yiddish literature and the evolution of his ideas during the 1930s, and situate his work in the intellectual milieu of the time. Wiener's historical fiction and his ideas on Jewish history are discussed in Chapter 8, whereas Chapter 9

deals with his memoirs and the unfinished magnum opus, set in the Berlin of the early 1920s. The Conclusion weaves together the threads of Meir Wiener's intricate life and fits them into the intellectual and cultural pattern of the age. It brings together the various themes and concerns of his artistic and intellectual pursuits and makes a case for the relevance of his legacy today.

This book should have been written at least ten years ago when some of Wiener's students, and others who knew him well, were still alive. Now there are significant gaps that cannot be filled in and questions that cannot be answered with the help of the available sources. The revival of interest in Wiener began in the early 1960s when his student Moyshe Notovich published a brief memoir in the Moscow Yiddish magazine *Sovetish Heymland*, establishing a cultural link between the newly established Soviet Yiddish periodical and the pre-war Soviet Yiddish culture.

The most important contribution to this revival in the Soviet Union was made by the literary scholar Eliezer Podriatshik, who began working on Wiener's papers in the 1960s and published some of his previously unknown works in the same magazine in 1968–69. At the same time, Max Weinreich, the academic director of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York (and a target of Wiener's virulent critical attacks during the 1930s), began to collect biographical materials about Wiener. Unfortunately, this project was cut short by Weinreich's death in 1969. A monograph on Wiener by the American scholar Elias Shulman, based on the available published sources and some archival materials, appeared in 1972. In Israel, the prominent Yiddish scholar Dov Sadan published Wiener's letters to the Prague rabbi Heinrich (Hayim) Brody concerning their collaboration on an anthology of Hebrew literature and promised to publish more material—a promise that was never fulfilled. Most recently, Marcus Moseley has brilliantly analyzed Wiener's memoirs in the context of his magisterial study of Jewish autobiography, paving the way to a broader literary interpretation of Wiener's oeuvre.⁵

This volume, which took nearly fifteen years to write, would not have been possible without all these important contributions by eminent scholars. No less important were the efforts of Meir Wiener's

daughter, Julia Wiener, who brought her father's papers—over fifty boxes—to Israel and donated them to the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem. Initially, my interest in Wiener was sparked by Chaim Beider, the deputy editor of *Sovetish Heymland*, where I worked from 1989 to 1991. Before I left for New York to pursue a doctoral degree at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), Beider handed me two volumes of Wiener's *History of Yiddish Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, with the words: "Take them now—you will understand later why you need them." When studying Yiddish literature in New York with David Roskies and Dan Miron, I realized, to my great surprise, how highly my teachers regarded this Soviet Marxist scholar. My interest in Wiener's enigmatic personality was deepened by reading his pre-Soviet writings in German and discovering his important, but forgotten, role in the European Jewish cultural life of the early 1920s. I finally was able to devote time to research on Wiener during my stay at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in the summer of 2003, which I spent working with his archives.

The destruction of Jewish life in Eastern Europe in the 1940s spelled the end of a vibrant and multifaceted Yiddish culture, rooted in the European Enlightenment, Judaism, and Russian literature. Yiddish has gradually lost its intellectual élan, its cultural breadth, and its artistic depth, often degenerating into "Just say nu" frivolities. On the evidence of some recent publications, it is clear that familiarity with Yiddish culture is no longer regarded as necessary for writing about Soviet Jewry—indeed, sometimes even for writing about Yiddish! It is my hope that this study of Meir Wiener demonstrates that the Soviet Jewish past was more complicated than is frequently believed.



I owe thanks to many individuals and institutions for their encouragement, help, and support. As I mentioned above, it was the late Chaim Beider who sparked my interest in Wiener, and I also benefited greatly from his unpublished "Lexicon of Soviet Yiddish Literature." I began to engage with Wiener's ideas seriously in graduate seminars with David Roskies at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and with Dan Miron and Rachmiel Peltz at Columbia University, who generously shared with

me their knowledge and understanding of Yiddish literature and encouraged my interest in Wiener. My study at JTS would not have been possible without the extensive efforts of David Fishman and Ismar Schorsch, then the Chancellor of JTS, who helped to bring my family to New York to join me while I pursued my doctoral degree at JTS.

I have learned a great deal about Soviet Yiddish from my colleague and friend of many years Gennady Estraiikh, with whom I was very fortunate to work in Moscow and Oxford. Conversations and e-mail exchanges with Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, Valery Dymshits, and Thomas Soxberger provided valuable knowledge and intellectual stimulation. Ritchie Robertson read the first two chapters of the manuscript and gave me valuable advice, and Marcus Moseley graciously permitted me to read the manuscript of his book before publication. People in different parts of the world helped me with crucial information and assistance: Viktor Kelner in St. Petersburg; Mark Kupovetskii in Moscow; Efim Melamed in Kiev; Evelyn Adunka in Vienna; Mordecai Altshuler, Moshe Lemster, Judith Levin, Vera Solomon, Chava Turniansky, and Arkady Zeltser in Jerusalem; and Misha Lev in Rehovot. Marek Web drew my attention to Wiener's materials in the YIVO archives, and Leo Greenbaum helped me locate them. Without the expert knowledge of Herbert Lazarus, I would not have been able to find half of the publications in the YIVO library that I needed. I am very grateful to Hamutal Bar-Yosef and Israel Bartal for inviting me to join the workshop on Russian Jewish culture at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University in 2003, and gladly acknowledge the support of the Institute, which enabled me to work with Wiener's archives in Jerusalem. The staff of the Manuscript Department of the Jewish National and University Library helped me to navigate through Wiener's papers and to locate related documents in other collections.

Special thanks go to Julia Wiener for her interest in and help with my work, as well as for her permission to use her father's unpublished materials and photographs from the family archive. I am also grateful to other members of the extended Wiener family for their interest and for their permission to use the archival materials.

This project would never have been completed without the support and encouragement I received from my home departments at the

University of Michigan at Ann Arbor: the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies and the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures. I am also grateful to my colleagues at the university for their expert advice, in particular to Anita Norich, Deborah Dash Moore, Shachar Pinsker, Scott Spector, Julian Levinson, and Zvi Gitelman. At the final stage of this project, I had the privilege of being part of an excellent group of scholars at the Frankel Institute for Advanced Judaic Studies, and I wish to thank all the fellows, and especially the Head Fellow, Todd Endelman, for their valuable comments and suggestions. I also wish to thank the Office of the Vice President for Research of the University of Michigan for a subsidy in partial payment of the cost of publication.

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And I would very much like to thank my family for their love and patience with me throughout the years.

One Failed Messiahs

German-Jewish Culture

Growing Up in Cracow

Born in 1893 in Cracow (or in its Jewish suburb Podgórze across the Vistula), Meir Wiener grew up in the lively atmosphere of the ancient Polish capital, which was incorporated into the Austrian Empire in 1795 with the third and final partition of Poland, but in 1809 was granted by Napoleon to the Duchy of Warsaw. Between 1815 and 1846 it was the capital of a small Cracow republic and was then again incorporated into Austria until the restoration of Polish independence in 1918. The first Jews probably arrived in Cracow in the thirteenth century and in the seventeenth century, the city had one of the most prominent Jewish communities in the world, concentrated in the old suburb of Kazimierz, which became officially annexed to the city in 1802. The Jews of Cracow were granted full civil rights by the Austrian state in 1867–68, which also lifted all restrictions on their residence in the city, but until World War II, Kazimierz remained the heart of Jewish Cracow.

Wiener was intensely proud of Cracow's Jewish past and the prominent role his family played in it. The city and its Jews exerted a powerful influence on his memory and imagination long after he left Cracow in 1914, never to return. Information about Wiener's Cracow period is found mostly in three sources, all of them from a later period: brief memoirs by his sisters Franzi Gross and Erna Adlersberg, written in London around 1968 at the request of various scholars interested in Wiener's life; Wiener's own letters to his sisters, written between 1916 and 1926; and fragments of his autobiography, composed in the late 1930s in Moscow. Each of these sources has its own distinctive tone, reflecting the situation in which it was produced. Combined, they offer a fascinating

but incomplete and somewhat contradictory account that often conveys feelings and emotions rather than “hard facts.”

Wiener's youngest sister, Franzi, re-creates the atmosphere of her childhood in her memoir, written in May 1968 in English (reproduced in her original spelling):

So far as I can remember we lived at ul. Sebastiana 16, Kracow, on the 2nd floor in a very commodious flat.¹ My brother was the eldest of 7 children (2 died in infancy), self-willed and domineering. At a very early age he was sent to a Heder where he excelled in the study of Talmud. He had a wonderful way of attracting our love and attention by telling us fantastic stories which he delivered in a serial form usually on Saturday afternoons. We children listened breathlessly to his animal stories and we allowed ourselves to be led into a paradise, and the entry was of his making. He was always ready to explain a picture, or work of art. He especially took trouble with me as I was the youngest.

Our parents were orthodox Jews. One of my father's ancestors was a Rabbi in Vienna in the 17th century and was buried in the Döblinger Cemetery. He had 7 children and his sons emigrated to Poland and took on the name of the town they came from, hence the name Wiener. My grandfather Wiener was a well to do textile merchant who used to live in Crzanow, where he had a nice house on the Ringplatz. He had 11 children (there were 3 more who died in infancy), of which our father was the eldest son. Grandfather Wiener was a good looking man with blue eyes and a very gay disposition. He loved life and he loved to sing and dance, of which he had ample opportunity with all his 11 children's weddings, Seder's and Barmizwah's.

On our mother's side one ancestor came from Germany to work as a Rabbi in Podgorze. Our grandfather Landau was a very devout Jew who lived according to the Book and the laws laid therein. A small episode will describe his character: a business man owed him money which meant a lot to him as he was not well off. He had to state his case under Oath but he preferred to forgo the money rather than break the Second Commandment.[...]

Our grandfather was very proud of his brilliant grandson who had excelled in the Talmud whilst still so young, and it was a great shock to him when my brother on his own determination left the Heder when he was about 15. There followed a hard fight not so much with his parents but with his grandfather.²



Figure 1. Alter Binyomin Landau, Meir Wiener's grandfather on his mother's side, lived in Cracow, died in a concentration camp, 1848–1941. Used with the permission of Julia Wiener.



Figure 2. Salomea Landau, Meir Wiener's mother, at the age of 17, when she married Ruben Zelig Felix Wiener. Born in Cracow, died in Vienna, 1870–1921. Used with the permission of Julia Wiener.



Figure 3. Ruben Zelig Felix Wiener, Meir Wiener's father, born in Chrzanow, Poland, murdered in a concentration camp in Poland, 1869–1945. Used with the permission of Julia Wiener.

This grandfather, Binyomin Landau, died at the age of 91 in the village of Wisnica in 1941, the same year as the death of his grandson. He made a strong impact on the development of Meir Wiener's personality and became the main hero of the memoirs, which are discussed in Chapter 9. Whereas the grandfather embodied the traditionalist aspect of Wiener's upbringing, the grandmother and mother personified the opposite, secular side, as Franzi explains:

Our grandmother Landau, née Korngold, came from an unorthodox background. It was her doing to send my mother to a finishing school which was a nunnery and I even suspect that my grandmother did not disclose the full fact to her orthodox husband. It might have been this education which enabled our mother to recognize and understand the talents of her son and to do everything in her power to help him to develop his gifts in full. She arranged for him to have private all round tuition with a Professor Rappaport, who was I think a writer.³

In response to an additional query from Max Weinreich, the director of the YIVO Institute in New York, Franzi Gross offered some additional information about the family's life:

My father was a textile manufacturer and he worked mostly for Czechoslovakian and German firms,⁴ and the "office" consisted of a very large room that contained samples of the goods, plus three rooms, one for a secretary, one for a male assistant, and another one in which my mother worked.[...] [S]he worked there from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. each day with an hour's break for lunch, when both parents went home to eat with their children.⁵

To Weinreich's question about the language that was spoken in the family, Mrs. Gross explained that the choice of the language depended on age and gender. The parents spoke Yiddish between themselves but between the parents and the children, the language was "rather mixed, the boys always being addressed by our parents in Yiddish and answering in Yiddish; the girls, always in Polish and answering in Polish. (Although we had a teacher coming to teach us Hebrew prayers the result was that I cannot even read Yiddish or Hebrew and therefore I do not know my brother's works)." Finally, the children spoke Polish among themselves.⁶

In a letter to Martin Buber, Wiener mentioned that his first language was Polish, but he was equally fluent in German and Yiddish.⁷ His sisters had non-Jewish governesses who spoke Polish to them. Franzi went to a Protestant school set up in Catholic Cracow for the children of the Austrian military employees and civil servants stationed in the city. The main language of instruction was German, whereas Polish had a secondary status.⁸ In her next letter to Weinreich, Franzi Gross shared some of her childhood memories about her elder brother:

When I said in my notes that he excelled in the study of Talmud it was said mechanically without forethought, but simply because I had heard it. But now I understand it better, that through the study of Talmud his brain was specially trained from his very early youth. He did not encourage me to take part in his work, only if he specially wanted it, as I mentioned in my notes, by translating here and there a chapter of his work. Somebody said of him, as a young man, that he was "wise." I think that it was this special training in Heder that made him so.⁹

Unfortunately, the correspondence between Franzi Gross and Max Weinreich came to an end when Weinreich died in 1969. Another important piece of evidence, which complements Franzi Gross's account, is offered by her elder sister Erna Adlersberg, who was also close to her brother but in a different way. Whereas for Franzi, the youngest one in the family, Meir was the paternal figure and an object of absolute adoration to whom she confided all her worries and anxieties, Erna, being more mature, had a better understanding of her brother's insecure and vulnerable personality. Meir Wiener's letters to his sisters reveal two different sides of his character. He addressed Franzi in the voice of a domineering authority, trying to regulate and control her life in every detail, whereas to Erna he confessed his concerns and troubles. Franzi herself realized this difference only when she began revisiting her past in the late 1960s, as she related to Weinreich:

I have never read the letters addressed to my sister before now, and they disclose to me my brother as a completely different man than I thought. Now I can see that he was lonely in spite of his many friends around him, that he wanted sympathy and that he wanted warmth. I never realized that he was longing for the home nest so much (as he expressed in his letters to my sister), all the time he had the urge to go

abroad and there was always this longing for home. He always showed himself to me as being self-sufficient, self-possessed, and self-confident, but my picture of him is now rather different.¹⁰

In Erna's memories, as in Franzl's, Meir emerges as an authoritarian big brother keen on controlling his sisters' lives. But being older than Franzl, Erna was more capable of resisting, which perhaps explains why Meir was more prepared to confide in her. Her re-creation of Meir's childhood is therefore quite different from Franzl's:

Meir always read every second of his free time. What he read was at that time beyond my understanding. I remember one day when Meir was ill, he sent me to the library to collect some books for him—he must then have been about 16 years old—I looked through the pages of one book—my criterion of a good book was one with small paragraphs and often interrupted, and this book seemed to be the type that I would find interesting. (We children were not allowed to read anything unless chosen and approved by Meir). I remarked maliciously to Meir, a phrase he occasionally said when he caught me secretly trying to read a book or children's magazine which was not approved by him—"what rubbish are you reading here?" He looked at me with a benevolent smile and with understanding and said "if you can understand one of the sentences in this book I will give you 100 Kronen." This, for an 11-year-old girl was a fortune. Eagerly I sat down to read and he let me struggle for quite a few pages, watching with his indulgent smile until I gave up and begged him to explain what it was about. It was Nietzsche's "So Spake Zarathustra." Later in life I tried to get through the book but I must confess with embarrassment that I never quite succeeded.[...]

Whilst our mother was alive we were brought up to observe the Jewish principles, although ostensibly our home was a patriarchal one. We were taught absolute obedience to our parents and to old people, as well as to help the poor. Our mid-day meal each day was shared with a "Bachur" [young man] (a different one each time) coming from a "Jeshiva." Friday evening father went with his two sons to the "shul" and always returned with at least one "Orech" [guest] for a meal. The same thing happened on Saturdays and holidays.

I remember when I was very young my father used to sit down with the two boys in the mornings to study "Gemarah" or whatever else it

was. On these occasions (and this stands out in my memory) Meir always had different interpretations which resulted in arguments. I think as a young boy already he knew more than the average scholar.[...]

Naturally I cannot recollect Meir's early education. I seem to remember though that he was sent to study [at] a "Jeshiva" at a place called Jaworzno. My clearest memories commence when he was about 15 years old and when he returned home. I think that he felt he had learned all that he could at the "Jeshiva" and wanted to continue to study on his own.

In the depths of his heart Meir was a believer in God, although he did not like the "trimmings" which in his opinion were senseless. He taught us children to believe in God without asking questions. He taught us to keep up the traditions and all traditional holidays. He rebelled about the rules restricting personal freedom or freedom of thinking. He did not believe that putting on the light, ringing the doorbell, playing the piano, or writing on the Sabbath, would be a sin, and he courageously said so, which in a home like ours was sheer rebellion. We sisters and brother felt exactly the same. Looking back I even think that our parents must often have felt the same, but mother observed the traditions out of loyalty to our grandfather and our father kept up appearances.

Father wanted Meir to become a businessman, and educated him accordingly, but Meir had no vocation for business. He wanted to study, to read and to write. In my father's eyes that was disastrous. There were very painful scenes between Meir and father which I can never forget, because in my heart I agreed with Meir. I remember one terrible argument when my father tore up Meir's book on Spinoza, and even burnt it. He said "it would be a shame on the family to see a grandson of Alter Benjamin Landau in a 'gymnasium.'" Meir put up a terrific fight, but with his mother on his side they reached a compromise, that he should work half days in his father's office and the remaining time he would be able to study. A professor was engaged. I cannot remember how long he was teaching Meir but my brother was always reading, writing, studying, visiting museums, libraries, and bringing home books, books, books. He also played the violin but he did not have much time for it. He was a linguistic genius, he knew 7 languages. Besides the modern languages he spoke perfect Yiddish and Hebrew, and some oriental languages.¹¹

According to Franz, there was an additional, ideological aspect to the conflict between Meir and his father: “As a Hasid, he [the father] did not approve of Zionism and he became rather annoyed when occasional articles appeared in periodicals written by my brother on the subject.”¹² In his memoirs, probably composed during the 1930s in the Soviet Union and not published until 1969, Wiener somewhat derisively recalls the fascination of the Jewish youth of Cracow with the new cultural currents:

Sometimes there was a heated conversation about the Baal-Shem and Hasidism. At that time Martin Buber’s *The Legends of the Baal-Shem* was published. Even earlier there appeared the Hasidic stories by Berdyczewski; articles about Hasidism by Shmuel-Aba Horodetsky, [Joseph] Klausner, [Avraham] Kahana; Peretz’s “Monish”; and stories by Yehuda Shteynberg. Many of those works were translated into Polish. This literature suited the decadent modernist sensitivity of the youth and blended eclectically, as usually happens in the decadent culture, with the Catholic mood among parts of the young Jewish intelligentsia. They would sit for hours daydreaming in front of the Gothic wooden sculptures by Stoss in the Kościół Mariacki [St. Mary’s Church], Christ on the cross in Wawel, painted glass windows in churches, read Przybyszewski, Wyspiański, mix Polish Catholic mysticism with Hasidic Zionism. A weird, awkward brew (*mesłunedike, umgelumperte kashe*).¹³

Writing in retrospect from a communist perspective, Wiener makes Yoel, the autobiographical protagonist of his memoirs, critical of these Jewish boys’ naive fascination with Catholicism. He maintains that the saints like St. Francis, whom they would compare to the founder of Hasidism, the Baal-Shem, should bear responsibility for the actions of their followers, some of whom were “the worst murderers in human history.”¹⁴

Wiener’s Jewish education was broad and solid. Under Rappaport’s tutelage he studied Hebrew grammar, Bible, and Talmud, as well as medieval Hebrew literature. He was interested in new ideas and sympathetic to Zionism.¹⁵ Turn-of-the-century Cracow, an old Polish city on the eastern border between the Habsburg Empire and the Russian Empire, offered Wiener a unique exposure to both the traditional East

European Jewish world and European modernity. Reading widely in German, Polish, Hebrew, and Yiddish, he learned about different, and often competing, cultural and political concepts, many of which were rooted in the late eighteenth-century critique of Enlightenment universalism.

Culture and Nationalism: From Herder to Buber

The German thinker Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) not only explicitly reformulated the “Jewish Question” in terms of the post-Enlightenment discourse of cultural nationalism, but also implicitly demonstrated the impossibility of solving it within that conceptual framework. Herder’s intellectual innovation was the representation of Jews in ethnic rather than religious terms. Although a Lutheran pastor himself, Herder did not share Luther’s view of Jews as an ossified religious community that stubbornly kept to its obsolete Old Testament faith, but regarded them as a *Volk*—a nation or an ethnic group—like many others, though with some special features that made the position of Jews among other European peoples problematic. One important implication of this new concept of Jews was the understanding that the historical evolution of Jews as a *Volk* did not stop with the crucifixion of Jesus, the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, and the expulsion from the land of Israel.

Nevertheless, Herder argued in his essay titled “Bekehrung der Juden” (“The Conversion of the Jews”), “in Europe, the Jewish people are and remain a *foreign Asiatic* people to our part of the world, *bound* to an old law that was imparted to them in a distant land and that, according to them, cannot be dissolved.”¹⁶ Herder’s description of Jews as a “foreign Asiatic people” is sometimes used as a proof of his inherent anti-Semitism, but its meaning in the context of his discourse seems more ambivalent. Herder seems to respect the “Asiatic” nature of Jews as an expression of their loyalty to their religious and historical heritage. Herder clearly separated the theological and political aspects of the integration of Jews into European society, admitting, at least in principle, the possibility of cultural integration without conversion.

Herder concluded that the best way of integrating Jews into Christian society would be through their moral and cultural education.¹⁷ Considering the great and manifold talents that Jews had demonstrated in the course of their long history, Herder was optimistic about the outcome of such a project. He believed that Jews would eventually put aside their “proud national prejudice,” discard customs that were unsuitable for “our time and constitution, and even for our climate,” and join forces with other “educated nations” in building the “Edifice of Sciences” (*Bau der Wissenschaften*) and the “Universal Culture of Humanity” (*Gesamt-Kultur der Menschheit*). The Jews would then be able to realize their great potential not on the “bare hills of Palestine, that narrow and desolate land,” but establish their Palestine “here, where they live and work honestly.”¹⁸

Herder’s nationalism was cultural and not political. He questioned the cosmopolitan rationalism of his predecessors from the Age of Enlightenment, fearing that it could lead to the levelling of cultural diversity and the eventual disappearance of individual languages; but he did not insist, like the German ideologues of romantic nationalism after him, that a national culture could be preserved only in a nation state. It was language that was the main ingredient of the “spirit of the nation.” But Herder’s classification of peoples according to their language and geography was not easily applicable to Jews and some other peoples—such as Arabs, Turks, Armenians—whom he had to place under the rubric “Other” in his systematic compendium *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (*Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, 1784–91). The cultural deficiency of the Jewish people manifested itself in the lack of an authentic language, which prevented them from creating a folk culture of their own in the Diaspora. Instead, the Jews had produced Yiddish, a language that Herder characterized as a “sad mixture.”

Julius Schoeps, the historian of German Jewry, argues that although Herder’s name was rarely mentioned by Jewish thinkers of Zionist and nationalist orientation, his ideas had a powerful influence on their way of thinking. This influence was twofold: on the one hand, the Zionists appropriated Herder’s notion of the Bible as the historical foundation of Jewish national literature rather than a timeless divine revelation; on the other hand, they accepted his concept of *Volksgeist* as a composite

product of a people's language, history, customs, and natural environment that defined the unique individual character of each *Volk*. The latter idea was particularly important for the cultural Zionism of Ahad Ha'am and Martin Buber, who argued for the primacy of culture over politics in the Zionist project of Jewish national revival. Schoeps specifically argued that Ahad Ha'am's concept of the "Jewish national spirit," as well as his notion of Hebrew culture as both the central agency of Jewish revival and the key to the Jewish national spirit, originate in Herder's thinking.¹⁹

But Herder's legacy was important also for the Yiddishist opponents of Zionism. Delphine Bechtel suggests that Herder's ideas about the origins of the language served as a basis for a new conceptualization of Yiddish as a Jewish national language among some German-Jewish intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century. They projected onto Yiddish the qualities that Herder attributed to the "oriental" languages:

According to Herder, the oriental languages and therefore Hebrew are characterized by their closeness to nature and their vitality [...] Feelings preceded reflective thought in the evolution of language, [...] and oriental languages, including Hebrew, reveal more feelings than Northern languages. Finally, feelings and expressiveness are inversely proportional to the development of grammar [...] Obviously they derived these characteristics not from an analysis of the inherent qualities of the Yiddish language, about which German-speaking Jews knew very little, but from the classical German culture adopted by German Jews which, in this case, can be traced back to Herder's interpretation of the Hebrew language.²⁰

Thus Yiddish, a Germanic language, acquires "positive" oriental features that remove the stigma of "mixed jargon." Whereas for Herder himself, as for the majority of German Christians and not a few Jews after him, Yiddish signified the "parasitic" nature of Jewish existence in the Diaspora, particularly in Eastern Europe; some of the early twentieth-century German-Jewish intellectuals used Herderian logic to rebrand Yiddish as an "oriental" language with all the attendant positive implications.

The discourse of orientalism and authenticity became prominent in Zionist debates in the early twentieth century, in particular in Martin

Buber's writings, which had a powerful effect on Wiener and his generation. Born in Vienna but raised in the house of his learned and prosperous grandfather in Lemberg (Lwów, Lviv), Martin Buber (1878–1965) had an intimate knowledge of East European Judaism. He enthusiastically embraced the new Zionist movement immediately after its inception but soon disengaged himself from political and organizational activity in it. In his manifesto titled “Jüdische Renaissance” (“Jewish Renaissance”), which opened the first issue of the German-Jewish monthly *Ost und West* (1901), he formulated his vision of Zionism in terms of neoromantic national revival, echoing some of Herder's ideas. Buber envisioned the goal of the new Zionist project as the unification of Jews into one organic community by eliminating the gap between *Denken* and *Tat* (thought and action) and restoring the lost unity of personality. Those spiritual elements, which dominated traditional Jewish life, should now acquire new practical forms because only a nation that had re-created itself spiritually was capable of performing the practical task of political restoration. The purpose of the Zionist movement was to create an “inner,” spiritual homeland for Jews before forming an “external,” political one.²¹

After temporarily withdrawing from the Zionist movement in 1902 because of a disagreement with its leadership, Buber devoted himself to the study of various mystical traditions, from Taoism to Protestantism. Among them was Hasidism, which Buber presented to the German readership in his acclaimed collections of stories attributed to the Hasidic “masters” Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav and Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, published respectively in 1906 and 1907. By adapting Hasidic folklore to the neoromantic *Zeitgeist*, Buber followed, perhaps unconsciously, Herder's advice to go back to the “naïve” stage of folk creativity and express it in contemporary European forms. But unlike Herder, Buber sought his sources not in the geographically and chronologically remote ancient orient but in the much closer regions of Ukraine and Poland in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

At the same time Buber developed an interest in the contemporary Yiddish culture. In the essay “Renaissance und Bewegung” (“Renaissance and the Movement,” 1905), he described Yiddish as the “idiom of the people” and attributed the preservation of the national charac-

ter of East European Jewry to their language. David Groiser explains Buber's reasoning: "the centrality of language is plain to see. Western Jews have been susceptible to assimilation, he argues, because they lacked a language of their own, whereas the *Ostjuden* have found an anchor in a 'thoroughly abnormal, and yet thoroughly salutary linguistic development.'"²² Groiser also notes that Buber's idea of Yiddish as both "abnormal" and "salutary" reflected "the tendency among German-Jewish writers in this period to cast the psychology and religious sensibility of the Jews in terms of coexistence of opposites, tense and yet creative."²³ Yiddish as a hybrid tongue was a good example of this inherent Jewish tension between the "mundane" and the "spiritual," a tension that became an important element in Buber's new concept of Judaism, which, as Laurel Papp puts it, "represents the next stage in the development of the *Ostjude* stereotype, where the *Ostjude* comes to represent the more authentic Jew who serves as a model for assimilated Western European Jews."²⁴

Equipped with new knowledge and ideas from various mystical sources, Buber emerged on the eve of World War I as a spiritual leader of the young generation of the Central European Jewish intelligentsia. His brochure *Drei Reden über das Judentum* (*Three Addresses on Judaism*, 1911), based on the first three lectures he delivered to the Bar Kokhba, a Prague Zionist youth association in 1909, had a great impact on the German-speaking Jewish intelligentsia of that time. Buber approached the "Jewish Question" from a new perspective that was more in tune with the individualist mindset of the time. He regarded Judaism not as a communal but as a personal issue. The most urgent task was not the reconstruction of the Jewish community as an independent polity or a national-cultural autonomy, but the restoration of the individual Jew as a whole human being. Whereas other nations were united by a common language, territory, and customs, Jews could only rely on their inner sense of belonging to a historical community of fate that Buber metaphorically described as the *Gemeinschaft des Blutes* (community of blood).²⁵

Historically, Buber argued, the Jewish tradition had always tried to overcome the dualism between the material outside and the spiritual inside and to achieve unity, which was the ultimate goal not only for the Jews but for all of humanity: "The striving of Jews for unity is what

makes Judaism a phenomenon of humanity and the Jewish question the question of humanity.”²⁶ This striving toward the ideal of unity had always been the source of Jewish creativity. In ancient times it found its expression in the messianic dreams and visions of prophets, whereas in modern times it has been reduced to the socialist idea so popular among secular Jewish youth.²⁷ As with all oriental peoples, Jews traditionally valued action over contemplation: “The decisive connection between man and God for the oriental is the action; for the occidental, it is the faith.”²⁸ Therefore, the contemporary situation of Jews as passive objects rather than active subjects of history contradicted their oriental character and contributed to their split identity.

In the end, however, Buber was unable to offer a clear solution to the existential problem he had described so vividly. He had to concede that he could give no definite answer to the main question of how and when the redemption would come: “We know that it will come, but we do not know how it will come. We can only be ready.”²⁹ His concluding recommendation sounded disappointingly tautological: “to be ready means: to prepare (*bereit sein heißt: bereiten*).”³⁰ Buber did not even specify what this preparation should include.

Wiener’s Encounter with Vienna: 1914–1915

The Wiener family moved to Vienna in 1914, just before the outbreak of World War I. In comparison to the vast majority of poor and distressed Galician Jews who flooded into the capital from 1914 to 1916, fleeing the devastations in the war zone, the move of the Wiener family in 1914 must have been relatively smooth, and the father was apparently able to relocate his business to the capital without great loss. They settled at 60 Praterstrasse, one of the most fashionable avenues in the Second District (Leopoldstadt), which led to the famous Prater Park. “The Praterstrasse is truly grand. It leads directly into pleasure,” wrote Wiener’s contemporary and fellow *galitsianer* Joseph Roth, who also settled in Vienna in 1914.³¹ At different times, Praterstrasse was the home of Theodor Herzl and Arthur Schnitzler. Leopoldstadt was also known as *Mazzesinsel* (Matzo Island)—it had the highest proportion of

Jews in Vienna and was particularly popular among newcomers from Eastern Europe.

In Vienna, Wiener made good use of the new cultural opportunities. Erna recalls her brother's first year in the capital:

There Meir made immediate contact with the literary world and came into the right circles. It was at that time that he met Hugo von Hofmannsthal and many other literary well-known people. He lived his own life but he still had time to be a friend to us all as well as a brother, always kind, a mentor to us younger sisters, guiding us with loving patience into the world of culture. He was the one who taught me to appreciate music.³²

Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929), a scion of an upper-class family with Jewish roots, was at that time one of the high priests of Viennese modernism. According to Erna, it was Hofmannsthal's recommendation that helped Wiener to leave Vienna in 1915 and go to Switzerland to study at the universities of Basle and Zurich. As Wiener himself informed Martin Buber in a letter of 1917 from Zurich, after his parents moved to Vienna in 1914, he stayed for some time in Cracow, where he was recognized as unfit for military service. Having spent a year and a half in Vienna "in distress and misery," he was sent, on medical advice, to Switzerland to recover. Sometime between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, he composed his first poem, titled "Judas Iscariot," in Hebrew, which he later translated into German and showed to Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who apparently liked it.³³ Yet, so far, I have been unable to find evidence of Wiener's contacts with Hofmannsthal. Erna Adlersberg remembered the following story regarding the circumstances of Wiener's move to Switzerland:

As he would not confide in a 15-year-old sister I must mention that the following may not have happened exactly as I have described it. I understood that Professor Jerusalem of the Vienna University (Philosophic Faculty) knew Meir well. Having in mind that Meir could be drafted into the Forces and that this brilliant mind could be lost, he decided to avert this danger by giving him a special recommendation to Professor (I think Joel) at the Zurich or Lausanne University to read Philosophy at his Faculty. And so Meir obtained a passport to go abroad during the War and left for Switzerland in 1915.³⁴

War Years in Switzerland

In Switzerland, Wiener tried to combine his university studies with working as a purchasing agent for his father's firm, with the former taking priority over the latter. In a letter to his parents written in 1916, he reported his business activity and academic progress: "never in my life have I studied so diligently, so much, and so seriously, as now in Zurich, despite a relatively small number of college classes. At the same time, I spare myself and refrain from overworking"³⁵—referring probably to his lung condition. Wiener tried to keep a close eye on his sisters' reading, education, and manners. He discussed books, criticized their views, and gave plenty of advice. The core of his curriculum consisted of the German classics. In the first place, he recommended Goethe, who remained his favorite author throughout his life: "it is worth devoting a whole year to reading Goethe," he wrote to Franz, who was about fifteen at that time.³⁶ Apart from Goethe, perhaps as somewhat easier reading, Wiener recommended the semi-autobiographical novel *Der grüne Heinrich* (*Green Henry*) by the Swiss writer Gottfried Keller, the historical novel by C. F. Meyer, and both Novalis's poetry and his novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. As for modern literature, he highly praised Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Der Tod des Tizian* (*Tizian's Death*) and especially recommended oriental poetry, which, he wrote, was characterized by abstract metaphors and similes, as well as the works of German female authors, such as the late romantic Annette von Droste-Hülshoff and his contemporaries Ricarda Huch and Else Lasker-Schüler.³⁷

Wiener was also concerned about his sister's Jewish education. First and foremost, she had to read the Bible—interestingly, both the Old and the New Testaments—followed by the abridged edition of Heinrich Graetz's *History of the Jews* in three volumes: "As a Jewess and a Zionist, you must familiarize yourself with the history and the past of the Jews." The recommended reading in Zionism included works of Theodor Herzl and, "more importantly," the two volumes of Ahad Ha'am's collection of essays *At the Crossroads* in German translation. "It will always be a great delight to hear from you about the progress of your spiritual development, and I will always respond to your letters," Wiener concluded.³⁸

The letters to Erna offer a more detailed picture of his intellectual life

during the last two years of the war, which he spent mostly in Zurich. Some of these letters contain full-scale essays on the issues that concerned him at that time, such as the concept of Messiah, the essence of Zionism, and the future of the Jewish people—his remarks on the last topic sometimes including views on the contemporary situation of the young Jewish woman. In one letter, Wiener composed a repetitive censorious catalogue of the shortcomings of Jewish women, a remarkable mixture of bourgeois propriety norms, Zionist criticism, and misogynic and anti-Semitic clichés:

Truly, in some respects we have sunk low due to the bitterness of life in diaspora and we have lost many characteristics of the noble race. Worst of all is the condition of the young Jewish woman. We must realize this in the end if we want to correct our mistakes. What use is self-deceptive silence and outward veneer?

The young Jewish woman has a spirited personality and is full of intelligence, and is consequently doubly in need of education. She is, however, lacking in education, particularly in the most important areas of morality, religion and good behavior, and this has depressing consequences.

The most dominant characteristics of a young Jewish woman are a gargantuan addiction to make-up, pleasure and attention, boasting, lying and boorishness. In the street, she raises her voice, as if she were at home, draws attention to herself, laughs boorishly, flirts with each passerby, regardless of who he may be, and demonstrates very little decency and human dignity. I often have the opportunity to observe Jewish women here and, unfortunately, much of what I am writing to you too often corresponds to the truth. Even when the worst-behaved lout on the street speaks with her, she does not hesitate to respond, especially when he is not a Jew. Then she abandons all self-respect and goes soft-hearted, instead of rejecting such socially unacceptable harassment and insult. In the coffeehouse she makes a show of herself, laughing hysterically instead of sitting quietly and decently. She speaks loudly, looking around, inspecting everyone with her glances, gauging what kind of impression she is making on them, speaks “elegantly” in an artificial manner, behaves with affectation, possibly in a foreign language so as to get attention and about things she believes will make an impression on those sitting around her, constantly glancing back and forth to ascertain what kind of impression she is making [...]

The young Jewish woman dresses in the flashiest colors and fashions and since she lacks good taste and just wants to be noticed, she is often the pinnacle of tastelessness.

She shows off with the most ridiculous things, such as her parents' wealth, her jewels, and loves to talk at length about her toiletries to the point of extreme bad taste. That her clothes suit her is beside the point; more important is that one *sees* that they cost a lot of money.

She is without dignity, because casual friendships are enough for her and because she does not show the slightest tact in her choice of relationships.[...]

At home she behaves shamelessly, to the point of meanness. On the street she affects elegance to the point of being revolting. This elegance is false because it does not come from her being but rather [...] is fabricated. She tells lies unscrupulously and is often full of lies. It is hard to find a being as hysterical and eccentric as the young Jewish woman.

In the concert hall she tries to get herself noticed with all kinds of vulgarity. She pipes up loudly about "Beethoven, Mozart," rolls her eyes with delight at "Liszt and Brahms," loudly discusses matters of harmony, the fugue, variation, etc., of which she understands nothing, glancing from left to right to ascertain the effect of her self-important talk.

This constant glancing over at someone else and gauging the impression she has made is her most revolting and disastrous quality. As soon as the concert begins, she marks the beat with her head and hands, so that everyone, by God, notices that she is intimately familiar with the music. She dances around on her seat nervously and hysterically. During the intermission, she runs over to her acquaintances in distant seats and exchanges a few affected and excited words. A repulsive self-importance and lack of discipline in body and soul. She behaves exactly like this in the theater, where she blares on about different book titles and modern authors.³⁹

Having listed examples of the inappropriate behavior of the modern Jewish woman in society, Wiener sought the root of the problem and offered a solution in the spirit of cultural Zionism:

All of these mistakes can be traced back to mistakes in one's upbringing. It is worth precious little if one can read a novel, speak in an hysterically affected manner about it, and play around on the piano. I locate the main flaw in the failure to teach a sense of self-worth. Un-

fortunately, nothing is done for its own sake, but rather so that others speak highly of it and admire it and consider us to be “somebody.” Yet that is how one loses the last of one’s true self and becomes a poser who wants every eye to be turned on him.

The truly refined person, however, is something and the way he is for himself alone. He does not want to appear to be different from how and what he actually is. And even what he is does not noisily force itself upon you.[...]

In all this I do not want to say that all young Jewish women are this way. Certainly not. Thank God, refined behavior and true nobility can still be found among us, especially in the “lower classes” where the novel-piano upbringing (shame on that sort of upbringing!) has not yet penetrated and traditional behavior still holds. Of course, this is a very limited, restrictive, sometimes even quite unpleasant behavior, because it is completely unconscious, more instinctive-traditional.[...]

Yet there is enough well-raised and very fine culture among young Jewish women. On the other hand, there are also far fewer non-Jews who are brought up well than badly. Yet Jews in particular are bound by duty to be brought up well without any exceptions. That is why we are Jews.⁴⁰

The letter was accompanied by an extensive reading list divided into three sections: “National Scholarship” (*Nationalwissenschaft*), “History of Art,” and “Literature and Poetry.” To fulfill his syllabus, Wiener proposed a rigorous hour-by-hour schedule for his twenty-year-old sister.⁴¹

Wiener’s views on women might appear quite old-fashioned for a young man interested in modern ideas, but they reflect sensitivities not uncommon in Zionist circles. Apparently, Erna expressed disagreement with categorical judgments of her brother’s brief, and in his reply Wiener felt it necessary to justify his position: he felt obliged to explain to his sister that her first duty was her loyalty to the Jewish people, “the most unconditional devotion, the most unreserved love belongs first and foremost to the people from whom one stems.” This devotion also included respect for their national heroes, such as Moses and the prophets, as well as Baruch Spinoza and Heinrich Heine, and belief in “our spiritual restoration in the land of our fathers, in Palestine.” Other duties included the “unflinching belief” that all Jews are one brotherly

family, as well as “blind, fanatical belief in the justice, sacredness and nobility of the Jewish spirit and character, even if there are a few, or a lot of, scabby sheep.”⁴²

From this basic set of duties followed practical implications: the study of Jewish history, Judaism, and Hebrew; membership in a Zionist organization; practical help to fellow Jews, as well as dignified personal behavior to uphold the Jewish reputation. As was noted above, Wiener stopped being strictly observant of the ritual regulations when still living in Cracow. He firmly believed that “[o]ur God belongs to us alone, and it is only us that has he chosen,” but ritual was for him an “absolutely secondary thing of little importance, it has little or nothing to do with the religion proper.” Judaism was first and foremost the national religion of the Jewish people, which meant that its most important aspects were the festivals, morality, the civil and criminal law, and the study of Jewish thought. Following the medieval Jewish thinker Joseph Albo, he postulated three main dogmas of Judaism: the knowledge of the unity of God, the belief in the Messiah, and moral behavior.

Wiener’s ideas about religion were formed by his intensive study of philosophy in Switzerland, which included the medieval Jewish thinkers, Spinoza, Kant, Nietzsche, and the neo-Kantian school of Hermann Cohen, whom Wiener characterized as “the greatest contemporary German philosopher.”⁴³ Wiener separated religion from aesthetics and ethics, believing that each of them expressed itself as a separate *Trieb* (drive) inherent to human nature. Religion was the most abstract and theoretical of those “drives” and had little to do with the other two. Religious concepts were not fixed and were developed by great thinkers. The general direction of the religious evolution of humanity led from anthropomorphism toward abstraction. Ritual, cult, and even morality had different origins from religion.

Consequently, the commandments and prohibitions of Judaism were not religious in origin, but represented various moral, practical, and hygienic rules, sometimes useful, sometimes not, but never sacred.⁴⁴ Of special importance for Wiener was *Vornehmheit*, behaving with dignity and confidence, the lack of which worried him so much in his female contemporaries. One had to wear one’s Jewishness as a badge of honor,

always conscious of one's illustrious origins. He admonished Erna: "You are a Jewess. Truly a venerable, noble people, older than the oldest aristocratic family in the world. Additionally, you belong to a fine old family.[...] You need only look in the mirror to see that you have breeding [dass Du Rasse hast], in fact fine and noble breeding [eine feine edle Rasse]."45

In Zurich, Wiener led an active social life. He mentions in one of his letters to Erna that he was attending public and private concerts almost every evening and with the help of his friends was learning to appreciate classical music. He also made acquaintances among Russian communists who had found refuge in neutral Switzerland and were busy preparing the Russian revolution. In reply to Max Weinreich, Franz Gross emphasized that Wiener had considerable sympathy for communism: "I have discussed this with my sister and she said that the encounter was not so casual as you imagine; they had meals every day together in the same Pension, not only Meir and Lenin and Trotsky [Trotsky was not in Switzerland at that time] but all their friends. How long it lasted I do not know but it must have been a year or two [...] when he returned to Austria, after the war, he was definitely a sympathiser."46

Lenin's name was mentioned casually in a letter to Erna written less than a month after the Bolshevik revolution in Russia: "What do you say, dear sister, about the armistice with Russia? God grant that this will be the beginning of the end. Lenin, the present 'master' of Russia, was a familiar figure here in Bolleystrasse, poor devil [*ein armer Teufel*], ate at the same *pension* where I once boarded, and spent hours every day in the reading room."47 Apart from musicians and Bolsheviks, Wiener's social circle in Switzerland included a great variety of other acquaintances, such as Zvi Yehuda Kook (1891–1982), who was the son of the future chief rabbi of Palestine, Abraham Isaac Kook, and who eventually became a spiritual leader of the right-wing religious Zionist movement Gush Emunim in Israel, and the Hebrew scholar David Hakohen, as well as some members of the Dada group, among them probably the Polish Jewish artist Marcel Slodki, who would later serve as a model for the protagonist of Wiener's unfinished novel. During his last year in Zurich, Wiener spent little time on his university studies. He survived the severe flu epidemic of 1918, which killed about 130 people in Zurich,

and kept busy with his research on medieval Hebrew poetry. His saw his future as uncertain: "Writing brings home no bread, an academic career even less so," he wrote in a letter to Leon Adlersberg, Erna's fiancé.⁴⁸ Being Jewish further limited his opportunities. The worst-case scenario was to follow in his father's footsteps and turn to business, he complained further in the same letter. The demise of the Habsburg Empire and the establishment of the Polish republic were accompanied by bloody pogroms in Galicia where Wiener's grandparents lived. He worried about their fate but in general looked to the future of the Jewish people with hope. A week after the armistice, he wrote to Erna: "In spite of the difficult times we have to endure at present, I hope that the Jewish people are heading towards very happy times. It would be unthinkable for Jewry alone to remain enslaved while the entire world is setting itself up for liberation."⁴⁹

Wiener did not limit his criticism of Jewish orthodoxy to his private correspondence with his sisters. Before returning to Vienna, he sent a Hebrew postcard to Kook, in which he severely castigated the "kosher world" for its arrogance, stupidity, and lack of interest in anything that went beyond the question "what to eat." Wiener could not conceal his feelings: "This kosher world, my Goodness! It's so disgusting." Orthodoxy had neither time nor desire to look into the really significant issues of good and evil. The true servants of God were those who served him with joy and self-abandonment, renewing his creation every day. Concluding his short but passionate plea, Wiener confessed that it was not easy for him to put his ideas down on paper but after some deliberation, he decided that they were true. He was happy that some of the *haredim* (ultra-Orthodox) were prepared to "awaken the souls of our beloved brethren." Wiener humbly ended his letter by asking forgiveness for the severity of his criticism and mentioned an article of his that had been published in the journal *Jerubbaal*.⁵⁰ In a second postcard, his last to Kook, Wiener thanked him for "important remarks" but said that he had no time to respond in detail because he was leaving for Vienna. He again castigated "clericalism" as the greatest danger to "living Judaism," comparing it to the Polish pogromists: "whereas the Poles torment [*me'enim*] our bodies, these villains [*gasim*], who are not worthy of the name of Israel, torment the spirit of Israel, which wishes to rise up."

This time Wiener's wrath had a direct target: Rabbi Dr Isaac Breuer, the leader of the ultra-Orthodox political movement Agudas-Yisroel.⁵¹

The Expressionist Generation

Wiener's main interest during his last two years in Switzerland was neither his sisters' education nor the family business, nor even his university study—which was to remain uncompleted—but Hebrew and German literature. He belonged to the “expressionist generation” of Central European culture, which was born in the 1880s and 1890s and came of age on the eve of the great cataclysms of 1914–21. Drawing on the philosophical ideas of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, theorists of expressionism stressed sharp oppositions between extreme concepts and irresolvable conflicts between the human personality and its environment, playing up feelings of fear, anxiety, and despair. Expressionist artists and writers sought new imagery and metaphors to communicate their sense of chaos and destruction. Religious symbolism, often in radically revised forms, served as an important inspiration for the expressionist imagination.

One of the core conceptual oppositions that defined expressionist aesthetics was the dichotomy between abstraction and realism. It was introduced and developed by the Swiss art historian Wilhelm Worringer in his doctoral dissertation, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (*Abstraction and Empathy*, 1908). This text went through numerous editions and became one of the key theoretical foundations of the emerging expressionist movement. Worringer “was later to be one of the most perceptive interpreters of expressionism, a term he may indeed have invented, and which he defined in an article of 1919 [...] as ‘an art in which mind (*Geist*) declares its autonomy over against the experience of nature.’”⁵²

Worringer argued that since antiquity, Western art, particularly in France and Italy, had been dominated by the principle of realistic empathy, which he described as “objectified self-enjoyment.” He claimed that “[t]o enjoy aesthetically means to enjoy myself in a sensuous object diverse from myself, to empathize myself into it.”⁵³ The opposite principle, which Worringer called “the urge to abstraction,” had an equally

distinguished pedigree but expressed itself predominantly among the oriental and Germanic peoples, who had a different spiritual disposition than the Romance cultures. Worringer explains these contrasting urges as follows:

Whereas the precondition for the urge to empathy is a happy pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the phenomena of the external world, the urge to abstraction is the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in a man by the phenomena of the outside world; in a religious respect it corresponds to a strongly transcendental tinge to all notions. We might describe this state as an immense spiritual dread of space.⁵⁴

Inherent in abstract art was the “urge for redemption.”⁵⁵ Elucidating Worringer’s somewhat obscure language, Roy Pascal explains that by “redemption” Worringer meant “release from the burden of organic life, from individuation itself, a release imaged in the geometric anti-natural forms of archaic primitive art.”⁵⁶ Thus, the notion of redemption bridges the gap between the primitive and the apocalyptic. Abstract art acquires an apocalyptic quality, primitive creativity becomes linked to ultimate redemption, and pre-history meets post-history, with ordinary history and its “empathic” realist forms of expression sandwiched in between.

In his classification of the national cultures of different peoples according to their inclination toward abstraction or empathy, Worringer placed the Jews together with the Germanic peoples in the “oriental” camp, in contrast to the French, Italians, Greeks, and other “occidentals.” This classification reflects a privileged place for the Jews and Judaism in the expressionist mindset. For instance, Kasimir Edschmid, a leading German (non-Jewish) exponent of expressionism, likened the historic mission of the Jewish people in his essay “Jüdische Dichter” (“Jewish Poets,” 1917) to yeast, building on the New Testament parable in which Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to a portion of yeast that leavens a large amount of flour (Matthew 13:33; Luke 13:20–21):

God threw the people out so that they would sour, whip up, and intervene in the coarse dough of the dull Western peoples, be martyrs for grand ideas and a new storm of spiritual and artistic tensions. But he

also gave them the most marvelous tragedy: to be incapable of forgetting that they were only sent away from a beautiful homeland to fulfill a difficult task, but that, in effect, they would never lose their longing to return and their own purpose and would one day see it confirmed.⁵⁷

Edschmid viewed the exilic condition of the Jews as a positive factor that enhanced their creativity. It was quite common among German-speaking expressionists, Jews and non-Jews alike, to regard the Jews as a kind of spiritual messenger, whose mission was to plant the seeds of transcendental idealism in the virgin soil of the materialistic civilization of the West. Albert Ehrenstein (1886–1950), one of the most prominent Jewish representatives of Austrian expressionism, typified this outlook, calling Jews “the explosive material of European humanity, strong as an eagle.”⁵⁸ The Jew was valued for being different, for mixing a pinch of the oriental ferment into the inert occidental culture. This view was diametrically opposed to the old Herderian theory that had been appropriated by so many Zionists and assimilationists alike, both of whom rejected the idea that Jews could and should realize their oriental identity in Europe.

Now the exilic status of the Jews and their otherness were not only accepted, but also celebrated. Jews needed neither to assimilate and become European, nor leave Europe and build their national home elsewhere. On the contrary, they had to preserve their alien nature and revitalize European culture. The Jew was valued for representing the principle of abstraction and not empathy. Needless to say, this school of thought rejected the drive to acculturation of the majority of German-speaking Jews on the eve of World War I.

The orientalist discourse was becoming prominent in German culture at the turn of the twentieth century. As Donna Heizer attests in her study of the impact of orientalism on the formation of the identity of German Jews, “much of this Orientalist literature was produced by Jewish authors and in some cases even by Christian authors of Jewish heritage.”⁵⁹ One example will illustrate the paramount importance of orientalism for the expressionist generation of German Jews. The popular German-Jewish writer Jakob Wassermann exploited the opposition between two kinds of Jews, the negative “Europeans” and the positive “Orientals,” to criticize the assimilationist German-Jewish intelligentsia.

In an essay titled “The Jew as an Oriental” (“Der Jude als Orientale”), written in the form of an open letter to Martin Buber and published in the seminal collection of essays *Vom Judentum* (*On Judaism*, 1913) in Prague under the imprint of the Bar Kochba association, he proclaimed: “The Jew as a European, as cosmopolitan, is a *littérateur*; the Jew as Oriental, not in the ethnographic but in the mythical sense, as someone who already understands the *transformative power* towards the present as a condition of being, can be a creator.”⁶⁰

Wassermann further elaborated on the difference between the categories of *littérateur* and the creator: “It is the contrast between withering and bearing fruit, between solitariness and belonging, between anarchy and tradition.”⁶¹ The oriental Jew is a creative spirit with roots in a genuine tradition, as opposed to modern European Jews, impotent imitators of foreign cultures: “He is free; they are slaves. He is true; they lie. He knows his sources, he lives with his mother, he rests and creates, those are the eternal wanderers who cannot be transformed.”⁶² Yet Wassermann had to concede that at present the oriental Jew was merely a “symbolic figure,” an idea rather than a reality. But it did not follow that this archetype had no power. “Is it not ideas that produce phenomena?” Wassermann asked rhetorically at the end of his essay.⁶³ Like Worringer, Wassermann ascribed the metaphoric notion of the orient to both the past and the future, tradition and redemption, whereas Europe signified the unredeemed present. To reunite with his true self and move into the future, the contemporary European Jew must reclaim his oriental roots. This return would be both an end and a beginning, a turning point in Jewish history.

Speaking of expressionism in the Austrian context, Armin Wallas describes it as “the field of tension between the strengthening of new, irrational systems of thought, most notably those of nationalism and the newer (racialized) anti-Semitism since the 1880s, and the various Jewish attempts to respond to this conflict-ridden situation.”⁶⁴ Wallas’s anthology of Austrian Jewish expressionist writing includes fifty-five authors, most of whom were born in the 1880s or 1890s in the Habsburg Empire. Although Wiener’s German poetry was not selected for this anthology, it falls under its scope both thematically and formally. Wiener specifically addressed the problem of the Jewish voice in German expressionism in

two essays that were included in Gustav Krojanker's important anthology *Juden in der deutschen Literatur* (*Jews in German Literature*, 1922).

A major outlet for Wiener's German publications was the monthly journal *Der Jude* (1916–28). Founded and edited by Martin Buber, it was one of the most important periodicals in modern Jewish culture. Reflecting a wide variety of scholarly and cultural opinions, the journal followed the general line of cultural Zionism, with a special interest in East European Jewry and in modern Yiddish and Hebrew cultures. Wiener's first publication in this journal was a review of a collection of Jewish tales, *Der Born Judas* (*The Well of Judah*, 1916), by the famous Hebrew-Yiddish-German author Bin Gorion (Micha Joseph Berdyczewski, 1865–1921). At the beginning, Wiener proclaims that storytelling (*Erzählen*) is one of the central commandments of Judaism, and it has an educational, liturgical, and mystical significance. Every act of telling and retelling a story reunites the narrator and his audience with the mythological roots of national existence. Any change that the narrator makes to the text to adjust it to the tastes of his audience inevitably distorts its original mythological meaning and turns it into an artistic creation: "A poet may revise and shape a tale as he likes, but if he is a collector, he must keep only to the text in its most original form."⁶⁵ The difference between the original and its revision becomes especially pronounced when one tries to adapt an oriental source to occidental taste. Every revision lacks beauty and depth in comparison to the original. Moreover, by putting texts from different periods and places together in one collection, the collector creates a new network of relations between images, themes, and motifs, which projects new meanings onto the old texts. Wiener therefore questions Bin Gorion's principle of textual arrangement according to motifs and suggests instead a chronological or genre organization of material.

Echoing Worringer's dichotomy between the expressive character of oriental abstraction and the descriptive character of occidental empathy, Wiener suggests that the genre of the *agadah*—the Talmudic or midrashic story or parable—was born when the ancient oriental Hebrew "ecstatic visionary prophetism" came into contact for the very first time with the "contemplative epic cultures" of the West. Over time, the western "epic" influence grew stronger, and the Jewish tale

gradually lost its “ecstatic vision.”⁶⁶ The “apocalyptic” images and motifs underwent transformations and were incorporated into the new genre of legends, which Bin Gorion sometimes insensitively selects for his anthology instead of the authentic originals. Wiener does not deny aesthetic value to those later adaptations, but he claims that their beauty is “decidedly un-Jewish” (*durchaus unjüdisch*). In the end, however, Wiener expresses his full appreciation of Bin Gorion’s magisterial effort, conceding that any translation from the Jewish original into a European language is bound to be a compromise. He concludes his review with a rhetorical question, foreshadowing the course of his future work: “Oh when will it be possible for such books to appear in *our* language?”—but does not specify what “our” language is.⁶⁷

In her historical study of *Der Jude*, Eleonore Lappin describes Wiener’s positions as “less scholarly than ideological.” She traces Wiener’s view of Judaism back to Buber, but notes that Wiener developed more rigid formal criteria for the “authenticity” of Jewish literature. These criteria forced him to exclude a large array of ancient Hebrew narrative texts as a product of the alien influence of other cultures. Thus Wiener “narrowed the area of authentic creativity to the *Erlebnismystik*, in accordance with the literary taste of his time.”⁶⁸ *Erlebnismystik*—the “mysticism of experience”—was a central concept in Buber’s existential religious philosophy. One can also hear in Wiener’s position a rejection of the cultural program—proposed by Herder and accepted by some of the *maskilim*, as well as Zionists—to re-create ancient Hebrew literature in accordance with contemporary European taste. Hence in his very first critical publication, Wiener already espouses an uncompromisingly rigid criterion for the authenticity of the “Jewish spirit,” against which he tries to measure the German-Jewish culture of the day.

Wiener regarded Jewish creativity in non-Jewish languages as a compromise resulting from the mixed, “oriental-occidental” nature of European Jews. Methodologically, he tried to separate the two elements in his critical analysis of their work and distill the specifically “Jewish” element, which he identified with passion, pathos, and mystical revelation. In a review published in the Zionist almanac *Jerubbaal*, Wiener discussed the collection *Hebräische Balladen* (*Hebrew Ballads*, 1913) by the great German-Jewish poet Else Lasker-Schüler (1869–1945). Four years

later this review was reprinted—though without the original dedication to Meir’s brother Schachna—in the collection *Juden in der deutschen Literatur* (*Jews in German Literature*, 1922), edited by the Zionist journalist Gustav Krojanker, which also contained Wiener’s article on the Prague expressionist poet Paul Adler (1878–1946). Unlike Lasker-Schüler, whose poetry became part of the German literary canon, Adler’s work has been largely forgotten.

Wiener begins his discussion of Lasker-Schüler’s poetry with a question: why do critics perceive her poetry as “particularly Jewish” (*besonders jüdisch*)?⁶⁹ Using as his main point of reference Goethe’s notes to *West-östlicher Divan*, in which Goethe elaborates on the difference between the oriental and occidental poetic traditions, Wiener classifies Lasker-Schüler’s work as oriental, that is, symbolist and romantic rather than realist and descriptive. The oriental mind is introverted, it is trying to reach down to the hidden core beneath the surface, which can be achieved by focusing on the essential and internal and disregarding the accidental and external.⁷⁰ In contrast, the occidental mind aims to conquer the world by means of accumulated, extensive knowledge about its external manifestations. This essential opposition between the oriental and occidental mindsets expresses itself in the difference between the respective poetic systems. An occidental simile, metaphor, or symbol must be “concrete” (*sachlich*): it must represent particular qualities that are related to the real object. For the republication of his essay, Wiener added a footnote to this point that claimed that the oriental metaphorical style could be found in Western literature only in mystical poetry. This exception could be explained by the universal erotic nature of mystical experience, which produced similar metaphoric language across different cultures.⁷¹ The oriental poet is not bothered by the representational inadequacy of his expression, or by the practical uselessness of his poetic work; it suffices for him to express just one quality, whereas his occidental colleague must worry about the adequacy of his description for the entire object.⁷² This is why the oriental style often looks “hyperbolic” to the Western eye. Even Goethe, Wiener argued, was not capable of appreciating the distinctive feature of oriental poetics and regarded its increasing “inclination towards abstraction” (*Neigung zur Abstraktion*) as a sign of degradation.⁷³

Wiener's examples of the German incapacity to appreciate that special "abstract" quality of oriental poetry ranged from Luther's German Bible to the celebrated Viennese critic and journalist Karl Kraus, whom Wiener somewhat pejoratively characterized as "ein Pamphletist." Kraus missed this quality in the works of Heine, whereas Luther was incapable of understanding the non-figurative imagery (*Unanschaulichkeit der Bilder*) of the prophets, which he tried to regiment in his translation. This biblical abstract imagination was at the root of Lasker-Schüler's poetry, which Wiener regarded as more Jewish than Heine's. He described her "Hebrew ballads" as "miniatures tightly interlocked, rewritings of biblical characters reduced to the bare soul, external events serving as symbols of the inner experience." Lasker-Schüler reshapes biblical figures and events in such a way that they "become timeless symbols, removed from anything incidentally individualistic. Here we also have the meaning of a symbol, truly Jewish, in the first place a symbol for something higher, inexpressible in human and divine experience."⁷⁴

Although Wiener found Lasker-Schüler's biblical "book flowers" (*Buchblumen*) delightful, he was critical of what he identified as a "primitive Catholic" personification of God.⁷⁵ For Wiener, this weakness pointed to the greater problem of dilettantism that affected the creativity of many contemporary poets. Dilettante artists could express their personal experience but were incapable of subordinating that expression to the rigid requirements of form. Thus, they produced an eclectic mixture of the oriental and occidental "spirits" that imperiled the very existence of art as a formal structure. Lasker-Schüler's poetry conveyed her "passive" experience but was not strong enough to "pave its own way to understanding."⁷⁶ In conclusion, Wiener pronounced his diagnosis of the spiritual malaise of his time: "a tragic dilettantism" that prevented many talented and diligent artists from expressing their experience in the strict and economic forms of oriental literature.⁷⁷ Contemporary artists were capable of experiencing reality in an "oriental" way but did not have sufficient mastery of form. Wiener was sympathetic to the efforts of his generation to create a new German-Jewish poetic idiom. But his critique of Lasker-Schüler's poetry was largely informed by his idiosyncratic and rigidly prescriptive notion of "genuinely oriental" Jewish poetry. Donna Heizer notes: "Although Wiener clearly

accepts standard, European stereotypes about the differences between Western and Eastern art (and therefore devalues the latter, even as she [*sic*—Heizer believes Meir Wiener was a woman] sings its praises), what she finds most offensive is the attempt to integrate the two.” This “strange position,” in Heizer’s view, “mirrors exactly the kind of identity crisis experienced by Jewish-German authors.”⁷⁸

Wiener’s observations regarding the “eclectic” nature of Lasker-Schüler’s poetic orientalism anticipate the views of some contemporary scholars. Ritchie Robertson remarks: “Lasker-Schüler constructed Jewishness from various components, among which literary Orientalism was prominent.” He notes that her “Orient” is “composite” and points out the artificial character of her own invented language, which she called “Asiatic.” It served her “as an imaginative means of overcoming racial and gender polarities.” Oriental fantasy was for Lasker-Schüler a way of escape into her private world, separated from bourgeois reality: “By linking her exotic Orientalism firmly to the Old Testament, she creates a new, primitive kind of Jew, the ‘wild Jew’ or ‘Hebrew.’”⁷⁹ This imaginary return of the modernist poet to the “wild Hebrew” is a private gesture rather than a public action in the true spirit of the Hebrew prophets.

In his essay on Paul Adler, Wiener further developed these critical ideas about expressionism. Like Wiener, Adler was interested both in Jewish mysticism and socialism. Wiener discusses three of Adler’s books, all of which were published during the war by Hellerauer Verlag at the progressive artistic colony of Hellerau near Dresden, where Adler lived from 1912 to 1921. These works represented the peak of Adler’s literary activity: the mythological story “Elohim” (“Gods,” 1914), the novella “Nämlich” (“Namely,” 1915), and the novel *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*, 1916).⁸⁰ Some of Wiener’s ideas at that time, such as the notion of the autonomous and antinomian character of religious experience, can also be found in Adler’s works. Karl Otten, one of the last survivors of the expressionist generation, who devoted much time and effort to reintroducing the legacy of Jewish expressionists into post-war German literary discourse, described Adler’s works as an experimental exploration of the condition of humanity in the age of modernity and technological progress, which called for a return from the “strangling

grip of technocrats” to the “primordial consciousness of the divine community, to the energy field of our mythical European capability, which consists of faith in the human mission.”⁸¹

Wiener saw in Adler’s works an expression of the “syncretic-Jewish mythos” of creation that was still unencumbered by an “abstract-ethical” dimension. Adler’s God reveals himself in silence and emptiness, rather than in precepts and commands.⁸² The simple and economic German style of Adler’s version of the creation story, “Elohim,” echoed the “pathos and power of the biblical Hebrew.” The novel *Die Zauberflöte*, as opposed to “Elohim,” belongs to the romantic tradition, which Wiener identified with dilettantism and eclecticism. To understand Adler’s intention, Wiener argued, one had to read his book not as literature (*Dichtung*) but as a vision “of the Jewish sort, which does not contemplate the external quality of a form, but rather the inner life of things, living and suffering along with their *sense*, their *meaning*.”⁸³ But Adler’s vision, like the works of the majority of Jewish writers in the German language, suffered from “impotence of representation” (*Ohnmacht im Darstellen*).

Elaborating on the points he made in his essay on Lasker-Schüler, Wiener formulated his critical assessment of the entire expressionist generation of German-Jewish writers:

Their stance is weak, their grip is feeble. They lack a sense of the agency of external things. Just when they succeed in forcing themselves, with great effort, to be pensive, they are startled and disturbed by the spirit. They may have poetic sensibilities, but what they produce are hardly poems.[...] There is harmony in these people, but, unlike Westerners, this is not what compels them to act. Rather it is dissonance. The expression cannot contain more than the impression and for Jews only the meaning of things makes an impression, but art is not concerned with the meaning of things. Thus, for me, Expressionism is a degeneration into one-sided Jewishness (*eine Entartung ins Einseitig-Jüdische*).⁸⁴

Wiener concluded pessimistically that an authentic German-Jewish art was not possible. Jewish artists, the “grandchildren of prophets,” inherited from their forefathers a capacity for spiritual vision but were unable to find an adequate form of expression for that vision in the

German language. Any attempt to achieve a harmonious synthesis between the oriental and the occidental spirit was bound to produce only dissonance.

Failed Messiahs as Poetic Heroes

In his Conclusion to his anthology of German-Jewish modernist writing, Karl Otten draws attention to the higher intensity of spiritual experience in the writing of German-Jewish authors. Their style “often reaches beyond the boundaries of the imaginable to the realm of myth, mysticism and God’s absolute solitude,” while in their works “they convey the experience (*Erlebnis*) that allows readers to divine how God works in them and how they make God better than he pretends to be.”⁸⁵ Otten’s observation offers some clues for understanding Wiener’s only published collection of poetry, *Messias*, which was dedicated “with admiration” to Martin Buber. Wiener composed these three narrative poems about three messianic historical characters during his student days in Switzerland between 1916 and 1917. They were published in book form in 1920 by the prominent German-Jewish firm R. Löwit Verlag (Vienna and Berlin) but received practically no critical response.

The hero of the first poem is Diogo Pires (1500–1532), better known as Shlomo Molcho—a Portuguese descendant of Jews who was born into the Christian faith and made a successful career in the legal profession but chose to return to Judaism. He traveled around Turkey and the Middle East preaching an imminent messianic redemption; but upon his return to Europe, he was arrested and executed on the orders of Emperor Charles V. In Wiener’s poem, Diogo is driven to the Jewish people by a quest that leads, through rejection of worldly beauty, knowledge, and pleasures, to his eventual self-destruction. He sees in death the ultimate fulfillment of life and tries to act it out as a protest against the divine order. First he attempts to offer his services to Satan:

Little brother Satan, shall I blaspheme Him?
My sin is service to God.

[*Brüderlein Satan, soll ich Ihn lästern?*
Meine Sünde ist Gottesdienst.]⁸⁶



Figure 4. Book cover of *Messias. Drei Dichtungen* by Meir Wiener.
Vienna: R. Löwit, 1920.

But when Satan rejects his offer and flies away, Diogo turns toward the world's ultimate outcasts, the Jews. In a dream, he walks down a dark road with a group of tired and desolate people, among whom he recognizes Jesus, whom he tries to rescue, but in vain. In another dream, he sees himself arrested and brought to execution for secretly celebrating a Jewish Passover in a cellar—strangely enough, with a company of bishops and priests. His final apocalyptic vision relates to the future of Europe:

The time will come when the men of the West,
suddenly reflective, will lift their eyes to the cross,
and will ask with eyes wide open, amazed: Are you, man bowed in
agony,
the ghost of our Spirit, blood of our blood?
[...]
Now we have recognized you: Jew! Jew!

*[Da wird kommen die Zeit, daß die Männer des Abendlandes
Sich plötzlich besinnend die Augen zum Kreuz erheben,
Weit offenen staunenden Auges fragen: Bist du Geist von unserem
Geist?
Bist du Blut von unserem Blut, schmerzgekrümmter Mann?
[...]
Nun, wir haben dich erkannt: Jude! Jude!]*⁸⁷

The Western world will eventually wake up to the fact that its values have nothing to do with that Jewish man who preached humility and submissiveness and will chase him away from his place of honor on the cross:

Great laughter will ring out
among all the peoples of the West.
They will stand on the country roads,
to see how he, expelled, is shamed in his disgrace.

*[Da wird ertönen ein großes Lachen
Bei allen Völkern des Abendlandes.
Sie werden sich hinstellen auf die Landstraßen,
Zu sehen, wie er vertrieben sich schämt in seiner Schmach.]*⁸⁸

After that, Jesus will come down from all of the world's crucifixes, take them all upon his back, and join his wandering people:

They will recognize their brother, take pity on the castoff.

In horror, they will throw the useless burden of despised crosses into the abyss.

Then Jesus will sigh with relief and shake off the bad dream.

[Sie werden erkennen ihren Bruder, des Verstoßenen sich erbarmen.

Die unnütze Last verschmächter Kreuze

Werfen sie mit Grauen in den Abgrund.

*Da wird Jesu erleichtert seufzen, abschütteln einen bösen Traum.]*⁸⁹

Freed from the superfluous burden of the Western cultural heritage, Jesus will perform the routine Jewish daily prayer ritual of putting phylacteries on his forehead and left arm and will follow his people on their eternal journey.

The second poem takes its cue from the Talmudic tale about King Herod (73?-4 B.C.E.), who killed all the sages out of fear that they would challenge the legitimacy of his rule, sparing only the life of Baba ben Buta, whom he blinded but left alive to serve as his counselor (Talmud Bavli, *Bava Batra*, 3b-4a). In Wiener's poem, God appears to Herod in a dream and accuses the king of blinding him by blinding his servant. Herod, fearing that he may have hurt God, asks Baba ben Buta to interpret his troublesome vision.⁹⁰ Herod says he had blamed God for his sins, trying to present himself as a mere instrument in God's hands: "Haven't you, O God, commanded me to sin?/You have created me crooked."⁹¹ But this argument has backfired, and Herod no longer knows who he is, a mighty king or an everlasting slave, a disgusting worm. As a great sinner, Herod had felt close to God: "Yes, I recognized you, my God, in my sins."⁹² Indeed, his sins were part of his service to God: "How can I be a sinner, when I am your servant?"⁹³ But now he feels that he has personally offended God and asks the sage to curse him as a slave. However, Baba ben Buta refuses, and with the words "How can I curse him, who is so beloved by God?"⁹⁴ he humbly kisses the hem of the king's robe. This expression of humility terrifies Herod even more. In the original story, Baba ben Buta told Herod that to atone for his sins against the sages, he was to rebuild the temple, but

this motif is absent in Wiener's poetic rendition. The Herod of Wiener's poem, himself formerly a slave of Gentile origin, is terrified not so much by his punishment, but by the mysterious nature of the God of Israel and by his people, who did not seek power and glory and were content with their status as the everlasting slave.

The hero of the final and longest poem in the book is the legendary fifteenth-century Spanish Kabbalist Joseph della Reina.⁹⁵ The legend of Joseph della Reina, who attempts to defeat Satan by burning incense before him and thereby bringing about messianic redemption, but is found guilty of idolatry and dies, was a popular trope in Yiddish and Hebrew literature. Several Yiddish authors turned to this topic at the beginning of their literary careers, among them Wiener's fellow *galitsianer* Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes, who was later to become a famous Hebrew writer under his pen name Agnon (1888–1970). His literary debut was a Yiddish ballad titled “Rabi Yoysef della Reyna,” which appeared in July 1903 in the weekly newspaper *Yidishes vokhenblatt*, published in the Galician town of Stanisławów, not far from his native Buczacz. The American scholar Arnold (Avraham) Band, who first reprinted this poem, notes its similarity in style and form to Y. L. Peretz's ballad “Monish.”⁹⁶ Following the tradition of Peretz and the *maskilim*, Agnon treated this mystical topic ironically, portraying the grand Kabbalist as a hapless Jew who fell victim to a rather simple trick of Satan and his female associate Lilith. When Joseph della Reina captures these two archenemies of humanity and is about to deliver them to heaven, to the great jubilation of all the angels and the Messiah, Satan and Lilith ask him to allow them to revive their failing spirits with incense. Having breathed in the incense, they escape, and the disappointed celestial host have to retreat back to heaven:

Messiah, go back to your resting place!
Trembling spreads through heaven.
Reb Joseph breaks into tears . . .
And the angels weep, too.

[*Mosheikh, tsurik in dayan ri!*
Tit es in himl a tsiter.
Reb Yoysef tseveynt zikh . . .
Oykh di melokhom veynen biter.]⁹⁷

Wiener departs from the maskilic tradition of treating the messianic figure of Joseph della Reina ironically. He presents his story as an expressionist parable of the tragic failure of human rebellion against the existing world order. In the opening scene of Wiener's poem, Joseph tries to summon the spiritual strength to reveal himself as the messiah of his generation. But as his entreaties to God remain unanswered, he challenges God and calls on him to reply, causing a great uproar in heaven. Joseph argues with God about Satan, who promptly appears, greeting Joseph and promising his help in the messianic endeavor. Now God has to admit defeat: "Right is overpowered, your will shall be my will!"⁹⁸ Having secured the cooperation of both God and Satan, Joseph prepares himself and his people for his messianic triumph, whereas all other nations tremble in the expectation of the Day of Judgment.⁹⁹ At this moment, Satan tempts Joseph by asking whether he really wants to purge the world of evil, which, after all, is the root of his protest and the inspiration of his rebellion. To resolve this painful dilemma, Joseph tries to sacrifice Satan, but is unable to lift his hand against him. Satan triumphs, Joseph is defeated. In Wiener's treatment, Joseph tries to overcome both God and Satan, who run the world jointly. His messianic attempt is doomed from the start because it is rooted in the same world order that he aspires to overthrow.

According to Wiener's friend Eugen Hoefflich, Wiener was extremely anxious about the reception of *Messias*: "In the meantime, he has become terribly aggressive, and at such moments he has no time for anything, only keeps insisting that *Messias* is his best and most important work."¹⁰⁰ This kind of behavior seems fully in accordance with the expressionist norm, which was in almost every respect "abnormal" by the bourgeois standard of normality. Wiener's confrontation with his father and his negative attitude to commerce, his interest in mystical experience and oriental cultures, and his style of writing and living have many parallels in contemporary culture, especially in the subculture created by the Jews of the former Habsburg Empire. For the theorists of expressionism, abstraction was not a theoretical or aesthetic notion, but a mystical concept akin to divine revelation. As one of the leading Austrian theorists of expressionism, Paul Hatvani (born Paul Hirsch,

1892–1973), proclaimed in his programmatic essay “Versuch über den Expressionismus” (“Note on Expressionism,” 1917):

The path towards the essential (*Elementaren*) is abstraction. The most rigorous abstraction leads to the element: it goes beyond form, destroying it and arriving at the origin of its contents. One cannot say that Expressionism places content before form. But it also transmutes form into content. Thus, here also something external is internalized, with the element triumphing over the preceding chaos.¹⁰¹

The conquest of chaos by the creative individual spirit—the imitation of creation in art and literature—was a central theme of expressionist writing. For Wiener, as for Paul Adler and Paul Hatvani, literary creativity was essentially a mystical process that included as its key components: creation, revelation, and redemption. But intensity of personal experience alone was not sufficient for producing authentic and powerful art, as Wiener argued in his critical essays. His preoccupation as a critic with the problem of eclectic “dilettantism” in expressionist Jewish writing was also reflected in his own poetic attempts. The heroes of his poetry—Diogo Pires, Herod, and Joseph della Reina—each in his own way resemble the expressionist generation. They have the ability, the will, and the ambition to bring about redemption, but they fail to accomplish their mission because they cannot rein in their power of imagination, which ultimately destroys their determination. They are unable to perform because they cannot submit their power of expression to the rules of creation.

Wiener’s Dissatisfaction with the German-Jewish Cultural Synthesis

Cracow, with its “artistic and intellectual developments that both converged and contrasted with those of the contemporary Viennese scene,” occupied a special place on the multicultural map of the Habsburg Empire, as Larry Wolff explains in his study of fin-de-siècle Polish culture. Cracow’s smaller size and more conservative atmosphere in comparison with Vienna produced different intergenerational dynamics: “the intellectual revolt of turn of the century Cracow pitted itself

not against the vulnerable paternalist ideals of liberalism in retreat but rather against a conservative traditionalism that had not yet seriously encountered the social, economic, and ideological challenges of bourgeois liberalism."¹⁰² The secure middle-class status ensured by the business acumen of his grandfather and father enabled young Wiener to pursue cultural and intellectual interests similar to those of his Polish Catholic counterparts. Like them, he rebelled against the religious traditionalism and political conservatism of his father but was unable to break with the bourgeois lifestyle and remained dependent on him financially, which aggravated the situation.¹⁰³ In Cracow, he received a solid educational background in Jewish culture, as well as in the classical and modern German and Polish literatures. In his later Yiddish fiction and memoirs, published in the Soviet Union, Wiener would create a series of vivid images of the Cracow of his youth that would combine nostalgia, sarcasm, and sharp ideological critique of his class.

The family's move to Vienna on the eve of World War I brought Wiener into a different environment, but one which he seemed to enter with great ease. If Cracow was still living largely in a pre-liberal age, the Viennese intelligentsia had already had to face a crisis of liberal ideology. As Carl Schorske explains, "the disaster of liberalism's collapse [...] transmuted the aesthetic heritage into a culture of sensitive nerves, uneasy hedonism, and often outright anxiety. To add to the complexity, the Austrian liberal intelligentsia did not fully abandon the earlier strand in its tradition, the moralistic-scientific culture of law."¹⁰⁴ It is not surprising therefore that Wiener admired Hofmannsthal, who, according to Schorske, combined Habsburg traditionalism with a "daring quest for a new politics of sublimation."¹⁰⁵

Although Wiener did not share the experience of the Viennese liberal intelligentsia, its crisis had a powerful and lasting effect on the formation of his personality. Rebelling against his father's traditionalism, he embraced radical views on arts and politics but remained conservative in his personal taste and manners, even acting like a dictator when it came to his younger sisters' behavior. The conflict between the son and the father was not only part of everyday life in the Wiener family, but also a formative myth of the generation that came of age at the turn of the twentieth century across Eastern and Central Europe. This myth

was analyzed in the classic studies of Freud and artistically re-created in the works of Kafka, both of whom belonged to the same milieu as Meir Wiener: the German-speaking, urban, Jewish middle class of the Habsburg Empire. Like Kafka and some other Prague Jews, Wiener was sympathetic to Zionism in its “spiritual” (Ahad Ha’am) or “cultural” (Buber) variety, which offered a modern reinterpretation of the traditional Jewish legacy, but was less interested in the political agenda of national state building. In terms of his erudition and concerns, Wiener was one of the most “Jewish” authors of the German-Jewish literature of his generation. His first-hand knowledge of Judaism made him skeptical of the expressionist promise of a new German-Jewish cultural synthesis, which he regarded as one-sided and inauthentic. His rigid views did not help him to gain popularity as a Jewish writer in German, and his quest for authenticity eventually led him to abandon German and embrace Yiddish as an alternative to both Zionist Hebrew and assimilationist German cultures. Wiener’s fascination with communism, as well as his interest in mysticism, was also not untypical in the expressionist generation. What makes Wiener unusual even among this highly eccentric group of artists and intellectuals is not merely his broad erudition and diverse interests, but his determination to carry out his ideas in practice.

Two Politics and Scholarship in Post-War Vienna

Wiener on Anti-Semitism and Zionism

In one of Wiener's first essays, "Hass und Verachtung" ("Hatred and Contempt," 1918), composed while he was still in Switzerland, Wiener revisited the problem of anti-Semitism. After a brief survey of anti-Semitic accusations, intended to reveal their irrational and self-contradictory nature but also their universality, he asks the perennial question about the meaning of hatred of Jews.¹ He begins by noting that understanding the reasons behind anti-Semitism was important in the first place for Jews themselves so that they could combat their own self-hatred and self-contempt. Hatred presupposed some degree of recognition and even respect, but Jews were always both hated *and* despised, even in ancient times when they still had their own state. Why? In general, Wiener argued, rejection of the "other" was a natural reaction, and the deeper the difference, the stronger the rejection. But Jews were rejected even when they attempted, no matter how successfully, to fit in with their environment. From this Wiener concluded that the duty of the Jews was to enhance and promote (*steigern und fördern*) their otherness and that host nations also should encourage Jews to be different. Wiener did not deny the possible usefulness of reciprocal cultural influences, but he argued that the alien character of such influences should be clearly recognized by the recipients, because the unconscious adoption of foreign "essences" and "spirits" could be disastrous. Echoing Herder, Wiener proclaimed that the most sacred ideal of any nation, as well as of any individual, was "the full evolution of its own nature towards its destination."²

Wiener was concerned not with popular anti-Semitism, but with its intellectual variety in the works of the best contemporary European scholars and writers, such as Treitschke and Burckhardt, Sombart and Renan. In Wiener's view, Europe had not truly accepted the Jewish moral teaching it had received in the form of Christianity. The European outlook remained essentially pagan, exemplified by the glorification of war and murder in European culture. Writing for a German publication in the third year of the First World War, Wiener must have come across as a radical pacifist when he exclaimed: "Will it ever occur to anyone in Europe to hold warmongers in contempt?"³

Indeed, the glorification of the war had created, "pitilessly and forever . . . one of the deepest rifts" between European Jews and Gentiles. The Gentiles' incomprehension of the Jews' innate aversion to violence, murder, and war was also at the root of all anti-Jewish sentiments. It reflected the fact that European cultural development lagged behind the Jews, who had gone through their "age of strife and thievery" (*Kampf- und Raubperiode*) much earlier than the Europeans.⁴ A similar view had been expressed eight years earlier by the Russian-Jewish writer, scholar, and activist S. An-sky (Shloyme-Zanvl Rappoport, 1863–1920), who argued, in his seminal essay "Jewish Folk Creativity" (1909), that Jewish folklore was free from heroic motifs and the glorification of physical strength because the Jew had adopted the idea of monotheism and abandoned paganism several thousand years earlier than Europeans.⁵ Fifteen years later in Kiev, Wiener will argue fiercely against An-sky's ideas as an expression of "bourgeois nationalism."

In Wiener's view, Christianity, which Europe acquired as part of the Roman cultural legacy, presented the Europeans with a monumental and unresolved problem of assimilating the Jewish element in that religion. The struggle within European culture between the two alien components, Roman and Jewish, had produced the most marvelous results, but also left their culture heterogeneous. Without those powerful foreign influences, the European peoples would have developed at a slower pace, but the result might have been more uniform, without the hybrid biblical language of Luther, the choral music for the Mass, or the paintings on biblical themes. The Germans would then have had their own "German god" instead of the Jewish one, and their ethics would

have been free of internal faultiness. But, contrary to the champions of cultural authenticity, this nationalist utopia was not possible, because in the end all cultures are formed as a result of mixing and crossbreeding. The best European minds—such as Goethe and Nietzsche—suffered from that gap between the natural essence of Europe and its religion, imposed upon but not appropriated by Europe, in the same way as the Jew suffers from the incompatibility between his nature and his environment.⁶ The growing appreciation of “distinct individuality” (*Eigenart*) in modern culture is accompanied by mounting anguish and anxiety. European anti-Semitism produces unconscious self-hatred of European Christianity, which cannot forgive itself for its Jewish origins: “As long as a single spark of Judaism still glimmers in European Christianity, they will keep forcing us to pay dearly for the crucifixion of ‘their’ Jesus.”⁷

Turning to the predicament of the Jews, Wiener asked what the notion of “distinct individuality” meant for them. He questioned the adequacy of the concept of nationalism because it was not suitable to the Jewish situation in Europe: “we are no longer pure orientals, the occidental lives in us just as strongly; two thousand years do not pass in the life of a nation without leaving a trace; we form a new type, the oriental-occidental one: European Jews. We take up Europe in a Jewish way, but to adapt to Europe has become our most urgent need.” Assimilation to the European way was natural and inevitable, but to preserve their “eternal existence,” Jews must remain true to their inner self and retain their “spiritual structure” even in their assimilated state.⁸

In this essay, therefore, Wiener already had formulated the concerns that would occupy him for the rest of his life in both his scholarly and literary work. What is a national character? How is it preserved? In what ways and forms does it express itself? And, above all—what is the condition that secures the eternal existence of the Jewish people? Is it given or is it achieved as a result of conscious effort? Wiener’s approach to these questions, especially his methodology and conceptual language, varied greatly during the course of his life. His point of departure was the cultural Zionism of Ahad Ha’am and Martin Buber, but he grew disenchanted with its gradualism. He wanted to keep both the “oriental-Jewish,” and the “occidental-European,” halves of his cultural legacy, but he also wanted a radical social transformation.

Wiener outlined his vision of Zionism in the programmatic essay “Goals of Zionism” (“Ziele des Zionismus”), which appeared in the Jewish youth almanac *Jerubbaal*, edited by the prominent Zionist leader and educator Simon Bernfeld.⁹ Following Ahad Ha’am and Buber, Wiener regarded Zionism first and foremost as a movement for the moral and spiritual improvement, and the eventual redemption, of the Jewish people through their return to Zion. But since “a future presumes a past,” Zionism means not just a better vision of the Jewish future, but also a better understanding of the Jewish past: a true Zionist “searches for a ground for his soul, where it can grasp the roots.” Zionism aims at restoring the connection between Judaism and ethics, which is distorted in the Galuth, where ethics has been replaced by superficial religiosity. Judaism, a religion “originally based on purely ethical principles,” has recently come to neglect the sphere of relations between man and man, emphasizing instead relations between man and God. But this latter sphere, too, has been slighted, and even Hasidism, once the most spiritual variety of Judaism, lacks a “simple experience of God” (*einfaches Gotteserlebnis*) and has dwindled to empty ritualism. Wiener attributes this decline of Jewish spirituality to the “decadent” practical Lurianic Kabbalah, which concerns itself with manipulations of the numbers and letters of God’s names instead of “penetrating their essence” (*Eindringen in ihre Wesentlichkeiten*). Wiener concludes his brief analysis of Jewish spirituality with the already familiar idea that ritual stifles genuine religious experience (67).

Zionism must restore the true values of Judaism, such as love, dignity, and nobility, which are sadly lacking among contemporary Jews, especially women. At this point in his essay Wiener reproduces, in somewhat milder form, the catalogue of misogynist invectives from his letters to his sisters. The root of the problem is the poor upbringing of Jewish girls, which fails to connect them to the national past of the Jewish people (68–69). Creating a Jewish political entity in Palestine is not the ultimate goal of Zionism: “With Palestine, Zionism is still far from fulfillment; it is only the first of its tasks which were set by the prophets thousands of years ago; the earthly Jerusalem is the first step towards the goal—the Jerusalem on high (*im irdischen Jeruschalem [sic!] beginnt der Weg zum Ziel—zum Jeruschalem der Höhen*).” Wiener emphatically

rejects the nationalist goal of political Zionism—of turning Jews into a nation according to the European standard of humanity: “If ‘human’ means man as he should be, then why is he measured by the European norm and not by the Jewish one, why not a *Jewish Jew*?” (70).

The rejection of Europe as the yardstick of humanity, perhaps strengthened by the catastrophe of the war that exposed the brutality of the old European order and brought about its collapse, would soon lead Wiener away from the cultural Zionism of Buber and Ahad Ha’am to the more radical camp of the “Pan-Asiatic” Zionism of Eugen Hoefflich and eventually toward communism. But while writing his essay in Switzerland, Wiener still shared the Zionist belief that the only way for the Jews to acquire a collective membership in the future family of peoples was to reclaim their national self: “We must become Jewish Jews; *that is how* we will become people” (70). And he still believed that this spiritual transformation and national rebirth could only happen on Palestinian soil, as is obvious from the conclusion of his essay:

We strive for Palestine as the foundation for our soul (*Boden für unsere Seele*), where it can clear its own path and then, guided by its own essence and unhindered by shameful external restraints, can find itself.[...] On this foundation, untroubled by restraints, our vision will be purified, our way of seeing will become clear and simple, open and good, because it is safe from obstacles that obscure it: open to the world without distrust, because it is inwardly at peace, united, strong, and simple. (71)

Back in Vienna, 1919–1921

Vienna, to which Wiener returned at the beginning of 1919, was a very different city from the one he had left in 1915. As a result of the military defeat, the Habsburg Empire had collapsed, and an independent German-Austrian (Deutsch-Österreich) republic was proclaimed on November 12, 1918; less than a year later it was renamed the Austrian Republic to comply with the Treaty of Saint-Germain, thus renouncing any claim to unification with Germany. Austria, a “state that nobody wanted,” to use the words of the Austrian historian Hellmut Andics, was the most ethnically homogeneous state among all the successor

states of the Habsburg Empire, but also the least eager for independence from the empire. The position of Jews as a minority in the new state was not easy, as the historian David Rechter explains:

The collapse of the empire and the establishment of the ethnically homogenous German-Austrian republic, whose only numerically significant minorities were Viennese Jews and Czechs, left Jews in a quandary. A simple transfer of allegiance, an option available to the empire's national-territorial minorities, was problematic for many Jews who prided themselves on their broader Austrian loyalties.¹⁰

The first post-war months in Vienna—a period of great political turmoil and economic deprivation—were aggravated by the Spanish flu epidemic. The Jewish population of Vienna, which toward the end of the war had reached over 200,000 (more than 10 per cent of the total population), faced the additional problem of burgeoning anti-Semitism and German nationalism.

Jewish politics in the immediate aftermath of the war became radicalized: “Mass rallies and rowdy street demonstrations replaced quiet diplomacy in the corridors of power. Jewish liberal hegemony was challenged by the appearance of a Jewish National Council, a Jewish Soldiers’ Committee, and a Jewish militia.”¹¹ The “Jewish battalions” were formed of demobilized Jewish soldiers in November 1918 to protect civil order in the city and, especially, in its Jewish neighborhoods. As Rechter points out, organized Jewish self-defense in Vienna and other cities of the former empire was a feature of East European Jewish politics, previously unknown in Central Europe.¹² By March 1919 the situation stabilized, and the Jewish militia was practically disbanded.

Wiener returned to Vienna after the dramatic events of November 1918. Having no other options, he took a part-time job in his father’s firm. Their relationship remained strained, a state of affairs that was aggravated by the son’s financial dependence on the father. The reunion with his sisters, which he had longed for so fervently, was not easy either. Although they had repeatedly reminded him while he was in Switzerland that they were no longer those little girls he remembered from the pre-war years, Meir was very upset to discover that Franzi did not live up to his standard of the Jewish woman. He was appalled that she

found Martin Buber boring and preferred August Strindberg. On the verge of breaking up with his sister, he wrote to her in an angry letter: "I see already how you are gradually developing into a little Viennese puppy-girl (*Wiener Pupperl*), which any person of spirit, morals, and good taste finds disgusting."¹³ Fortunately, they were reconciled a few weeks later.

Wiener's cultural interests were not limited to Judaism and Zionism. His social circle included, along with Zionist activists and Jewish scholars, German writers and theater people. Among his close friends of that time were the Zionist activist and journalist Eugen Hoeflich (Moshe Ya'akov Ben-Gavriel) and his wife, the actress Miriam Schnabel (a niece of the famous pianist Arthur Schnabel). Wiener also had friends among the small circle of Vienna Yiddish literati: the poet and journalist Melekh Ravitsh, the physician and poet Melech Chmelnitzki, the writer Avrom Moyshe Fuchs, as well as the playwright and journalist Moyshe Lifshits, who was rumored to be a Soviet spy.¹⁴

Interesting details about this period of Wiener's life can be found in Hoeflich's diaries, published with extensive commentaries in 1999, which offer a detailed portrait of the everyday life of the young Zionist intelligentsia of post-war Vienna. Drafted into the Austrian-Hungarian army at the beginning of the war, Hoeflich was sent to Galicia, where he was badly wounded in July 1915. After recuperation, he was assigned in 1917 to Palestine, where he served as a liaison officer between the Austrian and Turkish military commands. He found the condition of Palestine under Ottoman rule appalling but was enchanted by the mystique of the Orient. Under the impact of his encounter with non-European Jews in Jerusalem, he began to formulate a political ideology that he named "Pan-Asiatic Zionism." It combined elements of the spiritual Zionism of Ahad Ha'am and Buber with the radical political activism of post-war German expressionism.

Hoeflich regarded "Asia" not as a geographical but as a cultural concept that represented authentic spirituality in its original totality. Organic and spiritual Asia was opposed to the European culture of mechanical organization and commerce. Zionism offered Jews a way out from Europe to Asia, where they could join forces with the other awakening great oriental nations—the Arabs, the Indians, and the Chinese—

in their revolutionary struggle against European colonial dominance. In his political writings, Hoefflich advocated the return of the Jews to the oriental foundations of Judaism as a community based on the principles of religious socialism. His literary creativity was informed by his personal encounter with Palestine, which he represented in expressionist style as a series of mystical revelations. In 1927 Hoefflich emigrated to Palestine, where he supported himself by writing journalism and fiction in German, but he gradually fell into oblivion. Interest in his life and work was revived in the 1990s by the late Austrian scholar Armin Wallas. As Wallas observed, "Hoefflich's prose works, which are mostly based on experience and observations in the Near East, describe the confrontation between the Orient and the Occident through examples of symbolic events."¹⁵

Upon his return to Vienna from Palestine at the end of the war, Hoefflich expressed his views in articles and essays, as well as in his first novel *Feuer im Osten* (*Fire in the East*, 1920), a fictionalized account of his war experience in Palestine that was enthusiastically praised by Wiener. The defeat of the Central Powers made Hoefflich desperate about the future. On October 3, 1918, he noted: "The world is English. Palestine has fallen into English hands, Bulgaria has opened itself up, Austria is in ruins.[...] Pity I am not Japanese. I admire the consistency of those people who perform *hara-kiri* when they are overpowered by circumstances."¹⁶ For Hoefflich, Palestine was not merely the ancient land of the Jews that ought to be returned to them; for him, it had a personal spiritual significance: "I believe that the reoccupation of the land by the Jews is of no importance except for one purpose, for the appearance of the Messiah.[...] Palestine is an exclusively and purely *personal* necessity conditioned by external life, which has an *assured* impact on the preservation of Jewry" (56).

In Hoefflich's eclectic ideology, personal messianic sentiments took the shape of a utopian plan of evacuating Jews from Europe to Palestine. Return to the East was essential to rid Jews of the malaise of the West, so that together with the Arabs they could resist the westernization of their common homeland. There was little Hoefflich could do in practice, however, apart from entertaining utopian dreams, as his diary entry for December 11, 1918, testifies: "I pin all my hopes on the

world revolution that will free Palestine from English rule and bring to a complete end the capitalist-imperialist influence" (63). Finding little understanding among his fellow Jews in Central Europe, Hoefflich turned for support to the Soviet emissary Maxim Litvinov, who was at that time in Stockholm trying to establish contacts with Great Britain and France. Litvinov's response, which stressed the supremacy of the class struggle over all other varieties of struggle "in the interests of a nation, a race or a gender," was a disappointment to Hoefflich, as he noted in his diary: "This man has either completely misunderstood my letter or he cannot see the possibilities of an Asiatic Bolshevism (which can hardly be called class struggle because of the absence of clear class borders in Asia)" (101).

On May 1, 1919, Hoefflich received an offer from the Jüdischer Hochschuleaufschuss (the Jewish University Committee, the executive arm of the Union of Jewish Students) to become the editor of a new Zionist monthly aimed at young Jewish intellectuals. The choice of title, *Esra*, highlights the ideological purpose of the publication, to "save western Jewish academics for the Jewish cause"—that is, from the dangers of assimilation—by urging them to work on Jewish culture. Meir Wiener became one of *Esra*'s contributors along with Hugo Bergmann, Adolf Böhm, Max Brod, Albert Ehrenstein, Ernst Müller, Arno Nadel, Elijah Rapoport, Oskar Rosenfeld, Siegfried Schmitz, Charlot Strasser, Friedrich Thieberger, and Felix and Robert Weltsch. *Esra* was radical, if not militant, in its anti-bourgeois outlook, displaying a clear sympathy for socialism but distancing itself from Bolshevism, which it regarded as too European. In an article entitled "Bolschewismus, Judentum und die Zukunft" ("Bolshevism, Judaism, and the Future") Hoefflich proclaimed: "Our difference with Bolshevism is as great as with that kind of Judaism that feels itself European and has adopted European norms."¹⁷

It was the last issue of *Esra* that contained what was probably Wiener's most significant and outspoken piece of Zionist journalism, which also happened to be one of his last. On December 23, 1919, Hoefflich recorded in his diary:

Last night a conspiracy took place in Café Central. The conspirators were Meir Wiener, Miriam [Schnabel] and I. Wiener brought me

an article for *Esra* that was directed, with the greatest seriousness, against party politics in Zionism. Suddenly we had the idea of producing a special issue of *Esra* under the title “This Is Not Our Way,” in which a few decent people—Rappeport, Bernfeld, Boehm, Helene Hannah Cohn and the two of us—should come out against Zionist politicking.¹⁸

The plan was realized in the eighth—and last—issue of the journal, which came out in January 1920. Wiener’s piece, entitled “Is This Still Zionism?” occupied a prominent position. In it Wiener developed the ideas he had expressed earlier in “Ziele des Zionismus,” applying them to the post-war situation. He declared that the official “party Zionism” had lost its spiritual dimensions and had turned into a political, nationalist movement driven by narrow practical considerations. He criticized Zionist leaders, among them Jakob Klatzkin, for placing the national form of Judaism above its universal, ethical content. One of the reasons for the decline of spirituality in Zionism, Wiener continued, echoing Hoefflich, was the utilitarian Anglo-American variety of Zionism that had come to dominate the movement after the war. Because of the dire financial and political situation in their countries, Russian, German, and Austrian Jews had lost their influence over the affairs of Palestine, and the entire colonial enterprise was now dominated by American financial groups. By adopting the Anglo-Saxon commercial attitude to politics and economics, the Zionist leadership had betrayed the ideals that had inspired the youth movement.¹⁹

To stress his position, Wiener made use of Soviet anti-Zionist propaganda, though with some reservations. He quoted a Copenhagen Zionist Bureau report from Soviet Russia that mentioned an article in *Pravda* by Semyon Dimanshteyn, at that time the People’s Commissar for Jewish Affairs, which described Zionists as military agents of British imperial policy who were helping their masters seize control over Palestine’s indigenous people, the Turks and the Arabs. Although he questioned some points in the article that appeared totally outlandish, such as an announcement of the appointment of Ze’ev Jabotinsky as Governor-General of Palestine, Wiener nevertheless seemed to share Dimanshteyn’s overall ideological attitude. By juxtaposing the article from *Pravda* with an exchange of opinions from the Hebrew newspaper

Hapo'el hatsa'ir regarding the need for Zionists to use military force, Wiener attempted to persuade the reader that the chief point of Soviet anti-Zionist propaganda was essentially valid, though some of the facts were obviously wrong. For Wiener, the militarization of the Zionist movement under the “*Judenjunker*” Jabotinsky was a grave crime against the spiritual essence of the movement, for which, he predicted, “we will pay very dearly.”²⁰

Wiener saw the main point of Zionism as affirming the supremacy of spirit over matter, of culture over politics, and he rejected the slogan “Palestine by any means.” A physical return to Palestine was meaningful only in so far as it could lead to a spiritual rebirth. The defeat of the Central Powers in the war also meant the defeat of the German variety of spiritual Zionism, whereas the victory of the Entente meant the triumph of the Anglo-Saxon mercantilist spirit. Now that Palestine had been incorporated into the British colonial system, the Zionists had no choice but to serve their new masters and to adopt their practical philosophy. There was no place for true Jewish spirituality in British-ruled Palestine. At the same time, Wiener placed Soviet Russia on the same side as Austria and Germany, as countries representing the defeated world of idealist culture. But this critique of Zionism failed to make an impact: it was “nine months of work for nothing,” as Hoefflich noted in his diary on February 20, 1920.²¹ In August 1920, Hoefflich, Wiener, and Siegfried Schmitz, a translator of Yiddish into German, made an attempt to launch another oppositional Zionist publication as a successor to *Esra* but could not raise the money.

It is not clear when and how Wiener established his first contacts with communists, which eventually led him to join the Austrian Communist Party in 1925. On September 12, 1921, Wiener arranged a meeting between Hoefflich and a certain Dr Hersch Nagler, whom Hoefflich described as “one of the local leaders of the Jewish Bolsheviks who had arrived from Moscow via the Warsaw state prison.”²² Nagler offered Hoefflich a substantial monthly allowance in exchange for regular reports on the situation in the Near and Far East, but Hoefflich declined the offer. A few weeks later, Wiener left Vienna for Berlin. He continued his contacts with Hoefflich, but their relationship grew increasingly strained. In a diary entry of August 30, 1922, Hoefflich

reflects on his relationship with Wiener, offering interesting insights into the complex and controversial personality of his former friend and associate:

Meir Wiener has gone back to Berlin again, after spending a few days in Vienna. Strangely, his absence does not leave a gap in our memory. I have tried to understand why—he was, after all, a good friend of ours—but I can't. Perhaps it has to do with his somewhat arrogant behavior during his previous visit, perhaps something else, perhaps Miriam is right in saying that a man like Wiener, never burdened by any troubles, is a stranger in our circle [...] He cannot understand what it means for us to worry about a piece of bread for next month, for tomorrow. Can he understand what it means to be unable to go to town because there is no money for the tramway?²³

Wiener's friendship with Hoeflich and his wife, initially firm, finally came to an end by the summer of 1924.²⁴

Around that time Wiener met the artist and architect Fritz Gross, who was later to become Franzi's husband. Fritz Gross's memoir describes Wiener's character and his milieu in the Vienna of the early 1920s:

I am no longer sure how I was introduced to Meir Wiener. I only know that it was in a Viennese coffeehouse where the so-called artists' life took place every evening and every night and where, evening after evening, one met up with the same group of friends at one's regular table, as in an English club.[...]

Meir, quiet, with a restrained passion that expressed itself in his beautiful pale features and particularly in his dark eyes. I, on the other hand, somewhat younger, impetuous and full of an exuberant joy of life [...]. Perhaps it was these extremes in temperament that brought us together so quickly. We stood across from each other, shook hands, spoke freely with each other without the conventional mask.[...]

After only a few minutes during this first encounter, over a cup of mocha, we were deeply involved in a conversation about art. It was immediately apparent that Wiener was a well-trained debater and that his knowledge encompassed not only the fine arts, but also [missing text here]. We began a close relationship and saw each other almost daily. I got to know his friends and he mine.

There was Professor Dr. A[vraham] Sonne, Professor at the Hebrew Institute in Vienna, who was a Hebrew poet; a serious, intelligent and

sensible man. I have to admit that it demanded my greatest concentration to follow the philosophical discussions of these two friends.

Then David Vogel. A poet who often attempted freely to translate his poems into German for me, since I did not of course understand the Hebrew original.[...]

Through Meir I got to know Dr. Mueller, a philosopher whom Wiener held in high esteem. A delicate, shy, thin little man with reddish hair and a thin beard, who could have been a Vormärz²⁵ character in an E. T. A. Hoffman book.[...]

I want to mention another of Meir Wiener's friends. The now famous Viennese poet and playwright Oskar Maurus Fontana, to whom Wiener introduced me and with whom we spent many Viennese coffeehouse evenings. He belonged to a very different category of his friends. Here they would only discuss German literature, philosophy and particularly drama, and I was sometimes amazed how well-versed Meir also was in this area.

Meir Wiener was very critical of my acquaintances and was bitingly sarcastic when he did not like them. Often with great success, he would lure boastful men of letters, painters or actors to whom he took a dislike into an area of knowledge on which they had nothing to say, so as quickly to declare "checkmate" and reduce them to silence.²⁶

Avraham Sonne, Ernst Müller, and David Vogel, along with a few others, such as the writer Gershon Schofman and the translator Zwi Diesendruck, formed a small circle of Vienna Hebraists. To various degrees, they shared with Wiener his interests in modernist literature, mysticism, and philosophy, as well as his belief in Zionist ideals and his despair at the post-war reality of Austria. Whereas the writers and poets among them (Sonne, Vogel, Schofman) occupy today a respectable place in the Hebrew literary canon, the intellectuals and scholars (Müller and Diesendruck, as well as Wiener) remain merely footnotes in the history of modern Jewish thought.

Sonne (Avraham Ben Yitzhak, 1883–1950) was born in Przemyśl in Galicia, halfway between Cracow and Lemberg, and received, like Wiener, a solid Jewish and general education. At the age of twenty-five, already a distinguished young poet, he settled in Vienna and became engaged in Zionist activities. Sonne's poetic output, although modest

in size (there are eleven “canonical” poems and a few fragments), is recognized today as one of the highest achievements of modern Hebrew poetry. His refined poetry, enigmatic and saturated with allusions to the Bible and to European literature, was compared to Hölderlin’s. In 1913, Sonne went to Jerusalem to lecture on Hebrew literature and returned to Vienna on the eve of World War I. He gave lectures and published articles in Hebrew and German but stopped writing poetry.

After the war, Sonne briefly served as Secretary of the Palestine Department of the Zionist Organisation in London but resigned in 1921 after a bitter conflict with Chaim Weizmann; he “returned embittered to Vienna and withdrew from public life altogether.”²⁷ He stayed in Vienna until his emigration to Palestine in 1938, serving as the director of the Hebrew Teachers’ Seminary (Pedagogium), writing little but leading an active social life. Among his friends were Arnold Schoenberg, Robert Musil, Hermann Broch, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Elias Canetti, who met with Sonne regularly in the Café Museum in the 1930s and left a memorable portrait of that enigmatic man in his memoirs: “I knew nothing about Sonne; he consisted entirely of his statements, so much so that the prospect of discovering anything else about him would have frightened me [...] He was *ideas*, so much so that one noticed nothing else.”²⁸

A native of Miroslav, Moravia, Ernst Müller (1880–1954) came to Vienna to study mathematics and philosophy and became involved in Zionist politics. From 1907 to 1909, he taught at an agricultural school in Jaffa but had to return to Vienna for health reasons, where he served as a librarian at the Jewish Community. From 1917 he contributed essays to *Der Jude* on mysticism and the philosophy of language and translations from the *Zohar*, which were informed by his interest in Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy. His book *Der Sohar und seine Lehre: Einführung in die Kabbalah* (The *Zohar* and Its Teaching: Introduction to *Kabbalah*) appeared in 1920, and his translations from the *Zohar* into German came out in 1932 and have recently been reprinted. Wiener’s name appears a few times in Müller’s unpublished diary. They discussed medieval Hebrew literature and collaborated on translations. Müller especially admired Wiener’s “fine sense of the Hebrew language.”²⁹ Müller emigrated to England in 1938, where his *History of Jewish Mysticism*

appeared in English in 1946. Eleonore Lappin aptly summarizes his views in her study of *Der Jude*:

Müller stood for ethical and pacifist Zionism—even as a soldier of the Austro-Hungarian army—as well as for a pluralist understanding of the Jewish tradition, which he transferred to his Zionist worldview. He drew his political arguments from the Bible, Jewish mysticism and socialism. He linked them to universalistic Zionism, which he regarded as an alternative to European power politics.³⁰

David Vogel (1891–1944) arrived in Vienna around 1913 by illegally crossing the Russian-Austrian border near his native town of Satanov and stayed there until 1925. In 1923 he published a book of Hebrew poetry that now is recognized as one of the masterpieces of Hebrew modernism. He was Wiener's close friend, with whom Wiener shared domestic troubles, literary gossip, and plans for the future. Vogel's novel *Khayenu'im* (*Married Life*, 1929–30), published in Tel Aviv, portrays the milieu of young aspiring Jewish artists and intellectuals in the impoverished Vienna of the early 1920s. The main character of the novel, a troubled young Jewish writer from Galicia named Rudolf Gurdweill, represents the type that must have been highly familiar to Wiener and his friends from café society. In his study of European Hebrew modernism, Shachar Pinsker describes Gurdweill as “probably the best example” of Walter Benjamin's *flâneur* type in Hebrew literature; following his footsteps, the reader can take a detailed tour of the city.³¹ Taking long walks across Vienna was also a habit of Meir Wiener's as Fritz Gross remembers:

I learned a lot from Meir's worldview and philosophical reflections, which he presented to me on long walks. I clearly remember the summer nights we first spent with friends in the coffeehouse, and then promising to accompany each other home. The so-called last “blue” tramway (the last tramway, which everyone in Vienna knows; it runs around 1 o'clock at night and has a blue light) had long passed, and this time it was my responsibility to take him from the “inner city” to Praterstrasse, where he lived with his family. But our conversation had not yet ended when we reached his house, so he brought me back to the Third District, where I lived. This repeated itself three times, back and forth, until we finally decided to spend the rest of the beautiful summer's night on the bench of a vegetable market, where we kept on

debating, delightfully inhaling the air, fragrant with all kinds of vegetables loaded onto wagons. The beautiful early morning was dawning when we both went off to bed.³²

While Wiener's intellectual and artistic company was exclusively male, women apparently also played a significant role in his life:

Meir was not a "ladies' man" in the true sense of the term. He did not pursue women, but he fascinated most of them, partly through his intellect and vast knowledge and partly through his restrained sensuality, which was clearly expressed in his beautiful, pale features and especially, as already mentioned, in his fascinating dark eyes. With his girlfriends he was "possessively" jealous verging on the pathological.³³

It was Meir who introduced Fritz Gross to his sister Franzi, and he kept a sharp eye on their growing mutual attraction. Fritz Gross vividly remembers that episode:

Meir and I had been the most intimate of friends for more than two years when he invited me home for tea one day. As I learned later from my wife (Meir's youngest sister, Franzi), this was the highest distinction, awarded to only a few of his friends. In the motherless household, Franzi was enlisted to do the honors by serving the tea. This hour, which was to be so fateful for us both, had almost been thwarted by an earlier quarrel between Meir and Franzi. Meir, who could be very derisive, had referred to one of her friends, with whom she had wanted to get together that afternoon, as a "rat" or "mouse," after which it took a lot of persuasion to convince Franzi to play the hostess on this fateful afternoon.[...]

We met almost daily, our meetings carefully watched by Meir, who, as I later learned, had described me to her as a Don Juan (like any artist) and whose almost pathological jealousy also encompassed his beloved youngest sister.³⁴

Years later, living in the Soviet Union, Wiener revisited the situation in Vienna of 1918–19 in a fragment titled "Shotn-mentshn" ("Shadow People"), which forms part of the manuscript of his unfinished novel.³⁵ The fragment portrays Vienna's café society during the first months of the German-Austrian republic between November 1918 and July 1919. Vienna is described as "the gigantic city which now, after the demise

of the Austrian Empire and having lost its right to its gigantic size, has remained a gigantic capital of a small state” (33). Judging by the dates of his correspondence, Wiener was, in fact, still in Switzerland at that time, but apparently he was keenly interested in the dramatic developments taking place in and around the favorite haunts of the Viennese Bohemians—the Cafés Central, Herrenhof, and Museum—and was well informed about the behavior of their clientele during the political crisis.

Wiener’s depictions of various café types are often grotesque but mostly accurate. He provides interesting details and offers psychological insights that are paralleled in memoirs and diaries of the actual participants in the events. Wiener’s satirical style is rooted in the Viennese literary tradition, although the ideological tenor of his writing is unmistakably communist. His satire is aimed at the salon communists and Social Democrats, artists, and intellectuals, who are toying with revolutionary ideas but are unable or unwilling to get involved in the real political struggle on the side of the proletariat. The regular café crowd consists of

all kinds of world-improvers with various projects, followers of Buddhism and Shintoism, but mostly of psychoanalysis. Officers of the former Imperial Army, who were debating in their broad Viennese dialect one issue: that the war has proven that humanity should correct its mistake and give “our Palestine” back to the Jews [...], Social Democratic lawyers, who were reading *King Lear* and works by Kautsky systematically, two pages a day. (41)

Wiener’s satire becomes particularly venomous when aimed at the eclectic intellectual fashion of mixing Catholic Christianity with pacifism, communism, Zionism, various oriental philosophies, or psychoanalysis. Such intellectuals spend their evenings in Café Central around their own table, the Stammtisch in the Altenberg Room, named after the famous writer Peter Altenberg, who spent most of his life in that place:

In a big, poorly lit hall with an unusually high vaulted ceiling reminiscent of a Gothic church and big broad columns, little people sit at the little tables, always the same, day after day. They come here after work, read papers, play chess, chew over old jokes again and again. They are very polite to each other, and sometimes they strike up a conversation about the needs of “humanity.” (39)

Many characters are based on real prototypes, although not all of them can be easily identified today:

[At that table] sat Catholic communists—those who publish politically radical anthologies in the form of scholastic tomes, with Catholic content and pacifist messages to the pope—[among them] a tall, graying, very elegant gentleman with the face of an actor. I should add that he writes about well-mannered ladies of past ages in a soulful, aesthetic style, about the art of living, [as well as] aesthetic discourses about synthesizing communism and Catholicism. This is the Catholic-communist table, at which sit a Catholicizing radical Zionist, a drunken literaricizing actor, a former officer and the originator of the Zionist pan-Asiatic idea—the types that practice Buddhist self-forgetting and yoga. A Spaniard Viennese Jew, a certain Dr. Abram Moren, a young man with bushy beard and hair, and mannerisms like those of Christ, was busy organizing a trade union of prostitutes, so that, in his own words, they could protect themselves from exploitation. (42)

The “elegant gentleman” who writes stories about graceful ladies and essays about communism and Catholicism was Franz Blei (1871–1942), a writer and socialite who “did nearly everything one can do in the literary business.”³⁶ Blei published and edited books and newspapers, wrote criticism, poetry, biographies, plays, film scripts, and essays, and translated French texts into German, as well as performed on stage and in films. At different moments of his life, and sometimes simultaneously, Blei enjoyed a reputation as a communist and a capitalist, a German nationalist and a Social Democrat, a Catholic and a pornographer. He was also a promotion manager for some famous writers, including Robert Musil and Hermann Broch. During World War I, he worked for the imperial war propaganda office but at the beginning of November 1918, he drew close to the radical group of *café littérateurs*, such as Franz Werfel and Egon Erwin Kisch, who were instrumental in organizing the revolutionary Red Guard. At the turbulent time of the proclamation of the German-Austrian republic, Blei was, as Murray Hall tells us, at the “focus of the legal and ideological grotesquerie.”³⁷ However, after the first bloody confrontation with the authorities on November 12, Blei turned critical of revolutionary violence.

The “former officer and the originator of the Zionist Pan-Asiatic idea” is of course Hoefflich, with whom Wiener spent many evenings in Café Central. The “Spaniard Viennese Jew” Abram Moren is Jacob Levy Moreno (1889–1974), a charismatic writer and psychologist. In his autobiography, written in America in his later years, Moreno recalls his spiritual transformation:

My becoming a prophet was not sudden. It was a slow, gradual growth whose determinants could be traced to my early childhood. [...] I wanted not only to become a prophet, but to look like one. [...] By means of the beard I made the point that one should not interfere with the healthy spontaneity of the body. Nature should be allowed to take its course. My beard was reddish blonde and sparse. In the course of years it took the form which some medieval painters ascribed to Christ. Unconsciously I must have approved of its appearance and of the effect the beard would have on people living in a Christological culture. Looking fatherly and wise, anticipating old age, was exactly what a young God would like.³⁸

Among his other endeavors, Moreno tried to organize Vienna prostitutes into groups so that they could discuss their personal problems together. As he explains, “I had in mind that what LaSalle and Marx had done for the working class, leaving aside the revolutionary aspect of the labor movement, was to make the workers respectable, to give the working man dignity.”³⁹ In 1918, Moreno was an active member of the café society and edited a literary magazine titled *Daimon* (renamed *Der Neue Daimon* in 1919 and *Gefährten* in 1920), which had an eclectic mystical-religious and radical-revolutionary orientation of the kind Wiener satirized in his novel. A number of people mentioned in Wiener’s novel had their works published in *Daimon* and a few other magazines of this kind, among them Werfel, Hoefflich, Blei, and Kurt Hiller.

The metaphor of the shadow that Wiener uses as a way of depicting café society may have been inspired by the poem “Café”—by Iwan Goll (Isaac Lang, 1891–1950), a trilingual German, French, and English poet—that was published in *Daimon* in 1918. Goll compares the boulevard at which the café is located to Acheron, the river that separates the world of the living from the world of the dead in Greek mythology. Café is the Orcus or Elysium, where the dead shadows regain consciousness.

Conversations and newspapers are the only thing that gives meaning to their life and helps them to forget the reality of death around them.⁴⁰

Wiener was not the first author to make the revolutionary café intellectuals the target of his satire. In hindsight most writers viewed the Vienna “café revolution” in a satiric light. Wiener’s main predecessor was Karl Kraus (1874–1936), the famous Austrian writer of Jewish origin, whose virulent satiric diatribes were a fixture of Viennese culture for more than three decades. In the “magical operetta” titled *Literatur, oder, Man wird doch da sehn* (*Literature, or, You Ain’t Seen Nothing Yet*, 1921), a parody of Werfel’s “magical dramatic trilogy” *Spiegelmensch* (*Mirror Man*, 1920), Kraus mocks the revolutionary literati in their café habitat. As a Kraus scholar, Edward Timms, explains, “Set in a coffee-house crowded with pretentious intellectuals, the play parodies both the rhetoric of Expressionism and the jargon of the Jewish milieu.”⁴¹ Franz Blei (who was actually a Gentile) shows up toward the end of the play dressed in the cassock of a Catholic abbé with a Red Guard cap on his head and proclaims: “Long live communism and the Catholic Church! (*Es lebe der Kommunismus und die katholische Kirche!*).”⁴² Blei himself was also known for his satirical talent, in particular for his book called *Das große Bestiarium der deutschen Literatur* (*The Great Bestiary of German Literature*, 1920), a satiric catalogue of Viennese authors depicted as exotic animals.

While the dramatic events of 1918–19 brought together a motley crowd of illustrious writers, artists, and intellectuals under a few café roofs in Vienna, the life of each one of them took a different course thereafter. Moreno emigrated to the United States, where he fulfilled his megalomaniac dream and established a cult-like school of psychodrama that brought him fame and money. Others were less successful. Hoefflich moved to Palestine in 1927, where he earned a modest living by writing for German newspapers and producing adventure novels in German until he was practically forgotten. Blei moved to Mallorca in 1932 but had to leave after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. His books were banned by the Nazis; after many troubles, he managed to escape from Europe and died in the United States soon after arrival. For Wiener, the Viennese café became a starting point on the way to embracing communism both in theory and practice.

Most of the members of the Vienna café society with revolutionary sympathies in 1918–19 later drifted away from communism. The purpose of Wiener's satiric representation is to show the reasons why the novel's main character, a Polish-Jewish artist named Slovek Lagodny, grows disappointed with salon communism as an intellectual fashion and turns to seeking the "real communists" among workers rather than intellectuals. His guide on this search is Menter, a somewhat mysterious character who might function as a mask behind which Wiener disguises himself. Menter is introduced indirectly through one of his acquaintances who informs Lagodny: "I met an interesting young man from Switzerland, a Doctor of Philosophy and a very witty person." What follows can be interpreted as self-criticism aimed at Wiener's personality before his conversion to communism: "this writer was known for his feuilletons and witticism, but he wrote little. With all his mild and friendly politeness, he was also known as an insincere and disingenuous man [...] It was known that he was ready to praise anyone for money" (49). One of Menter's characteristic traits is his "modest elegance in dress"—something that can be found in memoirs about Wiener as well.⁴³

Menter proclaims his ideological choice to Slovek: "I have decided: I am going with Lenin." When Slovek inquires about his party membership, Menter answers in abrupt sentences, the way Wiener used to write his letters:

"No. This is not necessary. It is vulgar. One can have influence and stay on the sidelines, being free. An attachment to the Party is necessary only for the masses. An intellectual can accomplish something only if he is completely free."

"Then what have you to do with communism?" Slovek asked, surprised.

"My convictions. The study of problems. And something else," Menter replied enigmatically.⁴⁴

When Slovek asks Menter whether it is possible to meet with "real" communists, Menter feels somewhat offended but offers to help his friend.

Typically for Wiener's autobiographical writing of the Soviet period (which is discussed in Chapter 9), this fragment projects his later ideological position backwards, portraying him as a consistent critic of na-

tionalist ideology and bourgeois culture who was slowly but steadily advancing toward communism. In reality, as far as one can judge from the contemporary evidence, Wiener's political and ideological positions were shaped by many different factors, such as his personal relationships with his friends and family, the success or failure of his publications, and his economic situation. Even though it is not possible to reconstruct his evolution in its fullness and complexity, it is clear that his journey toward communism and Yiddish was far from straightforward.

Kabbalah and Scholarship

During the late 1910s and early 1920s, Wiener's interests in literature and politics were closely intertwined with his research on Jewish mysticism, particularly on its redemptive aspect. He began formulating his ideas about messianism in his letters to his sisters from Switzerland and developed them in more sophisticated form in the introduction to his anthology *Die Lyrik der Kabbalah* (*The Poetry of the Kabbalah*), published by R. Löwit Verlag in 1920, which incorporated some of his articles from *Der Jude*. The main premise was the metaphysical belief in the constant nature of spiritual truth that Wiener formulated in an essay titled "Kern und Schale" ("Core and Shell," 1919). Truth remains always and everywhere the same, but its forms of expression may vary: "Truth everywhere is always and eternally unique. What determines the worth of a herald? Whether he lives and speaks the ancient, one and only (*ureinzige*) truth with new and sincere enthusiasm.[...] There is nothing 'new' in the Spirit that is not actually ancient (*uralt*), just as the absolute is eternally old and eternally new."⁴⁵ Using a kabbalistic metaphor of divine sparks captured in their "exile" by lifeless matter, Wiener declared the Jewish mission to be the "redirection of straying, wandering sparks to their pure original source, to the original fire," rephrasing the biblical prayer *Shema Yisra'el* in the spirit of metaphysical existentialism, as "Hear, O Israel, being is our goal, being is one!" (*Höre Jißrael, das Sein ist unser Ziel, das Sein ist eins!*).⁴⁶ But whereas truth is universal and absolute, its messengers can and indeed must convey their message in new and striking ways.

The company of Wiener's favorite messianic heroes who wrestled in vain with God's world order also included Judas Iscariot, a figure who embodies human evil for Christianity. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, Wiener's first poetic work was a Hebrew poem about this character, which he translated into German and presented to Hugo von Hofmannsthal. In 1919, Wiener published in *Esra* an enthusiastic review of the novella "Judas Iscariot" by the famous Russian modernist author Leonid Andreev. Wiener argued that Judas was the only disciple of Jesus who followed his teacher to the very end, despite his inner conflict with God. He was a genuinely tragic figure because he performed an absolute act of self-sacrifice. In Andreev's novella, Judas appears as the most repulsive character, yet this "unspeakably ugly, mendacious and abhorrent mangy dog's soul" (*räudige Hundeseele, die unerhört häßliche, verlogene und abscheuliche*) revealed himself in the end as the truest servant of God.⁴⁷

As Wiener tells his reader, when he read this book for the first time eight years earlier (that is, around 1911, still in Cracow; Andreev's work could have inspired his own Hebrew poem), he saw in this character a "most fitting symbol of the Jewish people": "Horrifying in his ignobility, powerful and holy in his superhuman striving for God. Israel is like Judas, the holy self-torturer, who laid the heaviest cross upon himself and who nailed himself to it, pulling all of the world's sins towards himself in anger and rage."⁴⁸ Elaborating on this analogy, Wiener explained that the Jews' sorrows were self-inflicted and in their suffering, they had to carry the cross of all humanity, which is only too happy to blame Jews for all its sins. Andreev's moral and artistic ability to rise above the two-thousand-year-old prejudice against Judas made him a worthy successor to the two great prophets of Russian literature, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.⁴⁹ Wiener concluded his essay with a desperate plea: "When shall we finally see him, Judas, the true son of man, in his glory?"⁵⁰

The difficult relationship between the imperfect human being and the perfect God preoccupied Wiener during his sojourn in Switzerland. He shared his thoughts with Franzi:

Man alone, when he thinks of himself as man, is not God. Only when he thinks of himself as a small part of the whole, as a small part that merges with the wholeness of being, can he then discover himself in

the divine sense. However, since man always sees himself as an individual “I” and not as part of the whole, he can never perceive himself as divine, but rather as sinful and deficient. He can only intuit himself as part of the whole, and this only on rare occasions, and this is called experiencing God, when he is overcome by the notion of harmony, totality and our belonging to this harmony as single notes.⁵¹

Though human nature is flawed, one is able to experience God as part of the totality, as a presentiment of the divine harmony. These two themes, the imperfection of man and the intuition of the universal totality through artistic and mystical experience, run through Wiener’s writing in different variations throughout his life. In his fiction, he tended to create tragic and controversial characters who were torn between their spiritual quest and numerous destructive impulses, anxieties, and desires. But in his scholarly work, first on medieval Hebrew mystical poetry and later on Yiddish literature, he tried to apply a rigorously critical methodology—even though the methodology itself was sometimes problematic.

Wiener’s imagination was preoccupied with the figure of the messiah as the ultimate manifestation of human nature, a mediator between the human and the divine. He pondered this problem in a letter to Erna:

In the pressing need of that time, the people hoped for a savior who would rescue them from distress and thought of him as a descendant of David, as the “Messiah” anointed by God. This indestructible hope for a Messiah has lived on for two and a half thousand years, obviously often refashioned and modified. It is basically nothing more than a protest against the conditions of the time, a life-affirming hope in the future. The impact this hope has had on the preservation of our nation, despite unparalleled challenges that persist to this very day, is immense.⁵²

For Wiener, the messianic idea was the core element not only of Judaism but also of the Jewish national identity. Belief in the coming messiah gave the Jewish people the power to survive in the past and the present and hope for the future. Messianic figures emerged throughout Jewish history, partly fulfilling and partly failing to fulfill their mission. Among them were Ezra, the Maccabees, Jesus, Bar-Kochba. The Christian notion of messianism, according to Wiener, could not

satisfy Jews because it removed salvation from the political realm to heaven: Jews in the time of Jesus “did not demand from their messiah a salvation in the kingdom of heaven, they had in mind a political liberation.”⁵³ The messianic idea did not disappear in the diaspora, where it produced a number of remarkable personalities, such as Shabbatai Zvi. Finally, the modern era had its own messianic leader: “I regard Theodor Herzl as a modern messiah, who, of course, also failed.”⁵⁴ Messianic personalities were to be found not only among Jews; indeed, every nation had its own great figures who embodied the “genius of the people.” The Germans, for example, had their Frederick the Great and Bismarck, “who restored unity and redeemed the people (*Volk*).” The perseverance of the German people throughout the war could serve as an example for the Zionist project:

Zionism is supposed to be infeasible? We have learned to consider a great deal that is called impossible as quite possible and feasible. Who would have thought the world war possible? Who would have thought possible the resistance by the Central Powers to a whole world full of enemies? Anything is possible! Everything is feasible! “If you wish it, it is no fairy tale,” says Theodor Herzl.⁵⁵

Wiener’s views on Jewish mysticism and messianism found their most comprehensive and systematic expression in his introduction to the anthology *Die Lyrik der Kabbalah*. In the first chapter of the introduction, Wiener discusses the opposition between individual religious experience and ritual. The tension between ritual and free expression is a universal phenomenon that can be discovered not only in religion but in all “manifestations of the spirit.”⁵⁶ In the arts, ritual is usually called style or manner. The purpose of ritual, style, custom is to protect a religion and a society in times of “darkness,” when the spirit is distant. But in times of spiritual awakening, these normative limitations can turn into an obstacle, “because the origin of the cult is the impotent quest for the enchained spirit, which is unable to catch the light and its rays despite their nearness” (15).

To the ritualized cult, Wiener opposed the Buberian notion of *Gotteserlebnis*, a spontaneous, inspirational experience of the divine. The impossibility of ritualizing the *Gotteserlebnis* was at the core of religious

experience, because in its nature it was passive and could not be transformed into an action: “religion is experienced (*erlitten*) and not acted (*getan*)” (15–16). Religion may be the most wide-ranging of all forms of knowledge, which includes art, philosophy, and science, but it is too imprecise to provide a clear explanation of being as a whole. Therefore, the more limited and concrete areas of ethics and aesthetics must be separated from the general but loose domain of religion. In Judaism this step was made in its civil law. Particular forms of practice have a different nature from experience, because “one is able to experience the totality, but can only do particular things” (16).

Because religion knows no particularity, it cannot serve as a foundation for action, as opposed to ethics, which is based on the distinction between being and action. Similarly, one has to differentiate between religion and aesthetics; otherwise religion might be reduced to mere material for artistic inspiration. Judaism, according to Wiener, differentiated religion and aesthetics so sharply that the arts, especially the visual arts, were completely banned from Jewish culture (17). Historically, religion develops in circles, from ecstatic individual experiences to their ritualization in organized forms of worship, which in turn are burst apart by new revelations. The initial phase produces powerful individualist, ecstatic hymnic poetry, which gives way to calculated, rational liturgical text during the organizational phase. The “degeneration” of direct religious experience into cultic forms is accompanied by the transformation of religion in active performance, where ritualized prayer occupies a central place. Unlike the hymnic prayer, “the cult prayer is composed not *out* of religion but *for* religion” (23). When turned into a religious action, a prayer loses its inner life and its words become “mute” (*verstummt*).

The second chapter of the introduction, initially published as a separate essay in *Der Jude*, dealt specifically with the nature of Jewish prayer.⁵⁷ It opened with a declaration in expressionist style: “Prayer is according to its essence lyrically explosive, not epically constructive (*lyrisch-explosiv, nicht episch-aufbauend*).”⁵⁸ This distinction evokes the familiar contrast between lyric and epic as the oriental and occidental types of poetry. Wiener then calls prayer “the highest lyrical manifestation.” The authentic Jewish forms of expression have always belonged

to that explosive oriental lyric. It throws out a series of powerful images without trying to connect them into a cohesive narrative (26). Following Freudian logic, Wiener likens prayer's structure to that of a dream: both discharge inner experiences one by one rather than telling a story in a rationally controlled sequence. Jewish religious poetry has two central themes: praise to God as King, which is a common feature of all oriental religious poetry, and the special relationship between God and Israel. The former reflects individual experience and defies formalization. The latter is more formal. It revolves around the motifs of the destruction of the Temple and Galuth. Only a return to the land of Israel could restore the normal flow of historical time and connect the past with the future.

Christianity seeks a solution to the dilemma between the holiness of God and the sinful state of man in the humanization of God and the redemption of souls through that. For Jews, the only solution is to appeal to God's sense of mercy and justice by reminding him of their special status: "God is the God of Israel, without Israel God is unthinkable, therefore God must forgive Israel *for his own sake*" (31). God and Israel are equal in their position vis-à-vis history, which makes them mutually dependent (33). Persecution naturally produces hatred of the oppressed for the oppressor, which in times past found its symbolic representation in abstract images, such as Edom and Esau, with little relevance to concrete historical situations. All oppressors of Israel were perceived as mere tools in God's hands. This abstract symbolism gave expressive power to Hebrew poetry, which was enhanced by the separation of the Hebrew language from everyday reality. Discarding realism, Hebrew poetry developed a refined virtuosity that sometimes covered up the "emptiness" of its perception of reality.

Wiener regarded Kabbalah as a response to the severe persecutions of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which enabled Jews to preserve the positive aspects of their faith without turning it into blind hatred. Since that time, Kabbalah has become an inseparable part of Judaism and has grown from an esoteric, elitist teaching into the mass movement of Hasidism. It provides answers to the burning questions of why the Jews have to endure terrible suffering and why redemption does not come immediately. Mysticism has helped Jews in all parts of

the Diaspora to deal with their difficult situation, enabling them to preserve their Jewishness in different ideological and religious forms, including such worldviews as humanism and Catholicism, which are utterly different from Judaism—as happened, for example, to the Portuguese *conversos* who received mystical ideas via Christianity. Mysticism was the common ground on which Judaism and Christianity met and influenced each other.

The mutation of Kabbalah into a ritualistic system under the influence of Isaac Luria in the sixteenth century turned the ecstatic, chiliastic teaching of the Marrano Shlomo Molcho into a disciplined cult and magic ritual that was enhanced by ancient Gnostic elements, following the general rule of “degeneration” of *Gotteserlebnis* into ritual, which Wiener had established in the beginning of his introduction. From Safed, Lurianic Kabbalah traveled back to Europe, influencing Hebrew poetry in seventeenth-century Italy. From Italy Kabbalah was brought to Poland but made no impact on liturgical literature because Polish Jews were not accustomed to expressing their personal feelings and thoughts in poetry. Even Hasidism was too much a product of the abstract, scholastic mind of Polish Jewry to create original liturgical poetry (49). Indeed, Hasidism had a negative impact on the development of liturgy because it rejected some of the *piyut* in favor of magic exercises. Liturgical creativity was necessary for the preservation of the people as long as Jews had no civil rights and relied solely on divine protection; with the beginning of the Haskalah, it ceased.

Wiener declared the purpose of his anthology to demonstrate the “power of Jewish expression” rather than showing the development of Judaism through religious poetry (51). He warned his reader that his translations were not philologically accurate because he had tried to convey not the form but the essence of the original, the “initial intention of the poet,” seeing his task as transmitting the “experience which has been set down in poetry” (52). Privileging immediacy of expression over conceptual and philological accuracy, he chose not to preserve the technical symbolism of kabbalistic poetry in his translation. In his view, a “philologically driven representation” in German translation could distort the representation of the poetic intentions of the original. Anticipating disapproval of his work, Wiener concluded with a message to

his imagined critic: "The 'grammarian' who sees philological work as the pinnacle of wisdom should be told that it is much more important and also more arduous to find the poetically correct word in a translation than its linguistic equivalent" (54).

It is not clear whether this statement was addressed to anyone in particular, but Wiener's challenge was taken up by a young, ambitious man who was soon to emerge as the leading modern scholar of Jewish mysticism. Gerhard (later known as Gershom) Scholem published in *Der Jude* an acerbic, lengthy, and highly technical review of Wiener's anthology.⁵⁹ The two men probably met in Berlin in 1921, as indicated by Wiener's inscription on the copy of *Messias* in Scholem's personal library. Scholem's copy of *Die Lyrik der Kabbalah* bears no inscription, but its margins are full of Scholem's critical remarks. Scholem's approach to Kabbalah was based on the rejection of the expressionist sensibility, which was represented, at least in his eyes, by Wiener. Scholem was satisfied neither by Wiener's concept nor by his translations of kabbalistic poetry. He attacked Wiener on two major points. First, the title, and by implication the very concept of the anthology, was not accurate, because strictly speaking the collection included non-kabbalistic poetry (and non-lyrical poetry). Second, Scholem rejected Wiener's notion of mysticism as an active expression of religious experience as opposed to passive ritualistic forms. Scholem was opposed to the "experience terminology" (*Erlebnisterminologie*), "which, as a convenient conceptual mill, mechanically produces any number of sentences of that kind" (60). In his view Wiener represented the "vulgar expressionist theory," for which understanding is achieved through self-identification with the experience of the past, regardless of how remote it is geographically and chronologically.

Against the vague concept of *Erlebnis*, Scholem proposed a more precise notion of linguistic truthfulness and accuracy. In Kabbalah, the language serves as the agent of creation and development. The magic power of the word is a key part of the spiritual legacy of the Jewish people, and so language should become the "highest treasure" (*höchstes Gut*) of today's youth movement. Contrary to Wiener, Scholem did not believe in the translatability of symbolic language (62–63). But he argued that to ignore the "mechanical," practical-magic aspect of mystical

poetry was a distortion of its meaning. A good translation, in Scholem's view, had to be accurate, which implied ignoring symbolic language: "one may disregard the symbol in order to reach out to the text; but to disregard the text in order to reach out to the symbol is [...] not acceptable" (67). But this does not mean that the symbols had to disappear, because any philologically adequate reconstruction of the original in contemporary language automatically re-creates its symbolic meaning, Scholem argued. Thus, he turned philology from a positivist technical discipline into a powerful instrument for transcending space and time. Rejecting Wiener's "theology of expressionism," Scholem concluded his review with a bold statement that can be described as a credo of his "theology of philology":

I do believe that deep philology can have a truly mystical function when it promotes, accompanies and invokes the transformation of times (*Verwandlung der Zeiten*) in its work. I also believe that the dignified transmission of the goods of generations, whose positive or negative quality is ultimately to be judged not by world history but by the world court, might involve a deeper connection to a Kabbalah, not without reason called a "tradition," than is accomplished by staggering arbitrariness. (69)

Scholem's attack on Wiener involved more than a scholarly argument. It was a critique of Buberian "experience mysticism," which Scholem held responsible for the main evils of Wiener's translations.⁶⁰ As David Biale argues in his intellectual biography of Scholem, "as much as Scholem's fascination with irrationalism reflected his debt to Buber, his decision to study the Kabbalah as an academic project represented something new. Indeed, it has to be understood in part as a reaction against Buber's mystical approach to Jewish sources."⁶¹ Biale correctly interprets Scholem's review of Wiener's anthology as a critique of "Buberian distinctions" between living mystical experience and ritualistic dogma, but by the time Scholem's review appeared in 1921, Wiener himself had grown more skeptical of Buber.⁶² Two years earlier Scholem had criticized the *Erlebnis* mysticism in his open farewell letter to the editor and readers of *Jerubbaal*, which appeared in the journal following Wiener's essay "Ziele des Zionismus." Scholem proclaimed that the highest goal of Zionism was solitude, "because, on its very

own, shared solitude (*Einsamkeit*), gives reason for community.” He claimed that the Jewish community was founded not on common activity but on common solitude, for there can be no “Jewish community valid before God” (*vor Gott gültige jüdische Gemeinschaft*) in Galuth.⁶³ In Scholem’s view, the problem of contemporary youth was the absence of a language to bring their imagination alive. After the young generation finds its own language, it will reject the notion of the *jüdisches Erlebnis* because “experience” happens only to those who can neither be silent nor speak adequately, who can neither see nor act (127). Scholem denounced *Erlebnis* as “the chimerical in its highest concentration, glibberish turned absolute” (128).

The rejection of Buber’s existentialist philosophy of Judaism became an intellectual point of departure also for Scholem’s friend Walter Benjamin. After reading Scholem’s review, Benjamin wrote to him: “I was very delighted, albeit silently, with the slight allusion to my ‘Task of the Translator,’ which I believed to have discovered in the original version of your ‘Lyrik der Kabbala.’ To be specific, the allusion is that, in your words, the true principles of translation have already been established ‘often enough.’”⁶⁴ Both Scholem and Benjamin sought their understanding of Judaism not through experience but through a rigorous interrogation of its texts; indeed, as Paul Mendes-Flohr informs us, “Scholem’s friendship with Walter Benjamin was sealed by his discovery of their mutual disaffection with Buber’s *Erlebnis*-mysticism,”⁶⁵ which he attributes to their assimilated upbringing:

Benjamin and Scholem concluded that an immediate experience of God, independent of tradition, is ultimately elusive. For Jews such as themselves, products of the purgatory of assimilation and secularization, the divine reality could only be experienced via the mediation of traditional texts, bearing as they do the traces of a numinous reality informing them. One thus reads those texts with the hope of revalorizing that reality for oneself.⁶⁶

Scholem’s sharp polemics against Wiener—whom he otherwise respected as an outstanding Hebraist—helps us understand the fundamental philosophical difference between the two thinkers. Scholem’s worldview took shape as a reaction to the expressionist exaltation of the older generation. In his early writings, he asserted his belief in the

ability of rigorous scholarship to elucidate even the most obscure moments in the spiritual development of humanity. The metaphoric vision of philological criticism as “a uniquely marvelous mirror” is a recurrent motif in his personal writings.⁶⁷ In 1918 he wrote in an unpublished fragment, “Philology is a symbol, [...] in which the Kabbalah, which somehow still exists as a whole, can first and most purely be secured for the people of today as in a most wondrously constructed concave mirror.”⁶⁸ For Scholem, philological scholarship was a modern heir to the old Kabbalah mysticism, which he saw as first and foremost a written tradition, a unique corpus of texts that could only be understood through rigorous philological investigation in silent solitude. He had little interest in the still-thriving kabbalistic practice in the Jerusalem of his days.⁶⁹ As David Biale explains, “Scholem believes that the defining characteristic of Jewish mysticism as commentary on a secret tradition has its origins in a unique and explicitly positive attitude toward language. Commentary is not only the proper mode of Jewish mysticism, but is actually required because of the divine origin of traditional texts.”⁷⁰ In this sense philology, as the science of commentary, is the true continuation of the mystical tradition of Kabbalah, an exclusive scholarly discipline that sets its own goals for itself.

Contrary to Scholem, Wiener did not believe that scholarship opened a way to the mystical truth. He was initiated in the secrets of the Kabbalah as a teenager by his own grandfather, an experience that stayed with him for the rest of his life and that he recalled in his memoirs in the 1930s. The *Erlebnis*—an experience-event—remained central for his worldview. Unlike Scholem, Wiener used the word “Kabbalah” not in a strictly technical or philological sense, but to denote the broad range of mystical experience within Judaism. For Wiener, the truth was in experience, and literature was its expression. We do not know what impact Scholem’s criticism had on Wiener, but after Scholem’s review, he published only one more piece in *Der Jude*. By that time Wiener had turned to Yiddish, which he regarded not as a sacred tongue but as the product of the collective creativity of the Jewish people in Eastern Europe, and which he eventually came to regard as the highest expression of the Jewish artistic genius. For Wiener, Yiddish was superior to Hebrew as a language thanks to its ability to reflect the living reality

of Jewish experience rather than the abstract dogmas of Judaism. The symbolic notion of the orient played an important role in the intellectual evolution of both men. In the case of Wiener, it brought him back to Eastern Europe, where he created his own synthesis of Jewish culture and Marxism and took a leading part in the Soviet Yiddish experiment. Scholem went in a different direction, settling in Jerusalem and assuming the position of a “well-meaning” but rather passive observer of state-building.⁷¹ Over the years, Wiener apparently harbored no animosity toward Scholem. In 1926 Benjamin reported from Paris to Scholem in Jerusalem that Wiener had translated for him a Hebrew review of Hugo Bergmann: “He does not think much of Bergmann’s Hebrew and, therefore, takes all the more pleasure in recalling the pedagogical lashings you gave him in *Der Jude*.”⁷²

Wiener’s other contribution to Hebrew scholarship was his anthology of post-biblical Hebrew poetry, which came out in the prestigious series of world poetry anthologies produced by Insel Verlag in Leipzig. Each volume in the series was published entirely in the original language, including not only the texts but also the introduction and notes. The Hebrew volume, titled in Hebrew *Mivhar hashirah haivrit* and in Latin *Anthologia Hebraica*, contained two separate introductions, one by the volume’s chief editor, the prominent Prague rabbi and scholar Hayim (Heinrich) Brody, the other by his junior collaborator Meir Wiener, in which he repeated some of the ideas he had developed in his German works. The book was reprinted several times in Palestine from the 1920s through the 1940s, but subsequent reprints did not include Wiener’s introduction. Wiener had already mentioned the anthology project and his cooperation with Brody in a letter to Buber of November 1918,⁷³ but work did not actually start until March 1920.

Wiener’s letters to Brody, written in German and Hebrew, and now preserved in the archive of the Diaspora Museum (*Beit-Hatfutsot*) in Tel Aviv, were published in a Yiddish translation by Dov Sadan as the first part of an unfinished project of publishing Wiener’s pre-Soviet legacy. As is clear from the first letters, written during the spring and summer of 1920, the original plan was a collaborative project with Brody as the senior editor and Wiener and the Hebrew writer Shmuel Yosef Agnon as his junior assistants, but Agnon was soon dropped from the

project for reasons unspecified. Wiener also acted as an intermediary between Brody and the publisher. Wiener's letters reveal a certain degree of disagreement between the collaborators as to the goal of their project. Wiener believed that the primary purpose of the anthology was aesthetic, whereas Brody envisaged it as a critical edition, but they soon overcame this initial difficulty and developed a friendly relationship. The tone of Wiener's letters became more personal. He thanked Brody for his opinion about *Messias*; interestingly, he also insisted that Buber had had no influence on him in his youth because he did not become familiar with Buber's works until he went to study in Switzerland.⁷⁴

Wiener's Philosophical Synthesis: *Von den Symbolen*

Wiener's sisters recalled that he wrote theater reviews for the *Wiener Morgenzeitung* until his departure to the Soviet Union, but because the reviews in this newspaper were usually unsigned, it is not possible to identify any of them as his work. Thus, the treatise *Von den Symbolen* (*On Symbols*, 1924) should be regarded as Wiener's last and most comprehensive German publication, which presents a systematic exposition of his pre-Marxist ideas about religion, philosophy, and art. Based on diary fragments from 1915 to 1921, it also incorporates parts of his published essays, combining them into one coherent ordered narrative. *Von den Symbolen* deals with the problem of the expression of spiritual experience through the symbolic forms of human creativity. This issue was a preoccupation of many artists, writers, and thinkers of that age, from Wassily Kandinsky to Ernst Cassirer. Wiener's contribution to the discussion was original in its attempted synthesis of the German philosophical tradition and Jewish mysticism. But the book had no impact either on German or Jewish thinking of that time. Wiener himself would later claim that the period from 1923 to 1927 was the time of his conversion to Marxism, during which he published nothing. Yet the key ideas of *Von den Symbolen* found their way into Wiener's works of the Soviet period, although in a disguised Marxist form.

From the Judaic side, Wiener's theory of symbols appears to be inspired by the fundamental kabbalistic concept of ten *sefirot*, or channels,

through which the divine being communicates itself to the created world. Together, Wiener's "symbols," like the *sefirot*, serve as spiritual forces that keep the material world functioning and prevent it from decomposing into a disorderly multitude of fragments. Wiener regards symbols as the instrument that secures the "life of the integral thought of the whole of humanity."⁷⁵ Philosophically, Wiener's theory of symbols is an attempt to continue the Western pantheistic tradition of Spinoza, Goethe, and the romantics into the age of modernism. Unlike Hegel, Wiener sees the evolution of spirit not as a dialectical but as a cyclical process, envisioning the revelation of the creative spirit in the material world as a constant pattern of spontaneous outbursts of creativity, alternating with periods of gradual stagnation and formalization. Then comes the next moment of the spiritual experience, the *Erlebnis*, exposing a "dissonance" inside the established order and disrupting its apparent harmony. This dissonance is eventually resolved by a new act of harmonization, which inevitably carries within itself the potential for a new dissonance, and so forth. In this respect, the age of modernity is not different from the epoch of the prophets or the Middle Ages. One can only speak about progress in terms of the expansion of the process of releasing and resolving dissonances into new areas of reality.

Each essay of *Von den Symbolen* deals with one particular force or aspect of symbolic creativity. The most powerful of all is metaphor, which enables the word to surpass its concrete meaning and to express the infinity of the absolute, "purpose-free thought" (8), that is, thought free of worldly concerns. The "purpose-free" nature of the metaphor reveals itself in three ways: through love, action (ethics), and cognition (religion). These three drives toward transcending the limitations of material reality are at the center of oriental religious systems (among which Wiener also counted some schools of Greek philosophy, as well as Jewish and Christian mystical traditions), which expressed them in symbolic forms. In the Western world, the emphasis on the practical needs of understanding material reality has resulted in the suppression of pure spirituality. In occidental culture, the metaphor is not a channel toward transcendental reality but merely an illustrative tool. The oriental metaphor is introverted, abstract, and opaque; whereas the occidental one serves the practical purpose of illustrating, explaining, and rationalizing material reality

and must be exact, clear, and functional. In the oriental traditions, the metaphor is the foundation of scriptural hermeneutics, which remains largely inaccessible to the occidental mind. To illustrate his point, Wiener marshals an array of examples of metaphors from the literatures of India, China, Persia, and the Middle East. European cultures—with the important exception of folklore—are much less creative and mostly recycle the “dead” oriental metaphorical stock. The modernist revolution in the European arts at the beginning of the twentieth century generated a new interest in the oriental metaphoric culture but in most cases, that culture was misunderstood and wrongly appropriated (38).

The oriental notion of mystical or prophetic *vision* defied any Western-style order or system that would impose a hierarchy of values upon the whole; every part was equally important. The intuitive, visionary form of cognition was more comprehensive than the discursive one, for it conveyed the unmediated and unified reality through images. The visionary element was also present in Western cultures, but its origins were in the East. For the oriental mind, the act of cognition was a “shattering explosion” (49), which could only be conveyed through an intimate personal relationship between the teacher and his disciple, rather than learned from texts (52). The distinction between intuition and cognition is central for the Jewish tradition, which separates the written and oral Torah. Anything genuinely new, Wiener argues, can only be discovered by the way of intuition because “logic precludes any discovery” (53) of new truths that would contradict established beliefs. Vision is creative and positive; logic can only define and differentiate. The struggle between vision and logic produces myth, faith, and mysticism: “myth is a vision in its historical development; faith [is] a practical myth, logically reduced; mysticism [is] the living myth of the present” (54).

Language has its source and ultimate purpose in prayer, which in its purest form has no rational justification or intention; it is simply a “very human need” (61). Prayer helps people establish contact with God, transcending the barrier between I and Thou. It is individual by nature, and any form of collective organization of religion severs the direct link between man and God and can even turn into a dangerous perversion. At this point, Wiener acknowledges the critique of organized religion by philosophical rationalism and the Enlightenment, which restores the

value of individual religious experience. Indeed, Wiener regards the Enlightenment's skepticism of religion as healthy and helpful because it set in motion the process of intellectual revision (68).

Turning to literary genres, Wiener contrasts legend as an oriental genre to the Western genre of chronicle. Legend contains in condensed form, not just the past and the present of the national collective but also its future, and brings to poetic expression the "latent aspiration of the collective destiny of the people," reflecting their character, beliefs, and aspirations (72). Adding a Jungian touch to his theory, Wiener acknowledges the impact of the collective unconscious on the creation of the folk legend: "in the legend, which is not bound by any concerns about reality, imposed moral norms, and practical rationality, the actual character of a people lives like the character of an individual in a dream, free and unrestrained" (74). Legend not only preserves the national past but also reshapes it, together with the present, according to the collective self-image of the people, and sets creative objectives for the future. Two opposing forces are at work in legend, the rudimentary desires of the past against the collective creative will and the premonition of the future. Legend is the focal point where the inchoate ideas and desires of the people take the clear shape of religious, social, and moral principles that determine the historical development of a nation: "nowhere does the people's presaging of its future, the setting of a purpose and the aspiration towards it, speak with such original immediacy, still unrestrained by consciousness, as in the legend and the fairy tale" (77). This "presaging" makes the legend akin to a prophetic vision. But as the intellectual and moral concepts become more elaborate and sophisticated with time, legend loses its formal purity and merges with more developed genres. Now the original desires take the form of complex symbols and metaphors. Legendary motifs travel from one national culture to the other, acquiring foreign traits in the process. One example is the humble Jewish character of Yeshu, who under the influence of the materialistic Western Gentile imagination has been transformed into the majestic figure of Jesus the king and savior (81).

Law, contrary to legend, is a product of the decay of the original vision of the world as a whole. Legal regulations become necessary only as a protection against doubts and insecurity. Following nineteenth-

century biblical criticism, Wiener claims that the legal framework of Judaism was created after the age of the prophets by the Deuteronomists, who were no longer capable of an immediate comprehension of the highest, undivided idea of morality. The same happened in Christianity, where Paul, and later the Church, have turned the teaching of Jesus into a dogma. In both cases, the interpretation has usurped the place of the vision. Not only religious vision but also moral teaching has undergone a similar transformation from an unmediated individual experience into alienating norms of collective behavior, which are in many ways opposite to the original experience. Immediate religious knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) has become a temple organization, with its ritual and casuistry; the ethical idea has turned into the idea of the state. The notion of sin is also a product of the legalistic mentality: by trying to suppress and delegitimize destructive and immoral drives, the ethical consciousness makes them real. Wiener supports this view by invoking Freud's theory of civilization as the controlling force on sexuality. Instead of "original sin," one should speak of "original grace," which is the vision of sainthood—but such a saintly figure does not exist in the present; it is an image from the legendary past projected into the utopian future. History develops in a cycle of self-destruction and self-fulfillment that refutes the idea of progress in the history of ethics: the "final goals" are also the original ones (98). Reflecting the pessimistic mood of the time, Wiener remarks: "in comparison to the early Babylonian ethics, our present hardly demonstrates any progress" (106).

The Western tradition of art has long since rejected the abstract concept of beauty in favor of individualized forms of expression (116). During creative periods in the history of art, artists try to bring the individual "character" into the general notion of beauty, making ugliness look beautiful, pushing Western aesthetic norms toward "decentralized harmony" (120). Art can serve as a symbolic barometer of its age: when the established conceptual order becomes unstable, symbols lose their obvious meanings. Artists begin to look for a new truth in the old symbols that are considered obsolete under the current order and by actualizing them, they presumably produce a new order. The artist's task is to "redeem" (*erlösen*) the harmonies that are hidden in the past as potentiality by choosing one among several options. The discrepancy

between the new and the old concepts of beauty produces what Wiener calls an “area of ugliness” that must be harmonized. The “new” in art is born not out of a mere urge for a new sensation, but of a spiritual need to overcome the newly discovered dissonances. Like religion, art was born from the same quest for harmony: “when the harmonic vision in the formation of a fragment of being becomes active, then art is produced. But when this passive vision strives toward the infinite and becomes a harmonic, all-encompassing view (*Allschau*), then it is called religion” (133).

In Wiener’s scheme of artistic development, the pantheistic view of the world reaches its peak in the age of the baroque, which found its expression in the philosophy of Spinoza: “there is no privileged existence, no object or movement which has more value than others; all are equally divine” (133). Goethe and the romantics introduced this pantheistic mood into the German literary imagination, whereas the corresponding Jewish movement was Hasidism. As for the future, Wiener predicted that “the real art of tomorrow, enriched by the experience of ‘expressionism’ and ‘abstractionism’—whose grotesque transformations are to be regarded as the final convulsions of the ascetic idealistic worldview, which is hostile to visual phenomena [...]—will relate to reality in a completely different way from now. The time of a complete overcoming of the ‘ideal’ is drawing near” (138). All modern trends and movements are nothing but “stations on the way to the harmonizing of reality” (139). By overcoming the established “idealistic” norms, the future will bring about a new, universal form of expression, and “universal harmony” (*All-Einklang*), which is now maturing in Europe (141).

Life begins as an *Erlebnis*, a moment between harmony and disharmony; the purpose of religion, like art, is to bring back to harmony the chaos that was released through the *Erlebnis*, rather than to restore the harmony that was disturbed by the *Erlebnis*. Theology (theodicy) tries to justify God and rationalize evil. Buddhism separates the real from appearances and relegates evil to the domain of the latter, whereas the book of Job denies that man even has a right to ask questions about the nature of evil. Early Christianity and some syncretic cults try to resolve the problem of evil by introducing the intermediate agency of original sin. This does not cancel the dissonance, but creates

an abstract, timeless metaphysics of the two principles and a mediator between them. Wiener is not satisfied by any solution that tries to impose harmony from outside. For him, harmony could not be found in external reality but only inside one's own self. It could not be constructed but only experienced (165).

The two remaining symbolic forms, cult and poetry, stand in opposition to each other. Serving as an "activation of religion outside the artistic sphere by non-creative, earth-bound people," cult substitutes a mechanical action for genuine religious experience (170). Cult originates in an erroneous primitivist belief that cosmic redemption can be brought about by magic actions without an ethical dimension. The process of ritualization does not take place only in religion: in art it produces style; in the moral sphere, conventions and customs. Contrary to cult, poetry is spontaneous and creative. It can be divided into two major genres: the descriptive epic and the expressive lyric. Jews, who for a thousand years lived in the state of "feverish excitement," were not capable of accepting the rigid regulations of the epic genre, which explains their propensity for the lyric. Some cultures experience inner tension between the two genres. Thus, German culture is not epic by nature but has produced great works of epic. The great Russian epic writers Tolstoy and Dostoevsky had moments of great lyric intensity. The interaction between epic and lyric produces drama, bringing together the monologism of the lyric and the polyphony of the epic.

In *Von den Symbolen* Wiener utilized a great many of the ideas of his time. Rooted in the Herderian allegory that likens the life of the nation to the life of the individual and places both firmly in time and space, and enriched by the aesthetic philosophy of Goethe and the romantics, Wiener's eclectic philosophy of symbols affirms the centrality of the Buberian concept of *Erlebnis* as a "big bang" that sets in motion the life of the individual and the nation. Wiener's aesthetics has parallels in contemporary theories of modern art, which like that of Worringer, link abstraction with the primitive. Wiener's idea of the cyclical development of the forms of artistic creativity and intellectual discourse, which repeat themselves as one epoch replaces another, echoes Kandinsky's seminal manifesto "Concerning the Spiritual in Art" (originally published in German in 1912), which celebrated "primitive" art as an expression of

internal truths and the rejection of external formal restrictions.⁷⁶ Kandinsky vehemently protested against the “tyranny of materialist philosophy,” which expressed itself in the imitative style of impressionist art and separated “our soul from that of the Primitives.” He called for an artist to discover in his soul new, “yet unnamed,” subtle, and complex emotions—which reminds us of Wiener’s concept of artistic development as a series of new, revolutionary discoveries that expand the area of “harmonization,” in turn bringing about a new crisis of the established order. For both Kandinsky and Wiener, art has the prophetic quality of carrying within itself elements of the future in symbolic form. Kandinsky rejected the kind of art “which has no power for the future, which is only a child of the age and cannot become a mother of the future.” However, unlike Wiener, Kandinsky was not concerned with the national or religious aspects of art. For him true art is a product of “solitary visionaries,” who are “despised or regarded as abnormal” by their contemporaries, and is international by nature. Kandinsky concluded his manifesto on a note that resonated with Wiener’s messianic expectations: “We have before us the age of conscious creation, and this new spirit in painting is going hand in hand with the spirit of thought towards an epoch of great spiritual leaders.”

Wiener’s understanding of symbols has much in common with Ernst Cassirer’s idea of language and myth as basic “symbolic forms” that precede and inform any rational cognition of reality. For Cassirer, language “reveals a noteworthy indifference toward the division of the world into two distinct spheres, into an ‘outward’ and an ‘inward’ reality.”⁷⁷ The same can be applied to that kind of metaphoric thinking that Wiener described as “oriental.” For Cassirer, however, the origins of symbolism did not lie in religious or mystical experience. In his philosophy, both language and myth took their origins from “the basic experience and basic form of personal activity.” These two symbolic forms of cognition later parted ways. Whereas mythology “weave[s] the world in infinite variations around this one central point”—not unlike Wiener’s “oriental” mind—language “gives it [experience] a new form in which it confronts the mere subjectivity of sensation and feeling,” resembling the working of the “occidental” way of cognition.⁷⁸ It is not clear to what extent Wiener was familiar with Cassirer’s ideas because he never

refers to Cassirer's work in his writing. Yet there are certain unmistakable points of convergence between the two thinkers, and these can be found not only in Wiener's German writings but also later, when he switched to the Marxist idiom.

On the Way to Marxism and Yiddish

Meir Wiener fits well into a small but influential movement among Central European Jewish intellectuals that sought to combine elements of Jewish tradition with socialist ideology. In his study of this phenomenon, which he calls the "elective affinity" between Jews and socialism, Michael Löwy points out a "remarkable structural homology, an undeniable spiritual isomorphism, between two cultural universes, apparently set in completely distinct spheres: namely, the Jewish messianic tradition and modern revolutionary, especially libertarian, utopias."⁷⁹ Löwy further distinguishes two groups within that movement. The first group included "religious Jews with anarchist tendencies"—religious not in the sense of their personal faith or observance but their broader identification with the tradition of Judaism—among whom he counts Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin, and Hans Kohn. The second group consists of "the assimilated (religious-atheist) libertarian Jews," who "more or less distanced themselves from their Jewish identity, all the while maintaining a (more or less explicit) link with Judaism." Here one finds men like Gustav Landauer, Ernst Bloch, and Georg Lukács.⁸⁰

Given his intellectual inclinations and polemical temperament, Wiener was not likely to feel at home in the political atmosphere of post-war Vienna. As Harriet Freidenreich explains in her study of Jewish politics in interwar Vienna, Jewish political sympathies shifted from liberalism to socialism but not because the majority of middle-class Jews of Vienna came to believe in socialist ideas: "a great many Jews voted for the Social Democratic Party simply because it was the only major party in Austria which did not include an anti-Semitic plank in its program and did not form electoral alliances with any party which did."⁸¹ It was the middle-class Jewish vote that helped to create "Red Vienna,"

an “exemplary model of a large metropolis with a Socialist city administration” between 1918 and 1934 in a predominantly conservative country. The Austrian Social Democratic Party, “radical in its rhetoric but reformist in practice,” attracted many Jewish intellectuals to its ranks, some of whom rose to positions of leadership.⁸² But the assimilationist and reformist politics of Jewish socialists could not have been attractive to Wiener, who was looking for an alternative to Zionism that would combine political radicalism with a commitment to Jewish culture. His gradual ideological and political drift toward communism during 1921–25 was, of course, not typical for someone with his social background and cultural interests, but it was not exceptional either. The small Austrian Communist Party included Jews, some of whom formerly belonged to an “extremist” (as Freidenreich describes them) left branch of Poale Zion, which merged with the Austrian Communist Party soon after the war.⁸³ A number of Austrian communists and socialists, some of them Jewish, emigrated to the Soviet Union during the 1920s and especially the early 1930s.⁸⁴

Given the significance of communist theory and practice for Wiener during his final years in Europe, it is surprising that Marxist ideas play a very small role in his pre-Soviet writing. The only direct expression of his attitude to Marxism, in an article of 1921, sounds critical. At the conclusion of a brief review of the study *Jüdisches Elend in Wien* (*Jewish Poverty in Vienna*) by the socialist journalist Bruno Frei, Wiener sees a “bloody, tragic paradox” at the core of Marxism. Driven by the “purest ethos,” Marx and his followers arrived at the deterministic concept of class struggle as a “cure,” a justifying “superpower” that obliterates any ethical concerns. Dismissing Marxist class determinism, Wiener argues for a spiritual way of resolving social problems: “the social grounds of poverty must be removed—but this can only be done through a religious-ethical transformation, because a purely material reorganization of society will never suffice.[...] Spirit alone governs bodies, and also directs social circumstances.”⁸⁵

A brief comparison of Wiener and Walter Benjamin, who like Scholem represented the anti-Buberian trend in German Jewish thinking, can highlight some important points of Wiener’s thought vis-à-vis his more famous contemporary. As Marcus Moseley remarks in his insight-

ful study of Wiener's memoirs, "the two provide a sort of mirror image of each other. Benjamin, too, at an early stage in his career had been singled out as a budding talent by von Hofmannsthal. The two moved in the same intellectual circles and were acquainted with each other, living in Paris in 1926. Both traveled to the Soviet Union in that year."⁸⁶ However, whereas Wiener stayed in the Soviet Union for good and made a new career there as a Yiddish scholar and writer, Benjamin came back to Germany disappointed in the Soviet reality. Like Wiener, Benjamin's intellectual and spiritual point of departure was German romanticism, with its skeptical attitude to the bourgeois notions of positivism and progress. Both thinkers also shared a fascination for such diverse interests as Baroque art and Tolstoy's primitivist utopianism. It seems that Löwy's observation about Benjamin's Marxist period is equally applicable to Wiener's: "Communism and historical materialism did not supplant his old spiritualist and libertarian-romantic convictions; rather, they amalgamated with them and, in so doing, constituted a singular and unique form of thought."⁸⁷

An important distinction between Wiener and Benjamin has to do with their understanding of messianism. In a fragment written in 1920 or 1921, Benjamin formulated his vision of the messianic age as an absolute end of history: "First the Messiah completes all historical occurrence, whose relation to the messianic (in this sense) he himself first redeems, completes, and creates. Therefore nothing historical can intend to refer to the messianic from itself out of itself."⁸⁸ As Eric Jacobson interprets Benjamin's concept of messianism, "Belief in the authenticity of the Messiah as a means of individual ascension or salvation is not the focus of Benjamin's messianism but rather the final conclusion of worldly suffering in a collective and permanent end of history."⁸⁹

Contrary to Benjamin, Wiener placed the messianic hero not beyond, but at the very heart of, the historical process. Wiener would probably interpret Benjamin's statement that "nothing historical can intend to refer to the messianic from itself out of itself" as an example of the Western "epic" vision of history, which was alien to the Jewish way of thinking. Wiener's Messiah was a tragic Promethean figure who was bound to act—and eventually to fail—within the narrow confines of historical reality. Hoefflich aptly summed up this messianic character

in his review of Wiener's poetic book *Messias*: "Built from blood, love and the final hatred, the Messiah is fighting in us for God. He fights, ground into the dust, rising from the wasteland of all the deserts, crying out through the halls of palaces, and sacrificed in the fulfilling silence between one moment and the next. He struggles to reach the unity of God from the disunity of variety." Wiener's messianic character was not an abstract concept but a "fighting, problem-solving, hating, loving man, who fought for his struggle, his salvation, and his love and his hatred."⁹⁰

Wiener differs from Benjamin and Scholem first and foremost in his pro-active attitude to reality. Like Kandinsky and other prophets of the new art, he tries to explore things from the inside, by untangling the mass of conflicting and contradictory ideas, instincts, and emotions that he describes as "dissonance." This dissonance can be harmonized by a redeeming action of the messianic hero. Wiener's idea of such a hero underwent a substantial transformation in the course of his life. Initially, in the poems of the *Messias* cycle, this is a lonely tragic figure who aspires to challenge the entire world order and bears many traces of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. But as Wiener moves in the direction of Yiddish and Marxism, this character turns into a more mundane hero. Wiener now treats the act of redemption not as rising above mundane reality but rather as descending to the lowest level, and eventually dissolving the heroic self into the downtrodden masses. Unlike Wiener, most of the leftist Jewish thinkers of that age are contemplative in their approach to history, culture, and politics, and show little real interest in the masses whose interests they endeavor to represent. They prefer the position of a privileged outsider equipped with theoretical knowledge derived from Hegel and Marx, observing the unfolding historical drama from an imagined Olympian point of view.

As we have seen, such a position was also Wiener's point of departure, but he grew dissatisfied with the elitism of German Jewish intellectuals from Buber to Scholem. This dissatisfaction, along with other reasons of a personal and practical nature, might help to explain his ideological evolution toward Yiddish and Marxism. He embraced the new language and ideology because they offered him direct access to immediate material "reality" and showed a way out of the trap of bour-

geois existence. As we shall see, he had little personal sympathy for the proletariat and its representatives. As an intellectual, he chose, probably after many doubts and hesitation, to embrace the Marxist theory of class struggle as a harsh and inescapable truth, and threw in his lot with the projected victors. Yet, as an artist, he retained the trademark Viennese pessimistic fatalism and a bitter sense of irony that colored his fiction both before and after his emigration to the Soviet Union.

Wiener's turn to Yiddish both as the linguistic vehicle for his own artistic expression and the object of his study can be regarded in the context of the search for authenticity among the German Jewish intelligentsia of the post-war era, which expressed itself in an interest in Yiddish and Hebrew. As the historian Michael Brenner explains, "Most German Jews were neither willing nor able to immerse themselves in those cultures. For a small elite group, however, Jewish culture expressed in Jewish languages constituted the culmination of a Jewish renaissance."⁹¹ In the aftermath of the war, as Steven Aschheim writes, "the question of the *Ostjuden* [...] became an existential touchstone of national commitment," an existential *Erlebnis*: "For many, the exposure to Eastern Jews converted a political question into a private turning point, a watershed in their personal and ideological histories."⁹²

Part of this "cult of the *Ostjuden*" was admiration for the Yiddish language as the repository of authentic folk wisdom and Yiddish culture as the expression of the Jewish collective psyche untouched by the destructive effects of European civilization.⁹³ The encounter of German-speaking Jews with Yiddish occurred at different levels. During the First World War, for the first time many of them saw Jewish life in the occupied parts of the Russian Empire; after the war, in Berlin, Hamburg, Vienna, and other big cities, they daily encountered masses of poor emigrants and refugees from Eastern Europe; in print, they had access to translations from modern Yiddish literature; many could admire "authentic" Yiddish theater from Eastern Europe (which in reality was a highly refined product of avant-garde artistic experiment); and finally, some could, if they were really interested, meet with actual creators of Yiddish culture, many of whom found a temporary home in Germany and Austria during the early 1920s. It seems that Wiener was the only member of that German Jewish intellectual elite who made full

use of the last opportunity by striking up lifelong friendships among Soviet Yiddish writers in Berlin. Wiener did not need an *Erlebnis* of encounter with “authentic” East European Jewry. An *Ostjude* himself, he shared neither the positive nor the negative prejudices of “genuine” German Jews toward their eastern brothers. He simply chose to abandon German and Hebrew and reclaim his Yiddish as the most adequate and authentic form of expression both artistically and ideologically.

Three On the Way to Yiddish and Emigration

Yiddish in Vienna after World War I

The wars, revolutions, and other upheavals that shook Eastern and Central Europe from 1914 to 1921 had a powerful effect on Jewish culture. The collapse of the multinational empires—in which Yiddish culture existed side by side with other minority cultures and the emergence of the new political system, whose dominant feature was the acute ideological and political conflict between the Soviet Union and the new nation states of Central Europe—meant that the once relatively uniform Yiddish cultural space of Eastern Europe, with its regional and metropolitan urban centers and a large shtetl periphery, was now split into fragments. Some of the older Hebrew and Yiddish centers, such as Odessa and Berdichev, went into decline; others, once regional locales, like Kiev, Minsk, Łódź, and Czernowitz, grew vibrant. A new constellation of cultural centers outside the traditional area of Jewish settlement emerged in Russia, Germany, and Austria due to the mass migration of Jews out of the regions devastated by the wars. Moscow, Berlin, and, to a lesser extent, Vienna became the new hubs of Jewish cultural activity, laboratories where Yiddish modernist culture was developed, tested, and perfected.

Compared to Berlin, which after 1921 emerged as a new metropolis of Yiddish and Hebrew creativity,¹ Vienna's role was modest. Home to over a hundred thousand Yiddish speakers, predominantly war refugees from Galicia, Vienna also had a small number of Yiddish intellectuals, poets, and writers, who tried to develop Yiddish cultural life in the city. Yiddish publishing activity peaked in Vienna during the years 1919–22,

which coincided with a time of economic and political instability, inflation, and mass migration. Vienna had a daily Yiddish newspaper, *Viner morgentsaytung* (from 1919, *Yidishe morgenpost*), which served the needs of the large Galician refugee population, as well as a number of smaller left-wing Labor Zionist and Communist publications.² The German Jewish author Manès Sperber (1905–84), whose family were Galician refugees, remembers that his encounter with Yiddish avant-garde culture in Vienna “completely transformed” his attitude to the Yiddish language. He was particularly impressed by a Vilna Troupe performance of An-sky’s play *The Dybbuk* during its Vienna tour from October 1922 to February 1923, which was organized with the help of Hoeflich,³ and by the poetry reading by Perets Markish that took place in a small Labor Zionist club in the poor immigrant district of Leopoldstadt. In his memoirs he vividly reconstructs the atmosphere of the latter event:

I was probably the only young person among the approximately forty people who were patiently waiting for the late guest. He finally appeared, wearing a stylish trench coat, stiff from the rain, that he took off with evident reluctance. Perets Markish was a winner even before a party functionary had finished his endless, pointless introduction, for he looked exactly like everyone’s idea of a poet. It was as if his good looks had attained an unsurpassable perfection in that particular place and by the gloomy light of a miserably weak light bulb. For only an instant his face betrayed the extent to which the sight of the meagre audience depressed him, but he overcame his annoyance and addressed us with words that won everyone over, because each of us had reason to believe they were meant especially for him.⁴

Like the audience at Markish’s reading, some of the Yiddish-speaking intellectuals and writers in Vienna, mostly of Galician origin, were also enchanted by the somber magnetism of modern Yiddish culture. As the historian Gabriele Kohlbauer-Fritz tells us, they “put it in their head to make Vienna a center of Yiddish literature, a turntable [*Drehscheibe*] between East and West, which would form a connection between the audiences in Russia, Poland, Western Europe, and America.”⁵ Yiddish literati met at Café Herrenhof, where they mixed with their colleagues who wrote in Hebrew and German. Viennese Yiddish literature was influenced by the modernist Jung Wien school (Arthur Schnitzler, Rich-

ard Beer-Hofmann, Peter Altenberg), on the one hand, and by avant-garde expressionism on the other.⁶ However, by 1923 it became evident that the majestic capital of the former empire, now downgraded to minor provincial status, had neither the potential nor the resources for such a mission and was being eclipsed by Warsaw and Berlin. Political rivalry between different Jewish socialist parties also contributed to this decline. Some Yiddish authors, seeing no future for Yiddish in Vienna, emigrated to Poland between 1921 and 1923. Only a small group, such as the prose writer Avrom Moyshe Fuchs and the poets Melech Chmelnitzki and Mendel Neugröschel, stayed in Vienna until the late 1930s.⁷

The intellectual outlet of modern Yiddish culture in Vienna was the journal *Kritik*, ten issues of which were published from 1920 to 1921. The idea behind this project was to create a “bridge between the European and the American Jews”; as Melekh Ravitsh recalls in his memoirs, when titles for this journal were under consideration, its editor Moyshe Zilburg (1884–1941?) suggested *Di brik* (the bridge).⁸ Given the minority character of Yiddish culture in the German-speaking countries, it is not surprising that the main polemical arguments of the journal were directed against the mainstream German-Jewish Zionist culture that was perceived as assimilationist. The tone was set by Zilburg in his column titled “Vos ikh hob aykh tsu zogn” (“What I Have to Tell You”). Born in Molodechno (now Belarus), in his youth Zilburg was a Bund activist in Minsk and Vilna. After spending time in a Tsarist prison in 1912, he settled in the Habsburg Empire, living in Cracow and Lemberg. He lived in Vienna between 1918 and 1923, then returned to Vilna, and eventually settled in Warsaw, where he contributed to various literary periodicals. He was murdered by the Nazis in Vilna.

In *Kritik*, Zilburg launched a passionate attack on Zionism and Western Jewry, which he accused of usurping the leadership of the Jewish world without having any of the necessary credentials and qualifications. Zilburg objected to the Zionist denial of the value and validity of Diaspora experience and culture and argued for the use of Yiddish in modern Jewish schools. The Zionist project of building a Jewish state according to the old European nation-state model would, in his view, inevitably fail unless it became part of the universal redemption, the world revolution. The problem with the Jewish intelligentsia, according

to Zilburg, lay in its desire to rise above the folk, which was part of its fear of the masses. This problem had become especially acute after the war, when the Jewish intelligentsia languished in nostalgia for the “good old times.” For Zilburg, the only positive example was Soviet Russia, where Jews stood at the crossroads of a new direction, and where “the influence of the intelligentsia is weakening every day” due to the disappearance of the exploiting class. Outside Russia, the Jewish masses were too oppressed and tended to acquiesce in that situation, and the only solution to that problem was the creation of a folk intelligentsia that would unite the people and offer them a sense of purpose.⁹

Whereas Zilburg’s views on culture were influenced by the anti-Zionist and egalitarian Marxist ideology of the Bund, his colleague Naftole Vaynig represented a Labor Zionist ideology of Jewish culture that was dominant in the left-wing Jewish circles of Vienna at that time. Vaynig (real name Naftole Norbert, 1897–1943?) grew up in a Polish-speaking family in Tarnów near Cracow and learned Yiddish only at the age of sixteen. After graduation from a Polish gymnasium, he studied literature at Cracow University. He spent his life in Poland working as a teacher, folklorist, and journalist and perished in the Holocaust. In his essay entitled “In di trit fun a nayem yidishn stil” (“In the Steps of a New Jewish Style”), Vaynig identified the main problem of contemporary Yiddish creativity as a lack of a new Jewish style, which he described as an “expression of organic composition (*tsuzamenshtelung*) and interconnection between intellectual and artistic aspirations.”¹⁰ He argued that Yiddish literature needed a more focused and coordinated collective effort, blaming the chaotic intellectual and moral state of Jews in post-war Europe for this deficiency. In the time of Walt Whitman and Emile Verhaeren, Jewish imagination remained largely confined to the small world of the shtetl, the Jewish street, the marketplace, and the synagogue, which was falling apart under the impact of external forces. For Vaynig, the shtetl was no more than a pleasant dream that could not be brought back into existence by the nostalgic fantasy of Yiddish writers.

The new Yiddish hero was to be an intellectual searching for a way into the foreign city. The focus of literary attention had to shift from the collective to the personal; literature should take an interest in the dramatic and dynamic aspects of life, in attempts to make a difference. The first

Yiddish writer who introduced European style and ideas into Yiddish literature and celebrated the liberation of human instincts and emotions from the pressure of tradition was Y. L. Peretz. Rejecting the neoromantic orientalist concept of East European Jews promoted by Buber and his German Jewish followers, and also challenging some of Zilburg's ideas, Vaynig proclaimed that Jewish culture needed a pro-European orientation: "Our way leads to the West".¹¹ Vaynig interpreted assimilation as an active process of adaptation of national culture to current general trends, an idea he traced back to the philosophy of Henri Bergson (who was himself an assimilated descendant of a prominent Warsaw Jewish family). Following this logic, Vaynig interpreted the practice of using Yiddish, the spoken language of the masses, rather than Hebrew or a non-Jewish language, as evidence of assimilation, that is, an attempt to adjust Jewish culture to the contemporary socialist worldview. Modern Yiddish literature was to a large extent a product of the cultural development of the Jewish proletariat and a negation of the bourgeois nationalist culture. In his view, proletarian Yiddish culture was a major step forward in the progress of Jewish culture; it preserved its folklore foundations but at the same time "assimilated" new, universal socialist values.

Jewish neoromanticism, represented by the popular Yiddish poet David Einhorn (incidentally, a cellmate of Zilburg in the Vilna prison in 1912), offered no positive vision of the future, celebrating instead the age-old tradition of Jewish suffering, weakness, and passivity. Thus, Vaynig concluded, Jewish neoromantic literature rejected the very possibility of a productive solution to the existential situation of the Jewish individual within the framework of the Jewish collective.¹² After a brief critical survey of recent Yiddish poetry, Vaynig pronounced it detached from reality and deeply individualist, recognizing only one achievement: it refined and enriched the Yiddish language, making it suitable for the expression of personal thoughts and feelings and providing it with its own rhythm and melody. In his critical survey, Vaynig did not distinguish between different parts of the Yiddish literary world: America and Europe constituted one uniform literary space.¹³

Another important critical voice in *Kritik* was the prolific journalist and political activist Alexander Khashin (Tsvi Averbukh, 1888–1938). Born in Belorussia into an affluent family, in the early 1900s he emerged

as one of the leading activists and ideologues of Labor Zionism and served as an editor of its Hebrew and Yiddish publications. After World War I, he lived in Vienna and contributed literary criticism to Yiddish and German publications. In the late 1920s, he moved to the Soviet Union, where he occupied an important editorial position in *Der emes*, the Yiddish equivalent of *Pravda*, and wrote extensively under various pseudonyms on a broad variety of cultural and political issues, until he was arrested and executed during the “purges” of 1937–38. Khashin’s essay “Di kiever” (“The Kievans”), which appeared in the November 1920 issue of *Kritik*, was one of the first critical introductions of the Kiev group of Yiddish writers to the European audience.¹⁴ Khashin linked the flourishing of Yiddish culture in Ukraine with the establishment of Jewish cultural autonomy, which enabled Jewish cultural institutions, such as the *Kultur-lige*, to operate under the auspices of socialist parties within the new political framework, instead of depending on the goodwill of Jewish philanthropists.¹⁵ The new political structure united, under one institutional roof, Jewish literature, music, arts, theatre, publishing, and education. As a result, the Kiev group, rooted in the local Jewish literary tradition, made Ukraine the leading center of Yiddish literature, eclipsing Lithuania and Poland.

Khashin regarded the impressionist writer David Bergelson as a connecting link between the younger and older generations of Yiddish prose and the symbolist Der Nister as the harbinger of a new modernist Yiddish style; in their works, Yiddish prose “acquired the *rhythm* of a human heart and the discipline of an individual *will*” (5). Bergelson and Der Nister organized and led the young Kiev generation, which was represented by three poets. Perets Markish weighed in with a new Yiddish verse and rhythm. Leyb Kvitko was the least mature and the most rough and primitive of the three but also had the deepest roots in Yiddish folk culture. As opposed to Markish and Kvitko, David Hofshateyn had a well-articulated, restrained, and lucid poetic voice. Khashin characterized the three young Kiev poets as “primeval, people of the beginning” (*breyshesdike, onheyb-mentshn*) who “came out of nowhere, without pedigree, their father is the Jewish Ukrainian anonym [...] as if they grew up in the fields” (7). He regarded them as “free from all our national, social, romantic, and highly individualist themes; free from

grand, big city models of Jewish grief,” echoing the imagery frequently used by the Kiev critics to stress the original and authentic character of Kiev poetry and present it as a new beginning in Yiddish literature. In conclusion Khashin estimated the significance of the Kiev group for the future of Yiddish literature: “They are not only the beginning of a new collective style, but also a remote echo of a new Jewish collective cultural movement” (7).

Kritik ceased publication in 1921 when Wiener was just beginning to write in Yiddish. He knew some of the Viennese contributors and probably read the journal quite carefully. It might even have awakened his interest in the new Yiddish literature and especially in the work of the members of the Kiev group, some of whom became friends with him in 1922–23. The ambition of *Kritik* to form a bridge between different centers of Yiddish modernism could not be realized in the conditions of post-war Vienna. The last issue of *Kritik* had a clear pro-Soviet leaning, which might have also influenced the direction of Wiener’s ideological search.

Another mediator between Vienna and Soviet Yiddish literature was Wiener’s friend Moyshe Livshits (sometimes spelled Lifshits), a sharp Yiddish and Hebrew critic and an adventurous character with a reputation of a Soviet agent. In an essay titled “Literatur fun ibergangtsayt” (“Literature of the Transition Time”) in the collection *Geyendik* (*Going*, 1923), which came out in Berlin under the imprint of the Jewish Section at the Commissariat for Public Education of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, and included also Leyb Kvitko’s poems about pogroms and Der Nister’s novella “Tsayt-gayst,” Livshits celebrated, in a rather ironic style, the fifth anniversary of the October revolution. He identified that event as the beginning of a new “primordial epoch” (*urtsayt*), which gives birth to a new man, *der troglodit*, with new cultural creativity. By virtue of his belonging to the new age, this man stands above all cultural achievements of the old humanity, which are doomed to extinction. Livshits admonished contemporary poets, who were stuck between the two ages, to watch vigilantly for signs of the new age by looking the newborn *troglodit* straight into the eyes and not be led astray by all kinds of saboteurs who belong to the concentration camp.¹⁶ Despite its somewhat impish tone, Livshits’s article touched

upon an important problem of cultural continuity, which became an issue of fierce ideological debate in Soviet Yiddish literature during the late 1920s and early 1930s, and his arguments found their way into Wiener's writing of that time. But Livshits, in spite of his professed sympathy for the Soviet Union, apparently never set his foot on Soviet soil and chose to emigrate to Palestine, where he died in Tel Aviv in 1940.¹⁷

Wiener moved to Berlin at the beginning of 1921, working first as his father's employee; but soon he found a more rewarding job at one of the large Berlin publishing houses. He made new acquaintances in Yiddish and Hebrew literary circles, among others with the famous Hebrew poet Hayim Nahman Bialik, who gave Wiener helpful advice on the anthology of Hebrew literature.¹⁸ Wiener also discussed plans with Hoefflich to invite Bialik to Vienna. Berlin offered more opportunities than Vienna, as Erna Adlersberg recalls:

Although Meir loved to be in the family circle, he was not happy with life in Vienna. Father and son did not understand each other and as Meir was extremely sensitive he did not like upsetting his parents. However, he would not give in and decided to leave for Berlin where he worked with Ullstein Verlag and where he had plenty of incentive and leisure to write.¹⁹

In his letter to Erna, Meir describes, with pride and a touch of irony, his jolly Berlin days:

I am a literary advisor in a very big publishing house here—that is, I determine what should be published. I keep pleasantly busy just a few hours a day and am very well paid. A fortune when converted into Kronen.

Obviously, I have gotten to know many different people here. Famous and less well-known writers and other people [...] I go into the publishing house for a few hours in the morning—have my own office, secretary and typist. Read manuscripts, smoke cigarettes, talk with the authors and give my opinion about what I have read, give presentations to the publishing house's board of directors about books to be published or not.

In the afternoon around 4:30 I am usually invited to tea somewhere. I stay one hour and go home. Maintain my correspondence and work a bit on my own writing. 7:30 dinner at home. Then I either visit

acquaintances or less often the coffeehouse—even more rarely I stay [...] at home.²⁰

Late in 1921 or early in 1922, Wiener was again back in Vienna due to family circumstances. His mother fell seriously ill, and he stayed with her until her death a few months later.²¹ Franzi recalls: “I can still hear his heartbreaking crying standing by our mother’s open grave reciting *Kaddish*, the prayer for the dead. His voice was full of profound pain, but strong and proud, as if to challenge God or nature for having taken from him the most beloved.”²² The death of the mother, and his father’s second marriage, further aggravated the tensions between the father and the son, who headed the children’s rebellion against their new stepmother.

Working in Berlin for Ullstein Verlag, a major German publishing house, which probably supported some Yiddish publications,²³ Wiener made new friends among émigré Yiddish literati from the Soviet Union, among them Leyb Kvitko, Perets Markish, and Der Nister (Pinkhas Kahanovitsh). Kvitko’s wife Betty remembered that her husband regarded Wiener as his best friend in Berlin: “They used to spend hours together, walking the Berlin streets and talking. Kvitko eagerly absorbed Wiener’s broad knowledge, and Wiener listened with no less interest to Kvitko’s stories about his life, about the Bolsheviks, and about the land of the Soviets.”²⁴ Wiener started writing poetry and fiction in Yiddish no later than 1921 but could not get his Yiddish works published until 1926 when he moved to the Soviet Union. Possibly his Yiddish works found little appreciation outside the circle of Soviet émigrés in Central Europe; in any case, editors in Berlin, Warsaw, and Paris refused to publish them.

The Kiev Group: Poets and Critics

The young Yiddish poets and writers whom Wiener befriended in Berlin in 1921–25—Leyb Kvitko, Perets Markish, Pinkhas Kahanovitsh (Der Nister)—belonged to the so-called Kiev group, which was later to play a central role in Soviet Yiddish culture. This connection made it possible for Wiener not only to receive an invitation to come and work in the Soviet Union but to have an exceptional career there. At every step of his Soviet life, he was accompanied by people who were in one

way or another associated with the Kiev group. This informal association of Yiddish writers, poets, critics, and artists took shape toward the end of the first decade of the twentieth century and by 1918 emerged as an important new actor on the Yiddish literary stage.

The writer Israel Joshua Singer (the elder brother of Isaac Bashevis Singer), who spent the years of the war and the revolution in Kiev, later ironically described this group as a sort of “secret order” of priests of literary modernism: “[t]hey conversed in confidential tones, always discussing some secret. They believed with all their hearts [...] that literature was sacred, the holy of holies, that the ‘Kievers’ were the only high priests conducting the divine service, and that Kiev was Jerusalem.”²⁵ The artistic program of the Kiev writers was eclectic, as Gennady Estraiikh explains: “the Kievers based their innovation on the existing poetic culture—Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, Ukrainian, and West European. They were related to the contemporary modernist schools of Ukrainian writers. Like the Ukrainian symbolists, they rejected the narrow ethnographism of their predecessors and strove for a hybrid of Europeanization with national identity.”²⁶ In the works of the Kiev writers, Wiener found that amalgam of modernist national aesthetics with revolutionary socialist ideology that resonated with his own vision of modern Jewish culture. Upon his arrival in the Soviet Union in 1926, he turned from a follower to a leader, providing the Kiev group with sophisticated aesthetic conceptualization and literary-historical background.

The chaotic years following the end of World War I were a time of active search for a new expressive language in Yiddish literature, especially in poetry. There were two closely related reasons for this. On the one hand, poetry was looking for adequate ways to respond to the catastrophic events that had befallen East European Jewry; on the other hand, the new generation of Yiddish poets, who had grown up in the shadow of the aesthetic ideology that emphasized the social and national aspects of literature, sought to free themselves from its domination, following what Kenneth Moss calls “the deparochializing imperative”—“a desire to remake Hebrew or Yiddish literature as typical European literatures” that became prominent in Jewish culture at that time.²⁷ The deaths of the three founding fathers of Yiddish literature from 1915 to 1917 had great symbolic significance for the development

of that literature as the end of its “classical” period; one of the results of this change was the shift in the genre hierarchy, as poetry replaced prose at its center.²⁸ Of more practical significance was the profound political change that followed the demise of the Habsburg, Hohenzollern, and Romanov empires: the establishment of new, rival political systems, one based on the universalistic utopian Communist ideology, the other on increasingly aggressive nationalism.

The first post-revolutionary years were horrifying for Ukrainian Jews but truly revolutionary for Yiddish poetry in Ukraine. In the country, ravaged by the civil war, three young poets—Dovid Hofshiteyn (1889–1952), Leyb Kvitko (1890 (or 1893)–1952), and Perets Markish (1895–1952), who were later to form the new “classical” triad of Soviet Yiddish poetry—published their first substantial collections in 1919. Hofshiteyn emerged as the leader of a new generation of Yiddish poets. Until 1917, he was virtually unknown outside the small circle of young Yiddish poets, writers, and critics who lived in and around Kiev.²⁹ Hofshiteyn’s first publications in periodicals during the short period of Ukrainian independence between 1917 and 1919 quickly established his reputation as the leader of a new poetic school. By that time he “was already regarded as a classic of a kind and had a following among aspiring poets.”³⁰ Explaining the significance of Hofshiteyn’s poetry of the revolutionary era, Moss points out that it “spoke directly to the larger debate over the place of the self in relation to Jewish culture and Jewish nationhood.”³¹

Hofshiteyn’s 1919 collection *Bay vegn* (*At the Roads*) included a number of poems written in 1912 during his military service in the Russian army in the Caucasian mountains, in which Hofshiteyn departed from the cliché representation of the Jewish soldier as the victim of the anti-Semitic brutality of the Tsarist regime. Instead he admired the exotic environment of the Caucasus, placing himself within the established Russian literary discourse of Caucasian “Orientalism,” which had its roots in the romantic poetry of the 1820s. Writing from the perspective of a Jewish soldier who did not associate himself with Russian imperial interests, Hofshiteyn added a new perspective to the old Caucasian theme by identifying with his “oriental” brothers and being in turn recognized by them—and their women—as one of their own

(poem “In Armenia”). Whereas in the traditional European and Russian colonial and “orientalist” discourse, as Susan Layton notes, “the primitive’s spontaneous display of erotic affinities for the European interloper masked imperialism’s drive to domination,”³² the situation in Hofshteyn’s poetry is the reverse. As a Jew, a colonized subject forced into the Russian military uniform, Hofshteyn is capable of both utilizing the Russian literary idiom and subverting it, establishing a new status for the Yiddish poet as a mediator between East and West, a “native” and a “stranger” in both worlds.

Hofshteyn’s orientation toward canonical Russian poetry signals a break with the sentimental nationalist nostalgia that dominated much of the Russian Yiddish poetry of the previous generation and was exemplified in the work of its most famous representative, the bilingual Russian Yiddish poet Shimon Frug (1860–1916). Frug, even when writing in Russian, deliberately assumed the position of an outsider, the suffering “other” vis-à-vis the dominant Russian national culture. Whereas the choice of the Russian language imposed ideological constraints on Frug and forced him to speak in the collective voice of Galuth Jewry, Hofshteyn feels no such restrictions writing in Yiddish. He treats Yiddish as a poetic language of universal scope, enabling a Jewish poet to feel himself a member of the international community of poets and embrace the Russian tradition on his own terms without fear of becoming marginalized.

Another important contribution to the new poetic style was Leyb Kvitko’s first collection, *Trit* (*Steps*, 1919). Kvitko became known in Kiev circles around 1916 and was celebrated by his more urbane colleagues as an authentic folk talent. He cultivated this image by wearing homemade hats, clothes, and boots. In his rustic obscure verses, Kvitko grappled with many issues that occupied the minds of his more sophisticated and cultivated contemporaries in the aftermath of the devastating war. In contrast to the writers and intellectuals of the previous generation, such as Sholem Aleichem, Peretz, and An-sky, who celebrated Jewish folk creativity as a repository of moral values and spirituality, Kvitko was attracted to the dark and irrational side of the collective folk psyche. His poetic imagery is remarkably close to Freud’s theoretical constructions, with which he most probably was not familiar at that time.

In the opening poem of *Trit*, he contrasted the darkness of the primordial chaos of the “I” (*ikh*) with the illusory brightness of the “thou” (*du*). Similarly to Freud’s concept of the Uncanny (*das Unheimliche*), Kvitko placed the memory of the primordial chaos of *toyhu-vavoyhu* deep inside the *ikh*, an equivalent of the Freudian id. The *du*, which signified the ordered world of culture and civilization and can be likened to the super-ego, was praying to an illusion, the “Blind.” Kvitko’s poetry investigated the dissonance, contradictions, and unresolved conflicts that he discovered in everyday reality. His hero carried in his heart a “great numb restlessness” (*groysn toybn umru*) through the world, where “the two great nations, / the earth and the sky cannot already stand each other” (*beyde groyse umes, / erd un himl zaynen zikh shoyn nimes*).³³

Kvitko’s poetry was saturated with vague messianic hopes for a redemption that was to be brought by “someone,” a “new man.” But his messianic meditations were free from traditional optimistic connotations. His hero did not believe that the coming redeemer of the whole of humanity would be able to heal the wound in the poet’s heart: “and the heart alone will remain, / the heart alone with great grief” (*un harts aleyh vet blaybn nokh, / harts aleyh mit groysn brokh . . .*)³⁴ Kvitko’s hero is homeless, expelled from the old world and unable to find a place in the new one. In his heart he carries death in the image of his “blond child,” unable to bury him in the grave of his forefathers. Kvitko’s metaphoric language is powerful and original but is often also obscure and confusing so that the meaning of his early poetry is sometimes inaccessible to a reader who is not familiar with the private culture of the Kiev group. His eclectic and chaotic poems convey the sense of confusion and despair, the loss of cultural and spiritual orientation. Like Hofshteyn, Kvitko rejects the ready-made schemes adopted by the previous generation and is searching for a new language outside the established conceptual fields, in the murky depths of folklore, Hasidic legends, mysticism, childhood dreams, and avant-garde art.

The third and the youngest poet of the Kiev Group, Perets Markish, appeared in Kiev in the exciting revolutionary atmosphere of 1917. Like his new friends, he had little sympathy for the poetics of the older generation. An episode related by the Kiev critic Nokhem Oyslender in his memoirs illustrates Markish’s attitude to Bialik, the celebrated master

of Hebrew and Yiddish verse. In the summer of 1917, Markish visited Oyslender's home in Kiev and brought some of his poems with him.

"The more I read the more clearly I understand: this is outspokenly 'anti-Bailik' poetry," Oyslender remembers. He asked Markish: "Have you read this bunch of poems to anyone?"

"You say 'anyone,' but you have him in mind," replied Markish, his eyes light up mischievously. "Just so you know: this was read in Bialik's home." As Markish told Oyslender, at first his reading went well, which encouraged him to choose ever more provocative poems, until suddenly Bialik jumped up and screamed at him: "Young rascal, what are you talking about!" (*Yungatsh, vos zaynen dos far diburim!*). Badly hurt by this reception, Markish soon left Odessa, but eventually realized that this was not the end of the world for him.³⁵ As Oyslender notes elsewhere in his memoirs, Bialik's visit to Kiev in 1910 barely made a mark on him and his friends because "Bialik was filled with disbelief in the people, in our youth."³⁶

The rejection of Bialik's poetics by the young Kiev poets can be best illustrated by the way they treated the pogrom theme. In one of his most famous poems, "Di kupe" ("The Mound," 1921), written in commemoration of the pogrom committed by General Denikin's voluntary army in the Ukrainian shtetl of Pogrebishche in 1919, Markish takes the tragedy of anti-Jewish violence "beyond the Jewish scope," in the words of Avraham Novershtern, who reads the poem as a sort of apocalyptic vision situated outside historical time, in the apocalyptic "frozen flow of time." The pogrom is "universalized" and placed "beyond its Jewish and historical meaning."³⁷ As opposed to Bialik, who in his famous pogrom poems chastises Jews for their passivity and calls for revenge, Markish rejects the very possibility of any meaningful active response to the catastrophe.³⁸

A different, but equally innovative, way of dealing with the pogrom theme was chosen by Kvitko in the collection titled 1919. Kvitko warns his reader in the preface: "This book—because it is being published in a 'Pogrom series'—can be misinterpreted.[...] It would be mistaken and painful, if my book—the moments on the sharpest blade between *being* and *becoming-nothing* [*reges oyf der diner-diner sharf fun zayn un nit-vern*]*—is perceived as poetry, as poems about pogroms.*"³⁹ The

pogroms by Petlyura's gangs, which Kvitko and his family lived through in the town of Uman in the summer of 1919, were existential horror at its most uncanny sublime: "As the terrible horror of a child is subtle and real and lucid, so also is the pain, the fear, the sunshine, the spilled blood of 1919, so real are those moments."⁴⁰ Breaking with the representational tradition of Jewish pogrom poetry, Kvitko chose not to describe the external devastation of the pogrom but to convey its internal horror. He deliberately avoided graphic images and hyperbolic metaphors of death and violence, restricting his imagery to the domain of everyday familiar objects—*khfeytsim*. As Sabine Koller aptly describes the inner discipline of Kvitko's poetry, "his metaphors bind the concrete to the abstract [...] as well as the abstract to the concrete."⁴¹

Markish, notwithstanding all his vocal rebellion against the Jewish tradition and its norms, remained nationally oriented in his outlook. He was outraged at the destruction of the national collective, and his poetry expressed this outrage; but as a result, as Novershtern has pointed out, his verse lacks the personal dimension, which was central for modernist poetry.⁴² The rebellion against traditional collectivist poetics, led by the quieter and more constrained poets like Kvitko and Hofshiteyn, was more radical. Kvitko and Hofshiteyn deconstructed the very foundations of the Jewish national myth of the chosen people. Kvitko did this by representing the pogrom as a personal psychological experience that was liberation as much as destruction. The pogrom became a kind of shock therapy that relieved the individual from the burden of collective psychosis. Hofshiteyn's radicalism expressed itself in his turning to European forms and in unwrapping Jewish symbols from their traditional packaging.

Unlike the poets, who mostly came from relatively poor and rural backgrounds, the Kiev Yiddish critics, such as Nokhem Oyslender, Yekhezl Dobrushin, Moyshe Litvakov, and Isaak Nusinov, as well as Nakhmen Mayzil (who left Kiev for Warsaw in 1921 and became a leading authority on Yiddish literature in Poland and later in the United States), were brought up in middle-class families, received secondary education privately or in Russian gymnasiums, and attended universities abroad. They were well acquainted with new trends in Russian and other European cultures and took an active part in left-wing Jewish and general

politics. Some of them were recognized journalists in Russian, Yiddish, and Hebrew. As we shall see, it was they who provided the “rough” and “primitive” creativity of the young poets with a sophisticated theoretical interpretation, which helped to position the Kiev Group at the center of Yiddish modernism, particularly its left-wing variety. Together with the poets, they created an intellectual and artistic environment that turned out to be congenial to Wiener’s tastes and interests.

One of the earliest aesthetic programs for the new Soviet poetry was outlined by the critic Yekhezkl Dobrushin (1883–1953). A son of a timber merchant, Dobrushin was born in a village in Chernigov *gubernia* and received a private Jewish and Russian education at home. Between 1902 and 1909, he lived in Paris, where he studied law at the Sorbonne and was active in the socialist Zionist movement. After recovering from an illness that confined him to bed for several years, he published his first collection of poetry and short plays, *Benkende neshomes* (*Longing Souls*, 1912); other publications soon followed. In 1916, Dobrushin settled in Kiev, and his articles and poetry appeared in various Hebrew and Yiddish periodicals. During the civil war, he edited and contributed to the publications of the *Kultur-lige*, along with Litvakov, Mayzil, and Bergelson. In 1920, he moved to Moscow, where he continued his editorial work. He was a prolific literary and theater critic, cultural historian, and playwright.

In his review essay “Dray dikhter” (“Three Poets,” 1919), a discussion of the first books by Markish, Kvitko, and Hofshiteyn, Dobrushin suggests the following scheme for the evolution of Yiddish literature from prose to poetry. During the early period of modern Yiddish literature, prose was the dominant genre due to its descriptive and objective nature. Throughout the nineteenth century, Yiddish poetry remained unoriginal and derivative, lagging behind prose. Poetry began to catch up with literary development only during the first decade of the twentieth century, which coincided with the emergence of the two new literary centers in New York and Kiev. Dobrushin holds that poetry, in contrast to prose, is by its nature more abstract and synthetic. The mission of poetry is to express the “collective spirit” of the people, but this could not be accomplished during the early, formative period of modern secular Yiddish culture. Markish, Kvitko, and Hofshiteyn, each in his own

way, were making their contributions to Yiddish poetry, which eventually brought it to an artistic level equal with prose.

Markish exemplifies for Dobrushin the pure individual will unaffected by collective concerns. A loner with no pedigree, roots, or tradition, he wandered through the world without aim or mission, and his own self was both the object and subject of his poetry, “his own *way* at the moment.”⁴³ His “self” is not yet mature enough, and his poetic imagination can easily be carried away by a bold abstract metaphor or an extravagant rhyme. Kvitko, on the other hand, has deep roots in the folkloric tradition, which fill his poetry with brooding, primitive feelings. That folkloric tradition has little in common with the established Jewish cultural tradition, being closer to the elemental primordial chaos, the *toyhu-vavoyhu*, than to the meticulously regulated normative Judaism. One of the recurrent motifs in Kvitko’s poetry is the sensation of stepping down from the “height of light” of the daytime clarity into the “blind hole, the world of demons.” Dobrushin calls Kvitko the poet of the “world-madness” (*velt-meshuge*), who perceives reality primarily through his instinctive sense of touch rather than through vision or hearing, the senses more closely connected to reason. Though often dark and obscure, Kvitko is not a mystic, because his poetry lacks conceptual abstraction and generalization. His imagery is concrete and individual; he is instinctive rather than intellectual in his poetic outlook.⁴⁴

At the pinnacle of the Kiev poetic triad, Dobrushin places Hofshiteyn, whom he hails as the most accomplished and original of the three. Dobrushin provocatively awards Hofshiteyn the honorific title of “our first non-national” poet for introducing the European aesthetic sensitivity, with its taste for “conscious perfection,” into Yiddish poetry, which until then has been dominated by the verbosity of *badkhones* (wedding entertainment) and the pathetic rhetoric of the Hebrew *shir* (song).⁴⁵ Hofshiteyn’s major innovation is a new poetic persona that mediates between empirical reality and the invisible poetic soul, making his poetic outlook not just *veltlekh*—secular—but also *veltish*—worldly. By reaching out to the world, Hofshiteyn has overcome both Bialik’s poetics of nationalism and David Einhorn’s poetics of repentance: “He sees the world and man in their cosmic-natural origins.”⁴⁶

Dobrushin commends the three Ukrainian Yiddish poets for breaking with the “national” poetic tradition that required the poet to be the voice of the collective. Each of them contributes an important innovation to the composition of the new Yiddish poetry: Markish brings instinctive drives and desires, Kvitko a folkloric connection to the primordial chaos, and Hofshiteyn the European clarity of vision and hearing. Writing before the Bolshevik takeover of Ukraine, Dobrushin is not yet concerned with the social aspects of Yiddish poetry, operating instead with rather vague “cosmic” categories of Russian symbolism. For him, as for other Kiev critics of that time, the social sphere is the domain of prose, whereas poetry belongs to the realm of the sublime and absolute. He attributes the aesthetic faultiness of Bialik’s and Einhorn’s “national” poetry to its engagement with social issues, an error that should be rectified by the new generation of Yiddish poets. In Dobrushin’s presentation, the new Yiddish poetry appears in Ukraine almost *ex nihilo*. Hofshiteyn, Markish, and Kvitko, like their predecessors in prose—Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz—set off on their journey across the uncharted territory of Yiddish poetry like adventurous wanderers, discovering and mapping the new world.

Another important Kiev critic was Nokhem Oyslender (1893–1962). Like Dobrushin, he grew up in a timber merchant family but attended a Russian gymnasium in Kiev and studied medicine at the universities of Berlin and Kiev. During the Russian civil war, he served as a doctor in the Red Army, an experience reflected in his Yiddish poetry, three collections of which came out between 1917 and 1922. But Oyslender soon realized that he had little talent for poetry and turned to criticism and literary scholarship. He occupied leading positions at Yiddish cultural, academic, and educational institutions in Kiev, Minsk, and Moscow. The only member of the Kiev group to survive the Stalinist persecution of Yiddish culture from 1948 to 1953, he was the editor of the criticism section at the Moscow literary magazine *Sovetish heymland* from 1961 to 1962.⁴⁷

During his last gymnasium years in Kiev, 1909–11, Oyslender belonged to the circle of admirers of the budding Yiddish poet Osher Shvartsman, who was killed in the civil war fighting in the Red Army and posthumously acquired the title of the “founder of Soviet Yid-

dish poetry.” In his memoirs about Shvartsman, Oyslender described the young literati who were later to become known as the Kiev group. Among his friends and acquaintances were Hofshiteyn, whom he described as a “man of great seriousness,” as well as Bergelson and Der Nister, who impressed the Jewish youth of Kiev with their first publications in 1909–10. They all shared distaste for “decadence” that was imported into Yiddish literature from Russian literature and aspired to high-minded aesthetic standards.⁴⁸

Writing about five years after Dobrushin, at the time of the consolidation of the Soviet ideology, Oyslender would paint a different picture of the development of Yiddish poetry in Soviet Russia, in which social reality plays a much larger role. More sober in tone than Dobrushin’s early enthusiasm, his review offers prescriptive recipes to help Soviet poets move in the right ideological direction, steering clear from subjectivism, toward concrete imagery and clear meaning. Whereas Dobrushin in 1919 equally appreciated the innovative spirit of the Ukrainian and the American modernist poets (who were available in a short anthology published by Nakhmen Mayzil in Kiev in 1917), five years later Oyslender feels himself obliged to draw a clear line between the “decadence” of the New York *Yunge* group and the new objectivist style of Soviet poetry. He argues that, unlike its American counterpart, Yiddish poetry in the Soviet Union has successfully resisted the temptation to become an epigone of the declining European modernism and has found its own voice as a positive and objective representation of the new Soviet reality.

Evaluating the same familiar triad of Ukrainian Yiddish poets, Oyslender praises their capacity for “development,” which he understands as an ability to represent changing reality objectively. Literary development becomes inherently linked to the concept of revolution, which, in Oyslender’s view, is akin to the concept of infinity (*unendlekhkayt*). Now the revolution becomes the infinite source of creative energy, which enables the poet to outgrow his individual limitations.⁴⁹ In Oyslender’s inventive interpretation, the revolution is taken out of the flow of history and put into a separate category as a unique event of prehistoric nature, which forms an “eternal” foundation for the new authority in the Soviet poetic universe. In this scheme of things, the newly reformulated concept of “tradition” acquires a positive value, free from any “historical,”

that is, nationalist, connotations. This new, purified revolutionary tradition originates not in the historical national past but in the prehistoric beginnings of the universe and humankind.

The conceptual schemes of Dobrushin and Oyslender have a number of points in common with the theoretical discourse of German expressionism and the European avant-garde, which would ease the way for someone like Wiener to join their discussion. Dobrushin's distinction between poetry as abstract and synthetic and prose as a descriptive mode of writing resemble Worringer's distinction between abstraction and empathy. The early Soviet Yiddish interpretation of the concept of revolutionary art bears important similarities to the notion of the "oriental" in German Jewish discourse, as both of these concepts privilege the imagined "prehistoric" past and the utopian "post-historic" future over the "historical" present. By metaphorically presenting the revolution as a new fiat on the cosmic scale, which unbound the infinite primordial forces of creativity, Dobrushin and Oyslender offer a way of incorporating the metaphoric arsenal of Jewish mysticism into Soviet poetry, on the condition that it is to be cleansed of nationalist connotations and presented in universal terms.

Wiener's Early Yiddish Writings

Although it is not clear what motivated Wiener's turn to Yiddish, his early Yiddish works are close in style, ideas, and themes to the literature produced and promoted by the Kiev group and the Yiddish expressionists of that time. The earliest Yiddish manuscript in Wiener's archives contains fragments of a text titled "Yoyske mamzer" ("Yoyske the Bastard"), written partly in prose and partly in free verse. In so far as these unfinished fragments can be assembled into a cohesive narrative, they appear to be a story of a Jewish vagabond and adventurer, set in the Poland of the early nineteenth century, whereas some episodes resemble a parody of the Gospel story. One fragment contains a mock preface, in which the author says that an intelligent reader will undoubtedly understand everything in this story except its true intention, its moral, and the important clues because everything in it has a deep symbolic meaning.

The main character Yoyske (the name is derived from the derogatory Jewish nickname for Jesus, “Yoyzl”) is born under “miraculous” circumstances. When a Hasidic rebbe visits a shtetl, all its inhabitants go out to greet him. Among the crowd is a heavily pregnant woman named Sorel whose labor pains have just started. When the rebbe sees her, he realizes that there is something special about her child. The woman is brought to a nearby village, but since no peasant would let her into his house, she is left in a pig stall, where she gives birth to a boy. While the Jews await in awe outside, a group of peasant boys and girls appears, mocking the Adoration of the Magi and singing a Yiddish song that echoes the German Christmas song *Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht*:

A child has been born for us in Bethlehem,
 A little child has been born,
 Oy, a precious promise, oy, a precious message,
 Oy, a quiet holy night.

[*S'iz undz in Beys-lekhem a kindele geboyryn gevorn,
 A kindele geboyryn gevorn
 Oy tayerer tsuzog, oy tayere psure
 Oy heylike shtilinke nakht.*]

Having noticed the Jews, the children poke sticks at them and run away.

Yoyske's provenance remains unclear. It is rumored that his mother, a maid in an inn, was raped by the drunken Jewish estate manager of the local Polish landowner. Sorel's origins are equally murky: one rumor has it that she was left with the innkeeper as a child by a traveling Lithuanian Jew; according to another, she is the innkeeper's own daughter by a Gentile milk maid. Yoyske grows up under the protection of his mother but when she dies, he is exposed to all kinds of sufferings.

In later episodes he is already a young man, who apparently possesses some sort of charm that makes him very likable. Lazy, stupid, and inept, Yoyske miraculously escapes all trouble and makes the best possible impression on everyone he meets. At some point Yoyske is sent to deliver some textiles to a shtetl. On the way he falls asleep and is robbed. When he arrives at the shtetl and tells the story to the angry merchant, he is severely punished. It is probably after this that he joins a gang of local criminals who are meeting in a remote inn to discuss how

to get around the problem of being too well-known in the area. Yoyske passes by the tavern, and they catch him and appoint him their leader, hoping that nobody will suspect him. Later Yoyske and one of the bandits steal some horses from the local peasants. When they ride through the forests, they encounter a Polish aristocrat who takes Yoyske for his late friend's son and brings him to his manor. The aristocrat's daughters immediately fall in love with him and begin fighting each other for his favors. Although Yoyske can barely speak Polish, he somehow comes across as a clever and thoughtful young man.

Another episode depicts a shtetl fair where a Polish peasant tries to steal a piece of cloth from a Jewish seller. Their conflict nearly causes a pogrom, which is averted by the unexpected arrival of a coach with the Polish aristocrat. One of the Jews, to his astonishment, recognizes Yoyske and starts scolding him in Yiddish for changing his faith. For a moment, Yoyske is surprised, but then a Polish woman—apparently, one of the two sisters from the previous episode—looks out to see what is going on, and he quickly comes to his senses and starts whipping the Jews. The Jews are angry at the Jew who called the high-born Yoyske *mamzer*. The last fragment describes Yoyske's final dialogue with a rabbi in jail where he is expecting to be executed. The rabbi suddenly sees sparks of holiness (*kedushe*) in Yoyske and asks him in awe: "Rebbe, what are you, for God's sake, speak" (*rebe, ver zayt it, leman-hashem, redt*)—in response to which Yoyske only "laughs silly" (*lakht narish*).⁵⁰

The story of Yoyske is written in parodic idiom, as a mockery of both Jewish and Christian hagiographies. Written in free verse, the poem playfully uses Polish words and is aimed at connoisseurs who are familiar with both Polish Catholic and Jewish literary clichés and conventions, following the tradition of Y. L. Peretz. Because of its crude mockery of Christian beliefs, it was probably not intended for publication, at least in Catholic countries such as Poland or Austria, where it could easily attract accusations of blasphemy and obscenity, as happened with the poet Uri Tsvi Grinberg when he portrayed Jesus as a persecuted Jew. Wiener's figure of Jesus as a "crucified brother" whose "covered nakedness" makes girls pregnant, echoes the famous image of Jesus in Grinberg's expressionist poems, such as "In the Kingdom of the Cross" ("In malkhes fun tseylem").

Both poets identify with Jesus as their “brother,” a victim of the Christians’ cruelty. By stressing the sexuality of the corpse on the cross, Wiener subverts the Christian image of Jesus, portraying him as a member of the vagabond community of artist-beggars who embody the creative spirit of the people. Christological imagery, although certainly unusual for Jewish tradition, gained popularity among Yiddish expressionist poets such as Grinberg and Ravitsh after World War I. As Matthew Hoffman explains in his study of Christian motifs in modern Jewish culture, “the Messiahs and Christ-figures that appear in the apocalyptic works of these Yiddish expressionists are frequently identified with the speakers of the poems if not the poets themselves, and are typically depicted as tragically failed redeemers.”⁵¹

Writing in Yiddish enabled Wiener to tap into the vast resources of the Yiddish parody, something he could not do in German. Yet the image of “Yoyske mamzer” is firmly rooted in Wiener’s theological and aesthetic thinking. The messianic figure is represented as a lower-class character endowed with special talents. The close connection between the underground and the aristocracy, the lower and the upper layers of society, is a theme that runs through almost all of Wiener’s work; and so is the sacrificial role of the messianic figure and his failure to bring about redemption. Yoyske as a messianic figure is the parody of the conventional image of the Messiah: he is a vagabond taken for a saint. It is possible that Wiener intended to depict Yoyske’s whole life from birth to death as a mockery of the life of Jesus, with such elements as a miraculous birth, a life full of strange and miraculous episodes, and a martyr’s death.

Toward the end of World War I, messianic and apocalyptic motifs became popular in Jewish art and literature. In his study of the apocalyptic imagery in Yiddish modernism, Avraham Novershtern identifies its two key elements, destruction and redemption. Whereas much of the imagery of destruction was provided by the reality of the historical catastrophe of 1914–1921, the vision of redemption was the product of artistic or ideological imagination. Markish’s poem “Di kupe” was pure destruction with no redemption. Grinberg’s poem “In the Kingdom of the Cross” proclaimed a radical Zionist solution of the problem of East European Jewry in the form of the total evacuation of the Jews from

Europe to Palestine. The closing lines of Grinberg's poem sound similar to the ideas espoused by Hoefflich in his "Pan-Asiatic" Zionism:

Dress me in a broad Arab *abaya*, throw a prayer shawl over my
shoulders,
The snuffed-out Orient suddenly flares up in my impoverished blood
And—here, take the tails and the tie and the shoes
Which I bought in Eu-ro-pe.⁵²

Wiener and Grinberg exemplify two extreme paths taken by Yiddish modernist writers in the early 1920s. They both grew up in traditional families in Galicia, became involved in Zionism, and grew disappointed with the mainstream Zionist politics, which they found inadequate for dealing with the post-war crisis. But their responses to the crisis were radically different. Grinberg embraced expressionist poetics at the same time that he began moving toward radical, right-wing Zionism in Warsaw and Berlin in 1922–23, which eventually led him to abandon Yiddish for Hebrew. Wiener, whose active involvement with Zionist ideology and politics took place three years earlier, in 1919–20, had grown disappointed both with Zionism and expressionism just two years later. Grinberg eventually ended up in the right-wing revisionist camp as its leading Hebrew poetic voice; Wiener became a major exponent of communist ideology in Yiddish literature. Yiddish would better fit his notion of an authentic Jewish idiom because, unlike Hebrew, it was spoken by the masses and was an adequate reflection of the national character of the Jewish people in their natural environment.

A notebook in the Meir Wiener archival collection contains the final drafts of two early unpublished novellas, the pogrom story "A sude in Radnev" ("A Banquet in Radnev") and the autobiographical fragment "Yume mit zayn rebn" ("Yume and his Rebbe"). In these two texts, Wiener introduces techniques, themes, and motifs that later figure prominently in his Yiddish writing. The themes are those of suffering and irrational behavior, presented through a prism of autobiographical experience. "A Banquet in Radnev," dated February 2, 1924, is a naturalistic depiction of a pogrom in a small Galician shtetl in the aftermath of World War I. The narrator is a boy whose family had the good luck to survive the pogrom. It begins with a gang of Ukrainian bandits

entering the shtetl and demanding that the shtetl rabbi come to their headquarters in the church, which he does: "Along a distant road, covered with deep snow, he was walking, the Rabbi, on a particularly clear early winter day, alone, like a black little stroke on the faraway blinding whiteness, oddly bent in his unusually tall leanness. Like two wooden scroll poles, rolled together into a silk kapote, he was lifting his tall legs, and was shaking his head like a tired, good-natured horse."⁵³

As the terrified community watches the humiliation of their old rabbi, the butcher offers the bandits a deal: if they let the rabbi free, the shtetl Jews will make them nice lacquered boots and prepare a festive banquet. During the banquet, the bandits grow dissatisfied with the meager amount of sweet vodka and demand more alcohol, music, and women. The butcher is prepared to offer his two daughters; then five bridegrooms send their brides to the bandits. After a brief initial hesitation, the bandits go rampant and eventually murder most of the shtetl Jews. The rabbi is crucified with his head down. In the morning the gang disappears, chased away by rumors about the advancing Red Army. One of the bandits, too drunk to follow his comrades, is left behind. He slowly emerges from the heap of dead bodies in the marketplace, looks around in shock, finds a shirt and slowly begins to tear it into strips, making a rope out of them and singing a "loud peasant song" (*poeyerish-hilkhikn gezang*) with his "clear voice." He ties the rope to a strong bough on a big tree, climbs onto the bough, puts the noose around his neck, and jumps off, hanging himself.

This short story echoes two motifs from the pogrom poetry by Kvitko and Markish. In the poem "Katshen mir zikh fun gelekhter" ("We Roll about Laughing"), Kvitko sarcastically portrays the Europeanized *Rabbiner* of Uman. Every time a new gang captures the town, he puts on his shiny top hat, which looks eccentric—"in our place nobody wears a top hat, people walk around with or without their heads" (*bay undz trogt keyner keyn tsilinder, / mit kep un on kep geyt men um*)—and sets off, "the only Jew in the street" (*er aleyn eyn yid in gas*), to negotiate with the bandits. His humiliation is a pathetic spectacle:

We roll about with laughter,
When he is told to stay outside
All alone and waiting—waiting

With danger close at hand.
 When the riders see him,
 They go straight for his top hat,
 Gleefully flay his skin with whips!⁵⁴

Kvitko's poem is full of bitterness and self-contempt. He speaks in the first person plural of "mice" who run away and hide in their holes, waiting in terror for the outcome of the rabbi's humiliating negotiations. The rabbi loses all his dignity and authority as he tries to placate the bandits, and yet he remains the only hope for the Jews.

One small detail in Wiener's story makes a parody of the martyrdom motif both in its Jewish and Christian variety. The rabbi dies for *kiddush-hashem*, whereas the manner of his crucifixion resembles that of the apostle Peter; and yet in the final convulsions, his fingers form a *fayg*, a gesture of contempt and defiance to the whole world. As his fingers cannot be straightened, his gesture goes to the grave. The butcher's readiness to please the aggressor represents the opposite strategy. Neither the rabbi's spiritual resistance nor the butcher's strategy of appeasement works because the only force capable of saving the Jews is the Red Army. But the most striking and memorable image in the story is the calm suicide of the bandit, which questions the basic premise of humanist belief in the supreme value of human life. The bandit emerges from the *kupe*, the heap of dead bodies, an image presumably familiar to the reader from the famous poem by Markish. Wiener turns this apocalyptic, otherworldly vision into a rather ordinary feature of the shtetl landscape—a pile of rubbish where the bandit finds the tools for his own execution. He values his own life no more than the lives of others and is capable of killing himself as calmly and skillfully as he kills others.

By choosing a naive child as the narrator, Wiener refuses to give his story a clear and straightforward didactic moral. His view of human behavior is deeply pessimistic and fatalistic. People are urged on by sinister drives that lurk in the unconscious and break free in moments of excitement and pleasure, which are inseparable from suffering and pain; *eros* and *thanatos* always go together. One who commits an atrocity is ever thereafter haunted by it and is eventually driven to self-destruction. Victims are not morally superior to their murderers, and their petty attempts to avert the inevitable destruction never work. Any glorification

of death as an act of heroism and sacrifice is delusion or intentional deceit. Unlike the majority of Yiddish authors of that age, who aspired to speak in a collective voice, Wiener's Yiddish writings always remained focused on individual characters. As opposed to his German poetry, his Yiddish works never aspired to grandiose visions and never used abstract symbols and metaphors; tragedy is inseparable from travesty. Wiener's Yiddish voice remained sober, ironic, and down-to-earth; much of his writing was in one way or another connected to his own experience. The intimate nature of Yiddish helped Wiener to keep close to his characters, expressing the nuances of their character and mood through their own speech.

On the Way to Emigration

Like many former Habsburg subjects, Wiener had a grim view of the future of the newly established Austrian republic, which he shared with Erna in a letter written from Berlin at the beginning of 1923, trying to dissuade her husband Leon from selling his factory in Poland: "Austria is a dying country. There are *no* prospects of improvement for the short term. Poland, on the contrary, is a country on the rise. So, should he exchange a potentially promising factory there for unpromising things in Austria?"⁵⁵ There is more than a hint of irony in the anti-capitalist Wiener giving economic advice to his bourgeois brother-in-law. Around that time Wiener himself was already thinking about leaving Austria and was looking for a job in Jewish education or culture in Eastern Europe. His first choice was Poland. He made inquiries of the Yiddish poet, cultural activist, and fellow *galitsianer* Melekh Ravitsh, whom he knew from Vienna. In 1921 Ravitsh had left Vienna for Warsaw, where he eventually established himself as a key figure in Yiddish literary life. In November 1923 Wiener wrote to Ravitsh in Yiddish from Vienna:

I have to ask you a favor. Last winter I had an idea about going to Warsaw, and after I spoke with Markish a few weeks ago, things have become more concrete. And now—for different reasons—a request. I ask you: first, write me whether you recommend me now that I go at all. And second, whether you think I will get a good job there. And I

am not looking for a literary job; I have had enough of those to last me for ages. But what then? For example, a teaching position in a *Yiddish* teachers' seminary or gymnasium. I think I would be very suitable for that [...] and I could teach: general history (as well as Jewish and Polish history), history of literature, if necessary German. As you know, I can speak and write Polish quite well. I have not passed any academic examinations. I would be also prepared to take over the following subjects: philosophy and social economy, if they have been introduced.⁵⁶

After receiving Ravitsh's reply, Wiener described his situation in more detail:

I have no wife and don't need to live "hand to mouth." Nevertheless, I won't decide to go until there are at least some prospects for a paid job. I haven't been in Cracow for about ten years, and Vilna would be very uncomfortable for me because I am a *galitsianer* and feel very strange among Lithuanian Jews. Until now I have had no connection to Lithuanian Jews. I am already a bit fearful of Warsaw, where I know nobody except you—unless Markish comes back to Warsaw—and Vilna is much worse. I studied philosophy and history in Basle and Zurich, but I left before the examination. If a doctorate is an absolute condition, then nothing can be done, in my old age I am not going to waste time preparing for that. Friends are trying to talk me into going to Russia. But not now, only in six to eight months. At the moment I am hesitating, first because I cannot go now, and also Poland is a bit closer to my heart.⁵⁷

Four months later Wiener abandoned all thoughts of going to Warsaw. In the spring of 1924, he spent a few weeks in Venice, Florence, and Rome. This journey probably gave him ideas and material for his future historical novella about Jewish life in seventeenth-century Venice. In a postcard from Florence, he wrote to Ravitsh about his fear of going to Poland: "I don't know myself, but I am very afraid of the foreignness of the people and the atmosphere there. A stranger in a strange place, all right, that might be good. But being a stranger at home is no good [*ober epes a heyemisher fremder toyg nisht*]."⁵⁸

The years of 1925 and 1926 were emotionally and psychologically difficult for Wiener. He confided his problems and anxieties to his friend from Vienna, David Vogel. In October 1925 Wiener wrote from Erna's

Vienna address to Vogel in Paris: "I am not doing well. I am worse than before, and feel worse with every day. I am very distressed. Why should I tell you the details? You have your own troubles." Wiener mentioned quarrels and intrigues among Yiddishists in Vienna and Berlin, his breakup with Moyshe Livshits. Both Vogel, in his major Hebrew novel *Hayyei nisu'im* (*Married Life*, 1929) and Wiener, in his unfinished Yiddish novel, would later re-create, in sharp satirical tones, the meaningless and petty world of the favorite café haunts of *déclassé* Jewish intellectuals in the early 1920s. Wiener describes his days in Vienna:

Sonne is doing as usual. But there is a chance that he will soon have money. I go around without a groschen all the time. Perhaps later it will become better, in the meantime it's too bad. Every evening they sit in the Café Herrenhof: Sonne, Schreyer, Diesendruck, Livshits, Chmelnitzki and sometimes I too. But I stay for half an hour and leave. Schreyer looks like a good fellow. I've become a little closer to Sonne. In general I am very depressed."⁵⁹

At home Wiener found even less comfort. He reported to Vogel: "Our house is a big mess. My father wants to offset, in a nasty way, his tremendous expenditure at my and my brother's expense. It's simply terrible. I turn here and turn there, but so far I see no way out. Let it be—God will have pity. To the devil, things will settle somehow." Wiener concluded his letter with a plea for help: "I have written alarm letters to all my good friends everywhere asking them to think of something for me. It will help like pills to a dead man; they are all doing poorly themselves.[...] I have told you almost everything. No sense in coming to Vienna. Gloomy and empty. No matter how bad it is there, it is not better here."⁶⁰ Five days later he continued, with a little more optimism:

I received a long letter from Nister. He tells me that Kvitko was in Moscow, Kharkov, Uman etc. Everywhere he was received with enthusiasm and great pomp. A real triumphal journey. *Der emes* is full of Kvitko. They immediately took him in and gave him some kind of a mission. He will travel a bit more, then spend a month or two in Moscow and finally come back to Kiev to settle down. I am glad for him. Kvitko still has not written to me. Or maybe his letter has not arrived.

Nister writes to me that it was stupid not to publish my little book in the *Literarische bleter* or in America. I absolutely must think about



Figure 5. Meir Wiener in Vienna, 1920s. Used with the permission of
Julia Wiener.

coming out and putting an end to “carrying myself in a breast pocket.” However I do not quite think so. I cannot publish “at any price” and in bad company. It’s hard for me. Nevertheless I paid attention to Nister’s words and they touched me a little. At any rate, there is truth in what he says, one has to try and come out—many “doubts will be resolved that way” (his words). But what shall I do? I have other worries now. Perhaps you could write to Singer⁶¹ that since you have left Vienna and your address is no longer your address, would he send his reply to my address, directly to me and [inform me] what has happened to the little book and what he thinks will happen. Do not write so haughtily as you did last time, but rather in a somewhat pleading tone. Point out to him that our company here also liked my stuff and make him want to do something. Nister’s words made me a little anxious. He writes to me: if you can correct the silly thing, you should. . . . If you can and want to, write to Singer in a diplomatic tone, “from the heart.” And may the devil take them all.

I have received the postcard from Slodki with your greetings. How is he doing now? Slodki is a good fellow. Right? A pity he is doing so badly.

Dobrushin will come to Germany in [2? months] with the Jewish Chamber Theater. Nister puts great hopes on my meeting with Dobrushin. I am very skeptical. They are too alien, and for them my stories lack political content.

I thrash around like a fish, and feel bad. Do not know what to do. Every day I feel endless anger, and I don’t know how this will end. Shall I come to Paris or not?⁶²

Toward the end of 1925, Wiener’s quarrel with his father seems to have deteriorated into outright family scandal, which drove the son to the brink of despondency. He confessed to Vogel: “I have absolutely no money and no prospects, almost on my own in this world of thievery and violence”⁶³ With Vogel’s help, Wiener tried to negotiate the publication of his Yiddish works with I. J. Singer in Warsaw and Oyzer Varshavski in Paris, but had no success. At the beginning of 1926, Wiener himself came to Paris. At that time Vogel was at the lung sanatorium at Merano, a popular Alpine resort among Habsburg Jews, which became Italian territory after the war. Vogel presented a sarcastic portrait of the sanatorium society in his first prose work, the novella “Beveyt hamarpe” (“In the

Sanatorium,” 1926). From Vienna Wiener encouraged Vogel not to give up on writing: “You will write prose! Good prose! Very good prose! Don’t let yourself be discouraged by the first attempts.”⁶⁴ Paris did not lighten Wiener’s mood. The Yiddish writers—Sholem Asch, H. Leyvick (who was passing through Paris on his way home to America after a long trip to the Soviet Union), and Oyzer Varshavski—made a bad impression. Wiener reported to Vogel: “There are no people around. Only nasty masks,” adding, on only a slightly more cheerful note: “Girls perhaps, but all are so full of themselves, trying to be posh. Everyone thinks that in Paris one has to behave in an especially lascivious way. It’s kind of a duty here. But it comes out clumsy and stupid.”⁶⁵ More positive was Wiener’s impression of the Hebrew author Hayim Hazaz and his old friend Marcel Slodki. But the only promising news came from the Soviet Union, and Wiener was skeptical about his prospects there:

I’ve received a letter from Kvitko. He writes that I should come to Russia, and things will somehow settle. Of course this is absolutely impossible. He is inviting me to collaborate on the Yiddish monthly magazine *Di royte velt* (in Kharkov). I won’t send him anything because I understand very well that even with his best efforts he won’t be able to publish anything. There isn’t any way of getting it in.⁶⁶

One intriguing document among Wiener’s papers in the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem can shed more light on his communist activity. A memorandum or report, headed “Paris, May 25, 1926” and written in French under the title “Impressions of a Foreign Comrade” (“Impressions d’un camarade étranger”), contains a highly critical description of the “true state of the Western capitalist culture.”⁶⁷ Above the author’s name, M. Lucas, is written in Yiddish script in Wiener’s handwriting, “M. Viner,” which suggests that Wiener was the author of this document and M. Lucas was his pseudonym. The piece mixes a lament about the condition of a foreigner in Paris, reminiscent of Wiener’s complaints in his letters to Vogel and Erna, with social criticism—along Marxist lines—of decadent bohemian culture. Everything looks gloomy in Paris: ordinary people are depressed, overworked, and poor; politicians are cynical and corrupt. The author repeatedly stresses differences between Paris and Central Europe, usually to the detriment of the former. Several chapters deal with various aspects of culture. The

author declares the intellectual and artistic scene in Paris to be stale and decadent, making an exception, however, for such artists as Modigliani, Chagall, Pascin, and Soutine. The famous cafés Rotondé and Dôme are meeting places for all kinds of impostors and degenerates. Having surveyed the dismal social, political, economic, and cultural conditions in the French capital, the author warns: “the danger of fascism in France is great.” The only hope is the proletariat that, despite its downtrodden state, demonstrates resilience and strength. The coming revolution is being prepared by the educational and propagandist work in the party cells, which are transforming intellectuals, artisans, and the petite bourgeoisie into fully conscious fighters for a communist future.

The greatest conundrum for the biographer of Wiener is his motives for moving to the Soviet Union. As Max Weinreich wrote to Franzi Gross in 1968, “To my mind, one of the most obscure junctures in his life history is his decision to break completely with the past and go to Russia.”⁶⁸ After some initial hesitation, she offered some insight:

I mentioned in my letter that when he returned to Austria, after the war, he was definitely a sympathizer. It seems to me that he was definitely more than that, but in spite of his convictions I do not think that he would have gone to Russia if he would have felt that he could have more success in his own country. As a Jew it was very difficult to become a Professor at the University, and as there were urgent calls from ‘a high personality’ in Russia [...] (who this personality was we never enquired and we never knew) he yielded half-heartedly. I say ‘half-heartedly’ because I remember a scene a week before he left. We were waiting for the underground train and all of the sudden he turned round to me and said ‘Franzi I am going next week to Russia but I will be back in May at the latest’—that was in October. He counted the months on his fingers ‘the latest in May’ and he said it with conviction as if he thought ‘I don’t want to stay longer.’⁶⁹

As is evident from Wiener’s letters to Ravitsh and Vogel, the idea of going to the Soviet Union had been on Wiener’s mind since 1923. He only arrived at a decision after a great deal of agonizing deliberation. In April 1926 he poured out his heart to Erna from Paris:

Today was a very beautiful day, lovely spring. I was with people, awfully strange people, who do not concern me. I was terribly sad today

as I haven't been in a long time. I have to tell someone, but do *never* repeat these things about me. I don't know if it has to do with the futility of all my efforts or the anxiety about the near future. My God, what a shame, a crying shame, that I wasn't raised to be a shoemaker or carpenter. What should I do? I am, after all, nothing other than a poor "artist"—maybe a bad artist, I don't know, but definitely one through and through. It lies in my blood to look and to see and in my will to create. It is possible, very possible, that my work will one day prove its worth, as my previous work has. It is also possible that it will not. Who knows? But you see, I can't help myself. How can I help myself? If I had stayed in Vienna for two more weeks, I would not have traveled to Paris. From two sides, particularly strongly and seriously from one side, I was told that I had to go to Russia. I was promised all sorts of help. Now I am sitting here in agony and heartache and am torturing my poor brain. I did everything I could.[...]

Today I had such dark premonitions about my future. I have never been so discouraged. I myself don't really know why. And that is not good. I am not only concerned about my financial future, but about my future in general.⁷⁰

In May Wiener wrote to Franzi from Paris that he planned to go to Russia at the end of August or the beginning of September: "I am called by my friends, there I have a good opportunity to do work which is useful and suitable for me."⁷¹ He complained about his dejection and lack of money, and concluded fatalistically: "So: let be what will be—in Russia I will recover from all these feelings of depression. I will work as I please and I promise myself the best."⁷² Wiener left Vienna for Russia in the autumn of 1926, a few days after the wedding of Franzi and Fritz Gross. The day of his departure left a sad impression in Erna's memory: "It was a rainy, grey, cold, and sad day when I took him to the station. We were both depressed and crying and we were both young so we did not have any premonition that we should never meet again."⁷³

Four Soviet Beginnings

Arrival and Adjustment

Meir Wiener was one of 433 Austrians who immigrated to the Soviet Union in 1926 driven by economic and ideological reasons.¹ After his arrival in Kharkov in the autumn of 1926, Wiener stayed for a few months in the small apartment of his friend Leyb Kvitko and his wife, which served as a transitional home for a number of Yiddish writers who relocated to the new capital of Ukraine. But Wiener did not spend much time in Kharkov and soon moved to Kiev, where he had been appointed a research fellow at the newly founded Department (*kafedra*) for Jewish Proletarian Culture at the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences in April 1927.² The first director of that institution was the prominent Yiddish linguist Nokhem Shtif (1879–1933), who was appointed on a temporary basis because he was not a member of the Communist Party. During the early 1920s, Shtif lived in Berlin, where he played a leading role in organizing the YIVO Institute, but returned to the Soviet Union in 1926, attracted by new opportunities. He was soon replaced by a new, permanent director, the energetic and capable Joseph Liberberg, who in just a few years succeeded in upgrading the modest department to a larger Institute for Jewish Proletarian Culture with sections dedicated to the study of philology, literature, history, economy, folklore and ethnography, and pedagogy. The Kiev Institute for Jewish Proletarian Culture, to some degree mirrored the structure of the similar institution in Minsk, which had been established a few years earlier. Both institutions served the dual purpose of conducting academic research and developing an ideologically correct Marxist interpretation of Jewish

history and culture. But as far as literary scholarship was concerned, the prevalent mood in Kiev and Minsk initially was to stay within the safe haven of the pre-Revolutionary Yiddish classics and not to venture into the dangerous waters of current literary politics.³

In the annual report for 1927, Shtif noted: "Comrade Wiener has already settled into his new job and written a serious monograph on the literary works of [Shloyme] Etinger. He also contributes to the academic publications of the Department."⁴ The fellow communist émigré Esther Rozental-Shneyderman, who fled to the Soviet Union from Poland in 1923 and during the late 1920s and early 1930s was first a graduate student (*aspirant*) and then an academic researcher at the Institute, remembered Wiener as a reserved man who stood out among his colleagues due to his intelligence, erudition, and meticulous dress: "Meir Wiener was the most European and the most educated among the Soviet Yiddish literary historians and critics I knew. Intellectually he was not inferior to Moyshe Litvakov, and did not have his obstinate arrogance. His taste was also better than his Soviet colleagues."⁵ He was "well-built, a little taller than average, dark-haired, his pale longish face had a shade of olive color, with a forehead of a thinker and very Jewish almond eyes."⁶ Always serious, rarely smiling and usually silent, he had an air of gloom about him, which she took, perhaps in hindsight, for a sign of an inner tension: "it was very difficult for him to reconcile himself to the Soviet reality. This struck everybody who had a chance to observe him at work."⁷ Rozental-Shneyderman had an impression that Wiener tried to avoid administrative work that carried heavy political and ideological responsibility and that he declined an offer to become the head of the Literary Section. In 1931 this position was given to another prominent literary historian Max Erik, who also emigrated to the Soviet Union and was lured by the industrious Liberberg from the competing institution in Minsk.⁸ Wiener obtained the less ideologically charged appointment as the head of the Section of Ethnography and Folklore, where he had as his collaborators and students such remarkable folklorists as Moyshe Beregovski and Zalmen Skuditski.

A few details in Rozental-Shneyderman's memoirs preserve the atmosphere in which Wiener found himself in Kiev. She remembers his reticent participation in the long meetings of the local Communist Party

cell, where he would “very carefully weigh and measure out his every word regarding the problems of Jewish culture and general political events in this country and in the capitalist world.”⁹ During those meetings, which she conducted in her capacity as cell secretary, “I always saw the same picture: Wiener was literally squirming with uneasiness when he could not (that is—dared not) react openly to the things he disliked. And most of all he disliked the pseudoscientific revolutionary clichés, especially the babble from the communist youth who were just making their first steps.” In hindsight, she realized that it was Wiener’s expressive silence that prevented her from “following the path of least resistance” like most of her young colleagues and occasionally made her stop and ask herself, “What is going on? Is it really the right way to build a new life?”¹⁰

Outside the over-sensitive sphere of politics and ideology, Wiener was “the genuine democrat among Yiddish scholars in the Soviet Union” in his relationships with colleagues. He would never show off his intellectual superiority, despite his generally bitter mood, which brought him to a “state of great anxiety.”¹¹ He would reveal his real opinions only in the company of his two closest friends, the writer Noakh Lurye (whose daughter, Tamara, Wiener married in 1929¹²) and the poet Lipe Reznik, and even then usually through hints and half-finished sentences. On one occasion Rozental-Shneyderman had a chance to hear Wiener’s view on the work of Itsik Kipnis, one of the finest Soviet Yiddish writers, who was habitually criticized for the “petit-bourgeois character” of his writing. Wiener, referring to Litvakov’s criticism of Kipnis, said: “for Litvakov, the greatest sin of Kipnis is his ‘petit-bourgeois essence.’ But Litvakov is not prepared to acknowledge that without this ‘petit-bourgeois essence’ Itsik Kipnis would not be Kipnis because his works would lack their most powerful element: the nearly absolute faithfulness of the author’s own precious creation to his personal life. Then his works would lose their richness.”¹³ When it came to writing an introduction to Kipnis’s collection of short stories, Wiener carefully counterbalanced his praise of the author’s artistic talent with a critique of his “backward” ideology, making sure, however, that the overall balance of his article remained slightly positive.¹⁴

Understandably, Wiener would not share his concerns with his sisters in his letters, which were most probably subject to Soviet censorship. In

1928 and 1929 he would occasionally bring up the idea of visiting them in Vienna, only to counter it with numerous reasons why this could not be done at that particular time: bureaucratic difficulties on the Soviet or Austrian side, his heavy workload, or, alternatively, his holiday plans, as well as his desire to stay in Vienna longer than circumstances would allow. In these letters he sounded defensive, trying to create the impression that he was perfectly happy in the Soviet Union though exhausted by overwork: "I belong not to myself but to my work, which I love and which is for me more important than anything else. And when, after a day of hard work, I remember you, I am usually too exhausted to write a detailed letter as I would like to."¹⁵ Wiener mentioned that as the head of the Ethnographic Section of the Institute, he had to work up to sixteen hours a day. His workload at the Institute left him no time for his literary work. He also asked Franzi to send him some books and items of clothing and to address all correspondence to his office to ensure their delivery. In the last letter to the family preserved in the archives, addressed to Erna and dated August 2, 1931, Wiener introduced his wife, Tamara Lurye, as an "exciting person": "you would like her very much. She is a remarkable beauty."¹⁶ The political storm that broke out a few months later made further contacts with relatives and friends abroad very dangerous.

H. Leyvick Controversy

Wiener's first foray into the seismic arena of Soviet Yiddish literary criticism was not successful. A few months after his arrival in the Soviet Union, he published in *Di royte velt* a long review essay of two collections of poetry by the American Yiddish author H. Leyvick (Leyvik Halpern, 1888–1962) that had appeared in the Soviet Union in 1926.¹⁷ Wiener started his review by acknowledging the significance of Leyvick's poetry, but only from a purely aesthetic point of view. Wiener then asked his main question: did this poetry belong to the future, could it be used as "bricks for our revolutionary building," or was it merely a swan song of the past epoch, which had already ended in Russia with the October revolution but was still dragging on in the West? The rest of the essay was devoted to proving the latter proposition.

Wiener argued that Leyvick's "revolutionary will" was an abstract concept, devoid of the "creative unconsciousness" that would make it relevant for Soviet poetry because a petit-bourgeois poet could only acquire such "unconsciousness" by joining the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat. Leyvick was a poet of petit-bourgeois anxiety, that is, the loss of all sense of stability in the face of the revolutionary cataclysms. He could see the old world falling apart but could not comprehend the meaning of this process. His poetic response found its expression in decadent, neurotic, individualist tragedy. In this situation of lost certainties, his only remaining support was the individual self. Leyvick's main problem was the anachronism of his poetry: it may have been relevant before the Revolution, but was hopelessly outdated ten years after it (ironically, a similar charge was to be made two years later by critics of Wiener's own novel).

In his critical zeal, Wiener accused Leyvick of confusing his own neurotic condition, his "private stomach pains," with the crisis of the capitalist world. Individual anxieties could only be relevant when they coincide with the objective critical situation in society, as was the case with some of the Russian decadent writers on the eve of the October revolution. Otherwise they produce romantic dreams about escaping from reality and withdrawing into a secluded imagined past. A great talent who lags behind his time has less impact and value than a smaller one that stays in touch with his age. And this was the fate of Leyvick when he lost touch with the revolutionary movement.

Wiener identified two trends in Leyvick's poetry, which he associated with Peretz and Bialik, respectively. The former was "healthy" and "in accordance with the folk style," while the latter was decadent and individualist, and expressed itself in megalomaniac and sadomasochistic motifs. Wiener also touched upon the general issue of symbolism in Soviet literature, which was to become central in the debates of 1929. While sharing the general view that "symbolism must be eliminated from revolutionary literature," Wiener nevertheless made some allowances. He divided symbols into two categories. The first included simple stylistic devices for "economy of expression" that helped convey complex ideas in simple forms, such as the hammer and sickle. Symbols of the second kind served the opposite purpose of making

things more complex and ambiguous. Symbolism of that kind prevailed in literature during times of crisis, uncertainty and doubt, but when the crisis was resolved and a new order supplanted the old, those symbols lost their significance, both for the outgoing and the incoming ruling class. The obscure and complex symbols of the old order had been preserved in literature by inertia but were gradually being replaced by simple, clear new ones. Thus, Leyvick's sophisticated messianic and prophetic symbolic language was suitable for the premonitions of the pre-revolutionary age, but had lost its significance in the post-revolutionary epoch. Wiener concluded: "literature can and will use his formal and technical achievement, but Leyvick's work has not brought any substantial capital to the fund of revolutionary literary construction."¹⁸

Wiener's critique of Leyvick was a complex amalgam of personal antipathy, theoretical speculations, and political calculations. Wiener met Leyvick personally in Paris in 1926 when Leyvick was on his way back to the United States from his long visit to the Soviet Union. Wiener clearly took a dislike to him, as he reported in a letter to Vogel quoted in the previous chapter. After his relocation to the Soviet Union, Wiener must have felt it necessary to prove his communist credentials to his new Soviet comrades. In some places, especially in the discussion of the concept of symbol, Wiener's critique of Leyvick reads like an argument against Wiener's own views on that subject, which he had developed in *Von den Symbolen* only three years earlier. His belief that all of the complexity and ambiguity of the symbolic form of expression would be eliminated by the victory of the revolution might seem a naive oversimplification, but it could also have been a reflection of his hope that by emigrating to the land of triumphant socialism, he would be miraculously freed from all the painful dilemmas and anxieties he had to struggle with in capitalist Europe. Wiener's notion that the revolution would cancel all ambiguities and complexities was not unlike the belief in the utopian post-messianic age, where all antagonistic contradictions—to use Marxist terminology—would be resolved, and all remaining conflicts would be merely temporary.

In reality, of course, the situation turned out to be more complicated. Wiener's attack on Leyvick produced negative responses both on

the “right” (more liberal) and the “left” (proletarian) flanks of the Soviet Yiddish establishment and created enemies for him among Soviet Yiddish writers. The poet Ezro Fininberg angrily reported to Leyvick in a private letter in October 1927, soon after the publication of Wiener’s article:

I actually happen to know this very person—he has been living a while now in Kiev; a “Doctor of Philosophy” from Vienna, a magnate’s son, with Hebrew works behind him [...] Became a Party member abroad and with us as you know the powers that be seek out “experts” in literature with a flashlight. They are thrilled with this creature: a European! And a Doctor of Philosophy! [...] The “Doctor of Philosophy” (in Kiev, he is referred to as the “non-entity with silk underpants”) must, all the same, make a career for himself—he changed tracks [...] One thing is clear Comrade Leyvick: the “Viennese Marxist” will soon meet his dismal comeuppance with us.¹⁹

Even Yasha Bronshteyn, the Minsk-based champion of Yiddish proletarian culture, felt that Wiener had gone too far. Improbable as it may sound for anyone familiar with Bronshteyn’s militant views, he actually rose to the defense of the Inzikhists (from the Yiddish words *in zikh*—literally “in oneself”), a prominent American-Yiddish modernist literary group, of which Leyvick was one of the founding members: “As is evident from his article, comrade Wiener does not know that, under certain historical conditions, the decadent ‘inzikhist’ literature has also played a revolutionary role as a combatant against the bourgeois world.” Bronshteyn rejected Wiener’s thesis about the anachronistic nature of Leyvick’s poetry and argued that this poetry, as well as that of his Inzikhist colleagues, contained a kind of “explosive power.” Although they were unable to elevate their “aesthetic revolt” to the higher level of revolutionary action, they were progressive enough to flee—albeit no further than “into themselves”—from the “*Forverts* mud” of the American “business swamp.”²⁰

As one can see, purely literary considerations played little role in Bronshteyn’s view of the situation. Leyvick was important as a political ally, a leading member of the modernist group that opposed the influential socialist newspaper *Forverts*, the chief ideological foe of Soviet Yiddish Communists. The fact that the Inzikhists disliked the *Forverts*

for its poor style and bad literary taste, rather than for its opposition to communism, played no role in these purely tactical calculations. And Wiener, an idealist newcomer to the Machiavellian world of Soviet politics, probably had no inkling of this.

A more substantial defense of Leyvick was undertaken by Oyslender in an essay that appeared in the next issue of *Di royte velt*. Oyslender strongly objected both to the style and the substance of Wiener's attack, accusing him of disrespect and a lack of professionalism.²¹ Oyslender pointed out the inconsistency of Wiener's position: while Wiener began by hailing Leyvick as one of the greatest modern Yiddish poets, he later dismissed him as an irrelevant epigone of European decadence. Oyslender argued that Wiener had disregarded the socio-historical context of Leyvick's work and used an abstract psychoanalytical critical methodology rooted in Max Nordau's "Zionist philistine" theory of degeneration, which tended to reduce the whole of modern literature to hidden sadomasochist complexes. Oyslender placed Leyvick in the context of Yiddish literary development, locating him immediately after Peretz and alongside Bergelson. He declared Leyvick, along with Moyshe Leyb Halpern, to be one of the most progressive Yiddish modernist poets in America. What Wiener took for a celebration of death and mysticism was for Oyslender an expression of protest against the prevailing spirit of complacency and compromise in the American Yiddish literary mainstream. Oyslender stressed the great impact of Leyvick's poetry on the development of modern Yiddish poetry not only in America, but also in the Soviet Union, likening it to the influence of the Russian symbolist Alexander Blok on Soviet poetry. He even made the politically risky remark that the first generation of Soviet Yiddish poets, among them Osher Shvartsman and Hofshetyn, "never denied that the first anthology of the young American poets, among them Leyvick, which came out in Kiev in 1917, had a great influence on them."²²

In an endnote to Oyslender's essay, the editors of *Di royte velt* commented that he had failed to engage with the main claim of Wiener's article, namely, that Leyvick's poetry had no place in the "foundation of the building of revolutionary literature in the Yiddish language."²³ It looks, however, as if Oyslender deliberately tried to avoid this ideologically sensitive issue by channeling the discussion in the direction of literary

history. The effect of Oyslender's rather harsh attack on Wiener remains a matter of conjecture because Wiener did not pursue the debate. Indeed, as Dobrushin reported to Leyvick soon after the publication of the article, Wiener had "great, great regrets" about the publication of his critique: "now it is clear to him that neither he nor anybody else needs articles of this kind, which lack, most importantly, an outlook."²⁴ For the following three years, Wiener collaborated closely with Oyslender at the Literary Section of the Kiev Department for Jewish Proletarian Culture, until this and related issues once again became a subject of heated ideological debate in Soviet Yiddish literature.

Fiction and Memory

One of the incentives that drew Wiener to the Soviet Union was a promise—from a "high authority," as he somewhat enigmatically put it in a letter to David Vogel—to publish his Yiddish fiction. Indeed, Wiener's first Yiddish publication appeared in the Soviet Union at the time of his arrival there. A chapter from his novel *Ele Faleks untergang* (*Ele Falek's Downfall*) was published in the October, 1926, issue of the magazine *Di royte velt*. The magazine was founded in Kharkov in 1924 and focused initially on ideology and current affairs. The Party authorities hoped that the proletarian atmosphere of the new capital, a growing industrial city, which before the Revolution was outside the Pale of Jewish Settlement and did not have a large Jewish population, would dispel the nationalist fog of Yiddishism that had lain so thick on Kiev since pre-Soviet times.

In 1926 Leyb Kvitko was "intercepted," to use Gennady Estraiikh's word, by the Kharkov Jewish Section of the Communist Party on his way home from Germany to Kiev and appointed as one of the editors of *Di royte velt*. It was the period of change in that magazine's editorial structure, which led to the expansion of its literary department.²⁵ During the first half of the 1920s, poetry was the predominant genre in Soviet Yiddish literature, and so it was not easy to find new prose works to fill the extra space allocated to literature. This might explain a certain lack of ideological vigilance in choosing Wiener's text for publication.

To pay lip service to Soviet dogmas, Wiener (or one of the editors) added a short introductory note, describing the work as a

story of a Jewish intellectual who is doomed to fail because he belongs, by his origin, education and economic position, to the so-called dwarf bourgeoisie. Ele Falek was lost in decadent bourgeois ideas and feelings that did not correspond to his real conditions. He could not rescue himself from his conflicts because he could not find the path of genuine struggle together with the only true fighter, the proletariat.²⁶

As we have seen in the previous chapter, only a few months earlier Wiener had written to David Vogel that he was not going to send anything to Kvitko for publication in *Di royte velt* because his work was not suitable for Soviet publication.²⁷

Originally written in Berlin and finished in April 1923, this short novel reflects the anxiety of Wiener's youth in turn-of-the-century Cracow.²⁸ The novel opens with the boy protagonist visiting a Catholic hospital for the extraction of a tooth. This episode links Christianity, an oppressive power, with pain and suffering, an association that runs through the rest of the book. Catholicism dominates the city through images, buildings, and ideas, rendering Jews impotent. Ele's father, a large, silent man in his early thirties, comes from an old Cracow family that has been declining for years. As a private Hebrew teacher for girls, he occupies the lowest step on the intellectual professional ladder. This character might have been inspired by Erna's hapless Hebrew teacher, whom she recalls in her memoirs. He is despised and humiliated for his traditional Jewish appearance and poor command of Polish by both his students and their parents, assimilated Jews who live in the middle-class area of the city. As a result, all his efforts are wasted on girls who can never master the letters of the Hebrew alphabet (as was the case with Wiener's own sisters).

Ele's mother is more active and ambitious, but she also tries to avoid contact with the outside world. "A wonderfully slender woman with a face of rare nobility" (13), she sells cigarettes in a *trafik*—a tobacco kiosk—where she spends her days reading Yiddish novels and daydreaming, barely paying attention to her customers. She never looks her husband in the eyes and rarely talks to him: "for years, the

mother felt bitter resentment, not knowing against whom, not having any clear grumbles against anyone" (14). Not surprisingly, Ele grows up miserable and lonely, prone to sudden outbursts of self-destructive energy. The first premonition of his tragic end comes when he nearly falls out a window when left alone at home by his mother. As he gets older, his horizon gradually expands beyond the borders of the medieval Jewish quarter of Kazimierz. For his father, the daily routine of walking from Kazimierz to the newer Christian city is a torture he has to endure to earn his living. By contrast, Ele, eager to explore new territories, is particularly attracted by the forbidden and hostile Christian places. He instinctively tries to escape the narrow Jewish world, even at the risk of getting lost in the unfamiliar streets or drowning in the river. Cracow feels both oppressive and attractive, with its majestic Wawel Cathedral, the symbol of Polish Christianity, towering over the cityscape.

Conscious of the advantages of modern education, Ele's mother persuades the father to send their son to a Polish gymnasium at the age of ten after he finishes his heder education. Judaism remains for Ele forever associated with the oppressive atmosphere of heder, where he has suffered from the violent anger of the teacher's assistant, and with the absurdity of the Talmud, to which he prefers Polish adventure stories for children. Wiener portrays Kazimierz as a melancholic place full of memories guarded by people like Ele's father, for whom there is no room in the modern world. Particularly oppressive is the old dark synagogue where his father possesses an inherited seat. Though located at the very heart of Kazimierz, this synagogue is not popular with its inhabitants because of its age and morose air: "the closer one comes to the old synagogue and to the upper market, the actual Jewish town, the older the houses, the yellower from age and the more they are weathered by the sun" (49). The synagogue is supposedly more than eight hundred years old. Built in the Gothic style, it was once used as a fortified hiding space for the entire community, and its underground passages still lead outside the town. Nearly abandoned now, its Sabbath services are attended by only a few devout poor men, among them Ele's father, who carry on the tradition of their ancestors and pray according to the old *Kroke* (Cracow) rite.

Uncomfortable and anxious in the claustrophobic world of old Judaism, Ele is eager for a change. But his encounter with the Polish gymnasium, with its “smell of terror, kitchen soap, and dry air” and a crucifix in every classroom, does not make him any happier. He has frequent clashes with teachers and fellow students and once gets an unusually savage beating from a teacher for an offence he did not commit. This incident leaves the teacher and the other pupils with feelings of guilt and embarrassment, which aggravates Ele’s situation even further and provokes him to abandon Jewish observance. One day soon after his bar mitzvah he wakes up late and rushes to school, where he tries to catch up with his prayers in a toilet during a break. Alarmed by his long absence, other pupils suspect that he is doing something improper, and start to look over the cubicle, only to observe Ele with his tefillin (phylacteries) around his arm and on his forehead. After this incident, which makes his situation in school even less tolerable, Ele begins to feel hatred for Judaism. Now, instead of praying, he spends his mornings walking the unfamiliar streets of the city and staring at its magnificent churches. Gradually he makes new friends among Christian Poles and assimilated Jews, among them two attractive girls who live in the city center inside the *planten*, the boulevard ring which has replaced the old walls that historically separated the Christian city from its Jewish suburb.

As a child, Ele felt closer to his mother than to his father. He used to come to her little kiosk to sit and observe her daydreaming. But as he grows up and discovers a new world, the bond between them begins to weaken. He comes to believe that she is looking at him as if he himself is carrying the burden of his father’s doom. Ele thinks, she must be wondering to herself: “How will you end up? I *desperately* hope you don’t turn out like your father, I’m so afraid you’re like him, with all his ways” (67). In the meantime, the father falls ill and dies within a year in terrible suffering from what turns out to be stomach cancer. Exhausted by the physical and psychological stress, Ele looks for comfort in the quiet, clean homes of his Christian friends. Glancing during his long walks into the “clean windows of the quiet *goyish* streets, lined with trees,” he often feels the desire to be “one of their own, very eager to take in and breathe in the atmosphere of this clean *goyish* home” (82). The ever-present Christian imagery fills Ele with a mixture of excitement and

fear. His instincts tell him that his friends' families, despite their friendliness and liberal views, are ready at any moment to "seize a broom and sweep out 'those people' with such force that smoke will come out (*az s'vet azh geyn a roykh*). But in the meantime this is not allowed" (83). This premonition is much more sinister now than when it was written.

As he becomes more familiar with the Christian world, Ele develops a taste for modernist neoromantic poetry in German and Polish, and learns to admire medieval Christian art, which gives him a sort of masochistic pleasure. He begins to frequent the magnificent *kościół Mariacki* (St Mary's Cathedral) on Cracow's market square, famous for its fifteenth-century carved wooden altar by the sculptor Veit Stoss (known in Polish as Wit Stwosz). In the cathedral, "the wild Gothic sculptures, the bloody Catholic images of the cross, together with the kaleidoscopic stained glass and the odor of incense, wrap Ele round about with the air of fear and strange curiosity. When occasionally mass is said, he is overcome by a sense of extreme discomfort. Ele rushes away, paying no attention to the few worshippers on their knees who follow him with their murderously angry looks" (88). When he mentions his feelings to his Christian friends, they become suspicious that he could never really like Christians and their religion. After graduation from the gymnasium, Ele begins to study mathematics and physics at the Cracow University. As a student, he is entitled to a postponement of his one-year military service in the Austro-Hungarian army until the end of his studies. But a streak of self-destructiveness in his character leads him away from the normal path, and on a sudden whim, he decides to enlist to the military as a volunteer.

Sent to a small Silesian garrison town, he slowly but steadily adjusts to the harsh barrack conditions and soon is promoted to the rank of corporal in charge of drilling new recruits. This is a hard task given the fact that those soldiers come from remote Ukrainian-speaking areas in the Carpathian mountains and understand neither Polish nor German, which is the official language of the army. The captain insists on the extensive use of physical force and orders Ele to hit the non-cooperating recruits in the stomach as hard as he can. Incapable of causing pain to a human being and unable to disobey the order, Ele suffers a nervous breakdown and begins hitting himself in the face. When others try to stop him, he runs

away from his regiment and after a long journey across the country arrives home to his mother. Having immediately realized the danger of the situation, she puts him into a small rented room in a quiet neighborhood and sets off to the regiment to settle the issue. After extensive and costly efforts, she succeeds in obtaining fake papers that would protect her son from prosecution. But on the day of her return to Cracow, her son turns himself in to the authorities as a result of a deep depression and disappointment in love. He falls into the hands of a military *Auditor*, a sadistic German colonel with a fixation on implementing the law in the minutest detail. After a brief investigation, he orders Ele to be taken into custody by the guards. But Ele insists that he would go by himself and vigorously resists being handcuffed. As a result, he gets beaten up so brutally that he dies the next night. To cover up the accident, the military authorities order that he be given a funeral with full military honors and according to the Jewish ritual as if he had died serving the Kaiser. The funeral procession rushes to the cemetery, and the ceremony is complete before his mother and his uncle have time to get there.

The person named Ele Falek appears episodically in Wiener's memoirs about his Cracow years, which were written later. He is described as a "very naïve, astonishingly helpless and mixed-up boy," who "had a sharp and sober mind when it had to do with other people."²⁹ Together with Yoyl, the autobiographical protagonist of the memoirs, and his friends, Ele was enchanted by the Polish-Catholic neoromantic mysticism of Stanisław Wyspiański and the rebellious Satanic naturalism of Stanisław Przybyźsewski. All these readings got eclectically mixed, producing a "wild, inappropriate brew" (*a meshunedike, umgelumperte kashe*). The young Cracow Jews spent hours meditating in front of Veit Stoss's wooden altar and discussing the parallels between the lives and teachings of St. Francis of Assisi and the founder of Hasidism, Israel Baal Shem Tov.³⁰ The peculiar mixture of Jewish, Polish, and German cultures of the fin-de-siècle, with their penchant for mysticism and aestheticizing of death, violence, and suffering, their inclination toward the grotesque and distorted imagery, as well as their misogynist and sado-masochistic tendencies, would inform Wiener's writing and worldview well into the Soviet period. The name of Ele Falik might also imply a veiled reference Erik Falk, the main hero of the trilogy *Homo Sapiens* by

Przybyszewski, a highly popular, bilingual Polish and German novelist, who lived in Cracow in 1898–99 (the name Falk in turn may have been borrowed by Przybyszewski from Ibsen or Strindberg).³¹ This semblance, if intended, is purely ironic, because Ele Falek is portrayed as a typical Jewish *schlemiel* incapable of managing his life, whereas Erik Falk personified the confident virility of Przybyszewski's self-image.

Despite Wiener's later attempt to portray himself free from dalliance with modernism, his first novel bears numerous signs of modernist and expressionist influence. The opening image of the Christian hospital as a place of suffering and death dominated by the Catholic cult of the dying Jesus, echoes the beginning of the novel *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (*The Notes of Malte Laurids Brigge*, 1910) by the famous Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke, which begins with a memorable depiction of an old Paris hospital that is also presented as a place of dying rather than living: "So, then people do come here in order to live; I would sooner have thought one died here."³² Another similarity with Rilke's novel can be found in the episode depicting the death of Ele's father, which closely follows the portrayal of death of old Kammerherr Brigge, the grandfather of Malte. Rilke and Wiener share the perception of death not as something external to life, but as a part of one's personality that is carried within oneself for one's entire life and that slowly grows until it matures and fulfills its mission. Another common theme to both authors is the anxiety and alienation of a young intellectual in a big city. Malte comes to the modern metropolis of Paris from patriarchal, provincial Denmark, whereas Ele tries to make a much shorter, but no less difficult transition from Jewish Kazimierz to Christian Cracow. In both cases, the formative childhood experience retains its control over the protagonists and prevents them from blending with the modern urban life. This connection is not accidental: according to Franzi Gross, Wiener translated parts of Rilke's novel into Yiddish.³³

Another significant influence on Wiener's creativity came from the multiethnic and multilingual cultural mosaic of Galicia, the formerly Polish territory in the eastern part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. *Ele Faleks untergang* is a rare Yiddish example of the phenomenon that the Polish scholar of Austrian literature Stefan Kaszyński called "Galician syndrome," which he described as a mixture of feelings of guilt, suffer-

ing, and nostalgia.³⁴ With a variable proportion of its ingredients, this mixture defined the ways in which the bitter-sweet Habsburg-Galician past was recreated in Polish, German, Yiddish, and Hebrew by such authors as Bruno Schulz and Joseph Roth, Melekh Ravitsh, and Shmuel Yosef Agnon, who came to occupy leading positions in the respective literary canons. As the Austrian scholar Zoran Konstantinović points out, “the drowned Galicia, which no longer exists in that form, has grown in the Austrian literature into the notion of the human homelessness of our time.”³⁵ But while the German-Jewish writers from Galicia, such as Joseph Roth and Manès Sperber, remained forever enchanted by the land of their childhood utopia that was destroyed by the Great War and the collapse of the Habsburg empire, Wiener’s vision of that past was far from nostalgic. He focused on the signs of social and moral decay in the multinational fabric of the educational and military institutions, which Roth and others presented as the major pillars of the old imperial order. Wiener also acutely discerned the dormant Polish anti-Semitism that was often downplayed in the nostalgic representation of the good old times when Poles, Germans, Jews, and Ukrainians managed to live peacefully together under the benevolent scepter of Francis Joseph.

The Habsburg gymnasium was often celebrated by memoirists for opening the broad world of culture for talented young people regardless of their ethnicity and religion. Along with the administration and the army, the school was a major integrating force that kept the empire together by educating its subjects in the spirit of discipline and loyalty to the throne. However, in her study of Polish novels about school years in Habsburg Galicia, Iwona Ewertowska-Klaja presents a different picture: “In the Galician Arcadia, the gymnasium with all its school-day requisites was not a Utopia, but rather the harsh reality. It formed the focal point of conflict situations, which the young man had to resolve, and served as a model for the society, in which he had to function later.”³⁶ One of the major sources of conflict was the increasing tension between the growing national aspirations of the minorities—in the first place Poles and Ukrainians, on the one hand—and the dominant cosmopolitan German-language culture of the empire, on the other. The situation of Jews was even more complicated, because no matter how

carefully they tried to navigate between the conflicting sides, they were bound to antagonize one of them without winning the other. It is not surprising therefore that the Galician school was often remembered as a place of alienation, confrontation, and conflict, which generated a sense of spiritual loss, separation, and lack of contact. Summing up her astute observations based on three Polish novels, Ewertowska-Klaja states: "Essentially, the Galician school novels—where the childhood experience represents a point of departure for complications in later life—represent variations of the psychological Bildungsroman where the 'bad guys' win and the 'good' ones lose."³⁷ The school experience in Galicia leaves the protagonists of Polish novels with two lasting pieces of legacy: passivity and perplexity. Childhood nostalgia turns into a traumatic disorder.³⁸

Ewertowska-Klaja's analysis of the novels by the Polish authors Jan Parandowski (1895–1978), Emil Zegadłowicz (1888–1941), and Andrzej Kuśniewicz (1904–1993), all of which were written in the 1930s and the 1970s (later than Wiener's novel), seems to be fully applicable to *Ele Faliks untergang*, but with one significant difference that sets the Polish novels apart from their Yiddish counterpart. Whereas the protagonists of the Polish novels remain alive and eventually find a place in the post Habsburg-Polish society, the meaningless death of Ele Falik signifies the futility of Jewish integration into the Polish or the Austrian society. All their difficulties and conflicts notwithstanding, the Polish characters manage to establish positive relationships with their nation and family, whereas Ele Falik tries desperately but unsuccessfully to set himself free both from his Jewish legacy and his father's fate. Wiener deals with the issues of death and destiny at two levels: as a metaphysical issue and as a fact of life that is determined by social and psychological conditions. In the chapter on theology in *Von den Symbolen*, Wiener formulates the main task of that discipline as theodicy, that is, justification of God's action in the world: "The great human sufferings, death and pain, the screamingly loud injustice are the greatest incentives for dialectical theology. There is a moment in the history of religion, after which religion concerns itself almost exclusively, in a dialectic scholastic fashion, with the justification of God."³⁹ At the metaphysical level in the novel, Wiener treats the same question from a

secular existential perspective and comes up with a purely negative answer, finding no justifiable reasons for human suffering. He condemns the same old Habsburg world that some of his contemporaries came to regard as nearly ideal. Like the biblical Job, Wiener rejects conventional explanations offered by the established religions of Judaism and Christianity as inadequate and misleading.

At the social and psychological level, the novel is more problematic. Wiener briefly mentions, rather ironically, an important episode from Polish political history in connection with the election in 1897, when the Social-Democratic candidate Ignacy Daszyński, who was later to play an important role in Austrian and Polish politics, was first elected to the Austrian Parliament from the city of Cracow. Ele, who was five years old at that time (which makes him about one year older than Wiener) was so excited after hearing Daszyński speak to the Jews in the synagogue that he suddenly interrupted his father's lesson with a slogan: "Long live Daszyński, down with Bobrzyński [Daszyński's opponent in the election]" (134). But this childish political involvement with politics left no trace in Ele's memory. While Wiener's claim, in the introductory note to the publication in *Di royte velt*, that Ele "could not rescue himself from his conflicts because he did not find the way of genuine struggle together with the only true fighter, the proletariat" has no justification in the text of the novel, the socio-psychological predicament in which Ele finds—or puts—himself is an important and intriguing issue. Ele's downfall seems to be caused by his propensity to provoke irrational outbursts of anger from his superiors. No matter how hard he tries to normalize his social situation in terms of rational concepts and values, he remains unable to escape the fate of his forefathers, the generations of the old Cracow Jews who suffered a slow but steady social, economic, and psychological decline. The text is filled with references and allusions, which could be understood and appreciated only by members of Wiener's generation, the half-modern, half-traditional middle-class Cracow Jewish youth of the last pre-World War I decade. This layer was probably inaccessible for the Soviet readership of the same age and is even less accessible today. Stylistically and thematically, the novel belongs in the tradition of the Austrian-Galician noir literature with its dark irony, troubling sexuality, and social pessimism,

invoking the spirit of the most famous Galician writer of that kind, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch.

Not surprisingly, the publication of the novel did not get much critical attention. *Ele Faleks untergang* had little to do, stylistically or thematically, with the Yiddish literary mainstream of the 1920s, which focused on collective concerns rather than individual anxieties, and valued an accessible and idiomatic style filled with Jewish references; nor did it fit the new specific criteria of Soviet literature, which required the writer to represent the social reality according to the Marxist scheme of class struggle. The first review of the novel appeared in the Warsaw Yiddish literary journal *Bikher-velt* and was written by the prominent Bundist activist and literary critic Yankev Pat. In his view, the novel was out of touch with contemporary reality. It was a truthful, serious, compassionate, and well-crafted work that would be in place in Vilna around 1907 but was not appropriate for the Soviet Union in 1929. Pat perceived Wiener as a sad and distressed man who was unable to sort out his feelings. He concluded his brief review with a rhetorical question: "Meir Wiener knows the craft of writing. He has acquired it through effort, diligence, intelligence, and talent. But it is the year 1929 now. Why does Kharkov State Publishing House need to dig up a Cracow corpse from a soldier grave?"⁴⁰

Pat's critical opinion was sympathetically mentioned by a Soviet reviewer, who signed his brief article with initials A. A. Most likely, it was Avrom Abtshuk (1897–1937?), an ambitious and talented young writer and critic who had fled from Poland to the Soviet Union in 1921 and was making a successful literary career in Kiev. His novel *Hershl Shamay* (1929) is sometimes regarded as the best-written novel in Yiddish proletarian literature.⁴¹ Despite his understated manners and noble appearance of a "silk young man" from a wealthy Hasidic family, Abtshuk was a militant champion of proletarian literature and one of the most active members of the All-Ukrainian Union of Proletarian Writers (VUSPP) among the Yiddish writers.⁴² By the end of the 1920s, Abtshuk was a graduate student (*aspirant*) at the Literary Section of the Institute for the Jewish Proletarian Culture, which perhaps explains the relatively balanced tone of his review of the novel that was written by one of his mentors. But, as we shall see further, less than three years later he would

use this novel as an incriminating fact in Wiener's biography. The fact that Pat's review, which was published in Warsaw and therefore not easily accessible in the Soviet Union, was mentioned both in the 1929 review by A. A. and in Abtshuk's 1932 speech, supports the hypothesis that A. A. and Abtshuk were the same person.⁴³

The Soviet reviewer demonstrated his erudition by claiming that the influence of Dostoevsky and the Austrian writers Arthur Schnitzler and Stefan Zweig had prevented Wiener from writing a proper social novel. The main artistic fault of the work according to A. A., was Wiener's identification with his main character and the resulting inability "to differentiate between his own artistic individuality and his artistic object." Instead of taking control over the material, Wiener let the material take control over his narrative, producing an unacceptable atmosphere of gloom and decline. A. A. liked the novel as a work of art but could not approve of it ideologically. He skillfully summed up his insight into the novel's symbolic meaning with Soviet ideological clichés: "Wiener has an original manner of writing, and knows the secret of weighing his words and measuring his style. One can only wonder why, in our time of storms and struggle, he chose the theme of Job and wasted his creative energy on it."⁴⁴

1929: The Year of the Great Break

The year 1929 was the last year a modernist novel like *Ele Faleks untergang* could be published by a Soviet press without severe repercussions. This was the year Stalin finally consolidated his power, crushed the last remnants of the Trotskyist opposition, and expelled its leader from the Soviet Union, launching attacks on several fronts, from agricultural production to literature. In 1929 a series of high-profile ideological campaigns were waged against prominent Russian writers such as Boris Pilnyak and Evgenii Zamiatin. Yiddish literature had to follow suit, and one of the first victims of ideology was the hapless young author Shmuel Gordon, who was at that time a student in the Department of Yiddish Language and Literature at the Second Moscow University. Gordon was accused of sending a poem for publication to the Warsaw

weekly *Literarishe bleter*. His case was turned into a highly public object lesson that signaled the end of the period of relative tolerance in Soviet Yiddish literature.⁴⁵

In one way or another, these ideological storms touched practically every Yiddish writer of note, including Wiener's friends Leyb Kvitko and Der Nister, Lipe Reznik, and Noah Lurye, as well as Itsik Kipnis and other writers whose work Wiener admired. Perets Markish, who published two books in 1929 about the revolution, the novel *Dor oys, dor ayn* (*A Generation Goes, a Generation Comes*) and the long narrative poem *Briders* (*Brothers*), was accused by Litvakov of nationalism for celebrating exclusively Jewish heroes and martyrs of the revolutionary struggle and was "excommunicated," as he himself put it in a letter to Joseph Opatoshu in New York, for his story "Khaverim kustarn" ("Comrades Artisans").⁴⁶ In some cases, ideological accusations served as a pretext for settling personal scores. So, Kvitko, who by that time had established a solid reputation as a popular poet for both children and adults, was severely reprimanded for his trenchant poetic satire of Litvakov, in which he allegorically portrayed the powerful editor of the Moscow daily *Der emes* as "Shtingkfoygl Moyli" (Stinking Bird Moy[sh] Li[tvakov]). Kvitko was accused of violating party discipline and sent to work at the Kharkov Tractor Factory. The international situation also had its effect on Soviet Yiddish politics. In the aftermath of the outbreak of Arab violence in Palestine, a group of high-profile American Yiddish writers, including H. Leyvick, publicly resigned from the American pro-Soviet communist daily *Morgn frayhayt*, which stuck to the Soviet line of supporting the Arabs against the Jews. The Soviet Yiddish writers were forced to sign a resolution declaring the rupture of all relations with the "supporters of British imperialism."⁴⁷

The eventful year 1929 marked the watershed between the period of relative stylistic and thematic freedom and the new era of the ideological domination of the proletarian norms in Yiddish literature, which by 1934 had solidified into the doctrine of socialist realism. Yet 1929 was also a year of remarkable literary productivity, a fact that is often allowed to be overshadowed by the bleak political situation. Among the most important publications were collections of stories by Der Nister and Shmuel Godiner, which shared certain stylistic and ideological motifs

with Wiener's novel. All these works reflected the sense of perplexity and disorientation among the East European Jewish intelligentsia in the aftermath of a turbulent period of wars and revolutions, when things had settled down, and a new order had taken clear shape.

For Der Nister, 1929 meant the end of his prolonged symbolist period. To a large degree, this was enforced by ideological criticism from above, but to some extent it had come about naturally because of the exhaustion of his creative resources. Der Nister's swan song as a symbolist was the story "Unter a ployt" ("Under a Fence"), which first appeared in *Di royte velt* and was also included in the collection *Gedakht*.⁴⁸ This macabre story about a hermit scholar who betrayed his teacher to earn his living as a circus acrobat under the command of a sadistic dominatrix easily could be read as "nothing less than a grotesque portrayal of a Soviet writer's struggles and hardships."⁴⁹ The publication of this story caused an ideological tempest that prevented Der Nister's creative work from being published for the next five years. However, the initial reception of Der Nister's symbolist works by Soviet critics was not uniformly negative. Isaak Nusinov, a leading Soviet Marxist authority on Western, Russian, and Yiddish literature, endorsed the publication of *Gedakht* by providing it with a critical introduction. Admitting the limitations of Der Nister's ideological and artistic horizons, Nusinov nevertheless granted symbolism a certain role in Soviet literature: "Nister is not and never will be able to achieve realistic creativity in his artistic nature. His way of comprehending our reality remains the way of symbolic commentary, of interpreting it through symbolic images [...] It is Nister's responsibility to put this interpretation to the service of this revolutionary 'New Spirit' [referring to "Naygayst," published in *Geyendik*, 1923]. And this is a legitimate demand from our readership."⁵⁰

Even Litvakov, one of the most zealous Marxist critics of that time and a longtime admirer of Der Nister, managed to combine his ideological criticism with praise of Der Nister's talent, making a clear distinction between Der Nister's "reactionary" ideology and his art.⁵¹ Wiener followed a similar line when he had to express his view on the delicate matter of ideological criticism of his friend's work. According to a press report of a meeting of the Kiev District Committee of the Communist Party, Wiener seemed to favor a compromise. On the one

hand, he claimed that “it is not right for Nister to mentor a literary group. True, he has influence because he is a strong artist and many young people learn from him. Recently Nister has tried to distance himself from his traditions, and this is a fact that must be welcomed.” But Wiener also warned that VUSPP, which was behind the attack on Der Nister, trying to gain control over all literary activity in Ukraine, was “not yet a proletarian organization, and it is wrong to think that VUSPP can have a monopoly over Yiddish literature.”⁵² Previously Wiener had gone on record defending Der Nister, Lurye, and Reznik against criticism from Avrom Abtshuk at a literary evening in 1928 that was organized by the writers’ group *Boy* (Construction). *Boy* was established in 1927 by a group of “fellow travelers,” who chose not to join a proletarian organization and included, along with Reznik and Lurye, also Kvitko, Oyslender, Fininberg, David Volkenshteyn, and David Feldman. Their manifesto differentiated *Boy* from the proletarian writers, in David Shneer’s words, by “emphasizing the quality of writing, rather than its political orientation.” Shneer concludes that *Boy* “clearly reasserted the national path of Soviet Yiddish literature by mentioning the language and its writers, rather than the working class as the down-trodden.”⁵³ In 1929 *Boy* was disbanded, and a year later Wiener applied for membership in VUSPP.⁵⁴

Shmuel Godiner (1893–1941), one of the most original Soviet Yiddish writers of Wiener’s generation, published in 1929 a collection of his stories written between 1923 and 1929. The title, *Figuren oyfn rand* (*Figures on the Edge*), conveyed the message that the heroes of the stories were marginal characters who for some reason were unable to find their place in the Soviet mainstream. Among them are a Lubavich Hasid turned Moscow cigarette peddler and an assortment of revolutionary heroes who feel out of place in the relative calm of the mid-1920s, which they interpret as the failure of the revolution. One of them is a former Red Army commander named Tits, who is standing trial for embezzlement of trade union funds and murder. Unsure whether a death sentence is justified for a revolutionary hero, the judge, a young woman named Marta, decides to pay him a visit in his cell for an informal chat. Their encounter generates an erotic attraction on both sides, and they begin to share, in Yiddish, memories about moments in their lives that

were associated with violence and rebellion. The next morning Marta receives a call from a regional Party committee official who urges her to dispose of Tits as quickly as possible and get on with the next case. To answer the telephone, Marta steps with her naked foot on a bear skin on the floor, a gesture with an unmistakable reference to Sacher-Masoch's classic *Venus in Fur*. When she tries to bring up legal matters, her questions are cut short: "you know very well what kind of law rules among revolutionaries and Communists."⁵⁵ Tits's brother, a revolutionary sailor, holds a similar view. He believes that a communist should not be treated as an ordinary horse thief. It is better to be "dispatched in a comradely manner" than humiliated by having to clean toilets in prison like an ordinary criminal.⁵⁶

Despite the obvious differences in style and subject matter, the three texts by Wiener, Der Nister, and Godiner share common concerns of a moral and an existential nature. They all end with the death of their protagonist as a result of an absurd trial that flagrantly violates recognized legal norms. All three stories involve a sadomasochistic erotic relationship between the accusers and the accused that undermines the ideological validity of the authorities. In German literature, this existential situation of transgressing a law that is neither public nor comprehensible received an exemplary treatment in Franz Kafka's fiction. In Soviet conditions, the problem of the moral and legal justification of violence acquired a special poignancy. The officially sanctioned approach required the writer to demonstrate the supremacy of the "law of revolutionary necessity" over other, more traditional secular or religious legal systems. This was the message of Bergelson's novel *Midas hadin* (*Measure of Justice*, 1929), published simultaneously in the Soviet Union and Poland (at that time, Bergelson was living abroad and was not subject to the Soviet ban on foreign publications), as well as of the classical Russian civil war thriller *Razgrom* (*The Rout*, 1927) by Aleksandr Fadeev.⁵⁷ Wiener, Der Nister, and Godiner, each in his own fashion, offered a more ambivalent perspective. They did not draw a clear line between the aggressor and the victim, focusing instead on the bizarre love-hate relationship between them. They showed some sympathy for their victimized characters but did not rule out the possibility that their sufferings could have been partly self-inflicted, caused by their attrac-

tion, perhaps unconscious, to figures of power and authority. This shift of emphasis, however disturbing it might seem for those who prefer a black-and-white picture, opens up a new way of appreciating the ambivalence of the position of an intellectual in a totalitarian society.

Toward the “Leninist Period” in Soviet Literary Criticism

The process of consolidating the control of the Communist Party over Soviet literature, which lasted from 1929 to 1934, obviously could not leave Yiddish literature and scholarship untouched. Yiddish writers and critics had to abandon the illusion that their culture could have a semi-autonomous status, following its own path of development within the multinational Soviet culture, and had to recognize that Yiddish literature was to be fully integrated into the newly created system of socialist realism as one of the “fraternal literatures of the peoples of the USSR.” In some respects, however, Yiddish fared slightly better than other national literatures. Yiddish writers were well represented in both the governing body and among the rank and file of the Union of Soviet Writers, created in 1934, and some of them represented Yiddish along with other literatures—for example, Yasha Bronshteyn was an authority not only on Yiddish but also on Belorussian literature. Their works were published in relatively large print runs by subsidized state presses, performed in state Yiddish theaters, and translated into Russian and other languages.⁵⁸ Yiddish writers enjoyed many privileges, material and otherwise, that indicated their membership in the cultural elite of the increasingly hierarchical Soviet society.

The new status of Yiddish required a new historical and ideological foundation. Yiddish literary history had to be reformulated in the idiomatic language of Soviet Marxism with the emphasis on the collective as opposed to the individual. This also meant a refocusing of critical discourse from the question of whether the essence of contemporary Yiddish literature in the Soviet Union and abroad was petit-bourgeois or proletarian toward the more comprehensive task of adjusting Yiddish writing to the requirements of socialist realism. To accomplish this mission at the requisite theoretical level, Marxist scholars needed to

identify the “progressive” element in the pre-revolutionary Jewish cultural heritage as a foundation for the new Soviet literature and thereby put Yiddish culture on an equal footing with other cultures of the former Russian Empire. To borrow the expression coined by the American critic Van Wyck Brooks, they had to construct a “usable past” of Soviet Yiddish culture, a problem that was common to many different ideological projects of the modern age.

The cultural-historical schemes suggested by the Soviet Yiddish critics of the 1920s, notably by Moyshe Litvakov (1875–1938?), did not fit well into the dominant, new ideological mode because they made too little use of the general Marxist theory of historical development and tended to regard the Jewish case as exceptional rather than typical. Litvakov received his education in Lithuanian *yeshivot* and a Paris university. Upon his return to Russia after 1905, he became a leader of the Socialist Zionist Party and from 1908, he regularly contributed literary criticism for the Russian newspaper *Kievskaya mysl'* (*Kiev Thought*). From 1921 until his arrest in 1937 and subsequent death in prison, Litvakov remained a dominant figure in the Soviet-Yiddish establishment as editor-in-chief of the biggest Soviet Yiddish newspaper, *Der emes*.⁵⁹ The arrival in the Soviet Union of a number of political migrants from the West, among them the scholars Max Erik and Meir Wiener, the writers David Bergelson and Der Nister, and the poets David Hofshsteyn, Perets Markish, and Leyb Kvitko, revitalized Soviet-Yiddish culture and scholarship and challenged Litvakov's authority in Soviet-Yiddish culture.

The new ideological age was inaugurated in 1932 by an aggressive campaign for the “Leninist period in Soviet literary scholarship,” aimed at establishing the concept of “Leninism,”—a select set of Lenin's ideas and opinions on art and literature as interpreted by Stalin—as the foundation of Soviet literary theory.⁶⁰ The series of discussions, which took place in literary organizations and institutions across the Soviet Union, was triggered by the publication of Stalin's letter, “On Certain Questions on the History of Bolshevism,” to the editors of the journal *Proletarskaya revoliutsiia* (*Proletarian Revolution*) in June 1931. Using as a pretext the publication of an article which, in his view, cast doubts on Lenin's uncompromising stand vis-à-vis mainstream social democracy, Stalin called for the total eradication of “Trotskyist garbage” from

Soviet historiography. He made it clear that there could be one and only one version of the events and their interpretation, namely his.⁶¹ According to the German scholar Hans Günther, the purpose of this exercise was the “elimination of competing trends in literature and criticism,” in order to clear the ground for the new edifice of the literature of socialist realism.⁶² However, when reading the protocols of the special session of the newly established Kiev Institute for Jewish Proletarian Culture, it is hard to avoid the feeling that more moderate critics and scholars skillfully used this opportunity to settle scores with their willfully intolerant colleagues, especially Litvakov. Whatever its real purpose might be, the campaign signaled the emergence of a new approach to Yiddish literature and its history, in which Wiener was to play a leading role.

The discussions on the role of ideology in literary studies took place in the Institute’s Section of Literature and Criticism during the spring of 1932 and were subsequently published in two detailed books of protocols. Stalin’s letter was interpreted by local party functionaries, including Liberberg, as a call for a radical revision of all history-related work by means of “self-criticism.” This was a critical period for Liberberg and his institute. As Greenbaum points out, on the one hand, “the year 1932 was a hard one for what was now called the Institute for Jewish Proletarian Culture of the Ukrainian Academy. Famine raged in the Ukrainian countryside, and ideological quarrels were at their height after the famous Stalin letter. ‘Revision’ and self-criticism were the order of the day.” On the other hand, Greenbaum continues, “[a]fter this year and especially from 1934 on, while Minsk was in rapid decline, the pace picked up in Kiev. The main reason seems to have been increased party support for national minority work in the Ukraine as a counter to Ukrainian nationalism.”⁶³ Liberberg’s determination, ambition, and political and administrative skills played no small role in the rise of Kiev as the major center of Yiddish scholarship in the Soviet Union during the first half of the 1930s.

In his opening speech at the special session of the Section of Literature and Criticism on February 26, 1932, Liberberg proclaimed that Yiddish scholarship was lagging behind the “general ideological struggle” but also warned against unnecessary “panicking.” He suggested that “self-criticism” should become a “permanent method” of academic

work rather than a temporary campaign.⁶⁴ In the Soviet parlance of the day, the notion of self-criticism meant, as the historian of Soviet culture J. Arch Getty explains, an “elite ritual,” as opposed to the more widely publicized show trials. It was re-enacted behind closed doors, and its transcripts were later circulated, often in edited form, among a limited circle of readers. The pattern of this ritual was set up at the highest levels of the party leadership and was to be followed by all subordinate institutions: “typically, a senior official from outside presided over a meeting of the organization and encouraged criticism of the organization’s leadership from below. Those present were thus empowered to criticize or even denounce their leaders who were then expected to admit their errors. The scene followed mutually understood rules, forms, and genres of speech, although the outcome could be unpredictable.”⁶⁵

This ritual was performed at the Section of Literature and Criticism in two acts, and its final outcome was indeed unpredictable because of the sudden change in Party policy that occurred in April. The role of the “senior official from outside” was played by Liberberg, whereas the “organization’s leadership” was represented by Wiener and Oyslender, who were subject to criticism by their colleagues and subordinates. After a brief survey of the state of self-criticism in other sections of the Institute, Liberberg singled out for criticism Oyslender, as the former head of the section, and Wiener as the only party member in the section. At an extended session of the section in February 1931, Oyslender had already admitted his mistake in “orienting himself toward international research work in Yiddish,” which had determined the character of the section’s work. But the participants in that session remained unsatisfied with Oyslender’s confession, stating that the literary section was out of touch with reality, and its work was focused exclusively on the past. Liberberg reminded the meeting that even though Wiener supported the criticism of Oyslender, in the end the work of both of them had been characterized as “class-alien” and “nationalist-Yiddishist.” As a result, Oyslender had been removed from his position as section head. Wiener also had left the literary section to become the head of the Section of Ethnography and Folklore. Liberberg apportioned some blame to the younger scholars who represented the “proletarian” camp of VUSPP for not opposing strongly enough the “anti-VUSPP” position

of the section's leadership. Concluding his speech, he stated that the situation in the Literary Section, which had been renamed the Section of Literature and Criticism, had radically improved with the arrival of the new leadership, Max Erik from Minsk and Aron Gurshteyn from Moscow, and with the promotion of the former *aspirant* Abtshuk to the position of curator of the Cabinet of Soviet Yiddish Literature.⁶⁶

Wiener's defense strategy was to admit his "guilt" on certain minor points but to hold his general ideological ground. He claimed that he wrote and published "nearly nothing" during the period between 1923 and 1927, that is, two years before and two years after he joined the Communist party of Austria in 1925 (although in reality *Von den Symbolen* came out in 1924, and the fragment of *Ele Faleks untergang* in 1926). He also insisted that his general critical evaluation of Leyvick still remained valid, but conceded that its methodology was eclectic, especially where he used, instead of the clear Marxist concept of class consciousness, the vague notions of "intuition" and "creative unconsciousness," which might have been interpreted as an influence from the Russian critic Aleksandr Voronskii, who had just been denounced as a dangerous "Trotskyist." However, Wiener maintained that this was not the case because at the time he could not read "a single word" of Russian. His main methodological mistake was the "mechanical" separation between form and content, which resulted in his partially positive evaluation of Leyvick's poetry and its usefulness for Soviet Yiddish culture. But his worst mistake was his failure to respond to Oyslender's defense of Leyvick and symbolism.⁶⁷ This initiated his period of passivity, which Wiener blamed on his association with *Boy* between 1927 and 1929. Wiener held that *Boy* was a "practical consequence" of Nusinov's erroneous theory of the essentially petit-bourgeois character of Yiddish literature: "*Boy* neither believed in proletarian literature nor wanted it."⁶⁸ Turning to his historical studies, Wiener briefly mentioned his work on the Galician Yiddish author Shloyme Etinger (1803–1856), criticizing it for being too lenient with the bourgeois-nationalist ideology of Max Weinreich, the leading YIVO scholar who published the first academic edition of Etinger's work. Wiener also confessed to methodological errors in his literary-historical study of Mendeleyev's realism, in which he had implied the existence of a separate "Jewish society"

alongside “non-Jewish society,” which smacked of the Yiddishist theory of the “immanent” development of Jewish history.

The harshest ideological accusations came from Wiener’s young ideological adversary Abtshuk, who represented VUSPP in the literary section and took the floor after Wiener. He labeled Wiener with potentially dangerous, though mutually exclusive, epithets such as “Trotskyist” and “Menshevik,” blaming him for steering academic research in the section away from contemporary themes and toward the past, which was treated from a “non-Leninist” point of view. At the end of his diatribe, Abtshuk, like Liberberg, asserted that the situation in the section had radically improved with the arrival of the new leadership.⁶⁹ More substantial and less demagogic was the next speech, by Max Erik, who in his capacity as the new head of the section recited a lengthy catalogue of his predecessors’ errors.

The style and content of Wiener’s response to ideological criticism demonstrate that he had mastered the rules of the ritual of self-criticism well enough to avoid inflicting unnecessary damage on himself or his colleagues. He readily accepted the criticism of Erik and Gurshteyn but dismissed that of Abtshuk.⁷⁰ Gurshteyn, a recognized authority on Marxist theory from Moscow, spoke positively of Wiener’s study of the early Yiddish writer Yisroel Aksenfeld (1787-1866) as a “most significant achievement” of Marxist literary scholarship. He defended Wiener against accusations of deviation from Marxist theory, admitting, nevertheless, that Wiener’s idea of the social class was slightly “shaky” and based on a simplistic understanding of socio-economic relationships.⁷¹ In general, the more reserved and senior scholars Erik and Gurshteyn, in contrast to the more aggressive Abtshuk, tried to refrain from blatant political accusations, criticizing Wiener for ideological and methodological weaknesses rather than political malevolence. In the final resolution of the session, Wiener received a relatively mild reprimand. Most of his transgressions were attributed to his past membership in *Boy*.

Wiener, in turn, struck back at Abtshuk with counter-accusations that Abtshuk’s own theories were “anti-Marxist” and that Abtshuk was exploiting self-criticism for the sake of his own advancement. Wiener claimed that Abtshuk had simply misquoted and misrepresented his work—a charge that Abtshuk reciprocated.⁷² Speaking of his other

colleagues, Wiener mildly rebuked Gurshteyn, for his “gentlemanly” review of Weinreich’s edition of Etinger, and Erik, for his “polite” attitude to Sholem Asch, whom Wiener regarded not just as an ideological adversary but also as a mediocre writer unworthy of much attention.⁷³ Responding to the criticisms of Erik and Gurshteyn, Wiener readily agreed that his theoretical approach to literature had not been thoroughly Marxist, since he had presupposed that there were “immanent” areas of human creativity not subject to the dialectical laws of class struggle, such as folklore, speech, and humor. That presupposition was, of course, wholly in agreement with his early concept of artistic creativity as a sovereign spiritual phenomenon, but it had no place in the monistic Marxist theory. To rectify his theoretical mistakes, the Wiener of the early 1930s had to overemphasize social factors that led to the crude socio-economic determinism that vitiates much of his work of that period. But, as we shall see later, toward the end of the decade he was able to resurrect some of his earlier ideas, skillfully clothing them in Marxist-Leninist garb.

The supremacy of the champions of “proletarian” literature was much briefer than they had hoped. Less than two months after the session, VUSPP was suddenly disbanded, along with all other associations of proletarian writers on the same model, by resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Rozental-Shneyderman vividly remembered the shock of her “proletarian” colleagues. When the decision was announced on April 23, 1932 “they cut a poor figure, perhaps most of all Abtshuk. For he sincerely believed that the ship of true revolutionary literature was definitely sunk.”⁷⁴ This radical move of the Stalinist leadership was part of the far-reaching policy of herding all Soviet writers into one organization that would be tightly controlled by the party. The central and regional Associations of Proletarian Writers had fulfilled their task and were no longer needed.

The second act of the ritual performance took place only two days after the resolution was made public. On April 25, the Kiev Institute convened a plenary session of the Section of Literature and Criticism. Erik announced that this session had “wider tasks” than the one held two months earlier. Now the participants had to “review works of Marxist criticism outside the Institute,” that is, to criticize such

grandees of the Soviet Yiddish establishment as Bronshteyn, Khatskl Dunets (an important Belorussian critic and *apparatchik*), Litvakov, Nusinov, and Shakhne Epshteyn (a prominent communist leader who had returned to the Soviet Union from the United States).⁷⁵ Apparently, Erik wanted to seize the initiative and position himself and his section as the supreme authority over Soviet Yiddish literature.⁷⁶ Referring to the Party's resolution, he accused the proletarian literary organizations of paying insufficient attention to criticism of the critics and set out to rectify this error.⁷⁷ Now the roles were reversed, and the once powerful proletarian critics were mercilessly grilled by their former victims. Wiener rained devastating criticism on the proletarian critic Avrom Vevyorke for his book *Revizye* (*Revision*, 1931), in which the author attempted to rehabilitate mass literature, so-called *shund*, as a legitimate precursor of proletarian literature. Wiener defended the canon of high-quality literature against the advocates of bad taste, taking up the cause initiated by Sholem Aleichem in his famous pamphlet "Shomers mishpet" ("The Trial of Shomer," 1888), aimed at the most prolific author of *shund* novels, Shaykevitch (known by his pen name Shomer).

From Kiev to Moscow

The first six years of Wiener's Soviet life were a difficult time of adjustment and transition. As the Stalinist regime tightened its control over all areas of life, intellectuals and artists struggled to find new niches for creative expression, making all kinds of compromises with the regime. Wiener was fortunate enough to have his modernist novel published in the final year of the relatively liberal period. The dissolution of the literary group *Boy*, in which he played an active role, as well as other dramatic events of 1929, made it clear that the era of modernist experimentation was over. Like his friend Der Nister, Wiener eventually had to adopt a new style, that of the social historical novel, which enabled him to re-emerge as a fiction writer five years later. His first attempt to write literary criticism in the Soviet style was even less successful. Wiener could please neither moderates such as Oyslender, who were

still hoping to preserve a united “progressive” Yiddish literature that could cross political borders and needed Leyvick as one of its most important figures, nor proletarian propagandists like Bronshteyn and Abtshuk, who would simply never trust Wiener’s proletarian credentials. Caught between the two camps, Wiener, after initial hesitation, sided with the “fellow travelers,” only to find himself on the losing side in the fierce battle between them and the proletarian writers.

An academic career remained the only feasible option, but here, too, Wiener had to maneuver very carefully. His theoretical views were challenged by Max Erik who became the chief authority on Yiddish literature in Kiev. According to Rozental-Shneyderman, Wiener deliberately avoided becoming the leader of the politically sensitive literary section, preferring a more peripheral position as the head of the section of folklore and ethnography. But Wiener himself indicated that the move to ethnography and other responsibilities was not his choice—“the party transferred me to this job, and I am doing it,” even though he felt ill-prepared for it.⁷⁸ Whatever the reasons for his demotion, the campaign of 1932 demonstrated that, despite his communist credentials, Wiener was not regarded as suitable for an important position in the Kiev literary establishment.

Interestingly, more than half of the participants in the 1932 ritual drama of self-criticism were political émigrés from Europe, who had come to the Soviet Union because it offered new opportunities for cultural work in Yiddish. Now they had to learn the hard way the rules of a new political game, which would eventually lead to the arrest of Erik and Abtshuk and their death in the gulag. The same fate befell most of other participants of the ideological campaigns of the early 1930s: Litvakov, Liberberg, Bronshteyn, Dunets. Soon after the campaign of 1932, Wiener and Oyslender would leave Kiev for Moscow, and, probably with Gurshteyn’s help, find new academic posts at the Department of Yiddish Language and Literature at the Moscow State Pedagogical Institute, which in the mid-1930s replaced Kiev as the major center of Yiddish scholarship in the Soviet Union.⁷⁹

Five Folklore, Language, and the Haskalah

Folklore between Philology and Sociology

Wiener believed that the collective creativity of the Jewish masses played a major formative role in the development of modern Yiddish literature, and in his view, the study of folklore was part of literary studies. Wiener's transfer, from the Section of Literature and Criticism to the Section of Ethnography and Folklore soon after Erik's arrival in Kiev as a result of political change, also indicated the theoretical difference between the two leading émigré Marxist-Yiddish scholars. Whereas Erik, as a more orthodox Marxist, regarded modern Yiddish literature primarily as a product of the Enlightenment, which brought the progressive ideology of the bourgeoisie to backward Eastern Europe, Wiener, who retained some of the Buberian mystical belief in the redeeming power of folk creativity, believed that modern Yiddish culture emerged out of the interaction of Haskalah and folklore. As the head of the Section of Ethnography and Folklore, Wiener had to work out a new concept of folklore studies that would suit the new ideological paradigm. Wiener initially outlined his ideas in a handwritten manuscript dated March 31, 1931, titled "Proyekt tsu a[n] arbet-sprogram far der etn. sektsye" ("Project of a Working Program for the Ethn[ographic] Section"), which served as the basis for his editorial introduction to the first volume of *Problemen fun folkloristik* (*Problems of Folklore Studies*, 1932).¹

Wiener formulates the task of Soviet ethnography as a Marxist reconstruction of the culture of the oppressed classes.² He regards the study of folklore not as an independent discipline but merely an im-

portant “auxiliary scientific tool” (*hilfsvisnshaftlekhl mitl*) for other fields of cultural studies and criticizes the traditional descriptive and comparative methodology of folklore studies, whose purpose is to classify ethnographic phenomena across ethnic borders rather than to extract a “historical reality” from ethnographic materials.³ Contrary to “bourgeois scholarship” with its claim to objectivity, Soviet scholarship must be selective in accordance with its ideological orientation. However, this does not mean that certain kinds of materials, such as Hasidic folklore, should be disregarded. Although collecting this kind of material is not a primary goal of Soviet collectors, nevertheless it can be useful for explaining certain “facts of content and form”: “[w]e will not leave unpublished alien and hostile material where it is especially interesting from the point of view of social psychology, for example, New Economic Policy (NEP) songs of a class-hostile and class-foreign nature, and even Hasidic songs.” But, given the limited resources, this kind of material can be published only in small amounts, although all materials should be preserved in the archives.⁴

Ethnographic materials are important not for their own sake but inasmuch as they typify historical trends. Therefore, the tiresome and time-consuming work of comparing and systematizing different versions and variants of the same material has a purpose only in so far as it helps to accentuate a certain social meaning or function. In the end, it is the interpretation that determines the significance of the material, and the task of Soviet ethnography is to provide a new Marxist interpretation of ethnographic materials that replaces the old one given by the nationalist scholars: “without our interpretation, the old interpretations by An-sky and Prilutsky retain their validity by default.”⁵ Contrary to An-sky and Prilutsky, Wiener regards folklore not as an authentic expression of the national character of the Jewish people but as a product of concrete socio-economic conditions. In this sense, folklore is part of literature, which must be studied using the Marxist methodology of literary analysis.

In terms of form and genre, Wiener differentiates between “historically developed verbal folklore” (folk songs, tales, children’s songs, jokes, proverbs, plays, riddles, verses, idiomatic expressions, magic spells, good wishes, curses, swear words, special terms, etc.) and “folklore from other areas,” presumably, of a non-historical character

(religious and anti-religious beliefs, superstitions, folk concepts about law, medicine, the natural sciences, astronomy, zoological and botanical nomenclature). In a separate category between folklore and literature, he places published and handwritten folklore-related materials, such as letter-writing manuals, leaflets, prints, historical notes and *pinkasim* (community ledgers), and handwritten collections of songs and tales (interestingly, he specifically mentions Jewish tales about Jesus).

Research priority must be given to the “historically developed” verbal folklore, beginning with songs about work and the workers’ struggle, particularly the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, followed by folklore that emerged after the October Revolution, including “typical anti-Soviet NEP songs,” songs and tales about historical events of the early twentieth century, such as the Russo-Japanese war, the pogroms, World War I, as well as folklore about “everyday life” (*shtetnygerish*) from the time of the October Revolution and the civil war. Less important are older songs, tales, and proverbs, which reflect particular historical events and developments, such as the military and economic reforms, Haskalah and Hasidism, love songs, and children’s folklore.⁶ The primary task of the Section of Ethnography and Folklore is to analyze the social “essence” (*mehus*) of workers’ songs and songs of social protest, their relation to the social struggle of their time and to different social parties, as well as the relationship between those folkloric materials and literature, in particular the works of the American proletarian poets Dovid Edelstad, Yosef Bovshover, Morris Rosenfeld, and Avrom Reyzen, and even Shimon Frug, the Russian Yiddish poet of sentimental and romantic nationalism.⁷

From the specific issues of Jewish folklore, Wiener moves to a broader agenda for future Marxist theory of folklore: the definition of the field of folklore studies and of its place in the Marxist concept of history. How does one describe folklore as a historical category from the point of view of the class structure of society, and how does folklore reflect social differentiation? What is the relationship between folklore and literature, in particular, such borderline forms as couplets (*tshastushkes*) and cabaret songs? Who are the producers and the consumers of folklore motifs, forms, and ideology? Is there room for folklore in the Soviet “cultural revolution”? What is the role of folklore in the ideology and culture of

fascism? What is the nature of the “exotic” effect of folklore on contemporary audiences, and what explains its great national importance? What is the social function of folklore? What is the impact of other languages and cultures on folklore? How ought we to deal with variations within one folkloric culture, and how should folklores of different peoples be compared? And how should we approach “macaronic” materials, which use different languages?

Wiener’s way of thinking reflects the theoretical trends in Soviet folklore studies at that time. Toward the end of the 1920s, major Soviet academic institutions established new sections for the study of folklore that focused on its sociological aspects. As Dana Prescott Howell explains in her study of Soviet folklore scholarship,

These folklorists considered the “sociology” of folklore to be their distinctive contribution to folkloristics. They also identified it as the next stage in international folkloristics, and they pointed to contemporary work in Germany as representative of comparable concerns and directions of study. To these scholars, “sociology” meant the rejection of the concept of “popular” tradition as the creation of a socially undifferentiated mass of peasantry, a unified collective of “the people” (*narod*).⁸

Wiener’s program for the study of Yiddish folklore echoes some of the ideas outlined by the leading Russian folklorist Iurii Sokolov in his programmatic article “Latest Tasks in the Study of Russian Folklore” (1926). Criticizing his pre-revolutionary predecessors, Sokolov put the emphasis on the “sociological, or, more precisely, class and historical-economic exploration” of folklore from the point of view of the “history of class relationships.” He also stressed the importance of connections between folklore and other forms of folk creativity and between folklore and written literature. But acknowledging the close ties between folkloristics and its neighboring disciplines, such as literary study and ethnography, Sokolov—contrary to Wiener—insisted that the study of folklore would long remain an independent academic discipline.⁹

As Howell points out, “[t]he discovery of both the historical and the contemporary interpretation of oral and written traditions moved the folklorists beyond the village to urban cultural studies.”¹⁰ This shift corresponds to Wiener’s emphasis on the study of the most recent phenomena of urban folklore. But in trying to adapt the Russian

methodology to Jewish folklore, Wiener and his colleagues faced a formidable challenge. While the source of creativity in Russian folklore was traditionally identified with the village and peasants, Jews had no parallel phenomenon because they traditionally dwelt in small towns. Therefore, the methodological shift from the philological to the sociological approach and from traditional peasant culture to a more modern, urban one offered Jewish scholars more flexibility in the choice of their materials. In turn, the sociological approach had its own ideological problems, as Howell explains: "The sociological folklorists considered their approach to be consistent with, and contributory to, a Marxist analysis of folklore.[...] However, the 'sociological' folklorists found their approach rejected by Marxists as bourgeois, and subjected to criticism, which was, in part, the result of pressures of the new 'ruling class,' the urban proletariat."¹¹ Therefore, Wiener's task was not only to develop an adequate methodology for the socio-historical study of folklore but also to justify this methodology as genuinely "proletarian."

Folklore Studies as an Ideological Battlefield

From his position in Kiev as the leading Marxist theoretician of Jewish folklore, Wiener attacked contemporary Yiddish folklorists abroad, who, in his view, still practiced the "bourgeois-nationalist" approach of S. An-sky. Wiener's theory of folklore, particularly of the role of folklore in the formation of Yiddish literature, developed in a polemical dialogue both with his contemporaries, Jewish folklorists in Poland, and his predecessors, going back to the Haskalah. Initially, the attitude of the Yiddish *maskilim* to folklore and folk culture was ambivalent. As rationalists, they regarded folklore as a repository of prejudice and superstition, and, as Dan Miron tells us, "one of the enemies [of progress], together with the traditional methods of education, the professional stratification, lack of economic productivity, and so on."¹² But at least some of the *maskilim* felt a certain sentimental attachment to the old customs and wanted to preserve them as a cultural memory.¹³ This conservative impulse gained momentum under the combined pressure of the forces of economic and cultural modernization on the one hand, and

political and social discrimination on the other hand, to which Russian Jewry was subjected during the last decades before the 1917 revolution. According to Miron, it was the publication of the poem "Monish" by Y. L. Peretz in 1888 that signaled a radical change in the maskilic attitude to folklore and opened the way for the appropriation of folklore by high culture: "With Peretz, folklore becomes a source of inspiration for Yiddish literature, a deep well of symbolic truth, to be interpreted by the modern artist and adapted to the spiritual needs of the modern Jew."¹⁴

S. An-sky was one of those radical followers of the maskilic tradition who turned back to Jewish folklore under the influence of Peretz. In his essay "Jewish Folk Creativity," published originally in Russian in 1908 and later translated into Yiddish, An-sky argued:

The folk poetic creativity of Jews originates from a completely different source than that of the creativity of other civilized peoples. Whereas the foundation of all of the folklore of Christian peoples lies in the *pagan worldview* rooted in materialism and the mutual struggle of natural forces, as well as in the personality cult, Jewish folk creativity is fully imbued with the *idea of monotheism*, which in its essence is opposed to any struggle, tolerates no personality cult, and puts spiritual perfection above material, and especially physical, perfection.¹⁵

An-sky argued further that Jews, unlike all other nations, outgrew the pagan stage such a long time ago that their folk memory retains no trace of it, and the worship of one God became the only source of the whole of their entire folk creativity, which found its expression in the texts of the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, and other traditional genres, as well as in more recent oral folklore. As part of this spiritual tradition, Jewish folklore has no admiration or respect for physical power and strong personalities. The power of Jewish folk heroes lies in their spirituality: they "act not by the sword but by word and spirit."¹⁶ In their folk creativity, Jews adopt themes and motifs from other folk traditions and "spiritualize" them, permeating them with a "Biblical-Talmudic spirit" and a specific "religious mood."¹⁷

An-sky's "idealized notion that physical battle or combat were not themes for Jewish folklore" was challenged by some of the younger left-wing Jewish folklorists in Poland, in particular Shmuel Lehman (1886–1941), whose first book, *Arbet un frayhayt* (*Labor and Freedom*, 1921)

reproduced songs about the workers' struggle as counter-examples. As Itzik Gottesman reports in his study of Yiddish folkloristics,

The publication of this work proved to be controversial among folklorists, for it contradicted several established notions held about Yiddish folk songs. Rejecting the romantic-nationalist notion that folk songs had to be old to reflect the national character, Lehman placed his socialist Yiddishist-Bundist beliefs at the core of his folklore research and implied that whatever the Yiddish-speaking folk creates is folklore.¹⁸

Lehman's work triggered a controversy over the nature of Jewish folklore that laid bare the main difference between Jewish folklorists in the Soviet Union and abroad. In America, one of the leading Jewish folklorists, Y. L. Cahan, while generally positive about Lehman's achievement, tried to apply lexical analysis to separate the "authentic" folk songs from what he perceived as "propaganda," "implying," as Gottesman observes, "that folk songs could only have arisen in a pre-proletarian society."¹⁹ Predictably, the reaction of the Soviet folklorists was the opposite. The literary critic Ayzik Rozentsvayg praised the songs as a reflection of consciousness of the Jewish working class, arguing that folklore is a class-determined phenomenon.²⁰

In the first part of his unfinished study on the methodology of folklore scholarship, "Folklorizm un folkloristik" ("Folklorism and Folkloristic"), which appeared in the first volume of *Problemen fun folkloristik*, Wiener dismissed both the "left" and the "right" wings of Yiddish folkloristics abroad as an escapist reaction to anti-Semitism and Jewish suffering during the recent wars and revolutions:

Both "wings" respond in the same manner: the "Gentile nations," the Tsarist regime carry out pogroms—so let's remind ourselves of the old sacred taste of *kugl* and genuine Jewish dishes, steeped in the ancient national spirit, in the old *shtraymelekh*, kapotes and *shterntikhlekh*, let's immerse ourselves into the old, awfully backward tales about martyrs, *dybbukim*, spirits, devils, demons, miracles, and so on—with which our great-great-grandfathers of blessed memory consoled themselves during similar pogroms and disasters.²¹

Wiener saw no ideological difference between radical revolutionaries and liberals, Bundists and Zionists, in their treatment of Jewish folk-

lore, which he regarded as a nationalist mythology of the Jewish past. The same “Purim-ethnography,” based on An-sky’s ethnographic program, Wiener claimed, is practiced by the *Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut* [Jewish Scientific Institute] (YIVO) in Vilna and by the Hebrew University in Jerusalem: the ethnographical scholarship of the “Jerusalem yeshivah-style fascists with Mr. Bialik as their head” is as reactionary as the “fascist-style (*fashizirter*) Yiddishism of YIVO, headed by Mr. Weinreich.”²² In this post-revolutionary age, nationalists use folklore as an ideological tool for distracting the panicky petite bourgeoisie from joining the proletariat in the class struggle: “Contemporary Yiddishist ethnography and folkloric romanticism is an expression of the empty, groundless, and futile pessimism of the Jewish petite bourgeoisie under the conditions and influence of fascism, and its main purpose is to deaden the worker and distract him from his revolutionary struggle.”²³

Today one might find shocking the language of Wiener’s criticism of his foreign colleagues—especially the epithet “fascist.” It reflects his desire to fit into the Stalinist rhetoric of the early 1930s, which indiscriminately labeled as enemy anyone who did not toe up to the Party line. Yet it is important to keep in mind that Wiener’s attack had as its main target the nationalist German scholarship of his time, which in his view influenced the work of Jewish scholars in Vilna and Jerusalem. Most of “Folklorizm un folkloristik” is devoted to a detailed critique of nationalist trends in German ethnography and folkloristics, and for its time it is probably a unique document in this respect. To be sure, this penetrating analysis, published as it was in Yiddish by the Ukrainian State Publishing House for National Minorities, could hardly reach its target audience and was doomed to oblivion.

Wiener sets up an opposition between two kinds of “folklorism,” as he calls the use of folklore in culture: the liberating kind, which raises the consciousness of oppressed classes or colonized peoples by highlighting elements of protest in folk creativity, and the oppressive kind, which fetishizes conservative values and justifies the “educating mission” of colonizers.²⁴ It was the latter, nationalist attitude to folklore that came to dominate German scholarship after defeat in World War I and the ensuing political and socio-economic crisis. Analyzing the works of the prominent German folklorists Michael Haberlandt and

Adolf Spamer, Wiener shows how their concept of folklore as the unifying “soul of the people” goes hand in hand with the rise of nationalism in politics. He interprets Spamer’s vision of ethnography as a supreme idea that should consolidate and control the entire intellectual and political life of a nation as both a product of the trauma of World War I and a reaction to the rise of communism in Russia.²⁵ Spamer and other German folklorists take upon themselves the task of formulating the “Mission of Germany” (*Daytsblands shlikhes*) that will help mobilize the German people for a new war.

Wiener’s critique of 1931 sounds prophetic in the light of Spamer’s later career under the Nazi regime. In 1934 Spamer was appointed the “Reichsleiter für Volkskundeforschung” (Reich Director for Ethnographic Research), a position that suited his ambition to become a high-ranking state official in charge of ethnographic scholarship. Although not a National Socialist Party member himself, Spamer had close ties to the Nazi ideological establishment, which was keen on utilizing folklore scholarship for propaganda purposes. In a proposal on the tasks of the Reich Institute for German *Volkskunde*, which he drafted in 1936, Spamer formulated a practical program based on the principles so perceptively criticized by Wiener five years earlier: “[t]he task of *Volkskunde* as a science is a recognition of the intellectual and spiritual forces within a pure German community, in their substance and in the interplay of their respective expressive forms.”²⁶ Spamer’s former colleague at the Dresden Technical University, Victor Klemperer, who lost his professorship in Romance languages due to his Jewish origin, characterized him as a “big folklore animal with the Nazis.”²⁷ Spamer’s love affair with the Nazi regime was short. In 1937 he fell out of favor and was subjected to “psychic terror” and interrogations by the Gestapo, and in 1942 he suffered a complete nervous breakdown.²⁸ Ironically, it was Klemperer who helped bring Spamer back to the Dresden Technical University after 1945, and this avowed nationalist began a new career as a respected scholar in the German Democratic Republic. It was not until 1968 that his close intellectual links to the Nazi ideology became an object of historical research.²⁹

Probably responding to what he perceived as the dangerous nationalist trend in foreign folkloristics, Wiener tried to downplay the sig-

nificance of folklore and went as far as to deny folklore any place in a socialist society. Whereas the German nationalists used folklore as the foundation of their new religion of the *Volk*, the proletariat, being the progressive class, could not be satisfied by primitive songs and *bobe-mayses* and needed a proper high culture.³⁰ Folkloristics was meaningful if its goal was not to discover a mythical “spirit of the folk” but to study the old forms of expression of suppressed social protest and discontent: “in the broadest sense, ‘folklore’ is a certain complex of ideological expressions of the oppressed and exploited poor masses of the past (with some final vestiges in the present).”³¹

Wiener’s clearly inadequate and unbalanced criticism of Yiddish and Hebrew folklore studies abroad might have been influenced by his analysis of German folkloristics. Well aware of the potentially powerful political implications of scholarly theories in a totalitarian society, Wiener was in an excellent position to see how German folklorists made themselves useful to the emerging Nazi regime. From his militant communist and anti-nationalist perspective, Yiddish and Hebrew folklorists were following the same dangerous path toward servicing the needs of nationalist politics, which he, in the Soviet style of the day, identified as fascist. For Wiener, at that time, the only valid ideological alternative to this development was Marxist materialism, which regarded culture as part of the social superstructure and denied it any existence independent of the economic basis. Finding himself for a short time, and probably against his wishes, in charge of creating a new Soviet Jewish ethnography, Wiener saw his task in placing his discipline firmly under the control of Marxist historical materialism as an auxiliary branch of sociologically determined scholarship, in marked contrast to the nationalist “super-science.”

Folklore and the Haskalah Literature

The early period of what is called modern, or new, Yiddish literature—that is, a relatively small corpus of texts produced by the followers of the Haskalah movement in Prussia, Galicia, Podolia, Volhynia, and Lithuania—was an object of special interest for Wiener and Erik. Attracted by

the radical critical spirit of these writings and their outspoken European orientation, both scholars regarded this period as crucial in the development of Yiddish literature, as well as an important part of the Soviet cultural legacy. Scholars of other ideological orientations, foremost among them Max Weinreich, also paid close attention to this period, but treated it differently. The war of interpretations within the Yiddish scholarly community reached its height in the early 1930s when each party made great efforts to reclaim the Haskalah for itself.

One of the important differences between Wiener and Erik was their attitude to folklore. Whereas Erik was less attentive to the elements of language and style and focused on content and form and the ways in which Yiddish writers appropriated European norms, Wiener regarded Yiddish literature as a fusion of European culture, Jewish tradition, and Jewish folklore, which made it an original cultural phenomenon. He was particularly interested in the process of artistic appropriation of these diverse influences by Yiddish writers in the process of transition from the “old,” that is, essentially medieval, Yiddish literature to the “new,” which culminated in the emergence of the classical triad of Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz.

Wiener started to work on the Yiddish Haskalah soon after his arrival in the Soviet Union and published his studies of Aksensfeld and Etinger in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Toward the end of the 1930s, he turned to this period again, now as part of a larger general survey of Yiddish literary history. To understand the significance of the maskilic period of Yiddish literature for Wiener’s theoretical and historical views, now we briefly look at his synthetic works of the late 1930s and then turn to the more specific case studies he produced earlier.

In a 1939 article, Wiener complained about the lack of interest—presumably among the Soviet-Yiddish readership—in the literature of the first half of the nineteenth century. Mendele did not “fall from the sky” in the 1860s, Wiener argued, but continued a literary tradition established by his predecessors, the maskilic writers of the previous generation. True, their output was modest—it mostly consisted of plays and short prose, with little poetry—but it deserves to be called a “literature” not because of its part in the pre-history of the “classical development, but for its own sake, for the sake of its own significant value.”³² To un-

derstand this value, one must answer one key question: what was it about Yiddish literature that made it different from literature in Hebrew, which was the predominant language of the Jewish written culture of that time?

One of the differences, Wiener explains, was the audience: Hebrew literature was written for the “intelligentsia,” whereas Yiddish literature was addressed to the “downtrodden, oppressed and backward masses.”³³ Like those masses, Yiddish literature was despised and neglected even by the progressive *maskilim*; it also encountered hostility from the Hasidim, who justly regarded it as a propaganda vehicle for the Haskalah. And yet, Wiener claims, this modest and neglected literature has greater artistic value than its Hebrew counterpart. With a few exceptions, such as the works of Moshe Haim Luzzatto, Joseph Perl, Isaac Erter, and Avraham David Levenson, Hebrew literature did not produce anything aesthetically original in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries because it had no connection with the real life of the people.³⁴ Wiener identifies three features that make Yiddish literature superior to Hebrew: (1) realism; (2) lack of “nationalist fog”; (3) the originality of the language, which emphasizes its direct connection with the creativity of the people.³⁵ All this made the Haskalah Yiddish literature seem like a direct precursor of Soviet Yiddish literature.

Yiddish literature of the Haskalah period may seem naive and primitive but is striking in its freshness and originality, “a new creation” (*mayse breyshtis*), as it were, “when one abandons old canons, draws a line under the past and begins anew” (64). The metaphor of *mayse breyshtis*, a popular trope in early Soviet Yiddish poetry, helps to clarify the ideological significance of Wiener’s championing of this neglected literature. Early modern Yiddish literature was, like Soviet Yiddish literature a hundred years later, a “new creation,” and it had to fight for recognition against the Hebraists and Yiddish-speaking Hasidim, a clear parallel to the current ideological struggle on two fronts against Zionists and Yiddishists.

An emerging literature must not be judged by the established rules of the “official” poetics because the “plentitude of life is still largely free from the canons, and the writer follows the lead of life itself.”³⁶ At this early stage of literary development, the impact of linguistic originality

on artistic value is greater than at later stages, when a literature is established. That is why the Yiddish texts of the Haskalah lose much of their artistic value in translation; like poetry, their “soul” is in their language: “here *for the first time* is recorded artistically the language, the virgin linguistic land, which is filled with fruitful ferment and unbridled life.”³⁷ Yiddish literature, Wiener continues, received many of its ideas from Hebrew, but artistically it was completely independent; indeed, during the second half of the nineteenth century, such Hebrew writers as Y. L. Gordon and Sh. Y. Abramovitsh learned from Yiddish how to make their Hebrew more lifelike. Wiener concludes: “In the Yiddish literature of the first half of the nineteenth century, for the first time after many centuries, the folk began to tell of itself and its life, not in abstract phrases and autobiographical accounts or historical records, not in tales mixed with fantasy, but in robust, truthful, and original literary images.”³⁸ No other historical or literary source can offer us such deep and truthful insight into the real life of the Jewish people of that time. Wiener elaborated on this thesis with concrete examples in his introduction to the anonymous comedy by a Galician author, *Di genarte velt* (*The World Deceived*), which in somewhat revised form became the first part of his *History of Yiddish Literature*.

Contrary to Weinreich, who believed in the continuity of the Yiddish language as the nearly one thousand-year-old product of the creativity of Ashkenazic Jewry, Wiener argued that the history of Yiddish as a language in its own right begins only in seventeenth-century Eastern Europe, where it finally liberates itself from the German literary and linguistic canon.³⁹ At the end of the eighteenth century, Yiddish turns into one arena of the fierce ideological struggle between Haskalah and Hasidism for the soul and body of the Jewish masses. Each movement tries to utilize the creative potential of vernacular to convey its message and attack its opponents. And the new Yiddish literature came into being, between 1815 and 1820, precisely in those areas where this struggle was most intense: Galicia, Podolia, and Volhynia. This was also the time at which two major Hasidic works in Yiddish were published: *Shivkhey habesht* (*In Praise of Baal Shem Tov*) and *Sippurey mayseys* (*Tales*) by Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, both of which were heavily influenced by folklore. After a brief discussion of the first biblical translations into vernacular

by Mendel Lefin, Joseph Perl's anti-Hasidic satire *Megalleh temirin* (*The Revealer of Secrets*)—the Yiddish version of which, discovered by the Polish Yiddish scholar Yisroel Vaynlez and published in 1937 by YIVO, was still not available to Wiener at the moment of writing this study in 1936–37—as well as *Di genarte velt*. Wiener comes to the two authors who occupy the center stage in his argument: Yisroel Aksenfeld and Shloyme Etinger.

Wiener's interest in the theory of folklore was part of his broader interest in literary history, which remained his chief focus regardless of his administrative position. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, he produced a number of studies on the Yiddish literature of the Haskalah period, Mendeleyev, and Sholem Aleichem. His approach at that time was dominated by sociological determinism: he treated literature as a mirror of social and economic processes in Jewish society. But despite the occasional militant Marxist rhetoric, which can grate on the ear of the modern reader, Wiener's analysis is often nuanced and insightful, in particular when he deals with literary style.

One of Wiener's major scholarly achievements was the publication of the first volume of Aksenfeld's works in 1931, which set the standard for academic editions of Yiddish literature.⁴⁰ It included two plays, *Der ershter yidisher rekrut* (*The First Jewish Conscript*) and *Di genarte velt* (*The World Deceived*), accompanied by two long essays by Wiener and one by Skuditski, as well as some additional reference material. In the preface, Wiener argued for the necessity of a historical approach to Yiddish literature that would place it in the broader social and cultural context of the time. During the first half of the nineteenth century, Yiddish literature was produced by a small group of *maskilim* eager to spread their ideas among the masses, but their efforts were frustrated by a lack of material means and organizational infrastructure. In line with the Russian scholarship of that time, which was turning away from the formalist methodology to a more historical approach, Wiener sought to analyze the entire complex of relationships within a literary system of a particular period. As a Marxist, his primary interest was in the specific social function of a national literature: "The function of a new 'national literature' is to resolve a specific set of problems or to adjust general solutions to a specific environment.[...] Influences from other literatures are not

sufficient for resolving this kind of problem, and it cannot ignore its own, even very young, traditions, especially in the early period of its development.”⁴¹ Wiener viewed culture as an open stage, on which the conflict between the old and the new played itself out for contemporary and future audiences.

By 1927 the Literary Section of the Kiev Institute had already developed a plan for the publication of academic editions of the important Yiddish authors from the Haskalah period. The first volume of the prospective four-volume edition of Aksenfeld’s collected works was meant to serve as the model for such editions. Unfortunately, the plan ran aground, with only one publication to follow: the novel *Dos shterntikhl* (*The Headband*, 1939), which in any case was not indicated as part of the collected works. Wiener’s introductory essays in the first volume can be regarded as a blueprint for a future Marxist history of Yiddish literature. Its basic premise—which Wiener modified over time—is that Yiddish literature until the late nineteenth century was aimed at the poor masses but expressed the worldview of the emerging Jewish bourgeoisie. Although sympathetic to a certain extent to the plight of the exploited masses, the Jewish bourgeoisie pursued its own class interests, which were distinctly different from those of the poor. Therefore, Wiener argues, any analysis of a literary work must begin with a clear identification of the author’s own class position, as this had a decisive influence on his imagination and creativity. Thus, Aksenfeld was able to create a sharper, deeper, and more detailed portrait of the Jewish life of his age than Etinger because he belonged to the more “progressive” and dynamic petite bourgeoisie and by implication expressed its worldview.⁴²

In Wiener’s deterministic scheme of the early 1930s, literature functions as an agent for the transmission of class ideologies. To reach the broad audience of the poor masses, a bourgeois writer employs a variety of stylistic devices, such as elements of folklore and religious tradition, which, in turn, are a product of the socio-economic conditions. Wiener, following some of the Soviet Jewish historians of the 1920s, therefore sees a clear link between the religious doctrines of Hasidism, with its faith in miracles and mysticism, and the “secretive and insecure economy” of cross-border smuggling, an important source of income

for Jews in border areas of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. He regards Hasidism as an “ideological superstructure” produced by the insecure and high-risk Jewish economy, where various forms of luck, but most importantly, the capricious moods of Russian authorities and Polish landowners, could make or break an individual Jew or an entire Jewish community.⁴³ At that stage of historical development, Hasidism was deeply rooted in the consciousness of the poor masses but was part of the reactionary feudal ideology and was therefore, justly criticized as such by the early bourgeois *maskilim*.⁴⁴

According to Wiener, Haskalah originated as an ideology of the upper echelons of the Jewish trade bourgeoisie, which was fighting for its place in the emerging capitalist order of Central Europe. Initially contemptuous of the petite bourgeoisie of the shtetl, let alone of the working masses, the ideology of Haskalah gradually spread among the lower classes, acquiring a more democratic but also more contradictory character. The artistic reflection of this process in the works of Aksenfeld makes this writer particularly interesting and valuable from the socio-historical point of view. A close reading of Aksenfeld’s works, Wiener argues, helps us to identify minute socio-economic differences and understand the internal dynamics of social processes in the shtetl society, and eventually to understand the class conflict that was tearing apart its once solid fabric. Often acting against their own intentions and convictions, Aksenfeld and other maskilic authors brought to the surface the troubles, concerns, and dreams of the plebeian masses, the *hamoyn*.⁴⁵

For Wiener, the theater occupies a special place in the rationalist aesthetics of the Haskalah as the most efficient and direct vehicle for spreading its ideology, which explains why the first volume of Aksenfeld’s works includes two dramatic pieces. Stylistically these comedies belong to the age of the Enlightenment and are therefore still devoid of romantic nationalist ideas—a positive feature in Wiener’s view. Wiener argues that Aksenfeld’s choice of the genre of comedy was not dictated by his “aesthetic orientation” or “artistic need,” but rather by the efficiency of that genre as an instrument of social criticism. As a result, it was comedy that shaped the form and style of the nascent genre of prose in Yiddish, in which language and style were subordinated to social function.⁴⁶ Wiener’s understanding of the social function of theater

bears a close resemblance to Jürgen Habermas's notion of the theater as a venue of the emerging "bourgeois public sphere"; although in the case of Yiddish, it took more than half a century for the first written dramas to reach even a small audience through stage performances.⁴⁷ Contrary to that view, Georg Lukács—as Galin Tihanov points out—associated the genre of drama "with the decline of a (ruling) class, the moment when its worldview no longer goes unquestioned, and tragic defeat is near," seeing a new "form of expression of the ascendant bourgeoisie" in the genre of the novel rather than in drama.⁴⁸

Wiener conceptualizes Yiddish literature as a product of the bourgeois ideology that is free from any specific nationalist or aesthetic agenda. Because the *maskilim* treated Yiddish as a functional instrument that carried no inherent aesthetic or ideological value, their writings present a more accurate and complete portrayal of reality than texts in Hebrew, with its rich ideological legacy (and which were sometimes composed by the same authors): "According to its very essence, Yiddish Haskalah had to be more alert and sensitive when it came to the efficiency of its literary means. Writing in Yiddish was an expression of the will to exert influence over the broader masses and to adjust to their capacity for literary and cultural perception."⁴⁹

Unlike other European literatures or Hebrew literature, Yiddish literature from the outset was free of conventions and rules imposed by normative stylistic systems, such as classicism or romanticism. Its main goal was to portray not heroic individuals with unique features, but "character types" that could serve as "models (*mustern*) of entire social groups," and depict "their behavior in certain situations and under certain circumstances." Yiddish literature was more interested in action than in motivation, presenting individual psychology as an immediate product of the social situation.⁵⁰ It is precisely this "naïve," reflective but non-reflexive character of Yiddish maskilic writing that makes it a valuable source for sociological analysis. Such an "objective" manner of representation reflects, in Wiener's opinion, the worldview of the emerging bourgeois class at the moment of its consolidation out of diverse social groups. The new class wants to see "life as it is" and is not interested in stylistic nuances and psychological distinctions. Its artistic imagination is naïve and prone to simplification, interested in ends rather than means.⁵¹

Wiener attempts to show how a new Yiddish literature grows out of what he describes as naive naturalism by gradually adapting itself to the more refined and sophisticated conventions of realist style. Although the early maskilic works, such as Aksenfeld's *Der ershter yidisher rekrut*, adhere to the formalized rules of Enlightenment poetics, this does not alter the "truthfulness" of their representation. Aksenfeld himself insisted, according to Wiener, that the characters and events in his works were "factually taken from life," which suited the expectations of his "primitive" readership.⁵² The "truthfulness" of Aksenfeld's artistic representations was confirmed by such important figures of the Haskalah movement as the publisher Alexander Zederbaum and the writer Abraham Ber Gottlober, who were familiar with works by Aksenfeld that subsequently were lost. Aksenfeld's artistic achievement lay in his ability to represent the typical traits of the new Jewish bourgeoisie through concrete and recognizable characters.⁵³

Despite his considerable achievements, however, Aksenfeld's art remains confined within the limits of "primitive realism."⁵⁴ He did not master the skills of economical and balanced writing that are required for genuine artistic realism. Compared to Mendele, Aksenfeld's style is verbose and imprecise: "the details overpower the writer; they roam about, eliminating each other."⁵⁵ His characters remain schematic, and he is not capable of conveying the flavor of typical phenomena through individual details. Aksenfeld's artistic limitations become manifest as soon as he is compared to Etinger. Whereas Aksenfeld may be more accurate in capturing the details of social reality, Etinger shows more artistry in his portrayal of this reality as a whole. Aksenfeld's artistic method leaves little room for psychology and character development; the intrigue of his plays is "naive and not realistically natural enough," reminiscent of crude medieval European literature.⁵⁶

Wiener explains these stylistic differences between Aksenfeld and Etinger by the differences in levels of socio-economic development of Jewish communities in Ukraine (Volhynia and Podolia) and Galicia: "Etinger reflects more urban trends, Aksenfeld—the orientation towards the small shtetl and even the village; moreover, Aksenfeld's intended audience is socio-economically lower than Etinger's."⁵⁷ Aksenfeld's primary goal is didactic, whereas Etinger has a certain aesthetic agenda.

But the abundance of detail in Aksenfeld's works has great ethnographic and historical value. He was also the first Yiddish author to portray the shtetl "with its entire typology, which long remained 'canonical' in Yiddish literature up to Mendele and Sholem Aleichem."⁵⁸

Along with satire aimed at the fading socio-economic relationships of feudalism, the new bourgeois literature developed a sentimental streak, trying to portray the bourgeoisie's way of life in a positive light by presenting its values as "organic" and "natural." Initially the writers of the new up-and-coming Jewish bourgeoisie had no original artistic means for producing recognizable positive characters—as opposed to the rich palette of stylistic devices for portraying the social types that were passing away. As a result, by contrast with these instantly recognizable negative types, the public found the model heroes of the new class unfamiliar and unnatural.⁵⁹

The stylistic tension between the satiric portrayal of the old order and the sentimental depiction of the new hero, who struggles with the forces of the old and is often defeated by them, finds its expression specifically in the genre of tragicomedy, "laughter through tears," which is characteristic of the early period of critical realism and counts among its practitioners such writers as Jean Paul, Gogol, and Dickens, as well as Aksenfeld and Mendele. As Wiener claims, "Laughter through tears' is characteristic of that bourgeois socio-critical realism which must spare the weak points of its own class from its criticism and turn them dialectically around, making virtues out of shortcomings."⁶⁰

The comic effect could be achieved through the appropriation of the "vulgar" language of the masses, something that some maskilic authors often did out of aesthetic necessity but against their ideological conviction. Their intuitive orientation toward the living vernacular, combined with the ironic stylization of the artificial and archaic *taytsh* of didactic religious literature, produced a modern literary language. Aksenfeld played a key role in this process, even though his own style was still rough and his grammar clumsy.⁶¹ The evolution of literary Yiddish from the archaic *taytsh* through the stage-mimetic imitation of the vernacular was completed by Mendele and Sholem Aleichem, who created a highly refined and elegant language of Yiddish realism, which, as Wiener observes, "never existed in such a form in real life."⁶² Wiener concludes

his brief survey of the history of the literary Yiddish by contending that there could be no further development in this direction due to a change in historical conditions.⁶³

However, the fact that a writer adopts a language spoken by the masses for his writing does not necessarily imply that he approves of it. A writer can use this language as a stylistic device that serves his critical intentions. In a developed realist style, different linguistic registers are used to convey the nuances of social differentiation. At the early stage of realism—"primitive" in Wiener's terminology—this method portrays social types; as realism becomes more advanced artistically, individual characters acquire individual psychological characteristics. Stylistic registers of folk speech can be used ironically or positively, in accordance with the author's social position and ideological intention.

As Wiener's comparison of Aksenfeld and Etinger demonstrates, a fresh and energetic "primitive" and "naive" realism can be both more compelling artistically and progressive ideologically than its more advanced and refined variety.⁶⁴ This point is not merely of literary-historical interest but also helps boost the claim of Soviet socialist realism to superiority over the more artistically accomplished "bourgeois" realism. Thus, Aksenfeld serves as a prototype for the young proletarian literature with its open ideological involvement in the class struggle of the proletariat.

During the first years of his Soviet career, Wiener came up with the concept of "two lines" in Yiddish literature. The Polish line leads from Etinger to Peretz and has a "clear bourgeois character." As a product of a relatively developed urban economy, it reflects the more refined taste of middle-class Jews, while social conflicts were relegated to the background as improper material. The Ukrainian line, which runs from Aksenfeld to Mendele and Sholem Aleichem, reflects the worldview of the petite bourgeoisie of villages and small *shtetlakh*, which was more socially and economically backward but more "progressive" in its ideological outlook. This line also reflects the acute socio-economic contradictions in semi-feudal society, where Jews occupied an intermediary position between the exploiters—the Polish landowners—and the exploited—the Ukrainian peasants. The conflict between the progressive ideology of the Enlightenment and the backward state of society

produced a culture that was actively engaged with social problems. The Polish line was more open to Western influences, mostly from German and Polish culture, whereas the Ukrainian line was closer to Russian culture. Wiener's interpretation of Yiddish Haskalah literature was built on what he saw as the opposition between its two "points of orientation": Etinger as the representative of the moderate Polish strand and Aksenfeld as the representative of the radical Ukrainian one.⁶⁵

An important feature of the Ukrainian, or Russian, line in Wiener's scheme is its engagement with the shtetl. Although Aksenfeld, like almost all Yiddish writers, resided in a city, he was the first to make a small shtetl the setting of his fiction. This departure from the urban setting common in Yiddish literature in Prussia and Galicia was caused by the specific socio-economic situation of the Jews in Ukraine, as well as by the influence of Russian literature: "With Aksenfeld begins the succession of generations of 'Russian' Yiddish (mostly Ukrainian) writers who draw influence, sometimes more, sometimes less, from Russian literature. This succession leads through Gottlober, Goldfaden, Linetsky, Mendeley, Sholem Aleichem to Bergelson."⁶⁶

This concept was subject to sharp criticism by Max Erik during the 1932 session at the Kiev Institute. Wiener's concept of "two lines," Erik argued, was "anti-dialectical" because it "substituted a mechanistic scheme for concrete historical reality."⁶⁷ Representing the "official" Marxist position, on which he would elaborate two years later in his study *Etyudn tsu der geshikhhte fun der haskole (1789–1881)* (*Études on the History of the Haskalah*, 1934), Erik stated:

In contrast to Yiddishist scholarship, Marxist historiography must consider Haskalah from a concrete historical angle, one peculiar to Germany, another to Galicia, another to Russia, distinguishing within Russia the Kingdom of Poland and other regions. But then there will be far more than two main lines, and those "lines" will have to be drawn at any particular moment both horizontally and vertically, that is, according to the concrete historical movement of class struggle.⁶⁸

Wiener admitted the ideological faultiness of his concept of "two lines" and apologized for attributing these trends to local conditions, rather than the dynamics of social development and class struggle, and projecting the situation of the early nineteenth century onto the later

period.⁶⁹ By dividing Yiddish literature between the areas dominated by Russian and Polish culture (a division which incidentally nearly coincided with the 1921–39 political border between the Soviet Union and Poland), Wiener deviated from the dogma of proletarian internationalism that prevailed in Soviet cultural discourse until the mid-1930s. But his view would become more acceptable later, when Soviet ideology shifted from proletarian internationalism toward Soviet statism. It is also worth noting that Wiener's own fiction, with its urban settings and its focus on the middle class, is closer to the Polish-German tradition, to which he also belonged by birth and education.

Military Conscription: Yiddish Meets Politics

Wiener's second essay, in his edition of the first volume of Aksenfeld's works, deals with the play *Der ershter yidisher rekrut* (*The First Jewish Conscript*, 1836). Wiener rejects as "reactionary" the view of Jewish historians who interpreted the conscription policy of Nicholas I as a *gzeyre* (anti-Semitic decree) aimed at the entire "people of Israel." The goal of this kind of interpretation, Wiener argues, is to "connect all classes of the Jewish people through historical memories of persecution by a common enemy."⁷⁰ In reality, Wiener argues, the policy of conscription was driven by the logic of empire-building and had little to do with the Tsar's personal antipathies or religious beliefs, which could at best serve as an excuse for introducing more restrictive measures. From this point of view, "it will immediately become clear that the state *could not* treat Jews as a separate and close-knit community, not connected with its environment, or as a socially and economically uniform 'people,' but only in relation to the play of the forces and interests of the general class struggle and its dialectics."⁷¹

Accordingly, the conscription policy favored the upper and middle strata of the Jewish bourgeoisie, which actively participated, as contractors, purveyors, and financiers, in the building up of Russia's military forces, but discriminated against the petite bourgeoisie and the working masses, which were caught up in the "crippled economy" and presented an obstacle to the unification and militarization of society. The fact that the vast majority of Russian Jews belonged to the latter classes

might lead one to the erroneous conclusion that the state discriminated against the entire Jewish population. In fact, the commercial and industrial Jewish bourgeoisie had a direct interest in conscription because it undermined the power of the landowning nobility by drafting serfs into the army and creating a new workforce. It also helped to get rid of impoverished Jews who had lost their livelihood as a result of early capitalist development and were now regarded as “parasites” both by the Jewish oligarchy and the Russian state authorities. Thus, military reform both deepened class division among Jews and strengthened social bonds between Jews and Christians, drawing rich Jews closer to rich Christians, and poor Jews closer to poor Christians. This was part of the process of social integration, which was predetermined by the logic of transition from feudalism to capitalism.⁷²

For Wiener, the ways in which different Yiddish writers represented the problem of Jewish military conscription serve as a “touchstone for understanding the variety of nuances of their social position.”⁷³ Aksenfeld’s play stands out among the early maskilic works on this topic as the only “tragedy”—a genre that was not popular in the generally optimistic early maskilic literature. Pessimistic tones appear more broadly in Yiddish literature only later, in the works of Mendele and his contemporaries. Wiener reads Aksenfeld’s play as an early objective portrayal of different social groups of shtetl society at one of the critical moments of Russian Jewish history, not yet obscured by the later nationalist bias.⁷⁴

The play captures the moment of the awakening of social consciousness among the Jewish masses: “the poor have immediately understood the role the *kahal* [communal leadership] plays in that issue, protecting the interests of the social groups which it serves: to ease the burden of communal taxes and philanthropic obligations, to expand the space for the competitive struggle, and to take revenge on those who protest against their oppressive authority.”⁷⁵ Although Aksenfeld’s sense of class loyalty forced him to caricature the real acts of protest by the poor against conscription, his sympathy was clearly not with the communal oligarchy, and he succeeded in re-creating the sense of acute social tension generated by the conscription decree and its implementation. After a brief survey of the literature on conscription in Yiddish, Russian, and Hebrew, Wiener concludes that criticism of the conscription of Jewish

recruits, particularly the drafting of boys and their forced conversion to Christianity, became commonplace in Yiddish and Russian Jewish literature only in the second half of the nineteenth century, after the most inhumane practices had been abolished, whereas initially the attitude of the *maskilim* was rather positive.⁷⁶

Like other *maskilim*, Aksenfeld shows no solidarity with the poverty-stricken Jewish victims of the conscription decree. His concern is the corrupting effect of power on the institution of the *kahal*, which defends the economic interests of the shtetl middle classes engaged in local trade and commerce. As a maskil, Aksenfeld articulated the ideology of the rising class of the urban bourgeoisie, with its negative attitude to the “patriarchal” institution of the *kahal*, which restricted private initiative. The abuse of power in the handling of conscription by the *kahal* offers a good opportunity for exposing the corrupt and backward nature of that institution.

Wiener regards Aksenfeld as one of the most important Jewish writers not only of his age, but of the entire nineteenth century. He laid the ground for the “shtetl” tradition, his social analysis being more acute and penetrating than that of many other writers, particularly those who wrote in Russian and Hebrew. Aksenfeld was also the first Jewish writer to portray love as a feeling that could transcend mercantile considerations, which was possible in Jewish society only among the poor: “only a ‘common man’ (*hamoyn mentsh*), not used to expecting any economic benefit from his wedding, could afford ‘true love’; only in folk songs of that time can we hear genuine notes of love between the sexes.”⁷⁷ Wiener’s fascination with Aksenfeld had an impact on his own fiction. In the historical novel *Kolev Ashkenazi*, discussed in Chapter 8, Wiener exposes the machinations of the Jewish communal oligarchy in seventeenth-century Cracow, using *Der ersther yidisher rekrut* as a literary model.

Shloyme Etinger and the New Yiddish Style

Whereas Wiener regarded Aksenfeld’s main achievement to be the social engagement of his prose, he thought that Etinger’s major contribution to Yiddish literature was his innovative style. He deals with

this issue extensively in his critical review of Max Weinreich's 1925 two-volume edition of Etinger's works. Wiener sharply criticizes the "saccharine, unctuous, sanctimonious tone" of Weinreich's introductory essay on Etinger, which portrayed the writer as a timid and conservative philistine.⁷⁸ Weinreich's intention is clear to Wiener: "Weinreich wants Etinger to be perceived as the great-grandfather not just of Yiddish literature, but of the entire bourgeois Yiddishist way of living and thinking."⁷⁹ To do so, Weinreich ignores issues related to Etinger's situation, as an artist and a person, vis-à-vis major social and cultural conflicts of his age.

Although Etinger, as a representative of the moderate urban bourgeoisie, was less radical than Aksenfeld in his critique of the socioeconomic conditions of Jewish society, he was far more radical than his later biographers tried to portray him.⁸⁰ To prove his point, Wiener undertakes a revision of Weinreich's "bourgeois" account of Etinger's life, accusing him of censoring the story.⁸¹ Analyzing Etinger's fables, Wiener praises them as "constructed with precision, by the experienced hand of a master, permeated with elements of real life, folklore, fine humor and often pugnacious satire."⁸² In general a conservative genre, the fable served, in Etinger's case, as a precursor of the more "progressive" genres of satirical prose and bourgeois drama.⁸³

Turning to Etinger's main work, the comedy *Serkele*, Wiener defines its genre as "family drama" and describes it as being "strongly realistic but not 'ethnographic'" ("shtark shteygerish ober nit 'etnografish'"), which means that all of the ethnographic elements in the play have an artistic function.⁸⁴ Wiener praises the artistic qualities of the play, which was written when Yiddish had not yet developed as a literary language. Compared to Aksenfeld, Etinger's style is "more good-natured, calmer, less passionate" ("gemitlekher, ruiker, mit vintsiker laydnshaft"), and his characters are "complete" in the sense that Etinger "summed up everything that the people had been thinking about those characters."⁸⁵ In other words, in contrast to Aksenfeld, who responded to the new developments in Jewish society, Etinger was drawing up a final balance of a vanishing age. Despite its conservative ideology, *Serkele* is an absolute masterpiece: "since then, no better comedy has been written in Yiddish literature."⁸⁶

Wiener situates *Serkele* at the crossroads of two traditions, which he identifies with Yiddish folklore and European bourgeois drama. Dismissing Weinreich's characterization of Etinger's work as a "window into Europe" as too general, Wiener asks what makes Etinger's European orientation different from that of other *maskilim*. Etinger, Wiener argues, was not the first, but rather one of the last, East European *maskilim* whose cultural frame of reference was entirely European, without any trace of Russian influence. Unlike Aksenfeld and other Ukrainian *maskilim*, Etinger had few cultural ties with Russia, modeling his works on the classic French and German writers of the Enlightenment and their early nineteenth-century epigones.⁸⁷

Etinger's style has another aspect that was important for Wiener's concept of folklore as a literary device. Along with being one of the first Yiddish authors to adapt European stylistic forms to the Yiddish language, Etinger incorporated elements of Yiddish folklore into his literary creations. Wiener analyzes the use of folklore phraseology in Etinger's works in great detail in a special study, "Di rol fun shprakh-folklor in der yidisher literatur (fun etyudn tsu a monografye vegn Shloyme Etinger)" ("The Role of Folkloric Language in Yiddish Literature (from Studies for a Monograph on Shloyme Etinger)").⁸⁸ The monograph on Etinger was never written, but this study, in a slightly revised form, was later included in Wiener's collection *Tsu der geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur in nayntsntn yorhundert*, along with a few other works on Etinger.

Wiener proclaims Etinger the founder of the "artistic realist" style in Yiddish, which is more advanced than "primitive" realism, and one of the key elements of this more advanced realism was the creative use of the device that Wiener calls *shprakh-folklor* (folkloric language) in the first edition and *rednsartlekhe frazeologye* (idiomatic oral phraseology) in the later edition. The penetration of folk idiom into literary Yiddish (as into any other literary language) has the same social causes as the "revolutionary drive" of the masses to liberate themselves from "national oppression and exploitation" by the ruling classes.⁸⁹ Using *Serkele* as a representative example of the transition from the "primitive" to the "artistic" stage of realism, Wiener raises two problems: "First, how can one explain the fact that it is the negative characters who predominantly use the idiomatic phraseology (*stereotipishe*

frazeologye) in their speech; second, turning to a general evaluation, what was the positive and creative impact of the folk (*folkstimlekh*) language on the development of the Yiddish literature of the Enlightenment?"⁹⁰

In a brief historical excursus on the origins of the idiomatic phraseology, Wiener argues that at a certain (presumably archaic and pre-literary) stage in the development of a language, some metaphoric images become firmly associated with the expression of certain feelings, emotions, and ideas. Thanks to their frequent use, these fixed images turn into "abstraction," and their semantic range expands beyond the initial direct association with a certain idea or emotion: "an idiomatic expression (*rednsart*) absorbs a range of various associations," which makes an idiom a suitable tool for the expression of a whole variety of concrete meanings.⁹¹ These idiomatic expressions serve as building material for witticisms (*glaykhvertl*), didactic proverbs (*shprikhvort*), rhymes, and songs, which are the product of the collective creativity of the people and express human experience in a condensed form, different from "ordinary speech." These basic poetic "figures" gradually develop into the more elaborate and sophisticated literary genres of parable, fable, and poetry, which produce symbolic and metaphoric meanings. This process is a result of the collective creative work of the folk, which gradually forges abstract concepts out of the fixed idiomatic expressions: "This is a grandiose creative achievement of the people."⁹²

But this development does not follow a straight line. Sometimes it happens that a spoken language, which has not yet reached the literary stage, has already exhausted its creative potential and consists of clichés and formulaic expressions that are incapable of conveying new ideas and messages. At this stage, folklore loses its positive creative function and becomes an obstacle to the development of a language as a means of social communication: "this linguistic style (*shprakh-nusekh*) wraps the living pearls of the folkloric language in poisonous and stifling cobwebs."⁹³ It is precisely this phenomenon that is captured in the speech of negative characters in the works of the maskilic writers, though the elements of social critique are less pronounced in Etinger's works than in those of the Ukrainian *maskilim*. Etinger uses idiomatic clichés to create soft irony rather than sharp

satire because he sees the root of social problems in the lack of education rather than in economic inequality.⁹⁴

At the beginning of the new stage of its development in the early nineteenth century, literary Yiddish was overloaded with archaic phraseological and grammatical and lexical elements from the medieval religious tradition. This was a stage of linguistic evolution where a language “becomes independent from life and speaks with the accumulated wealth of its own associations and meanings.”⁹⁵ This phenomenon occurs every time that society is on the verge of a new order, but its linguistic abilities lag behind its socio-economic development. For example, some European poets, unable to express the new content by old linguistic means—Wiener mentions futurists and Dadaists—responded to the crisis of World War I by turning to primitive linguistic forms free from the burden of cultural associations carried by the literary language.⁹⁶

As opposed to Yiddish and other European languages, the “organic” development of Hebrew ground to a halt on the verge of the first millennium. Deprived of any contact with the spoken language of the masses, Hebrew has retained the fossilized cultural legacy that corresponds to the slave-owning stage. Even today, writes Wiener in 1929, despite all the attempts to revive Hebrew, it remains an exclusively written language consisting of fragments of quotations from various literary sources and carrying the heavy burden of its past cultural legacy. The subordinate position of Yiddish to Hebrew had for centuries prevented Yiddish from developing naturally. Yiddish writers had to slavishly imitate and reproduce Hebrew terms and phrases, syntactical structures, grammatical constructions, and stylistic devices.⁹⁷ The new Yiddish literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century had to launch a war of liberation against foreign domination by Hebrew. This war had a dual aim: first, to get rid of the rhetorical pomposity imposed by pseudo-Biblical style, and second, to modernize the archaic Germanic component of Yiddish. On the one hand, Yiddish found itself in the position of a young national literary language fighting against foreign control; on the other hand, Yiddish had to liberate itself from its own archaic legacy.⁹⁸

Etinger “was the first to believe that it was necessary and possible to create art in the Yiddish language.”⁹⁹ Unlike other, even more radical

maskilim, he respected the language in which he was writing and took upon himself the task of reforming Yiddish according to European artistic norms, which involved the “differentiation of the usage of idiomatic phraseology.”¹⁰⁰ He used the cliché phraseology as a device for the individual characterization of negative persons, each of whom had his or her own way with idioms. In Etinger’s artistic rendition, these stagnant idioms convey not only linguistic meaning, but also modulations of voice, gestures, and poses of such characters.¹⁰¹ However, when Etinger tries to convey his ideas through the speech of positive characters, he runs into artistic difficulty, and the results are often weak and unconvincing.¹⁰²

The inability to convey positive messages forcefully and dramatically, using the rich idiomatic potential of the language, is a typical problem at the early stage of development of any new culture. To fully appropriate the expressive potential of a language, one must sift through the abundant idiomatic and folklore material, separating the archaic elements suitable for satire and criticism from those that are “alive and capable of expression” (*lebedike oysdrukfeike*), a process that Wiener metaphorically compares to the mystical notion of *tikkun* (improvement, restoration of the right world order).¹⁰³ Etinger’s greatest achievement, according to Wiener, lies in the fact that he was the first Yiddish writer who consciously began to restyle folkloric elements for modern literature. In conclusion, Wiener reiterates his point that a new literature cannot be created by incorporating folkloric linguistic elements uncritically, merely for the sake of ethnographic effect—as was done by such writers as Berdyczewski or Z. Y. Anokhi.

Wiener’s Theory and Its Intellectual Context

Marxist theory provided Wiener with a conceptual framework that would incorporate literary and social aspects of Jewish cultural development in the early nineteenth-century Russian Empire. The emergence of Yiddish literature out of the fusion of folklore, Haskalah, and European literary tradition came to signify a radical breakthrough in Jewish historical development. Under the pressure of various internal and

external factors, such as the policy of bureaucratic and military consolidation of Nicholas I, the ideological struggle between the Hasidim and the *maskilim*, and the socio-economic progress in the western regions of the empire, Jewish society underwent the process of socio-economic stratification that found its reflection in Yiddish literature. For the first time since ancient Hebrew ceased to be a living language used in Jewish society, presumably in the first centuries of the common era, Jews resumed their creativity in *their own living language* in early nineteenth-century Russia, and that language was Yiddish.

Wiener's early Soviet studies of Haskalah literature in Yiddish combines a rigid adherence to the deterministic doctrine—which a few years later would be labeled as “vulgar-materialistic” and replaced by a more nuanced theory, developed with the help of Georg Lukács and his circle—with a penetrating and insightful analysis of the literary style, which retains its relevance until today. Wiener's direct precursor in Soviet Yiddish scholarship was Oyslender, who in his seminal study *Grund-shtrikhn fun yidishn realism* (*The Main Features of Yiddish Realism*, 1919; second edition, Vilna, 1928) explored the generic relationships between Yiddish folklore, realism, and modernist literature, emphasizing the significance of “primitive” art forms for formal experiment and stylistic innovation. The mission of the modern Yiddish writer, Oyslender argued, was to revitalize the tradition of Jewish collective creativity, which had its origins in folklore. Oyslender believed that the life of a Yiddish writer is inseparable from the life of his *folk*. For centuries, this *folk* had been nothing more than extras in the historical pageant of Judaism that had been directed by the Hebrew-speaking intellectuals. The mission of the Yiddish writer was to “hear the people; for the first time in the history of Diaspora the people had received a voice of their own [iz gekumen tsum vort]” in the works of Yiddish literature.¹⁰⁴

Oyslender regarded the folk song as the beginning of realism in poetry, just as the proverb was the beginning of realism as a worldview.¹⁰⁵ As a product of female creativity, it was a secular complement to the religious *tkhine* (woman's prayer, composed in an informal, personal style). The song, concerned with social issues, became the first stage of the Jewish secular realist culture, liberating the human being from the supernatural world by describing reality as part of the earthly world,

free of mysticism and superstition, and calling for its improvement by worldly means. The third genre of folk creativity, the Yiddish folk tale, was yet to be collected, like the historical anecdotes from the community chronicles (*pinkasim*). As a whole, Jewish folklore offered us the “primitive ideology of Yiddish realism”¹⁰⁶ and provided creative impulses for future literary development.

Oyslender’s concept of Yiddish cultural evolution, which he developed during the years of World War I and the Russian Revolution, was closer to Nietzsche than to Marx. He perceived history as the process of self-realization of the people’s individual character through the free manifestation of their collective will, which also included their liberation from the stale and obsolete religious norms. At that point, Oyslender’s ideas about art were eclectic, reflecting the situation of Yiddish criticism of that time. On the one hand, he shared the nineteenth-century Russian-populist ideal of the *narod* as the only true guardian of national culture and morals. On the other hand, he had appropriated ideas from Russian and German modernism, in particular the notion of the “primitive” as a foundation of modern artistic creativity. As a follower of the Russian “progressive” tradition, Oyslender was a staunch advocate of realism as the only true artistic representation of reality; but he was also interested in all kinds of modernist artistic experimentation as a way of modernizing and secularizing Yiddish culture.

One of the earliest Marxist interpretations of Yiddish literary history belonged to Litvakov, whose preoccupation with developing a Marxist theory of Yiddish literature began after the failure of the 1905 revolution. A fluid opportunist, Litvakov readily changed his position according to the dominant ideological mood of the day. Even though his ideas defy systematization, many of them remained central for the Soviet Yiddish ideological and aesthetic discourse during the whole of the pre-World War II period.¹⁰⁷ The Jewish tradition (*mesoyre*), Litvakov argued, underwent little development until the early nineteenth century, because the guardians of tradition in each generation kept a tight rein on innovation. The Jewish masses suffered oppression both from without and within: not only were they politically and socially trodden by other nations, but their creativity was suppressed by the Jewish ruling elite and forced underground. The folk spirit had to express itself in

religious forms, such as mystical dreams and messianic movements. The Jewish people carried its timeless heritage in a portable “national book-case” in their wandering from country to country, but wherever Jews settled, they immediately started a process of “Judaization” (*faryidishn*) of the local language and culture. The classical Hebrew language and religious culture thereby functioned as a repository, a “national museum of curiosities,” from which national cultural treasures were to be “evacuated” into the living vernacular folk culture when this culture was mature enough to absorb them.

According to Litvakov, this led to the emergence of two conflicting traditions, the living, informal tradition of the “people of Israel” (*folk yisroel*), and the official, rigid tradition of the “congregation of Israel” (*kneses yisroel*). The masses created their own popular religiosity, which brought the concept of God closer to the people by emphasizing his kindness and compassion in contrast to the official strict and legalistic halakhic Judaism. At the pre-modern stage, that popular culture was weak and dependent upon the official culture for its imagery and expressive means. At that stage, Yiddish folk culture was capable of creating merely “variations” (*iberdikhtungen*) on traditional Judaic themes, such as *Tsenerene*, the popular early seventeenth-century Yiddish adaptation of the Pentateuch based on the midrashic tradition of biblical exegesis. Gradually, Yiddish folk culture became independent from the dominant official culture, first in the anonymous works of folklore and later in the works of individual writers.¹⁰⁸ According to Litvakov’s theory, Jewish culture retained its “primitive” character longer than other European national cultures due to the stagnancy of Jewish society.

Unlike other nations, Litvakov continued, the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Jewish society did not generate favorable social conditions for the development of a progressive, national culture because the Jewish bourgeoisie shared no common social or political interests with the Jewish masses. The Jewish bourgeoisie joined forces with its Gentile counterpart in its power struggle against feudal dominance and adopted the ideology of Enlightenment as its own, and therefore did not create a radical national bourgeois ideology. The *maskilim*—the proponents of the Haskalah, as the Jewish variety of Enlightenment was called—did not reject traditional Judaism but

wanted merely to modify it by combining the tradition with bourgeois individualism. They did not favor the idea of historical development and change, let alone practical involvement in social progress, and valued formal and institutional stability in the spheres of culture and politics.

According to Litvakov, the ideology of assimilationism offered a more revolutionary solution to the Jewish problem than that of the moderate Haskalah in Western Europe, where the Jewish masses were absent. But the situation in Eastern Europe was different: whereas here the *maskilim*, as in the West, were still looking for a compromise between tradition and modernity, “the plebeian Jewish masses (*hamoyn*) reached a stage of their national-social development when they wanted to have a greater influence on the fate of Jewish culture, its character, its content and its forms.” The masses aspired to create a radically new, national, and secular culture that would eliminate the “gulf between the ‘Jew at home’ and the ‘Man in the street,’” the two concepts that the *maskilim* believed to be kept apart.¹⁰⁹

Wiener’s research of the Yiddish Haskalah literature modifies both Oyslender’s and Litvakov’s theories. Although agreeing with Oyslender’s emphasis on the role of folklore, Wiener at the same time seems to share Litvakov’s idea about the “retarded” development of Jewish culture due to the dominance of the religious tradition. Wiener’s major innovation is the introduction of the Haskalah period as a vital link between the pre-modern and modern period in Jewish cultural development. Whereas Oyslender simply ignored the Haskalah period and jumped from folklore to the classical triad of Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz, Litvakov dismissed the Haskalah as an inauthentic, Western influence. By bringing Aksenfeld and Etinger into the picture, Wiener establishes a continuity of Yiddish literary tradition, grounding it firmly in the socio-economic conditions of early nineteenth century Russia.

Wiener’s most original contribution to Jewish cultural studies is his concept of Yiddish literary language as a reflection of social and ideological contradictions of the time. His view of the evolution of language has some parallels with the ideas of Ernst Cassirer as outlined in the first volume of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923), which is devoted to the philosophy of language. Cassirer identifies three stages in the pro-

cess of the formation of language, which he calls mimetic, analogical, and symbolic expression:

The beginnings of phonetic language seem to be embedded in that sphere of mimetic representation and designation which lies at the base of sign language. Here the sound seeks to approach the sensory impression and reproduce its diversity as faithfully as possible. This striving plays an important role in the speech of both children and 'primitive' peoples. Here language clings to the concrete phenomenon and its sensory image, attempting as it were to exhaust it in sound; it does not content itself with general designation but accompanies every particular nuance of the phenomenon with a particular phonetic nuance, devised especially for this case.¹¹⁰

Rhythmic articulation is also produced at this first stage, "as particularly manifested in primitive work songs," which brings to mind Wiener's emphasis on the role of the working masses in the development of language.¹¹¹

At the next, analogical stage, the linguistic expression is separated from the immediate sensory experience that produced it:

There is no direct material similarity between the form and specificity of this relation and the sounds with which it is represented, since the mere material of sound as such is in general incapable of reflecting pure relational determinations. The context is rather communicated by a *formal* analogy between the phonetic sequence and the sequence of contents designated; this analogy makes possible a coordination of series entirely different in content.¹¹²

This movement toward clearer articulation and differentiation leads eventually to the highest, symbolic stage, where the word is completely separated from the initial sensual experience that generated a certain sequence of sounds. Now the "spirit" takes a "decisive step,"

from the concrete function of 'designation' to the universal and universally valid function of 'signification.' In this function language casts off, as it were, the sensuous covering in which it has hitherto appeared: mimetic or analogical expression gives way to purely symbolic expression which, precisely in and by virtue of its otherness, becomes the vehicle of a new and deeper spiritual content.¹¹³

As Cassirer explains,

The genesis of the articulated sound [...] presents us with a universal phenomenon which we encounter in different forms in the most divergent fields of cultural life. Through the particularity of the linguistic function, we perceive the universal symbolic function, as it unfolds in accordance with immanent laws, in art, in the mystical-religious consciousness, in language and in cognition.¹¹⁴

At this point, Wiener parts ways with Cassirer. While Cassirer seeks to bring together—in the formulation of Craig Brandist—a “rationalistic neo-Kantian account of knowledge” with a “Hegelian evolutionist and holistic approach,”¹¹⁵ Wiener, true to the Hegelian theory in its materialist Marxist variation, believes that the driving force behind all cultural and social development, including the evolution of symbolic forms, is the active social and cultural energy of the working masses. Those masses—the folk—act as the collective agent of progress in all areas, including language and culture.

Cassirer’s book on the philosophy of language, which Wiener probably had read before his emigration to the Soviet Union, had a strong impact on the so-called Bakhtin Circle, a group of young thinkers interested in the relations between culture and society. Wiener’s ideas about the ideological function of folklore elements in the creation of literary Yiddish have interesting parallels in Bakhtin’s study of Rabelais, particularly in its last chapter. During the Renaissance period in Europe, Bakhtin writes,

The primitive and naive coexistence of languages and dialects had come to an end; the new consciousness was born not in a perfected and fixed linguistic system but at the intersection of many languages and at the point of their most intense interorientation [*vzaimoorientatsiia*] and struggle. Languages are philosophies—not abstract but concrete, social philosophies, penetrated by a system of values inseparable from living practice and class struggle. This is why every object, every concept, every point of view, as well as every intonation found their place at this intersection of linguistic philosophies and was drawn into an intense ideological struggle.¹¹⁶

As we shall see in the next chapter, Wiener—similarly to Litvakov—believed that Jewish cultural development, particularly in Eastern Europe,

lagged behind other European peoples, and therefore the situation in Yiddish literature in the mid-nineteenth century could be usefully understood through the prism of European Renaissance and early modernity. In particular, this parallel is applicable to the relationship between the “high” literary Hebrew and the “low” vernacular Yiddish, which in Wiener’s interpretation looked similar to Bakhtin’s analysis of the relationships between medieval Latin and the Romance vernaculars:

The line of demarcation between two cultures—the official and the popular—was drawn along the line dividing Latin from the vernacular. The vernacular invaded all the spheres of ideology and expelled Latin. It brought new forms of thought (ambivalence) and new evaluations; this was the language of life, of material work and mores, of the “lowly,” mostly humorous genres [...], the free speech of the marketplace.¹¹⁷

In a way similar to Bakhtin’s study of Rabelais and the medieval folk culture, Wiener used the linguistic process of the selective appropriation of *shprakh-folklor*—the idiomatic elements of the language—by literature as a window into the social processes of transition between two stages of historical development. But contrary to Bakhtin, who celebrated the freedom and spontaneity of medieval folk culture, Wiener regarded Jewish folklore with some suspicion because it could be easily mobilized to the service of political and cultural nationalism, in its Yiddishist or Zionist variety. The Soviet Union, with its internationalist ideology based on Marxism in its practical Leninist implementation, was for him the only reliable safeguard to that resurgence of archaic mythological thinking in intellectual and political life. Rather than cherish Yiddish as a symbol of the mythological unity of the Jewish people, he believed that the task of Yiddish scholarship was to continue the work of the *maskilim* and critically revise its cultural legacy, adapting it to the conditions of the coming communist age.

But in his new theory of Yiddish language and literature, Wiener did not break with his past completely. One can hear a distinct echo of Buber’s ideas in Wiener’s interpretation of the Haskalah as a modern Jewish revolution. By creating modern Yiddish literature, the *maskilim* achieved a synthesis between the folk creativity of the Jewish masses and the European literary tradition, between East and West. The concept

of “working humanity” (*arbetndike menshhayt*),¹¹⁸ which in Wiener’s scheme is the agent of social and cultural progress, has its roots not only in the Marxist theory of class struggle, but also in the orientalist fantasies of cultural Zionists about the rejuvenation of the Jewish people through the return to their oriental roots. As the collective *Ostjude*, this eternal Yiddish-speaking *folk* represents the force of historical change, which was successfully mobilized by the *maskilim* in their modernizing project. The revival of Yiddish at the beginning of the nineteenth century in Eastern Europe saved the Jewish people from stagnation and brought them back onto the historical stage, where they now faced a new challenge, that of survival in the coming communist age.

Six Realism and the Yiddish Literary Canon

Moscow as a New Yiddish Center

Wiener's most ambitious intellectual project was a comprehensive Marxist history of Yiddish literature from the Haskalah to socialist realism. This project remained unfinished because of his untimely death, but the numerous published and unpublished materials enable us not only to see Wiener's general synthetic conceptual outline and his detailed analytical treatment of some major writers, but also to trace the evolution of his ideas over time. Wiener's works on the history of Yiddish literature in the nineteenth century form a cohesive conceptual unity that remains arguably the most detailed and theoretically coherent study of the subject to this day. Writing in a polemical and argumentative style characteristic of the Soviet criticism and scholarship of that period, Wiener regarded literature as one of the battlefields of the class struggle, where conflicting ideologies, reflecting the socio-economic interests of antagonistic classes, fought for dominance. Instead of celebrating the harmony, unity, and continuity of Yiddish literature, as was done by many leading critics and scholars outside the Soviet Union, such as Max Weinreich and Shmuel Niger, Wiener focused on the literary representations of socio-economic conflicts, tensions, and discontinuities within the East European Jewish community at the time of transition from feudalism to capitalism. The purpose of the present chapter is twofold. First and foremost, it attempts to present a concise summary of Wiener's view of the ideological evolution of Yiddish literary history. Second, it seeks to place Wiener in the context of the Soviet Marxist thought of the 1930s, and

in particular to position him vis-à-vis such leading theoreticians as Georg Lukács and Mikhail Bakhtin.

The final form of most of Wiener's works on nineteenth-century Yiddish literature is the two-volume edition *Tsu der geshikhte fun yidisher literatur in 19tn yorhundert*, edited by the prominent Yiddish critic Nakhmen Mayzil and published by the left-wing YIKUF press in New York in 1945 and 1946. This edition is in turn based on an earlier one-volume collection with the same title, published in Kiev in 1940. The New York edition added two works on Sholem Aleichem's humor, originally published in 1932 and 1941.¹

In the preface Wiener notes that "the works which appear in this book were written during the years 1927 to 1939. For the most part, they have been revised and corrected."² Despite numerous later revisions, the articles in the volume carry the dates of their first versions. A close comparison between the later and earlier version of the same text can reveal significant changes in Wiener's intellectual and ideological position. In the absence of other sources, such as letters or memoirs, these editorial changes remain the only evidence of the evolution of Wiener's views during the 1930s, when he, like his colleagues, had to conceal his opinions even from close friends for fear of potentially fatal consequences. As I intend to demonstrate, Wiener's outlook underwent a rather dramatic transformation between the early and the late 1930s, but this found its expression mostly in technicalities of literary analysis and shifts of emphasis.

The signs of this transformation appear in Wiener's scholarly writings around 1935 and can be detected from his style, tone, and method of argumentation. At this time Wiener also emerged as a leading critical authority in Yiddish literature on the newly introduced doctrine of socialist realism, a position which made him less vulnerable to ideological attacks like that of 1932. The earlier period of Wiener's scholarly work, during which he produced a series of articles on the literature of the Haskalah, a study of Sholem Aleichem's humor, and a monograph on Mendeleyev Sforim in the 1860s and 1870s,³ is characterized by aggressive polemical language, straightforward application of Marxist sociological schemes to literature, and direct attacks on foreign scholars. During the second half of the 1930s, his ideological position became more moderate and balanced, and his style more academic and detached

from ideological polemics. At the same time, as we shall see in the next chapter, Wiener's tone as a critic of contemporary literature was fully in agreement with the dominant Stalinist discourse of the late 1930s. Given the lack of evidence, one can only speculate about what Wiener "really" thought.

Having moved to Moscow soon after the campaign of criticism to which he was subjected in Kiev, Wiener found employment at the Department (*kafedra*) of Yiddish Language and Literature of the Moscow State Pedagogical Institute. Founded in 1926 as the Division of Yiddish Language and Literature of the Pedagogical Faculty (*otdelenie evreiskogo iazyka i literatury*) of the Second Moscow University (remarkably, it apparently had the same administrative rank as the Division of Russian Language and Literature) and transformed into two departments—of Yiddish language and literature—after the Pedagogical Faculty was reorganized into an independent Institute in 1930, these academic units were aimed at training teachers for Yiddish schools, primarily in the territory of the Russian Federation and later, also in Belorussia. Similar departments functioned at the universities and pedagogical institutes in Kiev, Minsk, and some provincial centers of Ukraine and Belorussia, and later in Birobidzhan as well. All but one of them were closed down in 1938 as part of a reform that abolished education in minority "diaspora" languages outside their "titular" territory within the Russian Federation, which in the Jewish case meant the Jewish Autonomous Region with its capital in Birobidzhan in the Far East.⁴ However, the situation changed dramatically from 1939 to 1940, when, as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop treaty, the Soviet Union acquired a large Yiddish-speaking population in eastern Poland, the Baltic republics, as well as Bessarabia and Bukovina. A significant number of Yiddish schools were opened in all these regions. Many Soviet Yiddish writers and cultural activists were sent to the new centers, such as Lviv, Bialystok, and Vilnius, to "Sovietize" Yiddish cultural and educational activity there.

By the time Wiener joined the Department of Yiddish Literature, it already had a well-established four-year program with about one hundred students, most of whom came from outside Moscow. The Yiddish-language faculty included such prominent scholars as the linguists Ayzek Zaretski and Eli Falkovich; the historians Tsvi Fridland,



Figure 6. Meir Wiener in Moscow, mid-1930s. Used with the permission of Julia Wiener.

Tevye Geilikman, and Moyshe Rafes; and the literary scholars Isaak Nusinov, Yekhezkl Dobrushin, Aron Gurshteyn, and Nokhem Oyslender, as well as Moyshe Litvakov. They taught a broad variety of courses, from ancient and medieval Jewish history and Hebrew language to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Yiddish literature, which covered not only the Soviet Union but also Poland and the United States.⁵ In the 1930s the Yiddish departments had their own library and a graduate program (*aspirantura*), which trained a new cadre of scholars and academics. As David Shneer sums up the task of the Soviet Yiddish academic institutions, “these scholars and the state functionaries supporting their scholarship needed to create institutions that would serve as the foundation of a particularly Jewish Soviet future and a particularly Soviet Jewish future.”⁶

Zalmen Libenzon, who was a student in the mid-1930s and later became a scholar of German, fondly remembers the warm and genial atmosphere in the Department of Yiddish Literature. Meir Wiener was among his teachers: “in his course on the history of Yiddish literature he opened up to us the names and works of the earlier period, before Mendele, which were completely new to us: Eichel, Wolfssohn, Perl, Aksenfeld, Etinger, and others.”⁷ Naturally, life was not without problems and tensions, both for students and faculty: thus, in the fall semester of 1928, students of the then Division of Yiddish Language and Literature complained about the poor quality of Hebrew instruction, and attendance dropped; they also put pressure on the faculty to change the focus from literary-philological to socio-economic disciplines.⁸ The two Departments were merged in 1937 into one Department of Yiddish Language and Literature, and Wiener was appointed its new head. The administration of the Institute complained that the graduates of the Department of Yiddish Language and Literature had a shaky knowledge of Russian.⁹ From their viewpoint, the teachers of the Department felt dissatisfied by the students’ knowledge of Yiddish, in particular of its traditional and religious vocabulary, but justified this by social changes in the Soviet society. This problem, they argued, “made difficult, and sometimes even impossible, a comprehensive understanding and appropriation of classical Yiddish literature (Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, Peretz), as well as of the works of prominent Soviet writers (Bergelson, Markish, and others).” To address this issue, it was

proposed that a required course on Hebraic and archaic elements in Yiddish, as well as a non-required course on the history of the Yiddish language should be introduced.¹⁰

The political atmosphere in the Department seems to have been relatively mild by the standards of the late 1930s. Two prominent and politically engaged teachers, Litvakov and Fridland, fell victim to state repressions, but this did not lead to any further repressions against the Department. Indeed, the only episode with political accusations that left an archival trail looks rather ridiculous today—although it must have been taken more seriously back then. During the discussion of Zaretski's Yiddish textbook for elementary schools at a faculty meeting in September 1937, the book was accused of “politically injurious errors.” In particular, Wiener criticized the textbook for its “inclination to injurious humor” but also for its “lack of fantasy and joylessness.”¹¹ Zaretski acknowledged his mistakes, but a few months later struck back, accusing the Department of “sabotage” that expressed itself in grade inflation. In the end, the issue seems to have been resolved amicably: Zaretski clarified that he was not making an accusation but merely voicing a “suspicion” of sabotage, “because students were promoted to the next year despite their unsatisfactory grades in such an important subject as their mother tongue.”¹²

Prior to the closing of the Department in 1938, its work was reviewed at a meeting at the director's office of the Institute. The faculty and staff of the Yiddish Department were accused of “isolationism.” In particular, Wiener and Dobrushin were reprimanded for submitting their “socialist obligations” in Yiddish with no Russian translation, while the historian Geilikman was criticized for teaching his course on dialectical materialism in Yiddish rather than Russian. A special commission that was established to inspect the Yiddish Department found the situation there “absolutely abnormal,” admitting also that it was unable to perform its work properly because all of the documentation of the Department was in Yiddish, which its members could not read (although apparently some of them knew Yiddish). Concluding its report, the commission declared the Department of Yiddish Language and Literature a “blind spot in our Institute.” Stating that “the Dean's Office has not a slightest idea about what is going on in the depths of this Department,” the com-

mission was especially worried by the fact that “a big unit such as the Department of Yiddish Language and Literature is headed by a person who has not completed his higher education, [...] comrade Wiener.”

In addition, the commission discovered that Wiener had been a member of Jewish social-democratic organizations and had belonged to “all kinds of Trotskyist groups, shared their views, although he later renounced them.”¹³ Professor Iurii Sokolov, the leading Russian authority on folklore of that period, pointed to the “gravest mistakes” in Wiener’s folklore studies of the early 1930s: “Wiener had an absolutely harmful view that folklore can only be ancient, that today it is outdated.”¹⁴ As a result, Jewish students had no interest in collecting and studying Jewish folklore. Sokolov exclaimed passionately: “I, a Russian man, have to convince and even plead with Jews to collect the most interesting Jewish folklore which characterizes our Soviet life!”¹⁵

Speaking in response, Wiener said that he never tried to hide his past, and all the incriminating facts had long been known to the administration. He blamed the administration for the lack of interest in the work of his department and explained that he never wanted to head the department because his main area of interest was literary work rather than pedagogy. He agreed to take this position only after persistent requests by Nusinov (the former head of the Department of Yiddish Literature) and other colleagues. Wiener and Geilikman defended the use of Yiddish as the language of instruction in the ideological courses because in their view it helped students to conceptualize a Marxist worldview in their native tongue. But the director of the Institute rejected all these arguments in his concluding speech. It remains not clear whether this meeting was meant to prepare the ground for the closing of the Department or it was merely a routine administrative tongue lashing.

Mendele and Sholem Aleichem in the Soviet Yiddish Canon

The study of the two *klasiker*—the founding fathers of Yiddish literature, Mendele Moykher-Sforim and Sholem Aleichem—forms the core of Wiener’s scholarship. It should be noted that although Wiener

clearly distinguishes the author Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh from his literary persona Mendele Moykher Sforim, he usually refers to him as Mendele, and my discussion of Wiener's scholarly work follows his usage. Conceptually Wiener's studies of Mendele are inseparable from his studies of folklore and the Haskalah, dealing with the same issues and applying the same methodology. To a large degree, Wiener's interpretation of Mendele and Sholem Aleichem was a response to the previous works of Oyslender and Litvakov.¹⁶ According to Oyslender's early view, a Yiddish author can acquire his genuine literary voice only by giving up his individual self and shaking off the intellectual baggage of the Judaic tradition. He must dissolve his personality into the masses and learn to speak their language, as the young Abramovitsh did when he joined a gang of Jewish vagabonds traveling from Belorussia to Volhynia. This experience had transformed the young yeshiva student into a seasoned folk character, Mendele the Book Peddler. Mendele has created a new Jewish realism based on the folk idiom of both Yiddish and Hebrew, though his Hebrew legacy has remained underdeveloped. Mendele's art is based on "the formula of the people's psyche, which has been worked out by the people itself," and this is the aesthetic and ideological foundation of Yiddish realism.¹⁷

Following the Russian radical critical tradition, which originates in the first half of the nineteenth century with Vissarion Belinsky, Oyslender draws a sharp line between realism as the only genuine form of collective folk expression and all other styles, which cannot transcend the limitations of individual expression. Mendele's discovery of the authentic collective voice not only shows a way into the future but also illuminates the past creativity of the Jewish people, demonstrating the folklore roots of Yiddish realism. Drawing his examples from the works of Mendele and Sholem Aleichem, Oyslender presents the folk artist as an instinctive rebel against the established order that always has set ethics above aesthetics and regarded any artistic expression with suspicion.¹⁸ Thus, any form of realist art that deals with living reality rather than abstract concepts is by default a subversion of the Judaic tradition.¹⁹

Contrary to the more common ordering, Oyslender places Sholem Aleichem above not only Mendele but also Peretz on the ladder of Yiddish literary evolution. Combining Mendele's panoramic view of the

Jewish community with Peretz's insights into individual psychology, Sholem Aleichem has created a comprehensive metaphor of Jewish existence in the symbolic shtetl image of Kasrilevke, which incorporates not just a comprehensive portrait of the Jewish space but also its inhabitants, such as Menakhem-Mendl and Tevye the dairyman—psychological types that occupy a central place in Jewish life. Sholem Aleichem is the first Yiddish artist to liberate himself from the pressure of the collective past by creating free individuals and declaring, in the voice of his character Motl, “I feel good—I am an orphan” (“Mir iz gut—ikh bin a yosem”), and thus marking a decisive transformation of “little Jews” (*yidelekh*) into “human beings” (*mentshn*).

By placing the fellow Kiev writer Sholem Aleichem on top of the classical triad, Oyslender creates a “usable past” for the Kiev group. According to Oyslender's concept, Sholem Aleichem's artistic worldview is based neither on the “scientific” knowledge of Jewish “nature,” like Mendele's, nor on the abstract notions of spirituality and will, like Peretz's. He constructs his characters out of their unmediated emotions, inner “demons,” passions that are not specifically Jewish but universal. By liberating his characters from their outer Jewish shell, Sholem Aleichem is able to portray their human nature. His early heroes are marginal members of Jewish society, the children of Jewish artistic bohemia, but his later creations are deeply psychological “synthetic” characters such as Menakhem Mendl and Tevye, whom Oyslender describes as the “first embodiment of Jewish energy in the present.”²⁰ With Tevye, Sholem Aleichem has shown a new direction for Yiddish realism, away from stereotypical “Jewishness” and toward subtle psychological typology.

Like Oyslender, Litvakov attributed the construction of what he metaphorically called the “Mount Sinai of Yiddish literature” to the collective effort of the three classical writers. Abramovitsh modernized the formal and aesthetic principles of Yiddish writing and emancipated it from the old tradition. His greatest artistic achievement was the synthetic figure of Mendele Moykher Sforim who mediated between the medieval tradition and modern Yiddish culture. Abramovitsh's personal ideological commitments and cultural orientation belonged to the old world of Hebrew-Yiddish religious symbiosis, but his works objectively expressed the ideology of the new Jewish national community (*klal*) on

the verge of breaking with the old religious “congregation (*kneses*) of Israel” and of the separation between Hebrew and Yiddish cultures. His works reflected the birth of the modern Jewish bourgeoisie in Russia and signaled the beginning of underground tectonic changes in Jewish mass consciousness.²¹ Concluding his analysis, Litvakov, with his characteristic conceptual twist, in one breath recognized Abramovitch’s historical significance and denied his value for future Yiddish literature: “Mendele is the ingenious embodiment of the ‘old style’ (*alter gang*) with its inner reverence for the old tradition—and therefore one of the aspects of the Mendele problem in our literature is to overcome him as soon as possible, in order to become free in our attitude to his great works.”²²

Litvakov described Sholem Aleichem as a unique product of Jewish national self-consciousness with no parallels in other cultures. Sholem Aleichem represented better than any other writer the casual, unassuming character of Yiddish literature, its aversion to the didactic and preaching. The Jewish masses regarded Sholem Aleichem as their own writer because he spoke as their equal. But the negative side of that simplicity was Sholem Aleichem’s inability to penetrate below the surface of everyday life. His characters did not fulfill their potential, and they remained merely anecdotal and “virtually ethnographic” types. Contrary to Oyslender, Litvakov interpreted the easiness of Sholem Aleichem’s style as an indication of the writer’s artistic primitivism, his closeness to the folkloric creativity of the masses. Litvakov placed Sholem Aleichem’s folksy style between Mendele’s old-fashioned sermonizing and the modern, educational tone of Peretz’s writing.

Litvakov’s overall assessment of Sholem Aleichem’s contribution to Yiddish literature was positive: by revealing “the elemental in the Jewish psyche,” Sholem Aleichem succeeded in transcending the social and historical boundaries of traditional religious culture.²³ But like Abramovitch, Sholem Aleichem also presented a problem for Litvakov when it came to the writer’s influence on the emerging Soviet literature. His artistic virtuosity and apparent ease of style could tempt young Yiddish writers to turn from serious proletarian writing to folkloric stylization and anecdote. “Perhaps the explanation of the paradox of Sholem Aleichem is that he is a great talent without a great idea?” (*a geonisher talant on a geonisher idey*) wondered Litvakov in conclusion.²⁴

Wiener's works on Mendele and Sholem Aleichem incorporated many ideas and insights by Litvakov and Oyslender and developed them in a more analytical and scholarly fashion. The first piece, a short essay titled "Di rol fun di folklor-elementn in Mendeles stil" ("The Role of Folklore Elements in Mendele's Style," 1927), appeared in print one year after Wiener's arrival in the Soviet Union, with a footnote stating that a fuller and more detailed version was to follow in the *Shriftn* (works) of the Department for Jewish Culture in Kiev (interestingly, the adjective "proletarian" was not yet part of the name of that institution).²⁵ In this essay, Wiener presented Mendele as the founder of Yiddish realism, a literary style that emerged from the need to expose the vices of Jewish society. Mendele aimed his criticism not only at people and institutions but also at the language itself. By mocking the *shprakh-folklor* of the vernacular, the writer uncovered the hypocrisy and insincerity of the Jewish way of life. Mendele appeared on the Yiddish literary scene at the moment when the old everyday language (*shteyger-shprakh*), being a product of the more "primitive" and "patriarchal" social conditions, could no longer adequately reflect the shifts occurring in the depths of society. The *shprakh-folklor* turned into a tool for concealing rather than revealing the true intentions of the speaker at every level of society. One talks too much and says too little (27).

Wiener described the first stage on the way from oral to literary language as "naive realism," which under the impact of political, economic, and cultural factors developed into a "naturalistic style." The use of idiomatic resources became more differentiated, as one can observe in the works of Yiddish *maskilim* from Isaac-Ber Levinson to Aksenfeld and Etinger, who used *shprakh-folklor* to express the negative, backward aspects of their characters (28). By introducing the literary persona of Mendele, Abramovitsh turned *shprakh-folklor* into his main instrument of satiric critique. We hear the voice of Abramovitsh himself (as opposed to the voice of Mendele) only on those rare occasions when the author wants to make a programmatic statement regarding positive characters or phenomena, such as children or nature. This voice is warm, sincere, direct and compassionate. Most of the time, however, we hear the voice of Abramovitsh's fictitious persona Mendele Moykher-Sforim, who mercilessly ridicules his characters, using the abundant resources

of *shprakh-folklor*. Only those who consciously took a stand against the outdated social order were spared Mendele's sarcasm (29).

Arguing against the mainstream tendency in the Yiddish criticism of his time to admire Mendele's idiomatic language for its expressive power and authenticity, Wiener argued that until Sholem Aleichem, *shprakh-folklor* was used in Yiddish literature primarily as an instrument of social criticism. Rather than reflecting the "healthy primitivism" and "fresh originality" of the folk worldview, those elements exposed the primitivism and stagnation of Jewish society: "they are not merely useless, they lead us astray into a meaningless speech mania" (31). *Shprakh-folklor* must be treated critically rather than apologetically, and any attempt to revive that legacy in post-classical Yiddish literature would be reactionary and anachronistic. Its elements must be used with great care and only after careful literary restyling (31–32).

In his short piece, Wiener formulated his key ideas and set up the direction of his future study of Yiddish literary history. He rejected the apologetic approach that prevailed in foreign Yiddish scholarship, but he also opposed the purely sociological interpretation. His focus on style and literary language enabled him to combine the Marxist concept of historical development with an insightful reading of literary texts. In the words of Dalia Kaufman, Wiener's study of Mendele's literary style "moved the Soviet Yiddish criticism of that time one step forward in the direction of Marxist critique," as well as prepared the ground for the future study of the use of folklore in literature.²⁶

Realism as Style and Realism as Worldview: The Case of Mendele

Wiener deals in more detail with the satiric aspects of Mendele's realist style in his two-part essay "Problemeyn fun Mendeles realizm" ("Problems of Mendele's Realism," 1928).²⁷ He asks three questions:

- How was it possible for Mendele to portray the society he detests so much with such great poetic force? Many *maskilim* refused to engage with the crude reality of Jewish social life, dismissing it as unworthy of any serious artistic, emotional, or intellectual attention (5, 119). But

Mendele, the most talented among them, applied the whole of his “artistic energy, human love and poetic sensitivity” to portraying a reality that he so deeply despised (5, 120).

- How can Mendele’s romantic and sentimental treatment of his characters be reconciled with his negative attitude to their way of life? In European literature, romanticism and sentimentalism are typically associated with a positive general attitude to the world in which those characters live and act; whereas in Mendele’s case, there seems to be a contradiction between his critical realist attitude to the reality of Jewish life and his sentimental sympathy for his characters, both exploiters and exploited.
- How can we explain Mendele’s penchant for adventurous, complicated plots with elements of mystery and fantasy, as well as entangled intrigue, and how do these romantic poetic devices fit his realist ideological agenda?

To answer these questions, Wiener turns to his interpretation of the Haskalah as the ideology of the Jewish bourgeoisie, which emerged as a social class out of the traditional Jewish community, with its weak sense of class differentiation. The Jewish bourgeoisie found itself in a peculiar position: whereas politically it was still dominated by the forces of feudalism, represented by the Russian imperial bureaucracy and the Polish landowning nobility, economically it became more independent and powerful, strengthening its control over the growing masses of the Jewish poor. This “dialectical moment,” as Wiener calls it, determined the contradictory ideology of the Russian-Polish Haskalah, which combined both the conservative and progressive ideas of its time (5, 122).

One group of *maskilim* sought freedom from the restrictions of feudal society so that it could secure its bourgeois status; the other group was more radical and sought to liberate the working masses from exploitation. With the latter group, the abstract “humanism” of the early Haskalah took the more concrete shape of “love of the masses,” along the lines of Russian *narodnichestvo* (populism). However, the difference between the conservative and progressive wings of the *maskilim* was less pronounced than among the Russian *narodniks*, reflecting the less differentiated character of Jewish society. Only after the pogroms

of 1881–82 did this difference become sharp, separating the conservative, proto-Zionist “nationalists” from the “progressive,” cosmopolitan socialists.

Comparing the situation of the Jewish and the Russian masses, Wiener notes that politically, Jews were more oppressed than Russian peasants. Granted, in the middle of the nineteenth century, even the poor Jewish masses were culturally and socially more advanced and closer to bourgeois status than Russian peasants, who had been liberated from serfdom only in 1861, but the economic decline of the shtetl reversed this development, causing the mass pauperization of the Jews (5, 125). The combination of these factors produced an ambivalent situation. Although social and political unity between different classes among the Jews was closer than in the larger Russian society, the economic gap between rich and poor Jews was growing wider.

This ambivalence found its reflection in the ideology of the *Has-kalah*, which celebrated the sentimental values of communal solidarity on the one hand, but condemned the increasing social and economic inequality within Jewish society on the other. In literary terms, this translates into a mixture of romantic-sentimental style, with its penchant for sensationalist intrigue and convoluted plot, and critical realism, with its emphasis on unambiguous clarity and didactic moralization. At the socio-linguistic level, the ambivalent attitude of the *maskilim* to the Jewish masses—sentimental and derisive—implies an ambivalent attitude to Yiddish, which is admired as the language of the folk, but despised as a low jargon compared to Hebrew (5, 126).

Until Mendeleyev, claims Wiener, the dominant genre in Yiddish literature was the pamphlet, which reflected a simplistic, one-dimensional understanding of the conflicts in Jewish society. Mendeleyev was the first to introduce an ambivalent attitude toward the masses into literature, resulting in a more sophisticated genre combining elements of critical realism and romantic sentimentalism. This mixed genre enabled Mendeleyev to portray artistically the tension between compassionate folkist feelings and critical maskilic reason, giving birth to a genuinely original literature in Yiddish (5, 128). Ideologically, the mixture of sentimental and satiric style reflected a belief in the possibility of a compromise between the oppressed and the oppressors, a reform of the

present order by exposing its injustice and appealing to the goodwill of readers (6, 123).

In European literature, sentimentalist novels have complex structures with elements of fantasy. In attempting to take a closer look at the lower classes, sentimentalist writers—who themselves usually came from the upper classes—chose themes and characters previously despised and deemed inappropriate for literature. In their efforts to challenge the aristocratic prejudice that the life of the lower classes was of no interest for cultivated readers, these writers often spiced up their narratives with various artificial effects to create an air of suspense, intrigue, and mystery, such as inserting a story within a story. In Wiener's scheme, these devices played a positive role at that early stage of the development of artistic realism, helping to represent new and unusual aspects of reality (6, 124–26). By highlighting the “weirdness” of his characters and their life circumstances, Mendele challenged the traditional perception of the Jewish situation in Russia as a “normal” state of *goles* (exile). Descriptions of nature served a similar purpose: by taking his stunted characters out of the dark and narrow confines of their shtetl habitat to the bright, open realm of nature, Mendele exposed the abnormal character of Jewish life. However, he remained uncertain about how to resolve this problem (6, 126).

Concluding his analysis on a sociological note, Wiener stated that the stylistic eclecticism of the Yiddish literature of the Haskala reflected the insufficient class differentiation of Jewish society. Ideologically, Yiddish sentimentalism combined elements of social criticism and special pleading: on the one hand, it introduced the lower classes into literature and highlights social problems; on the other hand, it romanticized the poor and obscured the true direction of social progress. It was precisely this stylistic ambivalence that made Mendele the “greatest social writer in Yiddish literature,” who was able to rise above “ethnographic specificity” to the “level of world literature” in his representation of the social conflicts of his time (6, 127–28).

In “Problemelen fun Mendeles realizm,” Wiener applied the same critical methodology as in his works on folklore, Aksenfeld, and Etinger, discussed in the previous chapter. While keeping his focus on the issues of literary style, form, and language, he treats them as

elements of the cultural “superstructure,” which was a product of the socio-economic conditions of the material “basis” of the society. By their nature, these conditions were contradictory because they were shaped by the predominant class conflict of the epoch, which informed the ambivalent character of literary representations of reality. Therefore, a Marxist analysis of a literary text must focus on the inherent tensions and contradictions in its content and form: the better the artistic quality of a work of literature, the deeper and more detailed is its representation of the social conflicts of its time.

Wiener’s Marxist methodology differs from mainstream Yiddish criticism on two important points. First, it does not treat Yiddish writers as collective voices of a monolithic oppressed community, but rather as chroniclers of the internal conflicts of society and critics of its negative aspects. Second, it regards Yiddish literature as part of world literature, focusing on what Yiddish literature has in common with other European literatures rather than on what makes it unique. Wiener’s studies of Mendele set up the theoretical agenda of Soviet Yiddish literary scholarship, placing a dual emphasis on the historical and transnational character of Yiddish literary development as part of a universal (in fact, European) “world literature.”

The Evolution of Wiener’s Thought: Two Versions of the Study of Mendele

Wiener’s works on Mendele, published throughout his Soviet career, not only offer illuminating analysis of Mendele’s development as a writer, but provide insights into Wiener’s own intellectual evolution during the 1930s. To bring these insights into the open, we briefly compare the two versions of Wiener’s major study of Mendele: the book *Etyudn vegn Mendelen in di zekhtsiker un zibetsiker yorn* (*Essays on Mendele in the 1860s and 1870s*), written in 1933 and published in Moscow two years later, and “Mendele in di zekhtsiker un zibetsiker yorn” (“Mendele in the 1860s and 1870s”), a long section in the 1940 collection *Tsu der geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur in nayntsntn yorhundert*, incidentally also signed “Moscow, 1933,” but differing substantially

from the earlier version. Apparently, soon after the first version came out, it was already perceived as outdated even among Wiener's students. Libenzon recalls:

We studied his book *Etyudn vegn Mendelen in di zekhtsiker un zibetsiker yorn* closely, although, as I recall, not everything in it satisfied us. The thing is, this book came out in 1935, when heated debates about the interpretation of the *klasiker* were going on in Soviet literary scholarship. There was already opposition to the sociological class principle, but Wiener had written his book earlier, and therefore it still followed the vulgar sociological orientation.²⁸

In contrast to the balanced tone of Wiener's 1928 essay on Mendele's realism, the 1935 book opens on a rather pugnacious note against the "bourgeois" and "nationalist" interpreters of Mendele's legacy in Poland and America. This harshness is substantially toned down in the 1940 version. Gone are epithets like "fascist" as a label for the "Yiddishist" scholarship of YIVO and "social-fascist" as a name for the editor of the New York daily *Forverts*, Abraham Cahan. Even more significant is the replacement of the adjective "proletarian" with "Soviet," signaling a profound ideological shift in Soviet discourse on culture.²⁹ The change of tone is also evident in the chapter titles: the first chapter in the 1935 book is titled "Our Attitude to the Literary Legacy of Mendele," whereas the corresponding chapter in the 1940 book bears the title "Mendele and Our Time," which suggests a more detached and less confrontational ideological position.

Although it is impossible to estimate the degree of editorial intervention in Wiener's original texts—often substantial in Soviet practice because the editor bore part of the responsibility for the political correctness of published materials—the very change of the editors' names of Wiener's two publications tells a tragic story. The 1935 book came under the editorial supervision of Litvakov, who treated the problem of the Jewish cultural legacy (*yerushe*) as an important weapon in the political and ideological struggle. Litvakov was purged in 1937, and the combative discourse of the early 1930s disappeared together with him and other militant ideologists of the proletarian revolution. By 1940, the attitude to the pre-revolutionary *yerushe* had become more detached from current politics and ideology. Now it came to be viewed

as part of a different age, which had a purely historical significance, and did not threaten the validity of the Soviet claim to be the most progressive society in the world. The new language reflected the more balanced, chronologically distant, and academically objective style of Aron Gurshteyn, the editor of the 1940 volume.

Wiener asserts that Mendele is the first great artist in Yiddish literature, arguing against the foreign critics of various ideological persuasions, such as Abraham Cahan, Hillel Zeitlin, and Yoel Entin, who appreciated Mendele's stylistic innovation and ethnographic precision, but did not think highly of the artistic value of his works. Wiener traces this negative attitude to Mendele's art back to the previous generation of Yiddish and Hebrew critics (David Frishman, A. Vayter, Y. Lerner, and Y. Levi, the latter, the editor of the St. Petersburg newspaper *Yidishes folksblat*). Despite the differences in their ideology and taste, all bourgeois critics disliked Mendele for his critical attitude to their class. In the earlier version, Wiener attributed this bourgeois "protest" against Mendele to the historical stage of "dying capitalism" (7), but in the corresponding passage in the later version (77), this reference is absent, indicating that the debate has been moved from the political to the academic sphere. Another notable change is a more moderate attitude to Hebrew, which replaces the sarcastic tone of the first version.³⁰

The bourgeois critics, Wiener continues in the later version, wrongly interpreted Mendele's social critique as an overall negative opinion of the *goles-lebn* of the Jewish people, and so these critics were insensitive to the stylistic nuances of his prose (78–79). More justified was the critique from the left, by such radical critics as Kovner and Linetsky, which was aimed at the conservative elements in Mendele's aesthetics and ideology (81). Applying Lenin's concept of the two trends in the European Enlightenment, a conservative and a revolutionary one, Wiener places Mendele in the former, despite some progressive elements in his worldview, because in general the Jewish Haskalah was ideologically far behind the Russian Enlightenment of that time. In the earlier version, Wiener elaborates on the ideological limitations of the Haskalah due to the specific conditions of Jewish society in Russia, whereas the later edition omits this discussion, keeping the focus on Mendele's writing.³¹

The central contradiction in Mendele's art is between his instinctive, subjective sympathy for the suffering and oppressed masses and his objective inability to understand their socio-economic roots. During the 1860s and 1870s, he was still unable to comprehend the connection between national oppression and capitalism, but when, in the 1880s, he finally came to realize the devastating social effects of capitalist development, he became skeptical about the capacity of Enlightenment to improve the social situation. Despairing of capitalist civilization, he lost his "grounding in reality" and fighting spirit and turned to the romantic idealization of the past (25; 88).³² In the first version, Wiener squarely puts Mendele into the category of "petite bourgeoisie liberals" and sees his evolution from critical realism to national romanticism as a natural consequence of his essential blindness to the revolutionary potential of the masses (28–29). In the later essay, Wiener is more positive, arguing that the rationalist message of Mendele's early work remains relevant even today for the non-Soviet parts of Eastern Europe (89–90).

Since the ideology of the Enlightenment focused on fighting against the vanishing feudal order, it was unable to see the emerging conflicts of advancing capitalism, meaning that the optimistic outlook of the Enlightenment stemmed from its limited historical horizon. This optimism informed the works of Mendele's early period, from 1864 to 1879. The ideology of "populism" (*folkizm*, *narodnichestvo*), which replaced the Haskalah, was aware of the problems of capitalism, but naively believed that the capitalist stage could be avoided altogether. Once confronted with the failure of this dream, however, populism turned pessimistic and produced escapist romantic fantasies about an idealized past. In the case of Mendele, his turn to populism in the 1880s brought about a change in his artistic worldview from sober realism to epic romantic sentimentalism (30–31; 91). Mendele's writing thus became frozen in time, replaying over and over again the historical moment of transition from feudalism to capitalism, but was no longer able to respond to the challenges of the present age: "In essence, Mendele's creativity after the 1880s is memoirist in its basic tone" (31; 92). In the 1940 version, Wiener moderates his early sociological determinism. In a few additional paragraphs he argues, in tune with the ideas that Georg Lukács and his school developed between 1934 and 1938, that the

power of Mendele's artistic imagination, driven by his love of the Jewish masses, often enabled him to overcome the limitations of his own petit-bourgeois class consciousness. His artistic imagination is more radical than his ideology in its social critique (93–94).

The bulk of Wiener's study is devoted to the analysis and division into periods of Mendele's Yiddish writings. Mendele's artistic and ideological development was, Wiener argues, far from straightforward, reflecting the inconsistency of the relationship between his art and ideology (37; 96). Even the first versions of his major works, published during the most radical period, 1864–69, had elements of the conservative ideology, making him more moderate than some other *maskilim* of that age. Similarly, during his later, more conservative period, he occasionally produced ideologically radical works, usually as revisions of his earlier books. Despite being a consistent champion of the poor and exploited masses of the shtetl, he was never able to overcome the limitations of that particular worldview and see the full scale of the problems of Russian society (38–39; 97). In the 1940 version, Wiener notes that the only way for Mendele to expand his cultural and social horizons was through acquiring a thorough grounding in Russian and European culture, which he did enthusiastically (98). This remark reflects not only Wiener's shift of perspective from the socio-economic toward literary analysis but also a new emphasis on the progressive influence of Russian culture on all of the minority cultures of the former Russian Empire, which became an important new element of the Soviet ideology of the late 1930s.

Wiener divides Mendele's literary career into three periods. In the early years, from the 1850s to 1864, he wrote in Hebrew as a typical maskilic *intelligent*, a critic of Hasidism, clericalism, and communal oligarchy, and a champion of education, in particular in the natural sciences. Mendele's worldview of that period was influenced by Russian radical positivists, such as the critic Dmitri Pisarev, and found its expression in his Hebrew articles and his adaptation of popular books on the natural sciences (40; 99). Mendele's worldview was altered, however, by the socio-economic crisis of the early 1860s, the liberation of the serfs (1861), and the second Polish uprising (1863–64). His social position became more engaged: he founded a society for the aid of the

poor that brought him into direct conflict with the wealthy leadership of the Berdichev Jewish community. To reach out to the broader mass audience, he turned to writing in Yiddish (42–43; 100).

Mendele's first Yiddish work, the novella *Dos kleyne mentshele* (*A Little Man*), belonged to the tradition (specifically Russian, as Wiener specifies in the second version) of the social critical literature of that time (43; 103). It was a "natural history" of a Jewish nouveau riche, who built up his wealth and power by skillfully exploiting his connections with the feudal landowning class. Mendele still naively believed that the roots of social evil were in bad education rather than unjust socio-economic conditions. But the masterful artistic portrayal of the main character and the depiction of social reality contradict this narrow view, showing that this immoral and corrupt character is a product not so much of bad education but of a society in collapse (44–45; 104–5). Mendele's penchant for sentimental moralizing is already evident in this work, written as it is in the traditional genre of moral testament.

The second period of Mendele's literary development coincided with the dramatic socio-economic transformation of the southwestern region of the Russian Empire during the 1860s and 1870s, resulting from the decline of the old Polish landowning nobility and the rise of capitalism. This process impoverished the lower classes in the *shtetlekh*, the artisans and small traders, who had earned their livelihood from the feudal economy. This became the main theme of Mendele's works during that time, making him a direct predecessor of Sholem Aleichem in portraying the new type of déclassé Jew as a victim of capitalist development. However, Mendele was too frightened by the inhumanity of capitalist reality and retreated from that reality to nostalgic fantasies about the primitive shtetl idyll "à la Rousseau."³³

Unlike his maskilic predecessors, Mendele protested not merely against the abuse of power by the communal oligarchy and not merely against the institution of the *kahal* per se (abolished by the Russian government in 1844 but retaining informal power long after that), but against the very notion of the rich dominating the poor (51; 111). Although the ideal of the generation of the liberal, Russian-educated, Jewish intelligentsia that in the 1870s came to replace the *maskilim* was what the contemporary historian Benjamin Nathans

describes as the “selective integration” of the Jewish middle classes and artisans into Russian society—that is, offering them broader political, social, and economic rights while keeping the poor under stricter regulations—Mendele, according to Wiener, firmly took the side of the masses (119). But his critique became far less radical when it came to the “external” oppression and discriminatory politics of the Russian government, turning into a traditional Jewish rhetoric of pleas and supplications (52–53; 112–13).³⁴

Applying to the Haskala the Leninist principle of dividing every movement into two trends, the more conservative, or “bourgeois liberal,” and the more radical, or “revolutionary democratic,” Wiener places Mendele somewhere in between. What made Mendele “bourgeois liberal,” as opposed to the “democratic” *maskilim* such as the radical Hebrew critic Kovner, was his sympathy for religion and his belief in the redeeming power of education, both of these characteristic of the old generation of the shtetl *maskilim*. Kovner, who grew up in Vilna and later lived in Odessa, represented the newer class of the Jewish urban petite bourgeoisie with its broader social horizons, whereas Mendele remained shackled by the shtetl mentality (65; 120). In 1869 Kovner argued, in his review of the Russian translation of Mendele’s Hebrew novel *Fathers and Sons*, that the root of Jewish poverty was to be found neither in mistaken concepts of religion nor in deficient systems of education, but in external socio-economic conditions (67; 122).³⁵ As a rule (with the prominent exception of *Di klyatshe* [*The Mare*], 1873), Wiener claims that Mendele’s social concerns were restricted to Jewish society (68; 123). In the earlier version—but not in the later—Wiener also remarks that Kovner was less interested in the specifically Jewish aspects of discrimination, arguing for the liberation of all oppressed masses, including the peasants, whereas Mendele’s interests were exclusively Jewish (77, cf. 131).

Wiener seems more sympathetic to Kovner’s radical social critique in the earlier book, whereas in the later one he defends Mendele’s position as more sophisticated in its recognition of both the social and aesthetic function of realist literature. Although Mendele’s ideological horizon remained within the worldview of the shtetl petite bourgeoisie, his cultural sensitivity was deepened by the attentive reading of Russian and

European literature. Thus, Wiener concludes, Mendele's literary talent and his love for the Jewish masses enabled him to overcome the ideological limitation of his own class (77–80 vs. 133–35).

Wiener details a threefold ideological program that informed Mendele's writing by the end of the 1860s: the "emancipation" of the masses, using "national self-criticism" as a method; "apology" for the masses through emphasizing their humanity; and the uncovering of the dire economic situation of the Jewish poor (92; 139). This program is realized in the first version of *Fishke der krumer* (*Fishke the Lame*, 1869), leading to the second decade of Mendele's second period. Wiener describes the style of *Fishke* as "baroque and also very realistic," explaining in an interesting footnote that it is "nonsense to regard baroque as mere decay and to ignore the rich, overwhelming power of the folk masses which is manifested here" (93; 140). This positive assessment of baroque might appear unusual for a Marxist critic so keen on social realism, but it reflects Wiener's long-standing interest in the seventeenth century, which finds its expression in his historical fiction.

Wiener's evaluation of the allegorical novel *Di klyatshe* offers another illustration of his intellectual evolution. In the earlier version, Wiener characterizes the novel as purely nationalist and petit-bourgeois in its ideology, whereas in the later edition he stresses the critical potential of its peculiar mixture of realism and fantasy (95; 141): "*Di klyatshe* is a work that battles fiercely for the civil rights of the Jewish folk masses, essentially a thoroughly democratic work," albeit, Wiener admits, with some nationalist overtones (142). *Di klyatshe* was the first work in which Mendele touched upon the "external" aspects of the oppression of the Jews, and the Tsarist censors reacted by prohibiting the publication of its Russian translation (141–42). In the earlier edition, Wiener warned his readers not to exaggerate the significance of that prohibition (95).

In the mid-1870s, Mendele published a few poetic works ("Dos yidl," "Zmires," "Perek shirah"), which, in Wiener's opinion, represent the reactionary, "apologetic" aspect of his worldview and are, therefore, an "artistically useless" attempt to create a nationalist apology for the Jewish people. Although both versions of Wiener's analysis agree in the essentially negative assessment of those works, the earlier version regards them as a natural product of Mendele's ideological degradation, whereas

the latter treats them as a temporary deviation from the generally progressive line of Mendele's artistic development (96; 142). Mendele "recovered" from this ("profound" in the 1935 edition) "ideological and artistic degradation (*gefalnkayt*)" in the late 1870s when he published *Masoes Binyomin hashlishi* (*Travels of Benjamin the Third*, 1878) and the new, revised, and expanded edition of *Dos kleyne mentshele* (1879). Although these works still remained within the limits of the "national novel," the author's stand was more progressive and his views more clearly defined than in his previous realistic works of the late 1860s. Mendele, in other words, was turning from the "national apologetic" approach back to "national self-criticism" (97; 142–43).

The criticism of the "internal" Jewish regime in *Masoes Binyomin hashlishi* makes this novel objectively progressive, regardless of its author's subjective intentions. This novel remains the most trenchant satire of the traditional order of the shtetl, the most concentrated expression of the progressive elements in his worldview, as well as his most accomplished work, summing up Mendele's own personal experience with the oligarchy (100; 144). This novel was not particularly popular with a mass readership and the nationalist critics of the 1880s because its true progressive message could become entirely clear only after the October Revolution, "thanks to the ideological influence of the proletariat," as was demonstrated by its stage adaptation by the Moscow Yiddish Theater (103; 147).

Being Mendele's most accomplished work both artistically and ideologically, *Masoes Binyomin hashlishi* did not undergo any subsequent revision and editing, as was the case with all his other works. The literary prototype of Binyomin, whom Mendele used as an artistic vehicle for his social satire of the shtetl, was the classical figure of Don Quixote. This parallel with medieval Spain stresses the backward state of East European Jewry, which was just emerging from feudalism, in particular the Volhynian Jews, "the most underdeveloped group of European Jewry," who had made little progress since the seventeenth century (104–5; 148). The utopian dreamer Binyomin prefigured the coming proto-Zionist ideology of the Hibbat Zion movement, which Wiener describes as "old slave illusions that are actively reshaped according to the new capitalist style and, in the most recent period, imperialistically

colored" (103; 147). The popularity of these utopian fantasies among Russian Jews was due to the abstract nature of Jewish learning, which was out of touch with its surroundings (105; 149).³⁶

Thus, the decade of the 1870s began with the innovative *Di klyatshe*, followed by a brief conservative interlude, and concluded with two masterpieces, *Masoes Binyomin hashlishi* and the second revised and extended version of *Dos kleyne mentshele*. These prose works framed the brief period of a temporary "decline," which expressed itself in the apologetic nationalist poetic works (106; 155). In Wiener's scheme, the end of this decade marked the conclusion of the original (*eygnartik*) and creative period in Mendele's career. His subsequent works showed few innovations either in style or content. He kept revising, polishing, and elaborating on old material, adding nothing substantially new (108; 156).

After the pogroms of 1881–82, Mendele became disappointed, disoriented, and depressed, seeing no way out of the predicament created by the combination of capitalist development with the increasingly reactionary politics of the Russian autocracy. Like many other democratic *maskilim*, Mendele responded to the situation by turning to nationalism and writing in Hebrew again. Although he remained critical of some social aspects of Jewish life and was still popular with the mass readership, the predominantly satiric tone of his earlier works gave way to "idyllic-lyrical epic," which better suited the memoirist character of his later writings as he reckoned up his life experience (109–12; 157–60).

Style and Ideology in Mendele's Works

Wiener's concept of literary style is inseparable from the broader socio-historical issues. As is usual for his work of the early 1930s, Wiener opens his discussion of Mendele's style by arguing against those Yiddishist critics who praised Mendele for the purity of his Yiddish language for its own sake (*lishma*), regardless of content. Wiener traces this view back to a 1910 article by Y. L. Peretz written for Mendele's seventy-fifth birthday. Despite some insightful observations on Mendele's craft of writing, Peretz formulated here the erroneous notion of Mendele the creator of "individual Yiddish style." Peretz's idea had

been taken up by Yiddishist critics, who had developed the notion that “stylization” in Mendele’s work is his way of “Judaizing” reality (129; 169–70). They praised Mendele for “purifying” his Yiddish from Slavic and Germanic elements, disregarding the fact that he often overloaded his language with Hebraisms, making it less accessible to a broad readership (126–27; 168–69). In the earlier (but not in the later) version of his study, Wiener contends that Mendele’s attitude to Yiddish was less progressive than that of Etinger and Aksenfeld because he regarded Yiddish merely as a temporary “lobby” leading to the “eternal” space of Hebrew (127).

The task of Soviet scholarship, Wiener asserts, is to explore the relationship between the style and the content of Mendele’s works (119–20; 163–64). With all his love for the Yiddish language, Mendele always regarded it as a tool for expressing and disseminating ideas rather than an end in itself. His Jewish “stylization,” first of all, was often simply a parodic device, and second, was more characteristic of his final, least creative period (130; 170–71). There is a marked contrast between the Judaized stylization of the later Mendele and the European style of the early Peretz, who drew upon Etinger’s rather than Mendele’s stylistic tradition. Sholem Aleichem used this kind of stylization sparingly and only for parody. Instead, he appropriated the achievements of Mendele’s “great style,” which “disciplined und cultivated the language of the folk masses.” Indeed, Wiener concludes, Mendele’s stylized Yiddish *nusekh* was scarcely taken up in Yiddish culture outside the Yiddishist circles of Weinreich and others and the Hebrew writers such as Bialik (131; 171).

Mendele’s stylistic achievement is not the stylized *nusekh*, but “raising the vast new linguistic layers of the speech of the folk masses” to the level of literary language. It was the “healthy . . . plebeian richness” of his language that made a great impact on Yiddish literature, including Peretz and Sholem Aleichem. He was the first Yiddish author to treat language artistically, albeit not for purely aesthetic purposes but as a practical vehicle for expressing his ideas. In the 1940 version, Wiener summarizes his understanding of Mendele’s stylistic achievement as follows: “his language is shaped, down to its finest nuances, by his attitude to social life” (173).³⁷ In the earlier version, Wiener treats Mendele’s style as a product of the writer’s “conscious” attitude to social reality, but

this class-deterministic view is absent from the second version. Instead, Mendele emerges as the voice of a general “folk consciousness” rather than any particular socio-economic group. Concluding this section in the second edition with an appraisal of Mendele’s importance for today, Wiener speaks of Mendele’s “great love of the people” (“zayn groyse libe tsum folk”) along with his “realist critical tendencies” (137; 175). This language would have been inappropriate in the Soviet discourse of the early 1930s.

Wiener links Mendele’s ideological vacillation between apologetic representation aimed at the “external” reader and “internal” criticism to the stylistic dichotomy between romanticism (which Wiener interprets as related to sentimentalism) and realism. The apologetic agenda with its sentimental-romantic style began to prevail in Mendele’s writing after the pogroms of 1881–82, reflecting his disappointment in capitalist “civilization.” But elements of apologetic ideology and sentimental style can already be detected in Mendele’s earlier writing, where they expressed the optimistic humanist attitude of the downtrodden masses, as opposed to the pessimistic resignation of Mendele’s later period (141–45; 176–79).

Wiener identifies what he takes to be the characteristic elements of these two stylistic “forms” in Mendele’s writing: parody and satire, realistic and straightforward plot structure, idiomatic language, and naturalistic details and didacticism are associated with “realist sobriety”; whereas poetic allegory, epic “objectivity,” poetic idealization, “Jewish” stylization, heartbreaking conflicts and convoluted plots with “intrigue” belong to “romantic sentimentalism” (146; 180). Both “forms” are closely intertwined in Mendele’s writing, and the elements of each of them can be found in all of his works. The clash between these “forms” produces grotesquerie, which Wiener understands in a “Gothic” sense, as an “original and contradictory way of throwing, through wild exaggeration, the light of poetry onto the dark reality of the Middle Ages” (148–49n; 181). The grotesque plays a crucial role in Mendele’s most accomplished works, serving as a stylistic device for the expression of social criticism (148; 182).

Analyzing in great detail various stylistic devices such as satire, humor (only in the later version), and parody; idiomatic, folkloric,

and “bookish” language; didacticism; and the imagery of nature and of everyday life, Wiener highlights Mendelev’s artistic achievements in comparison to his maskilic predecessors and contemporaries. Mendelev expressed his social criticism through the virtuosic use of his linguistic repertoire, exposing the particular Jewish way of speech, which sought to conceal rather than reveal, as a product of the warped mentality of Jewish society, which suffered externally from oppression and internally from depression (154; 188). Amplified to grotesqueness and overloaded with the folklore idiom, this mimetic style became the mark of Mendelev’s realism (157; 190). Wiener’s emphasis on the specific role of such parodic devices as mocking and aping (*nokhshtpetn*, *nokhkrimen*: 158; 191) closely resembles Bakhtin’s notion that the “mockery” (*osmeianie*) of different sociolects is a stylistic instrument of ideological struggle.

In two paragraphs that he chose to omit in the later edition, Wiener reflects on the role of the “Mendelev character” in Abramovitsh’s fiction. To achieve a satiric effect, Abramovitsh created the synthetic character of Mendelev, the fictitious narrator who was a parody of the old kind of Yiddish writer. Abramovitsh required this device to speak about the fictitious world of Glupsk in an authentic Glupsk voice. By letting Mendelev ramble, Abramovitsh exposed the emptiness of the Glupsk “philosophy” without implicating himself as the narrator: “The responsibility for the *manner of speech* is shifted from Abramovitsh to the fictitious Reb Mendelev” (“dos akh Hayes farn *reyd-shteyger* geyt ariber fun Abramovitshn afn fiktivn reb Mendelev” 159). Wiener later played down the separation between Abramovitsh and Mendelev, possibly as part of his revision of his overall interpretation of Mendelev’s work as having a “neo-folkist” (as opposed to a “neo-maskilic”) direction, which also implied a closer identification between Abramovitsh and Mendelev, the latter now conceived as Abramovitsh’s “alter ego” rather than a caricature of an old-fashioned Yiddish intellectual.

Another interesting distinction between the two versions of Wiener’s study has to do with Jewish bilingualism. In the earlier version, Wiener describes Yiddish as “in bondage” to Hebrew, claiming that from the seventeenth to the late nineteenth century, Hebrew elements—either direct borrowings or translated “archaic forms”—“raved untamed” (*vild gebushevet*) in Yiddish. This was not what could be called “normal bor-

rowings from one language to the other,” but “deliberate macaronisms,” products of the “distorted social situation.”

Wiener presents Mendele as a critic of this abnormality, especially during his earlier period, when he exposed and ridiculed it via his pointedly parodic use of bookish and Hebraic elements in his writing. But Mendele’s critical attitude to Hebrew gradually mellowed and turned into celebration, although even after 1880, it retained some degree of irony (160). Another object of Mendele’s parody was the traditional didactic literature in archaic Germanized Yiddish, which he ridiculed by using the expressive potential of the spoken Yiddish vernacular. But this satiric effect disappeared when Mendele translated his Yiddish works into Hebrew. Mendele’s “hatred of the old order” did not pass unnoticed by the nationalist critics, such as David Frishman, Hillel Zeitlin, and Abraham Cahan, some of whom accused him of anti-Semitism and argued against his works being translated into other languages (161). In the later version, Wiener’s tone is more moderate and cautious; while acknowledging elements of parody and satire in the way Mendele uses Hebraisms in his Yiddish, he does not mention any negative effects of Hebrew influence on Yiddish (191–94).

In the earlier (but not in the later) version, Wiener argues that Mendele treats all of the folkloric elements in Yiddish critically, mocking them in order to “eliminate linguistic folklore (*shprakh-folklorishkayt*) from actual speech.” Wiener sees an indication that this attack was successful in the fact that today much of Mendele’s idiomatic language is no longer intelligible to a modern Yiddish speaker. Those folkloric components “have been dead for many decades, especially among the toiling masses, despite the attempts at revival by the Weinreichs and other Yiddishists” (162). Thus, Wiener concludes, Mendele created no viable stylistic tradition in Yiddish literature and left no heirs to carry on his mocking and satiric use of linguistic folklore (apart from Sholem Aleichem). Wiener’s goal is to refute the Yiddishist attempts to present Mendele’s satiric style as an expression of “national originality” (*natsionale eygnartikayt*) (163). At the same time, he acknowledges some positive influence on Mendele of the language of the “plebeian masses,” which infused his style with intimate lyricism and a profound sympathy for the poor. These linguistic features expressed progressive elements in his worldview,³⁸ but in the

later writings these progressive elements gave way to stylization, which reflected the loss of social orientation and a turn to sentimental admiration of the old world (166; 196).

Wiener describes Mendele's style as "essentially realist" with an admixture of romantic and allegoric elements (168; 198). In the earlier version, Wiener regards those elements as alien to realism, while in the later he interprets them more positively as part of the symbolist form, which achieved its synthetic completion in images and characters in the realist style. Whereas realism enabled Mendele to critically portray internal Jewish social reality, the romantic and sentimental allegory, in particular in its depictions of nature, imposed limits on the critical scope of Mendele's worldview: "he can carry off his critique of the 'internal' conditions in a realist style, but when it comes to the *political* situation of the Jewish people, he has to conceal his helplessness—in allegoric representation" (171–72; 200). The multiplicity of symbolic meanings in Mendele's allegorization of reality is a sign of his inability to produce a clear synthetic interpretation, an inability that results from the ambivalence and limitations of his worldview.

Like other petit-bourgeois writers, Mendele often tended to compensate for the lack of critical depth by complicated composition—breaking the plot into fragments and adding elements of adventure and suspense (179–80; 205–7). This complexity demonstrates not his artistic "brilliance" but rather his limitations as a writer, his inability to deal with his subject matter clearly and directly (172–73; 201–2). Only in some cases do the elements of romantic style, such as hyperbole and grotesquerie, help to sharpen the critical message of realist depiction, in particular by stressing the dark sides of the life of the poor. During the later period, clear-eyed realism gives way to a slowly flowing epic "objectivity," sympathetic to, rather than critical of, the traditional forms of Jewish life (175; 203). This becomes particularly evident in the later version of *Dos vintshfingerl* (*The Magic Ring*, 1888–89) and his memoirs, *Shloyme reb Khayims* (1900–11) (175–77; 204–5).

Wiener argues, by drawing parallels between Mendele and Cervantes, that similar socio-economic conditions—specifically, late medieval Spain and Russia at the time of transition from feudalism to capitalism—produced similar artistic forms. Like Cervantes, Mendele created a mock

epic that exposed and ridiculed the backwardness of the fading socio-economic order by poking fun at its outdated literary conventions. At the same time, the portrayal of the idealistic hero of the old age, whether Don Quixote or Binyomin, had elements of romantic nostalgia, opening the way for an apologetic interpretation of this image as a personification of the “tragic history” of the Spanish, or the Jewish, people—in the first edition, Wiener cites Miguel de Unamuno as an example (186; Unamuno disappears, however, from the second edition, 212).

In *Dos kleyne mentshele*, on the other hand, Mendele utilized the genre of the picaresque novel for the ideological purposes of the Enlightenment. Wiener traces the roots of this genre to ancient Greek and Latin literature through medieval romance literature to Dickens and to the popular Russian novels of the mid-nineteenth century. Wiener disputes the view common in Yiddish criticism that Mendele’s works are compositionally inconsistent and fragmented. Regarding all stylistic and formal elements of a literary text as a reflection of the particular socio-economic situation shaped by the author’s class consciousness, Wiener asserts that the degree of clarity and unity of composition of a particular work of literature is correlated with its progressive ideological character. Thus, *Dos kleyne mentshele*, *Fishke der krumer*, and *Masoes Binyomin hashlishi* are more coherent in their composition than *Dos vintshfingerl* and *Di klyatshe*.³⁹

In conclusion, Wiener reiterates the fundamental theoretical principle of his approach to literature: all stylistic elements have artistic significance only in relation to their socio-critical function; once they begin to serve as a nostalgic apology for the past, their aesthetic value diminishes. In the case of Mendele, the application of this principle leads to an apparent conflict between intention and result: Mendele is at his most “serious” when he speaks in a satiric and parodic tone; but he loses his artistic and social earnestness when he tries to be “serious.” He is good with stylization, satire, and parody, as long as those devices serve the purpose of social critique; but when he tries to serve the “national” purpose, his style turns “ornamental,” imitative, bombastic, and verbose. Similarly, the ethnographic elements of Mendele’s work are valuable only when they are directed against the backward “ethnography” of Jewish life, not when he tries to preserve them for future generations.

Mendele's works can teach us to recognize the remnants of the past in our present; they help to "enrich our arsenal for the fight against stubborn and poisonous remnants and ghosts of the past"—on this forceful note, Wiener concludes his book (198–99; 220–21).

By juxtaposing the positive critical and negative apologetic elements in Mendele's works, Wiener follows the rhetorical pattern used by Lenin in his article "Lev Tolstoy as the Mirror of the Russian Revolution" (1908), the official model of socialist realist literary criticism. Lenin delivers the following judgment: "Tolstoy is absurd as a prophet who has discovered new nostrums for the salvation of mankind [...] Tolstoy is great as the spokesman of the ideas and sentiments that emerged among the millions of Russian peasants at the time the bourgeois revolution was approaching in Russia."⁴⁰ In other words, the classical cultural legacy is useful inasmuch as it reveals the social reality of its time, but when it comes to the expression of a writer's own views, it inevitably becomes reactionary and "absurd." This distinction is very clear in the first version of Wiener's study of Mendele, but in the second version it becomes blurred. Now Mendele is not only a trenchant critic of the backward socio-economic conditions of Jewish life, but also a spokesman for the entire Jewish "people," a socially undifferentiated mass of the poor.

Sholem Aleichem and the Social Function of Humor

Analyzing the differences between the two versions of Wiener's study of Mendele, Dalia Kaufman notes that by adding a chapter on humor in the later version, Wiener signaled a shift in the ideological attitude: "in Soviet criticism, especially during the 'proletarian' period, humor was regarded as a low, and even 'reactionary' literary style."⁴¹ The re-evaluation of humor becomes even more pronounced if one compares the two versions of Wiener's study of Sholem Aleichem's humor: "Di sotsiale vortslen fun Sholem Aleykhems humor" ("The Social Roots of Sholem Aleichem's Humor"), published as an introduction to the 1931 edition of *Motl Peysi dem khazns* (*Motl the Son of Peysi the Cantor*), and the book *Vegn Sholem Aleykhems humor* (*On Sholem Aleichem's Humor*,

1941). In the opening paragraphs of the later work, Wiener reflects on the change in his approach to Sholem Aleichem, which is indicative of the overall revision of his perspective on literary history: “it is only natural that in our socialist country the full historical significance of Sholem Aleichem’s works reveals itself more and more clearly and clearly. The time has come to revise one’s earlier opinions, to study the writer’s works once more, to understand them more deeply.”⁴²

The starting point of the first essay is the question why none of Sholem Aleichem’s works contain social critique of his own milieu of the Kiev bourgeoisie. Wiener explains that from the outset of his writing career in the 1880s, when “the economic situation in this city [Kiev] awoke and developed in Sholem Aleichem his class[-determined] creative abilities,” the writer always remained loyal to his class, the petit bourgeoisie (245). In the first half of the 1890s, he experienced an ideological transformation as a result of the objective process of the social stratification of the Jewish petit bourgeoisie under the impact of capitalist development in Russia (238–39). The social criticism of Sholem Aleichem’s early works, such as his first novel *Sender Blank and his Family*, was a vestige of the radical maskilic criticism of the nouveau riche, which never meant the class of the bourgeoisie as a whole.

Later this moderately critical attitude turned into compassion and consolation, which were to become the main social functions of Sholem Aleichem’s works from 1892 onward. The writer could no longer ridicule the desire to become a “Brotsky”—the name of the Kiev sugar magnate, which came to signify wealth—because this would go against his own class interests. Menakhem-Mendl became the epitome of the economically unstable situation of the “bourse rabbit” chasing after illusory success. The petit bourgeois quest for happiness resulted in extraordinary mobility: in Sholem Aleichem’s world, emigration to America represented the ultimate dream of petit-bourgeois fantasy. By contrast, Peretz envisioned the same impoverished East European Jewish masses as a static body firmly attached to its old place. This difference in the social orientation of two Yiddish contemporaries helps us understand why the neoromantic Peretz created a melancholic portrait of the Jewish past, whereas the humorist Sholem Aleichem entertained an unstable illusion of a happy future in America (274).

The harsh reality of capitalist development in Russia, as well as in the countries to which Russian Jews emigrated, narrowed the economic opportunities for the “Menakhem-Mendl stratum” of the Jewish petit bourgeoisie, and fostered its social stratification. A small minority succeeded in securing the coveted bourgeois status, while the fate of the remaining majority was impoverishment and proletarianization. The loss of their nominal bourgeois social status by Jewish immigrants to America created a feeling of lyrical nostalgia for the old country. This nostalgia was typical of the petit-bourgeois psychology of the capitalist period and found its artistic expression in *Motl Peysei dem khazns* and in the autobiography *Funem yarid* (*From the Fair*, 1914–16) on which Sholem Aleichem worked in America simultaneously with the second part of *Motl*. *Motl Peysei dem khazns* is the unfinished story of the transformation of a child version of Menakhem-Mendl into an American *allrightnik*.

In America the writer found a vantage point from which he could clearly observe the situation of the Jewish petit bourgeoisie as a whole. There were few other writers so sensitive to the slightest shifts in their social basis and its demands, and so careful in reproducing the nuances of the petit-bourgeois Yiddish speech pattern in response to the needs of the audience. In his works, Sholem Aleichem carefully avoided expressing his ideology directly, which was an eclectic combination of contradictory ideas, and skillfully concealed it underneath the comic surface. Thus, he fostered an illusion that the author’s true convictions remained beyond the limited comprehension of his characters. The skillful use of the artistic device of ideological estrangement of the author from his characters, combined with irony and humor, allowed Sholem Aleichem to conceal his “secret”—his deep dissatisfaction with reality. The accurate reflection of the feelings of the broad immigrant masses in America in *Motl Peysei dem khazns* is the culmination of Sholem Aleichem’s art, but also a vivid demonstration of his weaknesses as the spokesman for his class in literature.

In the end, class limitations prevented Sholem Aleichem from creating “an organically united, dynamically developed, broad picture of the processes which the class he depicts is undergoing” (254). Sholem Aleichem was not a social critic, and the aim of his humor was not to

attack but to protect. He kept destroying the illusions of his characters only to let them build up new ones. His humor expressed itself in words, not in actions or situations. His weakness as a realist writer becomes evident when he tries to portray reality directly; he is much better when he makes his characters talk about it. "The reality of his creations is in their 'unreality,'" because they themselves are fabrications of the imagined narrator (279). A talented writer, Sholem Aleichem gave us hints of the new revolutionary epoch, but was unable to present an adequate portrait of reality. He could register some sentimental sympathy for the workers, but considered them part of his class, that is, the poorest group of the petite bourgeoisie—an ideological position that precluded him from understanding the revolutionary historic mission of the proletariat. Wiener concludes: "The extent to which Sholem Aleichem reflected certain moments of the revolution in his works determines the value of these works as a heritage for the proletariat" (253–54). In other words, to come to the correct view of Sholem Aleichem, one must look at him through the eyes of the victorious revolutionary proletariat.

As we saw earlier, the narrow, Marxist, class-determined view of literature gave way in the late 1930s to a new one, based on the broader notion of folk. Now a great writer was to be celebrated, irrespective of his class background and subjective ideological orientation, as a "genuinely folk writer." The gala commemoration of the eightieth anniversary of Sholem Aleichem's birth in 1938 helped to cement his reputation as the greatest of all Yiddish writers. There was no lack of praise: David Bergelson, whose previous attitude to Sholem Aleichem had been rather skeptical, expressed the general mood by placing the four canonical books (*Tevye der milkbiker*, *Menakhem-Mendl*, *Motl Peysi dem khazns* and *Funem yarid*) among the classics of world literature and proclaiming that they "revolutionized the Jewish workers and drew them into the universal struggle for the liberation of their land." He opined that "the secret of the universal significance of this great humanist and proud democrat lies in the fusion of the labor of his life with the sufferings of the masses."⁴³ But the most comprehensive critical re-evaluation of Sholem Aleichem's writing came from Meir Wiener.

The title of Wiener's book, *On Sholem Aleichem's Humor*, already implies a clear break with the "sociological" approach of his previous

study, "The Social Roots of Sholem Aleichem's Humor." The new book is written in a series of fragments (a form popular among the early nineteenth-century German romantics), which contrasts sharply with the previous discursive treatise, and contains references to a wide range of materials. Instead of checking his every step against the authority of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, Wiener conducts an open dialogue with the great men of the European tradition, such as Aristotle, Lessing, Hegel, Fichte, Friedrich Schlegel, and others. The starting point of the later study is the acknowledgement that the true value of a piece of art must be determined by the extent to which it expresses the "tendency of its own time" (282). As a highly sensitive stylistic device, humor does not tolerate any deviation from the truthful representation of reality and therefore can be used as a touchstone for the worth of a literary text. If, after many years, the text can still make people laugh, it has fulfilled its function and captured the essence of its time. Sholem Aleichem's works obviously meet this criterion and by analyzing his humor, one can understand the most essential aspects of his epoch. Now Wiener reinterprets Sholem Aleichem's "light and elegant" humoristic style as a sign of the writer's historical optimism, his belief that life would eventually become "just, truthful and bright." Sholem Aleichem's characters, being "an original expression of the profound and beautiful wisdom of the people," are both natural and symbolic; they actually contain "much more than a piece of concrete life that the artist himself has originally put in them" (286).

Wiener rejects his previous view of Sholem Aleichem as "consoler" of the petite bourgeoisie and perpetrator of illusions. He points to the large number of unhappy endings in Sholem Aleichem's works as additional proof of the writer's commitment to realism. The lack of "reality" in Sholem Aleichem's representation of life, which Wiener previously regarded as the writer's major weakness, now turns into his greatest strength: "The realism of Sholem Aleichem's images consists in his uncovering of the 'unreality' of life and of its foundations and conventional truths" (301). The writer is presented now not as a talented imitator of a wide range of petit bourgeois speech patterns, but as the creator of the original, rich, and resourceful Yiddish literary language, an unsentimental but compassionate writer of the people. The

formal simplicity of Sholem Aleichem's works, which expresses itself in straightforward composition, is interpreted as a positive quality of the writer's *folkizm*.

Humor is an important structural and stylistic device in *Tevye*, which now replaces *Motl* as Sholem Aleichem's central work. Humor helps keep simple the overall composition of the whole collection of stories and series as the vehicle for universal themes: the conflict between generations, marriage for love versus marriage for money, religious intermarriage, and others. By portraying one poor Jewish family, the writer creates a broad picture of the historical period of great upheavals. The greatness of Sholem Aleichem's talent lies in his ability to represent the complex social reality of his time by means of simple, even trivial, plot constructions.

Whereas in the first study, the purpose of Wiener's analysis of Sholem Aleichem's humor was to elucidate the specific character of the writer's petit bourgeois worldview; in the second book, humor becomes the essential characteristic of Sholem Aleichem's art. Now Wiener treats the subject of humor not as a social but as an aesthetic category in world literature.⁴⁴ He deliberately takes Sholem Aleichem out of the social context of his time and the historical context of Jewish literature and places him within the world canon of comic literature along with Aristophanes, Cervantes, Rabelais, Dickens, Heine, and Gogol. Wiener uses the texts of Sholem Aleichem as a springboard for constructing his own theory of the genre of the comic as the most authentic expression of folk creativity and its progressive role in culture.

Wiener's conclusion: "All genres of European realism grow (in the literary-historical sense) from the seedbed of the popular-folkloric 'satirical' genres" (321) resonates with Bakhtin's ideas; an intriguing intellectual parallel that dates back to the late 1920s (although there is no evidence that Wiener knew Bakhtin or was familiar with his work). Like Bakhtin, Wiener comes to believe in the redeeming power of the "ancient folk culture of humor"⁴⁵ and its key role in the creation of modern culture. Like Bakhtin's Rabelais, Wiener's Sholem Aleichem "so fully and clearly revealed the peculiar and difficult language of the laughing people that his work sheds its light on the folk culture of humor belonging to other ages."⁴⁶

Y. L. Peretz as an Ideological Problem and a Propaganda Tool

In the biographical entry for the Russian Literary Encyclopedia (1934), Isaak Nusinov described Peretz as an “extraordinarily vivid personality, which was tormented by all the contradictions of the nationalist intelligentsia of the enslaved nations of the imperialist epoch.”⁴⁷ In the Soviet Union, Peretz was usually represented as both the most controversial and most modern of all three Yiddish *klasiker*. Up to the mid-1920s, Litvakov regarded Peretz as the most accomplished writer of the classical triad, who opened the way for modern European Yiddish literature by achieving the right balance between the rational and the sentimental and completing the synthesis of the “high” and “low” traditions in Yiddish literature. For the Jewish worker, Litvakov argued, Peretz had become the harbinger of a new secular culture. Following Peretz by “melting down within itself the cultural treasures of the past and preparing the way for our national culture of the future,” the Jewish workers would assume responsibility for the continuity of the Jewish national culture and “having completed their linguistic wanderings, transform Yiddish into its national language.”⁴⁸ This attitude underwent a reversal in the course of the 1920s, when Peretz turned into a “difficult problem of our literature,” and Sholem Aleichem assumed the position of *primus inter pares* among the classical triumvirate.

Wiener turned to Peretz only in 1935, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the writer’s death, which was commemorated on a much more modest scale than the aforementioned anniversaries of Mendele and Sholem Aleichem. Wiener published a short essay in the Minsk journal *Shtetn* under the characteristic title “A tragisher goyrl” (“A Tragic Fate”).⁴⁹ Following the accepted dualist scheme, Wiener praised Peretz for the portrayals of the plight of the oppressed masses in his short stories and novellas, which were marked by masterful literary style and composition. Wiener likened Peretz’s literary talent to the anonymous folk storytellers who “personify the artistic imagination of the oppressed poor working masses” (87).

According to Wiener, Peretz began his literary career as a “radical petit bourgeois,” the voice of the disoriented and victimized Jewish

masses who suffered from the rapid development of capitalism in the Russian Empire of late nineteenth and early twentieth century. But, like many other members of the nationalist petit bourgeois intelligentsia, he was incapable of understanding the logic of the historical development that led to the emergence of the proletariat as a new historical force. He turned to folk fantasies to revive the “demonic shadows of medieval darkness” and played with beliefs that he himself did not hold, catering to the needs of the “most backward strata of the petite bourgeoisie” (89). Whereas during his progressive period Peretz saw the Jewish problem as a social one, during his reactionary period he came to see it in nationalist terms, which was only one small step away from “clericalism.” Peretz exchanged his “wonderful plebeian fantasy” for a “decadent” one, in which religious types have replaced the characters from the poor masses. The example of Peretz demonstrates that even a great talent is not immune from the destructive impact of the bourgeois worldview, and his tragic fate illustrates better than historical studies the decline of the petite bourgeoisie in the age of imperialism.

In his brief essay Wiener follows the dualist Soviet scheme, which divided Peretz’s creative life into two periods: the progressive phase up to 1904 and the reactionary one thereafter. In contrast to this dogmatic view, Max Erik offers a more elaborate analysis. In an essay published in the same issue of *Shtetn*, he argues that Peretz had two creative periods: the last decade of the nineteenth century and from 1907 until the end of his life.⁵⁰ Although Erik, like Wiener and all other Soviet Yiddish critics, acknowledges that ideologically Peretz “was going downhill,” he keeps his essay focused on the artistic quality of Peretz’s writing, which he values very highly. He points out the ideological ambivalence of many of Peretz’s works, which can be interpreted both as “progressive” and “conservative” (72). This ambivalence becomes sharper in the later period, undermining the “realistic clarity” of depiction and questioning the “very possibility of a genuine artistic expression” (72–73). The ambivalence is rooted in Peretz’s sense of loss in response to the proletarian revolution. Erik compares Peretz with Gedali, an old Jewish shopkeeper from Babel’s *Red Cavalry* who wanted to say “yes” both to the revolution and *shabes*—an ideological position that Erik identifies with the “national-menshevist” Bund (77). For Erik, Peretz is valuable

as a complex, many-sided, artistic personality who embodies the confusion of his age (78).

In her analytical survey of the evolution of the reception of Peretz in Soviet criticism, Dalia Kaufman distinguishes three periods.⁵¹ During the 1920s, opinion toward Peretz was ambiguous, and there was no clear official ideological line until the early 1930s, when Peretz came to be regarded as ideologically reactionary but artistically sophisticated. According to this deterministic proletarian scheme, which became obligatory for Soviet literary criticism, Peretz's best works were his novellas of the 1890s, with their outspoken social criticism. His conversion to reactionary nationalism was brought about by his fear of the 1905 Revolution and the rise of the Russian proletariat. The 1935 anniversary issue of *Shtetn* became the high-water mark of this approach, but was followed by a temporary loss of interest in Peretz in the Soviet Union. As Kaufman points out, there were no publications on Peretz between 1936 and 1940, when derogatory adjectives such as "petit-bourgeois reactionary" gave way to laudatory clichés such as "great folk writer." However, the attitude toward Peretz's literary legacy always remained selective, reflecting the bias of the early 1930s.⁵²

Apart from the brief and schematic 1935 essay, Wiener wrote no other critical evaluation of Peretz. But one can assume that he would have done so were it not for the outbreak of war in June 1941. In the early spring of that fateful year, Wiener was appointed the Secretary of the Peretz Jubilee Committee of the Soviet Writers' Union. The Chairman of the Committee was Aleksandr Fadeev, a prominent Soviet Russian writer and high-ranking official at the Writers' Union, which indicates the high status of the whole enterprise. Judging from the few documents preserved in Wiener's archives, the celebration of Peretz's ninetieth birthday was meant to be a series of high-profile events, following the pattern set up by the jubilee celebrations of Mendele in 1936 and Sholem Aleichem in 1938.

The two-page "Program of Celebration of Y. L. Peretz's 90th Birthday" included dramatic performances in workers' clubs and theaters in Moscow and other cities, publications of Peretz's works in Yiddish and Russian, preparation of an academic edition of the collected works of Peretz in Yiddish, special Peretz issues of Yiddish magazines and

newspapers, special events in Yiddish schools, exhibitions in the Lenin Library and the Literary Museum in Moscow and in the Saltykov-Shchedrin Public Library in Leningrad, radio performances of Peretz's works, publications of articles in the major national newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* and other Russian periodicals,⁵³ and, as the climax, a "Gala Jubilee Evening" in the Column Hall of the House of the Soviets, the most prestigious venue in the Soviet Union, on May 25, 1941. Similar celebrations were planned in various other cities.⁵⁴

From Kiev, Itsik Fefer reported to Wiener on the scope of the festivities in Ukraine. He informed Wiener that, following the example of the 1936 double anniversary of the Ukrainian writer Ivan Franko (1856–1916), they had decided to combine the two anniversaries of Peretz (1851–1915)—twenty five years since death and ninety years since his birth—and to start the celebration in 1940. The list of events included sixteen festive evenings in various cities; publications in Yiddish, Ukrainian, and Russian periodicals; publication of Peretz's works in the original and of a book in Polish translation; theater performances; and preparation of an academic edition of Peretz's work. Fefer specifically mentioned that a group of writers had been sent to organize celebrations in the "new regions," including Lviv, Stanisławów (later renamed Ivano-Frankivsk), and Rivne.⁵⁵

The choice of cities for Peretz-related events clearly indicates the political and ideological significance of this large-scale celebration. First, there were the capitals of the pre-1939 Soviet republics in the European part of the country—Kiev, Minsk, Tbilisi, Yerevan, and Baku—all of which, with the exception of Yerevan, had a substantial Jewish population. Hence, such festivities were meant to demonstrate the appreciation of a minority culture by the Soviet authorities. Second, there were the two largest Jewish cultural centers in Ukraine, Odessa, and Kharkov, as well as Birobidzhan, the administrative center of the Jewish Autonomous Region. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the large-scale events were to be organized in the cities that had become part of the Soviet Union as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the subsequent occupation of the eastern parts of Poland, the Baltic republics, and Romania's Bessarabia and Bukovina: Białystok, Lviv, Vilnius, Kaunas, Riga, Tallinn, Kishinev, and Chernivtsy (Czernowitz). All these

cities (except Tallinn) had a significant Yiddish-speaking population exposed to various degrees of anti-Semitic discrimination from their previous states. As the rest of Poland was occupied by Nazi Germany, and Romania had its own fascist regime, the state-sponsored celebration of Peretz's anniversary must have had a powerful symbolic resonance among Jews who had recently become Soviet citizens. The timing, however, was unfortunate: the festivities peaked in April–May 1941, and were overshadowed by the German attack on the Soviet Union in June. This probably explains why the celebrations have left practically no trace in memoirs or research literature.⁵⁶

A History of Yiddish Literature that Remained Unwritten

Wiener outlined his scheme of Yiddish literary history in several type-written drafts that he probably composed in the late 1930s. These drafts were apparently intended as an extensive plan of a comprehensive monograph on the history of Yiddish literature (each page has the word *bukh* at the top) and can offer useful insights into his final conception of Yiddish literary development, crystallized in Wiener's mind on the eve of World War II. The plan begins with obligatory references to Lenin and Stalin and then proceeds to the period of the 1860s and 70s, which is regarded as part of the Russian cultural context. The emergence of Yiddish literature and the Yiddish press (as well as the Russian-Jewish and Hebrew press) in the early 1860s is treated as part of the general process of democratization of Russian society under Alexander II, with realism as its dominant literary style. In the 1870s, the influence of Russian *narodnichestvo* produces its Jewish equivalent, *folkizm*, which has an impact on the emergence of Yiddish theater (Goldfaden) and popular sentimental literature (Yankev Dinezon), as well as early Hebrew nationalism (Peretz Smolenskin).

In accordance with this scheme, Mendele turns from Hebrew to Yiddish in search of a new audience for his new ideas, which he develops under the influence of Russian and European literature. Wiener sums up his interpretations of Mendele's individual prose works, tracing the

writer's artistic and ideological development toward his conservative phase of the 1880s and thereafter, finishing his survey with the memoir *Shloyne reb Khayims*. Turning to Linetsky, Wiener focuses on the 1860s as the most radical period in that writer's creativity, stressing the importance of his main book, *Dos poylishe yingl* (*A Polish Lad*, 1867) for understanding of that period. Other writers from this era are the folk poet Mikhl Gordon and others, who represent a fusion between folklore and the Haskalah, which leads Wiener to Goldfaden as the founder of Yiddish theater.

The next period begins with the advance of conservative politics in the 1880s, reflected in the rise of nationalism and the growth of *shund* literature. The anti-Semitic policy of the government causes mass Jewish emigration, leading to the development of new literary centers in London and America, where a new proletarian literature emerges. The development of the workers' movement in the 1890s has an effect on Yiddish writers in Russia as well. At that point Yiddish literature splits into two strands: one leads through Dinezon, the "creator of the sentimental novel in Yiddish literature," to Peretz, the other one to Sholem Aleichem.

Peretz's main contribution to Yiddish literature was made in the 1890s when he developed the genre of the realistic novella, which Wiener analyzes in terms of its structure and content. The later period is evaluated more critically but not dismissed as purely reactionary. Peretz's ideological leaning toward political conservatism went hand in hand with his interest in modernism. The appropriation of elements of irony, satire, and folklore, in particular in his plays, led Peretz away from realism into impressionism and symbolism, although his work served as a "point of departure for new stylistic trends in Yiddish literature."

In contrast to Peretz, Sholem Aleichem succeeded in merging folklore and realism. Wiener traces his evolution as the heir to Mendele's tradition, from the declaration of poverty as the main theme in Yiddish literature, through his portrayals of Menachem-Mendl and Tevye, to the new image of Motl as a gifted child subjected to the growing pressure of capitalism. Like Peretz, Sholem Aleichem made a significant contribution to the development of the Yiddish novella, which in Wiener's scheme becomes the leading genre of the capitalist period at

the turn of the twentieth century. But unlike Peretz, Sholem Aleichem always remained loyal to the principles of realism, drawing his inspiration from folklore. A positive influence on both writers was European and Russian literature, especially Maxim Gorky.

The next part of Wiener's draft summarizes the development of "revolutionary poetry in the nineteenth century," with the central figures being Morris Winchevsky, Dovid Edelshtat, Yosef Bovshover, and Morris Rosenfeld (who receives the least attention). The beginning of the twentieth century is characterized, in accordance with Lenin's and Stalin's view, as the period of nascent imperialism and the exacerbation of every social conflict in the Russian Empire. This social development produces new literary styles, such as the naturalism of Itshe-Meir Weissenberg and Yona Rosenfeld, as well as the neoromantic apology of the bourgeoisie and social harmony (Sholem Asch).

Wiener attributed the growth of decadent trends in Yiddish culture, such as "nationalism, clericalism, mysticism, aestheticism," to the decline of the revolutionary movement after 1905. The new cultural atmosphere of withdrawal from political activity and individualism found its expression in the Yiddishist Czernowitz Conference of 1908, the Vilna journal *Literarische monatshriftn*, and the American group *Di Yunge*, which in one way or another rejected the realist tradition.

Along with Avrom Reyzen, David Pinsky, and Nomberg, all of whom Wiener regarded as part of the realist tradition and therefore worthy of individual chapters, the main focus in the last part of his pre-1917 survey is David Bergelson, who entered Yiddish literature during the rise of modernism and the decline of realism. Bergelson learned the skills of novella writing from Peretz and Sholem Aleichem and revived the critical realist tradition in his first novel, *Nokh alemen* (*The End of Everything*, 1913), and his other works of that period, which were also marked by elements of impressionism and symbolism.

In the concluding part of his plan, Wiener surveys American Yiddish literature, noting the elements of irony, satire, and folklore in the poems of Moyshe Leyb Halpern, as well as nostalgic sentimentalism in the poetry of Mani Leyb, which he interprets as a desire to escape from reality. He evaluates positively the satiric works of Moshe Nadir, who until 1939 showed sympathy for communism, and levels some criticism

at, but also praises, Isaac Raboy and Joseph Opatoshu, singling out in particular the latter's historical novels about the Polish uprising of 1863 and the novella *A tog in Regensburg* (*A Day in Regensburg*, 1933). Finally, Wiener briefly considers the naturalist works produced during and after World War I in Poland (Oyzer Varshavski, A. M. Fuchs), which focused on the decay of the shtetl and human alienation in the big city.

Legitimization of the Yiddish Literary Tradition

Discussing the development during the mid-1930s of what he calls "academic Marxism" in the Soviet Union, Aleksandr Dmitriev speaks metaphorically of the "calcification" of philosophical discourse. He connects this process of stagnation with the closing off of the lively ideological debates of the early 1930s and the institutionalization of intellectual and academic life in the Soviet Union. The Soviet "science of humanities" combined Marxist principles with the traditional pre-revolutionary legacy, rejecting the radical theoretical innovations of the previous decade.⁵⁷ Dmitriev points out that the Marxism of the 1920s and 1930s should be understood in two ways: "as the legitimizing *ideology* of the victorious regime and as a certain set of *methodological rules*, to be comprehended and used by Soviet scholars in their research."⁵⁸ In the small and relatively closed field of Yiddish culture, the transition from ideology to methodology took place in 1932–34 as a result of the gradual shrinking of the socio-political sphere of Yiddish in the Soviet Union. David Shneer succinctly summarizes this development: "As the Party came to dictate the shape of culture building, the Soviet Yiddish intelligentsia lost its ideological power. In addition, as the state centralized and consolidated its bureaucracies, the intelligentsia lost its institutional capacity to shape Jewish culture."⁵⁹

In that situation, scholarship and historical writing became the main creative outlet for Soviet Yiddish intellectuals. Wiener's concept of Yiddish literary history is a good example of that turn to the past. No longer an arena of intense ideological debate and political fighting, toward the second half of the 1930s, Yiddish culture became a domain of professional scholars and critics whose task was limited to training

other professionals. As the field of application of Yiddish contracted and general knowledge of that culture and language declined, especially among the younger generation, Yiddish studies gravitated to the periphery of the Soviet academic system and were therefore subject to less rigorous ideological supervision.⁶⁰ This gave Wiener and his colleagues more freedom to express their views as long as they remained within the general limits of the Marxist “methodological rules.”

There is no reason to suspect that Wiener regarded those rules as too restrictive, especially in the late 1930s. Indeed, the theoretical principles of his own conception of Yiddish literature seem to be in harmony with those rules. Wiener regarded realism as the most progressive and aesthetically superior literary style and treated all varieties of modernism as deviations. Accordingly, he assessed the use of stylistic devices such as folklore, satire, irony, and the grotesque through the lens of realism. They were good and useful if they helped produce realist effects in the representation of reality, and bad if they served the “modernist” purposes. That said, the Marxist lenses helped Wiener see more clearly the relationships between literary style and socio-economic reality, and his insights in this area are among his most valuable and lasting contributions to Yiddish scholarship.

Wiener was the first to conceptualize the style and the language of Yiddish literature as a product and reflection of the historical development of East European Jewry. The historicism of his approach was not fully deterministic because he recognized a certain degree of creative freedom in the writer that can be described as a dialectics of class and folk. On the one hand, he regarded a writer as a product of socio-economic circumstances and his consciousness as determined by his membership in a certain class. On the other hand, a writer was for him also a bearer of a certain folk consciousness, preserved in concentrated form in the language. A talented writer was able to unpack this cultural luggage and apply it to his portrayal of reality. A writer who allied himself with the progressive class could transform the folklore legacy into a powerful literary tool, but folklore in the service of the interests of the vanishing reactionary classes lost its expressive power and turned into mere ornamental decoration and stylization.

Seven Soviet Literature and Theory

Socialist Realism as a Utopian Vision

Whereas in his historical studies of Yiddish literature, Wiener applied Marxism primarily as an analytical method, in his Soviet literary criticism, Marxism served as an ideological worldview, which prescribed how reality should be represented in literature. Instead of scrutinizing every aspect of the form, the style, and the content of a literary text as a reflection of the socio-economic contradictions and conflicts at a particular historical moment, Wiener attempted to develop an idealized general concept of Soviet Yiddish literature, freed of conflicts and contradictions. In this construction, socialist realism as a “creative method” canceled Marxist critical analysis, creating a utopian vision of reality and eliminating all of the contradictions of the previous ages that the analysis discovered. As Evgenii Dobrenko puts it in one of his studies of that phenomenon, “socialist realism portrays a world of whose existence it is the only witness.”¹

After his first, unsuccessful venture into the minefield of Soviet literary criticism with the Leyvick article in 1927, Wiener took more care when dealing with current literary affairs, limiting his participation to short reviews and forewords. He returned to theoretical criticism after 1932 at the time of a fundamental transformation of Soviet literature. This was the period of the institutionalization of socialist realism, which was pronounced the official method of Soviet literature at the first Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934. Current scholars differ in their approach to socialist realism. Some, like Katerina Clark, deny aesthetic value to socialist-realist culture, regarding it as a set of rules for the construction

of a “correct” text. Others, like Boris Groys, treat it in purely aesthetic terms, as a grandiose *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) that represents the totalitarian regime by continuing the avant-garde tradition of erasing the borders between art and reality. Somewhere between these two positions lies Dobrenko, who treats socialist realism as a metaphorical “machine for the production of socialism.” Socialist-realist writers and artists create a new socialist reality, which then replaces “real” reality: “it is in art that Soviet reality is translated and transformed—through Socialist Realism—into socialism.” Thus, Dobrenko argues, drawing on the theories of Jean Baudrillard and Michel Foucault, socialist realism should be regarded not merely as the “production of certain symbols,” but as the production of “visual and verbal substitutes for reality.”²

The problem of the relationship between art and life was central for all modernist and avant-garde theories and practices. Like many thinkers of his age, Wiener had a special interest in the symbolic forms of representation of reality in art, culture, and religion. Already in his early articles he had criticized German-Jewish expressionist poets for their inability to break through the barrier between imagination and reality. At that time, he believed that the problem was resolved in the ancient Orient, where the Hebrew prophets and the mystics of various traditions had successfully overcome the limitations of individual experience and broken through into reality by way of ecstatic revelation. And it was the utopian promise to realize the ultimate dreams of humanity that brought him from Zionism to communism.

In the Moscow of the mid-1930s, Wiener returned to some of his old ideas and arguments, without, however, disclosing their idealist provenance. He presented socialist realism as a utopian artistic project that would eliminate the borders separating the individual self from collective life, imagination from reality, subject from object. The art of socialist realism was akin to a revelation of the creative spirit of socialism in the material world, a liberating *Erlebnis* that would enable humanity to progress to a new stage in its search for the absolute. From this point of view, Wiener’s articles on socialist realism represent not a radical departure from his previous thought, but the next step in his intellectual evolution, a revision and reformulation of the concepts that had informed his thinking since his years in Switzerland.

Of course, this evolution did not proceed smoothly and steadily. As with all other intellectuals who wanted to publish their work in the Soviet Union, Wiener had to respond to the changes in official ideological discourse, praise the achievements of the Soviet state under Stalin's leadership, and attack its enemies, imagined or real. None of the available sources tell us how sincerely Wiener held his communist beliefs during the late 1930s, how much he was aware of the purges, and what he thought about them. One can only state that his survival strategy was successful. He was able not only to stay afloat in the stormy sea of Soviet literary politics, but also, as much as possible, follow his own course. This chapter deals with Wiener's critical and theoretical writings on the themes of that time and his attempts to create a comprehensive synthetic concept of modern Yiddish literature in the light of Marxist theory.

Wiener's Response to the Proletarian Critics

Having performed the ritual of "self-criticism" in the spring of 1932, Wiener launched a counterattack against his opponents from the proletarian camp. Together with his younger colleague Aron Gurshteyn, one of the leading authorities on Marxist literary theory, Wiener published a book under the rather dry title *Problemen fun kritik* (*Problems of Criticism*, 1933), in which he included his article on the social roots of Sholem Aleichem's humor and two critical essays on contemporary themes. Written in the aftermath of the 1932 discussion at the Kiev Institute, these essays mark the threshold between the Kiev and Moscow periods of Wiener's criticism.

The first essay, "Tsu der problem fun literarisher yerushe (di teorie vegn di 'gute sof' in a Vevyorkes bukh 'Revizye')" ("On the Problem of Literary Legacy [The Theory of 'Good Endings' in Avrom Vevyorkes's book, *Revision*]"), addresses the issue of the Soviet Yiddish canon. Wiener energetically criticizes the Kiev proletarian author Avrom Vevyorkes for attempting to "revise" the established canonical hierarchy of Yiddish literature, with the triad of Mendeleyev, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz at its center, and to replace it by a more "democratic" and mass-oriented

one, which would include popular writers like the notorious Shomer (Nokhem-Meir Shaykevitsh, 1846–1905, the author of numerous *shund* (trash) novels. In his book *Revizye* (1931), Vevyorke argued that the “happy ending” format of these novels was more suitable for proletarian literature than the largely unhappy stories of the classical authors because it reflected the social optimism of the new, triumphant class.

While agreeing in general with the need to revise the classical legacy, and accepting Vevyorke’s judgment that proletarian Yiddish poetry should form a significant part of the Soviet canon, Wiener strongly disagreed on the issue of *shund*. Vevyorke’s mistake, he argued, was to consider *shund* in purely formal terms, as a genre of adventurous, sometimes pornographic novels, without taking into account the ideological aspect. For Wiener, the value of the cultural legacy had to do not with its ability to capture life in its various aspects, but with the meaning it could offer to the proletariat in its revolutionary struggle. Thus, the task of Marxist aesthetics was not merely to analyze the culture of the past as a mere reflection of socio-economic reality, but to use this legacy as the foundation of a new proletarian culture.

Wiener accused Vevyorke of mistakenly regarding the proletariat as a “normal” social class like all other social classes, whose historical vision and aesthetic sensitivity was determined by their socio-economic situation. Wiener’s idea of the proletariat was much grander. He envisioned it as a sort of super class, which would rise above the very notion of class division that had been the basis of human society through its entire history: “The proletariat—because it seeks to eliminate all ruling classes, class society in general, and to build a classless society—is capable of discovering [*aroysgefinen*] most objective criterion through practice and applying them to practice and theory.”³ Hence, the proletariat, as the class capable of overcoming all class divisions, should possess an aesthetic sensitivity that transcends the limitations imposed by those divisions and absorbs all of the achievements of the previous generations. The proletariat is strong enough not to be deluded by the illusory consolations of petit-bourgeois writers like Shomer, the German-Jewish authors of “family novels,” Sholem Asch, or Hollywood filmmakers, whose “fake” optimism merely masks the dark historical fate of the that class. Contrary to Shomer, his adversary Sholem Aleichem clearly fore-

saw the inevitable decline of the Jewish petite bourgeoisie and depicted it in his works without empty illusions.

In another essay Wiener takes on Khatskl Dunets, an influential proletarian critic and for some time a deputy minister of education of Belorussia. Wiener accuses Dunets of taking a schematic and formalist approach to literature and shying away from dialectical analysis of the relationship between form and content. Dunets mistakenly privileges revolutionary “spontaneity” (*stikhey*) over consciousness of the proletariat, which leads him to the mistaken conclusion that spontaneous emotions can control class consciousness.⁴ Literature, Wiener argues, should not follow unconscious emotions, but rather try to organize them by artistic means in accordance with proletarian ideology. Wiener further uses his “dialectical” approach to ideology to construct a defense of Der Nister, whom Dunets dismisses as a purely “archaic” and “reactionary” writer with nothing to contribute to Soviet literature. Unlike Dunets, Wiener does not view symbolism in purely negative terms, pointing out that before the revolution, some of the symbolists voiced criticisms of the old regime, and the most prominent Russian symbolist poet, Alexander Blok—as well as Der Nister in his tale “Naygayst”—welcomed the October Revolution. The issue is not style, but the ideology it expresses; some of the old forms and styles can be useful for proletarian art if they express new ideology. However, Wiener remarks, proletarian art must appropriate its legacy “dialectically” and avoid a historical “stylization” of the past, an attitude characteristic of Der Nister’s Hasidic and mystical tales.

In his criticism of Vevyorke and Dunets, Wiener deals with the issues of class consciousness and ideology, which were central to interwar Marxist discourse. In his seminal work, *History and Class Consciousness*, Georg Lukács defined class consciousness not as an inherent attribute of a certain class, but as something that can only be obtained by permanent struggle. Wiener’s view of the proletarian class consciousness as the only “true” consciousness echoes Lukács’s thesis about the special historical role of the proletariat, which carries messianic overtones: “The proletariat cannot liberate itself as a class without simultaneously abolishing class society as such. For that reason its consciousness, the last class consciousness in the history of mankind, must both lay bare

the nature of society and achieve an increasingly inward fusion of theory and practice.”⁵ Although Lukács’s concept of class consciousness and ideology was criticized in the Soviet Union, it appears that it left a strong impression on Wiener, who could have been familiar with *History and Class Consciousness*, which first appeared in 1923 in German. The idea of the special mission of the proletariat would be particularly attractive for Wiener, given his early interest in the messianic idea and its various transformations. For him the revolutionary proletariat became a new messianic force, whose mission was to bring about redemption for all of humanity. A dialectical approach to this notion aided Wiener in his controversy with his proletarian opponents over authority in Soviet literature. Genuine proletarian class consciousness was not a reality but a goal, which could be achieved by appropriating the entire classical legacy and cannot be monopolized by any self-proclaimed spokesmen for the “proletarian culture,” such as VUSPP or the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP).

The Theory of Socialist Realism

In a series of articles that appeared in 1934 and were intended as parts of a book, Wiener explores the theoretical opportunities that the new doctrine of socialist realism can provide for an interpretation of contemporary literature in general and Yiddish literature in particular.⁶ In one of the essays, he discusses the usefulness of various “primary” types and elements of style—such as humor, satire, idyll, the grotesque, fantasy, tragedy, pathos, sentimentalism—for the new literature of socialist realism. This particular issue, Wiener argues, can only be discussed as part of the larger problem of the relationship between literary style and social class. In other words, the question is whether a particular style, or a stylistic element, is part of a certain class consciousness or merely a device that can be used by different classes for their own purposes.

To take one example, Wiener believes that sentimentalism is associated with the petit-bourgeois class consciousness and therefore has no place in the culture of the “strong and heroic revolutionary proletariat.”⁷ Similarly, “eccentric fantasy” and the grotesque are alien to the

proletariat because they do not engage positively with objective reality. The same is true of the “works of a great number of expressionists, for example, Marc Chagall” (50). Various modern “-isms,” which deny the notion of historical development, have no place in socialist realism either, nor do “levity” (*vitslerishkayt*) and the “philistine idyll,” which express the sense of social despair and hopelessness. In other words, Wiener denies access to the socialist-realist culture precisely to those stylistic elements that he so carefully analyzed in the works of its predecessors, from the Haskalah to Sholem Aleichem.

Instead, Wiener argues, the dominant mood of historical optimism and revolutionary struggle requires an appropriately grand style, which can be produced with the help of “such stylistic means as satire, humor, tragedy and pathos” (55). As an instrument of class struggle in literature, the primary function of satire is exposing the class enemy, whereas humor (but not the “jocularity of a traveling salesman”) serves as an instrument of proletarian self-criticism (*ibid.*). Tragedy has an important place in the literature of socialist realism as well, but it should not be confused with elegy and used for the sympathetic depiction of the defeated classes. The purpose of tragedy is to mobilize the proletariat for the revolutionary struggle by portraying the suffering of the masses and the heroic death of their warriors. Another adequate form for the representation of historical reality is epic, which should be adjusted to the new historical situation rather than imitating classical Greek models. The new epic form is the epic novel rooted in the classical realist tradition—another interesting parallel to Lukács and his famous definition of the novel as the “big epic from, the most typical genre of the bourgeois society.”⁸

In another of these Yiddish articles, Wiener dwells on the specific aspects of literary craft, explaining the place and function of such literary devices as detail, narrative tense, and composition. The general message is that a literary text ought to be written according to the established norms: “the basic principle of socialist realism,” namely, “the strong discipline of form.”⁹ Proclaiming, on the one hand, that proletarian literature should destroy “bourgeois forms,” Wiener insists, on the other hand, that the new literature should follow strict formal principles. Although the era of wars and revolutions may have produced a certain

“chaotic vagueness” of form and style, the new proletarian literature must not tolerate such modernist trends as symbolism, futurism, and expressionism, because they reject clarity, consistency, unity of style, composition, and form.¹⁰ Economy, balance, simplicity, and, most importantly, the subordination of all artistic means to the “objective cognition of reality” should form the foundation of socialist realism. Interestingly, the editorial footnote to the article demurs at Wiener’s criticism of “fragmentary composition” and his requirement of a “centralized plot,” particularly in poetry.¹¹

Wiener published the most comprehensive summary of his views on socialist realism in the prestigious Russian monthly *Oktiabr*.¹² The essay, preceded by an editorial disclaimer describing it as a “matter for discussion,” focuses on the practical application of socialist-realist methodology to literature. Wiener criticizes the “dialectic-materialist method” promoted by RAPP as impractical and “scholastic” on the account of its presumption that a correct Marxist-Leninist ideology alone is sufficient for producing a genuinely socialist literature. True socialist realism needs a concrete and detailed aesthetic system of its own that focuses on style, which Wiener rather vaguely describes as a system of the “most general and essential elements characteristic of the form of expression of the ideological creativity of certain social classes in certain historical periods according to the real historical content” (238). Wiener regards socialist realism as the ultimate fulfillment of the realist potential of the literatures of preceding periods, from antiquity to capitalism. In the past, the elements of realism were restricted or even suppressed by the dominant ideology, which dictated the aesthetic criteria of the age. Only in certain moments, when “objective reality breaks in and expands the limited range of vision,” as happens sometimes in the novels of Balzac, is realism capable of achieving genuine artistic greatness. In the bourgeois age, realism reached its most advanced stage in naturalism, which is the style of the *petit bourgeoisie*. Although this social group occupies an intermediate position between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, its worldview remains within the confines of the bourgeois ideology, which prevents it even from glimpsing the road to liberation of humanity. Naturally, only socialist realism, with its proper ideological foundation

in Marxist-Leninist theory, is unencumbered by the reality beyond all class limitations and therefore able to represent reality (239).

Yet, regardless of his historical situation, a "genuine artist" like Balzac possesses a capacity to reflect certain "revolutionary" aspects of his age, which contain "the future in embryonic state." Following Hegel, Wiener distinguishes two kinds of reality, the "necessary" and the "accidental." The necessary consists of "elements of the future" that propel human society toward its next revolution. From antiquity onward, the great poets of all ages have taken part in the epic struggle of the new against the old, whereas great European writers from Dante to Balzac, as well as Russian writers like Gogol, Saltykov-Shchedrin, and Nikolai Nekrasov, reflect in their works the various stages of the process of transition from feudal society to capitalism. The socialist artist must continue this tradition by "reflecting *correctly* the reality of the socialist construction." Wiener's emphasis on "correctly" means, of course, that literature should follow Communist Party politics (239-40). On the issue of realism versus romanticism, one of the points of contention between different schools of Soviet thought, Wiener sides with those (like Aleksandr Fadeev) who believe that romanticism is too "cowardly" to stare reality in the face because the romantic tradition tends to glorify the past and shy away from the revolutionary potential of old forms and ideas. This position is consistent with Wiener's general distaste of romanticism and his preference for the realism of Yiddish literature over the romanticism of Hebrew. Similarly critical is Wiener's view of naturalism and its inability to distinguish between the accidental and the necessary and to identify the central "social problems of its age" (242). Even worse, however, is impressionism, initially also a petit-bourgeois style, which evolved into a "style of the bourgeois in the age of imperialism," moving further away from the essence of reality (245). For Wiener, "Impressionism offers only shadows"; rather than re-creating passions and emotions in art, it produces mere "impressions" and "moods" (246).

Contrary to these styles, socialist realism uses only those details that "express the concentrated moments of the development of reality," separating the necessary from the accidental (242). In this, Soviet writers are guided by Marxist-Leninist ideology, and do not need to rely, like their predecessors, on artistic intuition. The task of a socialist artist is

to represent the connections between particular “decisive facts” and the general progress of society toward socialism, giving those connections an artistic interpretation that will “emotionally enrich” our understanding of reality (243). Emotions, Wiener claims, cannot be separated from reason, and realist metaphors and images must appeal simultaneously to reason and feelings. Literary works of bourgeois realism can sometimes offer a better view of capitalist society than the historical and sociological studies of that time because art is less restricted than social science by the dominant bourgeois ideology. This is no longer true, however, in socialist society, where the social sciences are genuinely “free” of ideological restrictions—that is, fully in agreement with the teaching of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin (245). Thus, the function of socialist-realist literature is to portray typical characters as representatives of particular classes and groups of society, disregarding individual “fantasies.” Wiener cites Dostoevsky, one of the favorite authors of his youth, as an example of a talented realist writer who got carried away by his “fantastic, distorted notions about classes and social strata.” Dostoevsky’s inordinate interest in individuality typifies his overall orientation toward the past rather than “reality in its development” (246).

In accordance with Engels’s authoritative definition of realism as the “truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances,”¹³ Wiener believes that the individualization of a character is permissible only as long as it remains true to the dominant social trend. Siding with Fadeev and other Soviet champions of realism over romanticism, Wiener invokes Engels’s advice to Ferdinand Lassalle to follow Shakespeare rather than Schiller (“Shakespeareize” rather than “Schillerize,” in the Soviet jargon of the time), that is, to show ideas and images in their socio-historical context rather than as abstract entities (250). Having learned the lessons of the critical campaign of 1931–32, Wiener constructs his new theoretical platform carefully. He expresses no radical opinions and takes no clear side in the ongoing debates. He focuses on the relationship between the class-determined *Weltanschauung* of a writer and his ability to portray reality objectively, which, as the historian of socialist realism Herman Ermolaev observes, “was dealt with in almost every article written on socialist realism in 1933 and 1934.”¹⁴ One group, represented by Lukács and his Soviet colleagues Mikhail

Rozental and Mikhail Lifshits, believed that a writer of true genius is able to overcome the limitations of his class consciousness by virtue of his artistic intuition. Their opponents, led by Nusinov, held that this is not possible. Wiener's views are closer to the former group, which eventually emerged victorious, but he mentions no literary critics or theorists by name other than Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Another point of similarity between Wiener and Lukács is their shared dislike of modernism for its "decadent" and "degenerative" style.¹⁵

But even Wiener's most politically correct essays contain traces of his pre-Soviet thinking. The very notion of socialist realism as a new artistic way of resolving the contradictions, central to the art of previous ages, echoes the scheme of cultural progress from *Von den Symbolen*. In this book, as we saw in Chapter 2, Wiener envisioned the development of human culture as a series of redemptive revolutionary breakthroughs that liberate artistic vision from its constraints every time it reaches an impasse in its attempts to harmonize the contradictions of reality. Back in 1924, Wiener predicted that the dominant styles of that time, abstractionism and expressionism, would be surpassed by a new style that would overcome their "ugliness" and create a new harmony. In *Von den Symbolen*, Wiener believed that art, like religion, tries to resolve the crucial problem of redemption. Naturally, mystical language and religious parallels would be inappropriate in Marxist discourse. But the notion of the proletariat as a redeeming force that will once and for all destroy the ugliness of capitalism and usher humanity into a new communist aeon is another materialist variety of the secularized messianism of radical German Jewish intellectuals, which Michael Löwy describes as a "millenarian expression of the hopes, dreams and aspirations of the pariahs and those excluded from history."¹⁶

The official declaration of socialist realism as the canonical doctrine of Soviet literature had of course a "calcification" effect on culture and society, but it also calmed the turbulent waters of Soviet literary life. Socialist-realist doctrine offered a stable and clear set of theoretical guidelines that had to be obeyed by all and could only be changed by the Party. Perhaps fortunately for Wiener and other intellectuals, these guidelines were rooted in Hegelian thought in its Marxist interpretation. This gave the intellectuals an advantage over the less educated

ideologues of proletarian culture, whose philosophical training was limited by their superficial knowledge of Lenin's and Stalin's texts. Perhaps even more helpful was the absence of Russian nationalism in the discourse of socialist realism at its early stage, as explained by Ermolaev: "In 1933 and 1934 the approach to the literary heritage was still free from the bias of Soviet patriotism, and the writers of the past were judged strictly on the basis of the sociopolitical value of their works. Because of Marx's and Engels's admiration of Balzac, Shakespeare, and Stendhal, these writers were singled out as the most valuable sources for enriching the art of socialist realism."¹⁷

Wiener's final contribution to Soviet literary theory was an essay authored with Gurshteyn on socialist content and national form in Soviet literature. In accordance with official doctrine, the movement toward socialism is seen as a dual process of liberation and transfiguration, which is applied both to reality and consciousness. The "progressive" elements from the past culture are "liberated" from their pre-socialist context (not unlike sparks of divinity are to be redeemed from the captivity of dead matter in the kabbalistic doctrine in its Lurianic and Hasidic interpretation) and brought together in a new synthesis that becomes possible only under the new socialist consciousness: old "human feelings and relationships acquire in our socialist reality their real, true content."¹⁸ The new socialist present also affects the vision of the past and can rewrite it under the right angle, as in Soviet historical novels such as Bergelson's *At the Dnieper* and Der Nister's *The Family Mashber*.

In his report to the Sixteenth Party Congress in 1930, Stalin pronounced his famous definition of the "national culture under the dictatorship of the proletariat" as "national in form and socialist in content."¹⁹ Taking their cue from this simple but rather vague formula, Wiener and Gurshteyn attempt to forge a sophisticated concept of "national form" as a combination of tradition and its reflection in contemporary reality (391). Metaphorically speaking, the national form is a "crystallized history" that includes not only the most characteristic features of past and present, but also of the future planted in the "revolutionary" aspects of contemporary reality (i.e., in the activity of the Party, 394). Gurshteyn and Wiener warn that "national form" should not be understood in an exclusive, nationalistic sense. Pushkin, for instance, contributed to the development of the

Russian literary tradition by introducing elements of European culture, and similarly, Mendele developed the Jewish “national form” by transcending the limits of “ethnography” and opening that up to Russian and European influences (349). Any national culture, they argue, is a product of multiple influences, and the process of internationalization of culture has become more intense in the age of capitalism. However, capitalism also causes the growth of nationalism and antagonism between nations, which leads to cultural isolation. All these contradictions will naturally be cancelled under socialism, when all national cultures will participate in the process of mutual enrichment through translation. As examples of the positive transformation of the Jewish tradition in Soviet Yiddish literature, Gurshteyn and Wiener mention works of Bergelson, Kipnis, Markish, and in particular, Shmuel Halkin’s adaptation of Goldfaden’s operetta *Bar-Kokhba* for the Moscow State Yiddish Theater, which revived the “metaphorism” of ancient Jewish history (400).

Gurshteyn and Wiener’s article can also be viewed in the light of the complex political situation between the beginning of the Second World War and the German attack on the Soviet Union. Like everyone else in the Soviet Union, Gurshteyn and Wiener obviously were not in a position to express openly any opinion that differed from the Party line, yet it seems that they hid just such a message in their text. Their emphasis on European culture and cultural exchange and their vision of socialist multiculturalism might seem trivial today but in the situation of 1940, it could be interpreted as a bold attempt to keep the position of Yiddish in the shifting field of Soviet ideological discourse. As representatives of official Soviet Yiddish culture, they faced the difficult task of delivering the Soviet message to the Jewish intelligentsia from the new territories, offering them a vision that was strictly communist but also leaving some space for a humanist interpretation.

Wiener’s Early Soviet Criticism

Wiener’s critical output of 1928–33 includes brief evaluations of work on three of his friends: Avrom Moyshe Fuchs, Leyb Kvitko, and Itsik Kipnis. In the foreword to a small collection of works by Fuchs, Wiener

introduces his fellow *galitsianer* from Vienna to the Soviet readership.²⁰ One of the “most powerful prose talents in Yiddish literature,” Fuchs is a master of “ascetic realism,” able to produce shocking images of the “nightmare of big city poverty” (3). But his extraordinary powers of observation and representation go hand in hand with the “dire poverty of his ideas” (4). Fuchs is an example of a writer whose “unconscious, naïve artistic perception is much healthier and sharper than their conscious ‘ideology’” (4). Paradoxically, Fuchs shares the petit-bourgeois ideological bias of the unsympathetic characters from his own works, which creates a sharp contrast between his art and his thought. Stylistically he is a pessimistic realist, an “urban storyteller without any romanticism and provincialism”; his images are crude; his mood is dark; his intrigue is flat; the plot is simple and straightforward, arranged as a chronological sequence of episodes (7). In conclusion, Wiener states that the only lesson one can draw from Fuchs’s writing is “objective realism” (*zakhlekhn realizm*), invoking the concept of new objectivity (Neue Sachlichkeit), an artistic style that became prominent in German modernism in the mid-1920s. Although Wiener does not use the word “naturalism,” his brief evaluation of Fuchs fully fits his understanding of this style as the expression of petit-bourgeois fatalism.

Wiener’s review of Kvitko’s collection of children’s poetry, published on the eve of the “Kvitko affair” in 1929, declares its author one of the “few original poets” in Soviet literature.²¹ A poet who writes for children faces two temptations: either to identify with the “primitive folk style” of children’s literature, or to adopt a snobbish attitude to his work and its audience. Kvitko has successfully avoided both extremes, showing us the way to the treasures of folk creativity. Not merely does he “draw his nourishment” from folklore, he also gives shape to the indigenous “formless” folk creativity. Kvitko’s children’s poetry has all the positive features that Wiener will later identify with the socialist-realist method: simplicity, realism, clarity, and unity of composition.²² By “acculturating” the raw folklore material, Kvitko continues the tradition of the earlier Yiddish writers into the new revolutionary age, giving voice to the masses that have been liberated by the revolution: “Kvitko was the first to turn the plebeian language of the new social groups into poetry in an artistic and creative way.”²³

In his foreword to Itsik Kipnis's collection *12 dertseylungen* (*Twelve Stories*, 1933) Wiener performs a delicate balancing act of returning his friend, who had been the target of a fierce critical attack, back to the literary mainstream.²⁴ Wiener assures his readers that the new book is an improvement in comparison to the *Khadoshim un teg*, albeit a small one. Kipnis is still dangerously close to the petit-bourgeois worldview, which betrays itself in disharmony between content and form. He is not yet able to raise the social consciousness of his narrative above the limited impressionist depiction of individual family life and relationships between men and women to the level of socio-psychological generalization (4). Although one of the most talented of Soviet Yiddish writers, Kipnis has not yet overcome the crisis of his creativity and will waste his talent by repeating himself, at best producing minor variations of his previous work unless he acquires a proper ideological consciousness. So far, Kipnis's ideological progress has been slow, and his artistic response to criticism inadequate, but that might change after the "historical resolution of the Central Committee of the 23rd of April" has put an end to the proletarian domination in literature that has ostracized Kipnis (5).

The main artistic merit of these three writers in Wiener's eyes is their direct and unmediated perception of reality and the deep roots of their artistic intuition in folk consciousness. But each one of them must bridge the gap between his natural artistic intuition of reality and Marxist consciousness. Fuchs, as a foreigner, probably has no chance of doing so and is doomed to remain eternally in the limbo of naturalism between bourgeois and proletarian realism. Perhaps too optimistically for 1929, Wiener believes that Kvitko has already solved the problem of redeeming the folk consciousness in his children's poetry. Only a few months later, Kvitko would be criticized precisely for the sin of petit-bourgeois nationalism. The foreword to Kipnis's book of 1933 exemplifies a new sub-genre in Soviet literature: sympathetic criticism of an author who was subject to ideological discipline. This kind of introduction, however harsh it might sound, signals official approval of the author's return to the literary world. This should not be regarded as a sign of the liberalization of the Stalinist regime, but merely as an indication of stabilization after the turbulent period of 1932.

Settling Scores with the Past: Wiener on Markish and Bergelson

Wiener's review of the poem "Dem balegufts toyt" ("The Death of a Kulak") by Perets Markish is probably his most problematic text.²⁵ Written in the style of ruthless Stalinist criticism, it can perhaps be dismissed as a compromise with the system or a regrettable error of judgment. Yet, however reprehensible some of Wiener's statements are, the article is instructive in the ways it puts insightful literary analysis to the service of the totalitarian regime. It may also be regarded as a strategic move: by casting a literary character as an imagined enemy of the Soviet regime, Wiener presents Markish, the author and Wiener's friend, as a staunch defender of that regime. Wiener opens his discussion by stating a paradox: the unsympathetic protagonist occupies practically the entire narrative space of the poem, and yet this poem is the most profound expression of Markish's communist commitment (321). Does this create a contradiction between the means and the ends, the artistically powerful negative image of the "anti-hero" and the positive message of communism?

The problem with this "satirical poem, written for the most part consistently in epic tone" might arise because traditionally the epic genre is associated with positive characters (322). This could create a stylistic dissonance, but Markish has resolved this difficulty by infusing the "epic tone" with "parodic self-mockery," following the examples of Voltaire, Goethe, and Heine, and turning the idyll into sarcasm. Markish occasionally resorts to naturalistic style to stress the animalistic, physical nature of his predatory character. By doing so, he breaks with the sentimental tradition of Yiddish literature, which tries to appeal to the sense of compassion and mercy through light irony and humor. Markish's use of biting satire evokes Mendele as its source, bypassing the gentle humor of Sholem Aleichem's "laughter through tears" and Markish's own elegiac style in the poem "Volin" ("Volhynia," 1920) (323). In his new work, Markish subverts the genre of idyll to expose its worthlessness (*nisl'tikeyt*).

Anshel is a former shtetl shop owner who loses his livelihood under Soviet conditions and decides to join the settlers in agricultural colonies.

However, unable to reform his exploitative essence and adjust to the new life, he turns into a kulak, the class enemy of socialism in the newly founded Jewish village. Anshel hates the new life and remains loyal to the old traditions, believing himself "smarter" than other Jews who dutifully become toilers. In the end, he falls victim to his own avarice. As a kolkhoz horsekeeper, he is ordered to take the corpse of a sick horse outside the village and burn it. Out of greed, he decides to keep its tail, gets infected, and dies in great pain (325). Although Wiener questions the ideological effectiveness of such a "self-destructive" ending, he decides that it does not "diminish the poem as a mobilizing force for the daily struggle against the last remnants of the class enemy" (325). Anshel embodies the vanishing past that tries in vain to resist the progress of Soviet society. Life shakes him off without much effort, and therefore the poem has little dramatic action and few dramatic events (325). Markish does not portray Anshel as an evil man: he even "leaves in many patriarchal-idyllic details with which Sholem Asch and Bialik embellished the shtetl kulak" (326). Without resorting to caricature, Markish shows us a "representative exemplar" of the exploitative social class, in accordance with the requirement of socialist realism to portray the "typical."

Wiener notes that the moral critique of avarice and egoism has a long tradition in world literature. But this critique has usually been aimed at excess, not at the principle of private ownership per se. Literature in capitalist society could not be consistent in its criticism of this principle because it is the economic foundation of that society. At their very best, the bourgeois realists such as Balzac could offer a glimpse of the "fragments of the future," in which private property would be eradicated by the proletariat (328). Bourgeois literature could expose the contradictions of its society but not offer a solution. The educational task of Soviet literature is to bring the old aesthetic sensitivity of realism into line with the dominant class consciousness by exposing the "proprietary consciousness" (328). For the Soviet writer, social critique is no longer sufficient; his task is to create a positive image of the new man as an embodiment of "the image of the future."

Anshel's attachment to private property has an element of nostalgic attachment to the Jewish tradition. He is searching for an escape route into his beloved past from the hostile present, oblivious to the dangerously

widening gap between the two epochs. In this he reminds Wiener of the pathetic character of Don Quixote, trying to revive extinct practices and sensitivities (329). But, whereas the original Don Quixote was a harmless romantic guardian of the chivalric tradition in proto-capitalist society, Anshel, a “Don Quixote of the property principle,” personifies the evil in capitalist society and is far from a naive idealist (329–30). Anshel is not a tragic character because his downfall is a justified and logical “collapse of nothingness into nothing” (*tsefalung fun der nishtikayt in nisht*) (331), whereas tragedy can occur only where there is unjust or unjustified suffering or unhappiness. The notion of tragedy, Wiener argues, elaborating on his essay on socialist-realist style, is not applicable to a misfortune that is “logical, natural, or individual”—such a misfortune can be described as “terrible” or “awful,” but not “tragic.” The decline of Anshel as a representative of the doomed social class is fully justified and natural, like Markish’s own image in the poem of felling a dry tree (332). Although Anshel is not a kulak (*bal-guf*) in the narrow sense of the word (indeed, there must have been very few Jewish kulaks in reality, given the small number of Jews involved in agriculture), he stands for all exploiters, including Jewish petty merchants, “*kremershe kulaks*” (333).

For Wiener, the story of Anshel illustrates Stalin’s thesis that class struggle intensifies on the way to socialism. A hapless old-style Jew turns into a class enemy when all other Jews become conscious Soviet citizens. Anshel has no freedom of choice and is doomed to extinction. Unfit for class transformation, he is doomed to perceive reality through the prism of private ownership, trying to assign a monetary value to every piece of collective property, even the pigs, whose fat can be exchanged for money. Anshel’s religious belief in Jewish chosenness is the “product of national oppression of Jews in various countries which took the form of internal compensation for their enslaved and humiliated position.” In the Tsarist empire this oppression became especially fierce, causing a nationalist reaction. As a result, all Jewish movements, from socialism to Hasidism, joined in celebrating Jewish “spirituality” (*rukhnies*) as opposed to “goyish” materialism (*gashmies*) (335–36).

By portraying Anshel’s “animal hatred of socialism,” Markish presents an “encyclopedic picture of this ethnographic-religious ‘spirituality,’” exposing its “organic ties” with the “bestial” materialistic egoism

of the small property owner and laying bare class foundation of religious nationalism (336). Wiener remarks in a footnote that the poem can serve as a source of ethnographic material for a lexicon on Jewish religious practice and customs. The figure of a Jewish kulak, like a Jewish bandit (*gazlen*), might elicit an ironic smile, but Markish demonstrates the reality of this specific type of class enemy, using his biting sarcasm and bitter satire (337). The nostalgic-sentimental lyrical voice is reserved for parody. Anshel remembers the past as sweet, but Markish subverts this idyll and exposes it as a dark and bitter reality (340).

Wiener finds a number of faults with the poem: it has little dramatic action, and descriptions and direct speech predominate. Furthermore, it consists of individual episodes loosely strung together and so lacks an overall plot. This particular weakness indicates that Markish has not yet fully absorbed the reality of the new society (341). The schematic composition makes the ending less convincing, and the symbolic meaning of Anshel's death is not justified by the logic of the plot development. The final episode, where Anshel cuts off the sick horse's tail and gets infected, reveals no new aspects of his character (342). The rough naturalistic depiction of the decomposing body of the horse is "weirdly and sickeningly perverse" (*meshunedik-krenklekh pervers*). Wiener suggests that Markish should have removed this episode from the mundane context of everyday reality and transposed it into a different realm that would emphasize the symbolic significance of the event.

As a result, the poem is closer to a parable (*moshl*) than to a truly realistic work (343). This shortcoming stems from Markish's penchant for the grotesque and hyperbole, which was particularly strong in his early work. As Wiener remarks, friends sometimes joke about Markish that he depicts Jews eating onions with herring or Ukrainians eating watermelons, as Homer portrays a battle. Markish is not always able to control the exuberance of his rich and idiomatic language that originates, like the language of Sholem Aleichem, in the genuine spoken language of the folk (346). Every "genuinely great" style has its own way of simplifying the complexity of reality by paring off extraneous details and exposing the essential content of the phenomena (347), and poetry is particularly sensitive to the musical and associative potential of a particular word.

In his detailed analysis of Markish's poem, Wiener sets a new tone for Yiddish critical discourse, based on the clear artistic and ideological principles he had formulated in his essays on socialist realism in the previous year. Yiddish socialist-realist literature must do justice to the historical importance of the "most powerful, most decisive transformations" in the whole of human history (350). Its style must be based on the classical aesthetic principles of artistic economy, unity of action and composition, and the conscious choice of the "essential" and "typical" aspects of reality as opposed to the "accidental" and "extraneous." Wiener now emerges as the leading critical authority on socialist-realist discourse in Yiddish literature. He can no longer be accused of not appreciating proletarian literature because this literature has become firmly incorporated into the broader framework of socialist realism. That new framework enables Wiener not only to promote new works by Soviet Yiddish authors, but also to revise the pre-Soviet legacy and incorporate its "progressive" elements into the Soviet canon.

In accordance with the doctrine of socialist realism, Soviet Yiddish literature becomes a natural heir to the "progressive" tradition of earlier periods. Wiener conceptualizes this continuity in his short essay on Bergelson, written on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the beginning of the writer's literary career.²⁶ Wiener focuses on the evolution of Bergelson's characters and style, from his early story "Der toyber" ("The Deaf Man," 1909?) to his final, autobiographical novel *Baym Dniepr* (*At the Dnieper*, vol. 1, 1932; vol. 2, 1940). In "Der toyber," Bergelson depicts the tragedy of a worker's consciousness being obscured by the oppressive social order, the tragedy of "creative folk in the bourgeois society." He does this by portraying the "uncanny" (Wiener uses the actual Freudian term, *unheymlakh*) destructive act of a deaf worker turning his anger against a hapless miller rather than his real enemy, the capitalist exploiter.

This story sets the tone for the whole of Bergelson's pre-revolutionary period, which reaches its culmination in the novel *Nokh alemen* (*The End of Everything*, 1913). Wiener disagrees with the widespread reading of the novel and its heroine Mirele as a Yiddish version of *Madame Bovary*. He views Mirele as a female version of the Bergelsonian type of an *intelligent*, who hates the bourgeois environment and despises

its philistinism but sees no way out. This impasse finds its stylistic expression in the contrast between the “dreamy poetry” of nature and the “sharp satiric undertones” of the portrayal of a gray and meaningless human existence (46). Contrary to the majority of Yiddish writers of that time, Bergelson never allowed himself to be misled by petit-bourgeois and nationalist illusions. Bergelson’s new hero evolves slowly during the post-revolutionary period from the civil war novellas to the novel *Midas-hadin* (*Measure of Justice*, 1929). Now the symbolic intensity of the new revolutionary character achieves harmony with the powerful metaphoric images of nature. *Baym Dniepr* is a further step in Bergelson’s artistic development. This is a bildungsroman similar to Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, a synthetic portrait of the generation born in the 1880s and maturing in the years of the 1905–7 revolution. The style is simpler, concentrated on the “essence” (*tokh*), and it avoids the exaggerated victimization of *Midas-hadin* (49–50).

The Poetry of Socialism

Wiener’s most substantial piece of literary criticism, the essay “Lirik un sotsializm” (“Poetry and Socialism”), surveys and evaluates the achievements of Soviet Yiddish poetry over twenty years of its existence.²⁷ Wiener begins by reiterating his idea of “genuine poetry” as a concentrated expression of the “deepest, noblest, and most elevated feelings of the people” (477). “Spiritual inspiration” (*bagaysterung*) is a necessary condition of any poetry, without which it turns into boring “prose,” as happens to “bourgeois” Yiddish poetry when it plays about with meaningless psychological “*khelyndlekh*.” Yiddish bourgeois poetry, Wiener argues, has cut its ties not only with the “nurturing forces” of the folk, but also with the progressive poetic traditions of the American proletarian poets and the Haskalah.

Only Soviet Yiddish poetry is capable of restoring that vital connection between literature and folk by overcoming and revising past traditions and legacies and bringing “great content, great subjects, great motifs, great problems” back into Yiddish literature (478). It has created new genres for Yiddish, such as epic and children’s poetry,

and developed the pre-revolutionary traditions of political and satiric poetry. The new revolutionary message was expressed by the very last poems of Osher Shvartsman before his death in the civil war and has become the foundation of a new Soviet literary tradition (480). This new trend of poetic engagement with politics has been taken up by the younger poets, who have developed their own styles of political poetry, such as Kvitko's folk symbolism and Markish's ecstatic lyricism (481–82).

Markish's poetry has evolved from the lyrical mode in the direction of the epic, even though lyric elements are still present in his larger epic works. Markish anchors his epic narrative in his immediate emotional response to political events (as an example, Wiener quotes an episode with little children pleading with the Soviet court to "trample and crush" (*tsetret zey un farnikht*) the "disgusting worms (*paskudne verem*) of Trotsky's and Bukharin's gang"), whereas Kvitko tries to "convey feelings in their development," showing the formation of the complex web of emotional relationships between the poet and the external world of events and objects (484). In his poems addressed to Stalin and the military commander Voroshilov, Kvitko imagines himself as a child eager to follow the example of the great leaders (485).

Wiener believes that in times of great historic upheaval, people develop a special sensitivity to greatness and pathos and express it in elevated and inspirational poetry, which often does not suit common bourgeois tastes (486–87). Bourgeois aesthetics dislikes pathos but for Soviet literature, as indeed for all literatures produced at similar times of upheaval, from ancient Greece and biblical Israel to revolutionary Europe, pathos is a natural way of greeting the birth of a new reality: "Our Soviet poetry is often *hymnic*. It is not afraid of lofty, festive words because they are appropriate for the great historic moment, because those words are filled with genuine social and personal content" (487). The social and personal spheres overlap so closely in the Soviet Union that every public event generates an immediate and powerful personal, emotional response—an expression of love for the socialist fatherland or hatred for the "enemies of the people"—deepening and broadening the common concept of human emotion (490).

Socialism breaks down social barriers between individuals, as well

as between an individual and society, which in turn erases borders between different genres and styles in poetry. The traditional “bourgeois” oppositions between emotions and thoughts, nature and culture, individual and society are no longer relevant in socialist culture (491), an idea that Wiener illustrates by examples from Soviet poets. Oral forms of folk creativity in the Soviet Union also engage with politics. Soviet Yiddish folklore is free of traditional Yiddish melancholy and celebrates the joy of new life. To illustrate this claim, Wiener mentions a “folk song,” supposedly recorded in Bobruisk, which turns the traditional motif of a lonely winter tree abandoned by birds into a celebration of kolkhoz life. Wiener now regards as erroneous his contention in his 1931 essay (for which he was criticized by his colleague, the Russian folklore scholar Sokolov, during the review of the Department of Yiddish Language and Literature) that oral forms of folk creativity would soon be replaced by written literature. In the “general upsurge (*oyfshlayg*) of our culture and art, oral forms of folk creativity also blossom” (501).

The category of the sublime has a special place in Soviet poetry, especially in its political variety. Bourgeois aesthetics, trying to compromise with the unjust nature of a society based on exploitation, sees this category as problematic and often banishes the sublime from the realm of social reality to the realm of nature, turning nature into an object of tourism. Only in socialist society can sublime feelings, such as admiration for great personalities, historical events, and social phenomena, be brought into real life (502). Similarly, unconscious feelings and spontaneous emotions have become part of the public sphere in socialist society, producing a mixed—lyric-epic—genre in Soviet poetry (513). The penetration of social reality into the sphere of the most intimate emotions, the traditional domain of lyrical poetry, makes Soviet poetry particularly original and innovative (505). This process began after the October revolution but was not completed until the late 1930s. In the 1920s, poetry was already Soviet in spirit and reflected revolutionary reality, but had not yet bridged the gap between the public and the private, remaining “problematic” in its approach to the rift between ideas and emotions (506–7). Only with socialist realism has Yiddish poetry achieved a complete harmony between language, style, and meaning (521–22).

Wiener distinguishes three major stylistic trends in Soviet Yiddish poetry: the intellectual-meditative (*gedanklekh-nokhtrakhterish*), represented by Hofshiteyn, Halkin, and Kushnirov; the topical-narrative (*suzhetish-dertseylerish*)—Kvitko, Fefer, and Zelik Akselrod; and the emotional-spontaneous (*bagaystert-umitlbare*)—Markish, Fininberg, and Reznik—although these trends are not mutually exclusive, and each poet's creativity can fit into more than one category (517). Wiener gives the example of Fininberg's poem on the occasion of the death of Moyshe Leyb Halpern, the leading American Yiddish modernist, who in the early 1920s was closely affiliated with the communist newspaper *Frayhayt*. Fininberg's poem combines a clear narrative structure with deep emotional engagement and sober critical analysis. The Soviet poet grieves the untimely death of his talented colleague, who was unable to withstand the pressure of capitalist society and fell victim to its inhumane conditions, but also argues against the bourgeois interpretation of Halpern's poetic legacy by "business aesthetes" (519).

In socialist society, poetry has reached the stage where the objective world of outside reality and the subjective world of individual feeling become one. In the introduction to *Die Lyrik der Kabbalah* and in *Von den Symbolen*, Wiener identified this stage with the spirit of ancient oriental poetry, in particular biblical prophecy. Now the same phenomenon is ascribed to the "poetry of socialism," with its miraculous ability to dismantle the barrier between object and subject. Life under socialism becomes a mystical experience, an ongoing *Erlebnis* that transforms the poet's self into a "water mirror," responsive to the slightest movements of the political atmosphere (505). Comparing Wiener's conceptualization of socialist realism to his earlier German writings, one cannot help noticing their common roots in expressionist aesthetics, despite Wiener's radical rejection of expressionism. "Lirik un sotsializm," unlike Wiener's essays of 1934–35, makes no reference to Marxist theory. Instead it repeatedly invokes such concepts as intuition, ecstasy, and dream, concepts central to the modernist discourse of the early twentieth century.

The death motif, a prominent feature of expressionist discourse, acquires a new significance in the light of socialist-realist utopianism. Although Wiener acknowledges that "death will always remain tragic," he believes that the fear of death will not dominate the socialist worldview

the way it has done in other ages. Under socialism, the old relationship between life and death is reversed: "it is not life that becomes incorporated (*ayngeglidert*) into death, but conversely, death, with all its tragedy, becomes incorporated into life" (510). Accordingly, the problem of relations between generations receives a clear resolution. In Markish's poetry, the figures of parents are part of the conflict between the past and the present: "the poetic category of 'father' sometimes symbolizes the past, yesterday. On the one side there is the old 'father,' who prepares himself for the 'other world,' on the other side—the vivacious and active (*broyzike shprudldike*) life of our present" (512).

In the absence of personal evidence, one is left to guess what meaning Wiener himself gave to his theoretical speculations on socialist realism. Today some of his ideas—particularly the representation of socialist realism as the supreme achievement of world culture—might appear bizarre or even eerie but in the second half of the 1930s, they probably made some practical sense. Wiener's new conceptual construction—unlike the more confrontational one of the early 1930s—precluded any divisions along political lines that could potentially bring about political persecution. By emphasizing the unity of the public and personal sphere, Wiener pre-empted the possibility of dangerous accusations of "decadent individualism," which was potentially linked with "bourgeois nationalism." All of the poets who were reprimanded for their political errors or aesthetic deviations in the late 1920s and early 1930s, such as Markish, Kvitko, Halkin, Hofshteyn, Akselrod, and Reznik, were now models of socialist-realist style. Their ideological deviations were left behind in the transition from the revolution to Stalinist socialism. Wiener did not deny that some of their works had certain stylistic imperfections, but these were overshadowed by the most important achievement of Soviet Yiddish poetry, the newly achieved harmony between the inner and the outer world, which reflected the near perfection of socialist society. Using the conceptual apparatus of early twentieth-century modernism with its utopian aspirations, Wiener skillfully constructed a theoretical foundation of the Soviet literary canon with the Kiev group at its core. This canonic structure would outlive its members and remain largely in place until the demise of the Soviet literary system in the late 1980s.

Constructing the Soviet Yiddish Canon

In the second part of his unpublished prospectus of Yiddish literary history, Wiener deals with the Soviet period. He begins with a periodization that follows the order of official Soviet chronology, with its periods of revolution, civil war, reconstruction, industrialization, collectivization, and the “flourishing” of socialist society.²⁸ The first two periods, from 1918 to 1920, were dominated by the search for new poetic voices free from decadent nationalism; they were followed by the emergence of the new Soviet prose during 1921–25. At that stage, both poetry and prose dealt with the representation of the revolution and war, the problem of the shtetl, particularly the problem of overcoming nationalist, individualist, and idealist trends, and symbolist motifs in its representation. During the periods of 1926–29 and 1930–34, Soviet Yiddish literature focused on the portrayal of industrialization and collectivization, the adjustment of the Jewish intelligentsia to the Soviet regime and the struggle against the negative consequences of the New Economic Policy, as well as new Soviet literature for children. This was also a period of an intense group struggle between RAPP and *Boy*, which was ended by the Party resolution of 1932. The period that Wiener calls “flourishing,” 1935–37, showed a steady growth of the Soviet epic and lyric poetry, the historical novel (Bergelson, Nister, Wiener, and Lipman-Levin), and the general glorification of Soviet life in a simple and accessible style.

In accordance with his periodization, Wiener constructs a canon of the most important names with a brief description of their major contributions to Soviet Yiddish literature. The canon opens with Osher Shvartsman, followed by the two cohorts of poets: the senior group of Hofshiteyn, Kvitko, Markish—all of them entered the literary world before 1917—and the younger, post-revolutionary cohort of Kushnirov, Fininberg, Halkin, Fefer, and Akselrod. The corresponding “senior” prose group consisted of Bergelson and Der Nister, while the younger one consisted of Godiner, M. Daniel, Meir Alberton, Hirsh Orland, and Note Lurye. Thus, with the sole exceptions of Akselrod and, to some extent, Halkin (born in Belorussia, though he started his literary life in Kiev), the Soviet Yiddish canon consisted of the Ukrainian writers, many of whom had moved to Moscow in the 1930s.

By the 1930s, Shvartsman had become the recognized “founder of Soviet Yiddish poetry.” The only deceased author in the Soviet Yiddish canon, he occupied a special place as a link between the old and new periods. He was awarded this privilege due to his heroic death in the civil war. Almost all the other writers no longer living at the time were victims of the Stalinist terror campaign, and their names were automatically removed from the canon at the moment of their arrest. This explains the absence of Moyshe Kulbak and Izi Kharik, two major writers from Belorussia. Akselrod, too, would be arrested in 1940 and executed in 1941. In a commemorative volume on the twentieth anniversary of Shvartsman’s death, Wiener published a short essay in which he celebrated the poet’s “pathos” and “search for truth,” while at the same time alleging a whole range of literary influences on his work, including Bialik, Goethe, and the Polish symbolist poet Leopold Staff. Nevertheless, Wiener insisted, Shvartsman’s form was original and sound.²⁹ No longer alive, Shvartsman was permitted to combine “decadent” influences with a proto-Soviet poetic identity. He showed the way to future Soviet poets, introducing such themes as Soviet patriotism, the communist dream, and love for the folk and hatred for the class enemy, but his poetics remained largely pre-revolutionary. His immediate followers, Hofshiteyn, Kvitko, and Markish, built upon his revolutionary legacy and were less affected by the “decadent” elements, although they all suffered from a certain degree of temporary ideological “disorientation” during and after the civil war. Wiener emphasized Russian and Ukrainian influences on the post-revolutionary Yiddish poets, from Pushkin to Blok and Vladimir Mayakovsky, which replaced the impact of Hebrew, Polish, and German authors—indeed, in the case of Markish, Wiener claimed to detect specifically “anti-Bialik motifs.”³⁰ The subsequent cohort is even less problematic according to Soviet ideological and stylistic standards. Their literary development is presented as a gradual mastering of new themes, genres, and stylistic idioms.

Turning to prose, Wiener analyzes Bergelson’s evolution toward mastery of the revolutionary theme, which culminates in the autobiographical epic *Baym Dniepr*. When dealing with *Der Nister*, Wiener glosses all of the problematic issues, presenting his artistic development as a steady movement toward realism, with its climax, as in Bergelson,



Figure 7. Meir Wiener with his daughter Julia in Malakhovka near Moscow, 1939. Used with the permission of Julia Wiener.

in a socio-historical epic novel, *Mishpokhe Mashber*. Wiener's selection of canonical prose works, including Godiner's novel *Der mentsh mitn biks* (*The Man with a Gun*, 1928), reflects his bias toward large, epic, historical representations of what Katerina Clark calls the "mythic Great Time" of the revolution and civil war.³¹ For him, the epic novels of Bergelson and *Der Nister* hark back to the period of Mendele and Sholem Aleichem and re-evaluate the past from a new, communist perspective, thus concluding the cycle rather than opening up new perspectives for Yiddish literature. What is remarkable in Wiener's outline of Soviet Yiddish literary history is not only what he includes but also what he omits. Wiener seems to be less interested in works dealing with contemporary Soviet reality, even with such politically correct themes as industrialization, collectivization, and the Jewish settlement of Birobidzhan. The absence of Kipnis probably indicates that this writer, arguably the most talented of the younger generation, was unable, despite Wiener's hopes, to overcome the limitations of petit-bourgeois mentality and expand his horizon beyond the family, and did not meet the criterion of social significance for inclusion in the canon. Also omitted, for obvious reasons, was most of the work of Bergelson, *Der Nister*, Kvitko, Markish, and Hofshiteyn written in emigration.

In her study of the socialist-realist novel, Clark makes an interesting observation about what she calls "modal schizophrenia" of socialist-realist literature:

In most Soviet novels one finds a whole series of seemingly contradictory general features. To name a few: the novel is traditional/it is modern; its structure is simple/it is complex; its characters are individuals and are given psychological portraits/they are depersonalized or barely disguised sociological-ideological categories, or they are emblematically virtuous.³²

Clark describes this feature as a "proclivity for making sudden, unmotivated transitions from realistic discourse to the mythic or utopian."³³ To interpret this phenomenon, she turns to Mikhail Bakhtin's distinction between the epic, as a genre that "depicts a completed, perfected world," and the novel, "as the genre of an imperfect, incomplete world," with the former corresponding to utopia and the latter to

reality.³⁴ She finds roots of this “modal schizophrenia” in the “peculiar Stalinist cosmology” of the 1930s: “the Stalinist novel was supported by a world view that tended to annul time, to write off that unbridgeable distance between its own kind of absolute epic past and the present.”³⁵

I would suggest that this juxtaposition of reality and utopia, of “what really is” and “what ought to be” is part of the early twentieth-century modernist worldview, which found its expression in various ideological and aesthetic systems, and is not limited to socialist realism. This opposition has its parallels in the metaphorical contrasts between “abstraction” and “empathy,” as well as between the utopian “orient” and the realistic “occident,” which informed much of expressionist writing. The opposition between the concrete socio-historical category of class struggle and the utopian dream of socialism was not ignored by the Soviet theorists of socialist realism. To bridge this gap, the critics of the Lukács circle introduced the concept of *narodnost*’ (plebeianism), which helped to circumvent the problem of historical class determinism. As David Pike explains, Mikhail Lifshits in his 1936 debate with Nusinov expanded the notion of the “class struggle in literature” so that it included “the struggle of plebeian tendencies against all that obstructed historical progress,” regardless of the concrete historical moment.³⁶ One of the most thoughtful and provocative Soviet thinkers, who nevertheless always remained a staunch Marxist, Lifshits made his name as the main interpreter of Lukács for a Russian audience and as a consistent opponent of Nusinov and his followers in the debates of 1932–36. Lifshits criticized those “vulgar materialists” for their class-deterministic approach to culture, which denied the *narod* any role in cultural creativity. The complex relationship between the concepts of class struggle and *narodnost*’ in socialist-realist discourse was perceptively analyzed by Lifshits in his lecture at the Moscow Institute of History, Philosophy, and Literature (IFLI) in 1938.³⁷

Lifshits states that “genuine art is always ‘*narodnoe*’ (people’s art),” arguing further that there is no “direct correlation between the development of high art and the general development of the class society and its material basis.” He distinguishes three historical stages of *narodnost*’: the first, the “primitive” stage *narodnost*’, is rooted in folklore and the “primitive consciousness of the masses”; the second, “classical”

stage, produces a short-lived but highly influential culture of “aristocratic democracy”; finally, *narodnost*’ acquires a truly democratic and revolutionary character in the third stage, when it changes into the worldview of the new, incoming class of the progressive bourgeoisie. This last stage presents a particular problem for the ideological project of Enlightenment, with its universalistic aspirations and its contempt for the “primitivism” of folk culture. Only genuine realist literature is capable of rising above this contradiction and reflecting society in all its aspects, from the upper to the lower strata. Its ability to do so is rooted in the transcendental category of *narodnost*’, which provides a particular historical episode with a meaning that surpasses the confines of class structure. Class struggle, according to Lifshits, cannot be understood merely as a battle between different social groups defending their economic interests. It only has meaning “in the perspective of the final outcome,” that is, the ultimate victory of the dictatorship of the proletariat and elimination of classes. Thus, although the consciousness of a particular class is determined by its concrete socio-economic situation, the method this class uses to achieve its historical goals can be more universal, powerful, and progressive than its worldview. Therefore, a class analysis of literature should proceed in two stages. First, one must establish the position of a particular author within the actual class structure of his society. Second, one then establishes points of difference between his literary works and the norms of his class consciousness. The greater the writer, the deeper the conflict between his imagination as an artist and his worldview as a member of his class. This is the point where *narodnost*’ comes on stage:

[W]here an artist confronts his class, where he is great in spite of his class nature, and where between him and his class there emerges a contradiction which takes his thought beyond the ideological class boundaries—there it is impossible for a writer not to rely on some other spiritual material, other ideological elements, which come from the people, impossible not to reflect the aspirations and needs of the people.³⁸

In the late 1930s, the concept of *narodnost*’ acquires a transcendental meaning as an eternal attribute of the *narod* that exists outside the realm of concrete history. At that time, the concept of *folkstimlekhkayt*, the

Yiddish equivalent of *narodnost*, which is equally difficult to render in English, comes to play an increasingly important role in Wiener's thinking. As we have seen, it informed his concept of Yiddish literary history, as well as his understanding of contemporary Soviet Yiddish literature, enabling him to construct a uniform tradition from the Haskalah to socialist realism. As we shall see in the following chapters, it also had a great impact on his imagination as a creative writer and a memoirist.

Eight History and Fiction

Wiener and Lukács on the Historical Novel

Wiener's interest in the genre of the historical novel was both practical and theoretical. He developed his concept of historical fiction within the theoretical framework of socialist-realist discourse that was outlined in the previous chapter. Another important factor was Yiddishist theory and practice in Poland and America, to which Wiener responded with scathing criticism. Both contexts are equally important for understanding Wiener's critical and artistic mindsets. The most coherent exposition of his views on the historical novel can be found in his essay on the popular Russian historical novelist Aleksey Pavlovich Chapygin (1870–1937), the author of two novels of Russian history set in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹ This essay, which appeared in 1940 in the leading Soviet literary monthly *Novyi mir*, was to remain Wiener's only critical foray into the field of Russian literature.

The essay opens with a theoretical statement echoing *Von den Symbolen*: “The historical theme in general is a kind of a gigantic metaphor, through which the author expresses his attitude to the events and very essence of his time.”² To adjust this view to Marxism, Wiener defines the metaphor of the historical theme in socio-historical rather than aesthetic or mystical terms. He argues that historical events are important not for their own sake but only in their relation to the present: “a poetic narrative about the past is at the same time, to a greater or lesser extent, a story of the present” (218). The genuinely positive hero of historical fiction can only be an epic character who embodies the “most exalted aspirations of the people.” This means that the plot of a “positive” historical novel

must be based not on a romantic story of individual passions but on the “social aspirations of the period depicted” (219). The true aspirations of the time, Wiener continues, are to be found in the consciousness of the suppressed underclass rather than in that of the ruling elite. To bolster his argument, Wiener invokes Marx’s idea that the social energy for change in the late medieval period was located in the urban plebs. Wiener takes this argument to the conclusion that a genuine folk character is both national and universal. A plebeian protagonist serves as a pivot for the entire novel, with the other characters revolving around him and personifying the variety of social types of that age. The authority of the epic folk hero is rooted in “his ability, by means of free, just, resolute, and steadfast action, to overcome the contradictions of life, danger, and death” (222). The “naïve” folkloric idea of heroism produces an “epic” literary quality, harmonizing the emotions with the intellect, and engaging the reader with the characters and their struggle for redemption.

One of the features of this naive style is its unmediated way of depicting cruelty and other passions that need not, however, degenerate into a decadent naturalism. The portrayal of the extreme forms of passion elucidates the most dramatic qualities of the folk character. Propping up his point with an appropriate quote from *Das Kapital*, Wiener points out the progressive role that was played by paupers and beggars in the historical transition from the Middle Ages to early modernity. It was that underclass rather than the more privileged social group of artisans and craftsmen who gave birth to the modern proletariat. Similarly, it was the picaresque novel rather than more “cultured” genres that gave birth to the modern European novel. Chapygin’s achievement, Wiener concludes, lies in his ability to incorporate picaresque elements into the Soviet historical novel and to provide them with a new ideological meaning. In Chapygin’s works, “the old picaresque novel receives a new development in the form of the revolutionary Odyssey of the rebellious medieval peasantry and urban plebs” (228).

Wiener’s concept, of the plebeian underclass as the primary motive of historical progress and of the vagabond intellectual and artist as the voice of this force, can be interpreted as a response to Lukács’s theory of the historical novel, which had been developed during the second half of the 1930s.³ In contrast to Wiener, Lukács gave little weight to

the masses as a historical force. In his view, the masses possessed no historical consciousness until, for the first time in history, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars shocked Europe and awakened the sense of historic change among its nations, offering them “a concrete opportunity to understand that their entire existence is historically conditioned, to see history as something that intrudes into their everyday lives.”⁴ This awakening of historical consciousness, Lukács argues, gave rise to two opposite but complementary ideological paradigms, nationalism and universalistic humanism: “on the one hand, the national element gets connected with the problems of social transformation; on the other hand, an awareness that the history of each nation is merely a part of world history spreads outward in a widening circle.”⁵ Contrary to Lukács, Wiener regards both types of historical awareness, the national and the universal, not as an ideological product of a new historical experience, but as the inherent feature of mass consciousness, something that every national community possesses naturally. These “hidden qualities and abilities of the folk character” contribute to the “national realization of the advanced aspirations of the whole of humanity.”⁶

Another difference between Wiener and Lukács has to do with the role and place of the central character in the historical novel. Lukács’s favorite historical novelist is Sir Walter Scott, who, he claims, introduced the “mediocre” protagonist as a mediator between different forces in the novel, enabling the author to maintain equilibrium in the portrayal of the different sides of the historical struggle.⁷ Wiener admires Scott’s use of folk poetics but criticizes his idealized portrayal of Scottish nobility, a “gang of perjurers, thieves and bandits,” as noble folk heroes.⁸ Wiener’s notion of the “epic hero” as the embodiment of the eternal energy of the masses is the opposite of Lukács’s concept of a “mediating” character. For Lukács, the task of the historical novel is to show how the dominant conflicts of a particular age shaped people’s characters and affected their actions, rather than to portray extraordinary historic personalities.⁹ By depicting ordinary people in ordinary circumstances, a skillful writer can re-create the authentic atmosphere of an age. Wiener, on the contrary, privileges the extraordinary character who is capable of overcoming the limitations imposed on his freedom by the historical

forces and conditions of his age. According to Wiener, such a character is to be found not at the top or in the middle of the social pyramid, but at the very bottom.

As a Hegelian thinker with a penchant for authoritarian leadership, Lukács divides humanity into two categories. The overwhelming majority of people are ordinary “maintainers” (*Erhaltende*), capable merely of reproducing the existing order but unable to change its course, whereas a few heroic “world-historic” (*welthistorische*) personalities have the ability to affect the course of history by forming or leading mass movements.¹⁰ Lukács believes that the protagonist of a historical novel can only be a “maintainer.” Due to the limitations of its genre, the historical novel cannot adequately represent the grandiose intellectual and practical activity of a “world-historic” leader. Literature can show history only through its reflections on the surface of ordinary reality, the way life is perceived by ordinary people.¹¹ Unlike Lukács, Wiener has little interest in heroic characters of the “world-historic” scale. He believes that the energy for historical change is concentrated in the masses rather than in individuals. In his unpublished “Notitsn vegn historishn roman” (“Notes on the Historical Novel,” 1930s) Wiener criticizes non-Soviet Yiddish writers for creating a national Jewish version of the “world-historic” character: “a central figure of contemporary historical themes in capitalism abroad is the historical ‘national Jewish’ ‘hero’—the ‘saint’ in different shapes.”¹² For Wiener, an example of the ideal Jewish folk character is Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye the dairyman, and this is also a type he tried to re-create in his own fiction.

Wiener and Lukács hold different views on the relevance of images of the past for the present. Lukács believes that the historical novel must “bring to life the past as the prehistory of the present, bring to life artistically, those historical forces that have, in the course of a long development, formed our life the way it is now. A genuine artist makes this process as tangible and visible as if we were experiencing it ourselves.”¹³ According to Lukács, most historical fiction, from the nineteenth-century romantics to the early twentieth-century German modernists, suffers from what he calls “psychological modernization,” the anachronistic presentation of the minds of historical figures as if they were one’s contemporaries. Wiener is less interested in the dynamics of historical

process than in certain constant metaphorical structures that link the past with the present and show us the way to the future.

Like Lukács, Wiener is critical of “psychological modernization”; however, he proposes, instead, a different kind of artistic modernization, which one can call “metaphorical modernization.” What Wiener values in historical fiction is the ability to discern timeless symbolic images behind historical reality, not to “bring to life the past as the prehistory of the present.” For Wiener, who in his early works rejected Hegel’s dialectical view of history in favor of Goethe’s “morphological” concept, metaphors constitute the symbolic foundation of reality. In contrast, Lukács regarded symbols and metaphors as technical devices that help to produce an artistic illusion of immediate reality and recreate the image of life. For Wiener, metaphors and symbols are metaphysical entities that transcend historical reality; for Lukács, they are merely projections of infinite reality onto the finite medium of literature.

Yiddish Historical Imagination

While most of Wiener’s Yiddish scholarship concerns folklore and the literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, his historical fiction reconstructs the events of the seventeenth century, a period of little interest to Soviet Jewish scholarship. But outside the Soviet Union, that dramatic age received considerable attention among Yiddish writers and scholars. In literature the tone was set by Sholem Asch. In his early play *Shabsey Tsvi* (*Shabbatai Zvi*, 1908), Asch brought on stage the Shabbatean movement that galvanized Jewish communities across Europe and the Middle East in 1665–66. In the novel *Afkidesh hashem* (*In Sanctification of the Name of God*, 1919), he vividly portrayed the devastation visited upon the Jews of Ukraine by the Cossack uprising led by Bohdan Khmelnytskyi.

Both works made clear references to contemporary events: in *Shabsey Tsvi*, the failure of the messianic promise of the 1905 Revolution, and in *Afkidesh hashem*, the pogroms of the civil war in Ukraine. The historical setting of the seventeenth-century Ukraine was merely a backdrop for

a contemporary tale of collective Jewish suffering. According to Ellen Kellman, "Asch apparently intended to draw a parallel between issues of Jewish power and powerlessness in mid-seventeenth-century Eastern Europe and in post-World War I Europe and America, thus seeking to warn contemporary Jewish leaders not to repeat the costly mistakes of their predecessors."¹⁴ Shabbateanism was also the theme of Isaac Bashevis Singer's debut novel *Der sotn in Goray* (*Satan in Goray*, 1935). As a number of interpreters have demonstrated, Singer's zesty portrayal of the spiritual and material degradation suffered by Polish Jewry as a consequence of their infatuation with messianic antinomianism is an allegory of the Jewish infatuation with the new, Marxist variety of messianism.¹⁵

The seventeenth century was also extensively studied by Jewish historians, particularly in surveys of Jewish literature by Max Erik, Israel Zinberg, and Max Weinreich. For Zinberg, this was the time of the transition of the center of Jewish culture from the Mediterranean Sephardic communities to Ashkenazic Poland. For Erik, that century brought the end of the open and liberal "shpilman" tradition in Yiddish literature and the beginning of the "ghettoization" of Jewish culture. Weinreich devoted a whole book to the events of the seventeenth century in Eastern Europe, *Shturemvint: Bilder fun der yidisher geschikhte in 17tn yorhundert* (*Stormy Winds: Pictures from Jewish History in the Seventeenth Century*, 1927), aimed at the growing Yiddish-speaking intelligentsia.

Weinreich's book promoted the intellectual and ideological agenda of the Yiddishist movement by providing it with a usable past. The first two parts offered an account of the two major crises in seventeenth-century Judaism, the Cossack uprisings and the Shabbatean movement, using a compilation of already available sources. In the third and fourth parts, entitled respectively "Kdoyshim in amolikn Poyln" ("Martyrs in Old Poland") and "Der Vilner blut-bilbl" ("The Vilna Blood Libel"), Weinreich introduced hitherto neglected material, Yiddish historical songs, presenting them as valuable historical sources. He argued that in those days, these songs functioned as a major vehicle for distribution of news, like modern newspapers: "There were still no newspapers then, not in the modern sense of the word, but the urge to inform the world about important events was every bit as strong as it is now. They

wouldn't write a telegram or an editorial about an edict, a fire, an expulsion, or slander, only a poem, to sing to a tune, which would be taken from another song that was already familiar."¹⁶

The use of Yiddish literary folklore as a historical source was part of the ideological agenda that attempted to distinguish the new emerging Yiddishist scholarship from the German *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Weinreich emphasized the significance of these previously neglected sources for raising the historical consciousness of East European Jewry: "Up till now, people paid almost no attention to those little books. The Sages of Israel [...] didn't have a proper interest in that sort of writing. They thought little of us eastern Jews, that we couldn't even speak German correctly, and, as a matter of course, they were not very interested in anything having to do with our *history*" (168). To appreciate the true value of Yiddish sources, one must possess the right kind of historical consciousness: "When an interest in their own past first arose in 'Jewish' [Yiddish-speaking] Jews, they realized that the historical songs were also of great value, and not only to the literary scholar, but also to the historian [...] sometimes it even turns out that the Yiddish song has survived as the only witness to historical experience" (169).

As the historian of Yiddishist scholarship Barry Trachtenberg explains, "Weinreich sketched a portrait of the development of Yiddish as a struggle of a language yearning to break free from the constraints imposed by the forces of religiosity on the one hand, and the hegemony of German on the other."¹⁷ Trachtenberg associates this view of Yiddish with the general ideological trend in the Yiddish scholarship of the time:

Yiddish scholars turned much of Jewish historiography on its head. They argued that although it took centuries to reach maturity, the modern Jewish nation was born concurrently with the Yiddish language. So it was not to ancient Israel that Yiddishists looked as their nation's cradle, nor to Mount Sinai or some distant Golden Age, but rather to the beginnings of Ashkenazic Jewry.[...] The Diaspora, the Yiddish language and its literature now occupied the axis around which the rest of Jewish history rotated.¹⁸

Meir Wiener shared the Yiddishist belief that Eastern Europe played the key role in Jewish history. But as a Marxist, he rejected the Yiddishist

concept of Ashkenazic Jewry as a uniform Yiddish-speaking nation free of internal conflict. Instead, in his historical studies he sought to identify and explore the moments of class struggle, regarding them as the main engine of historical progress. Contrary to Weinreich and other Yiddishists, Wiener emphasized the historical importance of internal conflicts and tensions over the ideal of national unity. He regarded culture as both a product of class struggle and a field on which this battle took place. In his scheme of things, the national dramas and tragedies, such as the Sabbatean movement or Khmelnytskyi's uprising, were historically less significant than the gradual socio-economic changes within the Jewish community in the course of its transition from the late feudal to the early capitalist mode of production.

Whereas the majority of Yiddishists, keen on extending their tradition as far back as possible, "located their origins in the centuries following the dawn of the second millennium when Jews who once spoke Romance languages moved into the Rhineland and started to utter what would later become recognizable as Yiddish,"¹⁹ Wiener placed the beginnings of the independent Yiddish culture much later, in seventeenth-century Eastern Europe: "We assert that a decisive turn in the development of the Yiddish language first took place in the seventeenth century, in those lands with a large and dense Jewish population where the connections with the German language were geographically disconnected. In that sense, conditions were most favorable in Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine."²⁰

The decisive role in Wiener's historical concept of Yiddish was played not by philological or linguistic facts but by social and political factors. Yiddish was able to develop from a German-Jewish dialect with a limited sphere of usage into a full-fledged language only outside German-speaking territory, where there was a cohesive mass of people speaking it as their first and often only language. But apart from this general statement, Wiener devoted no scholarly attention to the emergence of Yiddish culture in seventeenth-century East Europe. However, he vividly and competently depicted this epoch in his historical fiction, set in the two major Jewish communities in the Europe of that time, Cracow and Venice.

*Valenty Gulviets:*Satire of the *ger-tsedek* and *kidesh-hashem* Motifs

Among Wiener's unpublished Yiddish works of the pre-Soviet period is a historical novella titled *Valenty Gulviets* and dated "Vienna, May 1924."²¹ The handwritten text is clean and clear with no corrections and is apparently the final draft ready for publication. Although this novella is not mentioned in Wiener's available correspondence, it seems reasonable to assume that it was one of the works that he tried to have published (unsuccessfully) before his emigration to the Soviet Union. After arriving in the Soviet Union, Wiener revised and expanded this text considerably, turning it into a short novel titled *Kolev Ashkenazi*. The novel appeared in the first issue of the Moscow Yiddish almanac *Sovetish* (Wiener was a member of its editorial board) and was then published by the Emes press in Moscow in two different editions, the first in 1934 (168 pages) and the second in 1938 (254 pages). A Russian translation by B. Cherniak was prepared for publication in 1938, reached the galley-proof stage, but never appeared in print, for reasons which remain unclear. A copy of the proofs with Wiener's remarks has been preserved in his archives.

The original novella is a bizarre story of a mentally deranged Polish aristocrat, Valenty Gulviets, who first tries to rape a Jewish woman at his own wedding and then stabs her musician-husband Bromko. Haunted by what he takes to be the ghost of the dead Jew, Gulviets decides to convert to Judaism in order to break the spell. Disguised as a vagabond, he disappears among the shtetl Jews. In the meantime, it transpires that Bromko did not die but was secretly sent to a Jesuit seminary and has become an ardent Christian, the Jewish community having received a nailed-up casket filled with stones instead of his body. As a result of a lot of intrigue and machinations by the Jewish community leaders and Polish aristocrats in Cracow, Gulviets, the Jewish convert, is murdered by Bromko and proclaimed a martyr who gave his life for the sanctification of God's name (*kidesh-hashem*). He is buried near the coffin filled with stones.

The primary target of Wiener's satire is the popular Polish-Jewish legend about the *ger-tsedek*, the eighteenth-century story of a Polish

aristocrat, Count (or Duke) Walentyn Potocki, who supposedly converted to Judaism and was burned at the stake in Vilna. Analyzing the origins, the structure, and the significance of the legend, the historian Magda Teter arrives at the following conclusion: "The legend of *ger zedek* [*sic*] of Wilno, though said to be a true story, appears to be a carefully crafted tale of conversion, a polemical and apologetic response to a number of challenges that the Polish Jewish community faced from the mid-eighteenth century."²²

As Teter demonstrates, the *ger-tsedek* legend was constructed as a reversal of the classical Christian tale of martyrdom. In contrast to a Jewish conversion to Christianity, where the convert gained a higher social status (in medieval Poland they were as a rule elevated to the nobility), Potocki, "the righteous convert, son of a duke . . . openly acknowledged his decline in status when he stated that he was a Jewish man dwelling in exile."²³ Teter interprets the *ger-tsedek* legend as a response to a variety of external and internal challenges faced by Polish Jewry in the second half of the eighteenth century: Catholic propaganda, Frankist and Hasidic movements, and the Haskalah. The Jewish community "needed religious stability, and the legend of *ger zedek*, which affirmed the truth of Judaism in no uncertain terms, served the purpose." But at a different level, Teter argued, the legend could also be read as evidence of the "permeability of social and cultural boundaries between Jews and Christians, not only because it tells of Christians who become Jews, but also because it illustrates Jewish appropriation of Christian literary topoi."²⁴

By the time Wiener turned to the *ger-tsedek* legend, it had already become a popular motif in Jewish literature in various languages.²⁵ Thanks to his broad knowledge of both Christian and Jewish cultures, Wiener must have been familiar with a range of interpretations of the legend, so his irreverent rendition of it is clearly a deliberate subversion. In *Valenty Gulviets*, Wiener focuses on the bizarre psychology of the main character and the irrationality of his behavior rather than on social or religious issues. In its style and sensibility, this is a typically Austrian study of a pathological personality, elegantly written and skeptical in its attitude, and in tune with pre-war Viennese modernism, with its interest in the instinctive, the irrational, and the uncanny rather than with the national and social concerns of the Yiddish literature of that time.

Valenty Gulviets's double obsession with Jews and women is characteristic of the age that produced Otto Weininger, the author of the influential treatise *Sex and Character* (1903), which blamed the decline of aristocratic European masculinity on the harmful influence of these two particular groups of humans. A proud and powerful aristocrat who excels in battle and in love, Gulviets first loses his mind over a Jewish woman and then is captured in the nets of Judaism. Only in his final act of self-defense does he reveal a glimpse of his old aristocratic self, a reversal that is mirrored in the cowardly behavior of his murderer. In the last episode, Gulviets reappears in the company of two Jews in the garden of the old Cracow synagogue. As a group of Jesuit seminary students passes by the garden, they shower the Jews with stones and shout anti-Semitic abuse. One of the Jews detects traces of a Yiddish accent in one of the students and returns the abuse, provoking more stones and abuse.

At this moment the meek convert Gulviets, now nicknamed Abrashkegoy leaps at the Jesuit student and strikes him, shouting in Polish: "Bej psubratów, bej żyda, zabej!" ("Beat the son of a bitch, beat the Jew, kill him!"). The terrified student hits him back with a stone, and Abrashke/Gulviets dies, crying "Jezus Maria!" After some deliberation, the community leaders decide to overlook these improper last words and pronounce Abrashke a new martyr, an unknown *ger-tsedek* who gave his life for the sanctification of God's name. Despite their religious conversions, Gulviets and Bromko remain true to their old natures. Bromko preserves his instinctive Jewish fear of Christians even after he has become one of them, while Gulviets, now the lowest of the low even among Jews, keeps his aristocratic pride and loses his life because of it.

Wiener was not alone in treating the *ger-tsedek* legend this way. A strikingly similar interpretation was offered by the Polish Yiddish author Alter Kacyzne in his play *Der dukus* (*The Duke*), which was performed to a mixed reception in Warsaw in 1925. The play was criticized by some Yiddish commentators for a "goyish" approach to the theme and a lack of stylistic uniformity.²⁶ In the preface to the play, Kacyzne explained that he used the story of the *ger-tsedek* of Vilna not as a "theme" but as an "outline" for his psychological drama because the story itself was only good for a sentimental national melodrama: "The tale of the Righteous Convert inspired me not as a legend born in the Jewish

imagination but rather as a plausible event that is psychologically extraordinary."²⁷ Kacyzne explained that his primary goal was to create a "social Jewish drama," rather than a "personal drama of the convert . . . [t]he Righteous Convert with his aristocratic fantasy of becoming a Jew interested me only to the degree that it allowed me to illuminate the background of the Jewish community."²⁸

Like Valenty Gulviets, Kacyzne's central character, the Young Duke, is portrayed as a mentally unstable personality. His identity undergoes a complete change after his conversion to Judaism, changing into that of a religious scholar with strong messianic aspirations. In his final confession before the court of noblemen, the Young Duke proclaims that the true goal of his conversion to Judaism is martyrdom:

It is not my life, but my death, that is necessary, for myself and for my Jewish faith.[...] I want to die now, for my whole life's work lies in these last few steps to the pyre.[...] Though I have immersed my soul in the waters of Judaism, my back has not borne the Jewish yoke, and my aristocratic spine remains unbent.[...] I am strong enough to die as a Jew, but too weak to live as one.²⁹

In their introduction to their English translation of *Der dukus*, Joel Berkowitz and Jeremy Dauber describe the deterministic idea of human fate in the play as "essentially congruent with Communism," adding that "it may also be that Kacyzne's own attraction to Communism may be related to his interest in characters as archetypes."³⁰ Although some Marxist theorists would question the supposed congruence between communism and historical determinism, one can clearly see the parallel between the story of Kacyzne's and Wiener's conversions to communist ideology and the legend of a Catholic aristocrat's conversion to Judaism. Kacyzne, Wiener, and the Young Duke, all, to different degrees, choose to reject their precarious status as bourgeois intellectuals and identify with the struggle of the downtrodden proletarian masses. But they also realize that they will never fit into the new community, and their conversion might look like an act of madness from a "normal" point of view.

Yet, despite some remarkable parallels between *Der dukus* and *Valenty Gulviets*, any mutual influence of one work upon the other seems unlikely. Both were written nearly simultaneously, one in Warsaw, the

other in Vienna; by the time of the stage premiere of *Der dukus* in 1925, Wiener must have already finished *Valenty Gulviets*. The parodic treatment of the *ger-tsedek* motif by both authors reflects their critical attitude to the dominant nationalist mythology among some left-wing Central European Jewish intellectuals. By travestyng the heroic *ger-tsedek* legend, both Wiener and Kacyzne expose the rift between the misery of real Jewish life and the lofty ideals of Judaism.

From *Valenty Gulviets* to *Kolev Ashkenazi*

The conclusion of *Valenty Gulviets* touches upon the problem of the reliability of a historical memory produced by the authorities and transmitted through official channels. The invented stories of two “martyrs” are utilized for propaganda purposes by the communal leadership, yet the folk memory preserves a trace of doubt, hinted at by the sly smile on the face of the female caretaker at the old Cracow Jewish cemetery. The conflict between the collective memory of the people and the official history of the community becomes more prominent in the subsequent expanded versions of the novella. In *Kolev Ashkenazi*, Wiener presents a broader picture of the social transformation of the Polish Jewish community at a turning point in history, when the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth began to decline. The novel’s main hero is not Valenty Gulviets but Kolev Ashkenazi, the powerful *parnas* of the Cracow Jewish community and the financial agent of King Jan III Sobieski (1629–96), the last great ruler of Poland. The story of Gulviets becomes a subplot within a wider historical narrative, connected to the main plot through the figure of Bendit Sirkis, the nominal head of the community.

Sirkis and Ashkenazi personify two different types of Jewish leaders struggling for dominance over the Jewish community. Ashkenazi is a medieval Jewish financier who provides the ruler with money, whereas Sirkis represents a new socio-economic force—emerging industrial capital. Ashkenazi derives his influence and prestige from his close relations with the king Jan III Sobieski, while Sirkis builds his economic and social power base by investing in the development of salt mines that he leases from the Polish magnates. To circumvent the surviving medieval

prohibition by the Jewish community on direct commercial dealings between Jews and the nobility, which safeguarded the power of the old communal oligarchy, Sirkis secretly employs the impoverished aristocrat Gulviets as a front for his business. This is meant to demonstrate, in accordance with Marxist theory, how common economic interests unite across religious and ethnic boundaries—two members of the emerging capitalist class, a Jew and a Pole, in their desire to exploit Polish serfs who are forced by economic necessity to become miners. Wiener's novel explores the very beginning of the process of the poletarianization of the peasantry, which will eventually bring about the downfall of capitalism.

Kolev Ashkenazi opens with two Polish peasants coming to Cracow to seek protection from ruthless treatment in the mines. In the Marxist framework of the novel, the peasants signify the victimization of the masses under joint economic exploitation by the Polish nobility and Jewish entrepreneurs. In the course of the novel, these peasants are cheated, abused, accused of false crimes, and finally executed by the authorities. Their tragedy conveys the ideological message of the novel: it is the peasants and not the fake Jewish "martyrs" who are the true victims of history. By exposing the collaboration between the Jewish oligarchy, the Polish aristocracy, and the Christian city authorities in cruel intrigue against the innocent peasants, Wiener highlights the supremacy of the economic interests of the ruling classes over religious and ethnic divisions. But the emerging capitalist system not only affects the lower classes, it also undermines the authority of the king, as the leader of the nobility, and his factor Ashkenazi, as the leader of the Jewish community. While the noblemen wrestle ever more concessions and privileges from the king, the Jewish entrepreneurs struggle for more independence from the community. For his analytical exposition of the economic links between the Jews and the nobility, Wiener skillfully adapts the grand historical narrative of Marxist theory to the specific conditions of late seventeenth-century Poland. Such events as the Khmelnytskyi uprising or the messianic movement of Shabbatai Zvi, which are central for Jewish historians, have no relevance for this narrative, which sees history as a process driven by the class struggle.

The clear-cut ideological scheme of the novel does not prevent Wiener from creating a complex psychological portrait of the controversial

main character, Kolev Ashkenazi. Scrupulously honest in his religious observance, he can be cunningly ruthless in his political and economic dealings. One of the greatest intellects of his generation, famous all over Jewish Europe for his expert knowledge in religious and secular affairs, Ashkenazi holds no formal position of power in the Jewish community. He exercises his authority quietly, relying mainly on his wealth and his direct access to the king. In contrast to Ashkenazi, who inherited his wealth and power, Sirkis had to work his way up from being a modest horse dealer to a wealthy lessee of salt mines. His reward is the title of head of the Cracow community, which carries no real power. Now Sirkis's standing is imperiled because the peasants threaten to expose his real position as the lessee of the salt mines, which in turn would put the entire Jewish community in danger. Quickly realizing Sirkis's predicament, Ashkenazi starts an elaborate intrigue whose aim is both to weaken his opponent and rescue the community. To achieve his goal, Kolev uses the communal *rekim*—convicts who are protected from punishment as long as they perform useful services for the communal oligarchy.

Kolev maintains close personal relationships with the members of this underclass on the margins of the Jewish community. As a pious Jew, he invites all those who have nowhere to go every Friday evening to his house for a Sabbath meal. Even the *rekim* are there, although they are served in a separate room. The depiction of the beggars' meal at Kolev Ashkenazi's home is one of the most memorable episodes in the novel. It is based on Wiener's own childhood memory of a banquet that his grandfather Binyomin Landau used to give for the Cracow beggars once or twice every year. Kolev emerges in this episode as a patriarchal authority, genuinely committed to the welfare of his people regardless of their social standing. This aspect of his personality comes through especially vividly during the plague epidemic when every other leader abandons his community, and only a few individuals, among them Kolev and some of the *rekim*, remain true to their religious and human duty and continue to care for the sick:

Those were the kind of people who appear unexpectedly by themselves in a time of great need, ready to offer help with their body and soul to anyone who needs it. They were experienced and skilled in dealing with human pain, with the horrors of disease and death—and everybody

demanded from them the most difficult things, as if they had to repay a debt. And they did everything with that carefree courage that lies dormant in the depths of the people.³¹

As Wiener makes clear in this passage, the hour of need is also the hour of individual heroism, when even people like Kolev and the *rekim* realize their human potential. As an act of repentance, Kolev forgives the debts owed to him by those who are dying.

Kolev's opposite number in the novel is Shepsl Gets, a vagabond who wanders from one community to another. A committed enemy of the establishment and the rich, Gets is also a folk poet whose songs give voice to the sufferings and aspirations of the people. In the course of the novel, Kolev and Shepsl encounter each other twice, first at the beggars' table in Kolev's home, where Gets displays his independence by arguing with Kolev, and the second time during the plague, when they join in giving aid to the victims. From the Marxist view of the novel, the relationship between Kolev and Shepsl is ambivalent. Socially they represent two antagonistic classes within the Jewish community, yet spiritually they share a sense of responsibility for the collective fate of the Jewish people. Shepsl personifies the worldliness, the open-mindedness, and the social energy of the Jewish masses, whereas Kolev embodies the patriarchal notion of communal responsibility as a religious duty, something which is no longer shared by the up-and-coming bourgeoisie.

During the plague, the figure of Shepsl reaches almost mythological proportions: "Shepsl Gets behaved as if the plague could have no power over him." As part of the eternal world of nature rather than mortal humanity, he seems to be immortal: "nothing bad happens, wild weeds do not wither" (131). In his last encounter with Kolev, Shepsl explains to him his concept of Judaism, which he regards as a mere translation of the social order of exploitation and inequality into the language of religious discourse. He sarcastically notes that he will be expelled from paradise in the same way he has been expelled from every Jewish community, for the lack of a "residence permit."

While Shepsl's ideas are intended to confirm the Marxist notion of religion as a mere part of the ideological superstructure determined by a socio-economic basis, his character as a symbolic image of the eternal Jewish people certainly contradicts this materialist interpreta-

tion of history. The first edition of *Kolev Ashkenazi* makes the ideological message of the novel explicit by using a sentence from Karl Marx's essay "On the Jewish Question" as its epigraph: "Let us consider the real secular Jew, not the *Sabbath-Jew* [...] but the *Jew of every day*."³² This epigraph is conspicuously absent both in the first and the second book editions of the novel. The removal of the epigraph may suggest that sometime in the mid-1930s, Wiener's concept of history underwent a transformation and became less class-deterministic, a trend we have already observed in his scholarship.

The first edition of the novel was reviewed favorably by two prominent Soviet Yiddish scholars, the historian Osher Margolis (1891–1976) and the critic Aron Gurshteyn. Margolis, who collaborated with Wiener on a number of projects, praised the novel for its objective portrayal of the tragic life of the peasantry and its artistic representation of the contradictions between the city and the country and between different religious and ethnic groups.³³ But Wiener's greatest achievement as a historical novelist, in Margolis's view, was his detailed analytical picture of the Jewish community.

Kolev Ashkenazi was portrayed in accordance with Marx's prescription, in his everyday garb rather than his Sabbath attire, a big step forward in comparison with the idealized images of Jewish leaders in the works of the bourgeois nationalist historians such as Heinrich Graetz, Simon Dubnov, and Meyer Balaban. Margolis also praised Wiener for being the first Jewish writer to throw light on a social group ignored by Jewish historians, the *déclassé* Jewish plebs who had no place in the communal structure. On the other hand, Margolis noted, Wiener's narrative left out the class of the working Jew—the artisans, the apprentices, and the coachmen—who were part of the communal structure. In conclusion he expressed a hope that Wiener would produce another, larger, historical novel covering all aspects of Jewish life in old Poland.

Margolis was also critical of Wiener's image of the Polish nobility, which he found artistically weaker than that of the peasants. He pointed out that the mentally deranged character of Valenty Gulviets was by no means typical of his class. He also complained that the story of Gulviets had no clear meaning in the conceptual framework of the novel: was it meant to be a rationalist critique of the romantic *ger-tsedek* legend, or

was it a depiction of psychological disorder bred by the bad conscience of the landowner? As a result, Margolis argued, Wiener's critique of the bourgeois-nationalist concept of Jewish history as a chain of religious persecutions and sufferings was not as convincing as it could have been. Nor did the distorted image of the Polish nobility match the masterful portrayal of the peasant characters, who had genuine symbolic significance.

Gurshteyn concentrated in his review on the literary aspects of the novel.³⁴ He commended Wiener for introducing the historical genre into Soviet Yiddish literature, "dealing a blow" to the bourgeois-nationalist concept of Jewish history, which had found expression in works by the foreign authors Sholem Asch, H. Leyvick, I. J. Singer, and, to a lesser extent, Opatoshu. Gurshteyn noted the element of parody in Wiener's treatment of the *kidesh-hashem* theme but found it flat and formal. Gurshteyn regarded the character of Valenty Gulviets merely as a literary construction following the genre conventions of parody, rather than a realistic portrait of a Polish nobleman.

Nonetheless, as a whole, the novel had broken free of the limitations of parody and was a full-scale realistic portrayal of the social reality of the age. Gurshteyn saw the internal stylistic shift in *Kolev Ashkenazi* from parody to realism as an indicator of Wiener's artistic development as a creative writer. By turning to the historical theme, Wiener had successfully overcome the limitations of the "subjectivist-psychological" format of his first novel, *Ele Faleks untergang*, and had achieved a synthetic fusion between psychologism and realism. The next stage in Wiener's artistic development was to be—and here Gurshteyn's view coincided with Margolis's—a large historical epic novel in the style of socialist realism.

As both Margolis and Gurshteyn pointed out, Wiener shifted the mode of the Jewish historical narrative from celebration to criticism. Instead of eulogizing the virtues of the old communal solidarity as a mechanism of defense and preservation, as was common among Jewish historians and writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Wiener focused his artistic lens on the analysis of internal conflicts and the economic interests that supported them. He exposed the communal administration as an instrument of socio-economic oppression and of ideological dominance in the service of the oligarchy. Eager to preserve

their control over the masses, the communal leadership used the cult of martyrdom to produce an illusion of unity where in fact economic conflicts were tearing the community apart. The true martyrs in his novel were not Jewish victims of religious persecution but Polish peasants who suffered from economic oppression. Religion was merely a pretext for false accusation. Indeed, the Christian peasants falsely accused of robbing and desecrating a Christian church were framed with the help of the Jewish leaders.

Wiener had already lampooned the archetypal Jewish story of *kidesh-hashem* in *Valenty Gulviets*. In *Kolev Ashkenazi*, the accent shifts from psychopathology to socio-economic relations. The mentally unstable *ger-tsedek* Gulviets becomes a tool for Sirkis's economic exploitation of the peasants. To stress the theme of social antagonism within the Jewish community, Wiener adds a third "martyr" in *Kolev Ashkenazi* to the two already present in *Valenty Gulviets*. This is the communal *rek Vrome* (Avrom) Drukars, whom Sirkis has used to set the peasants up as suspects in the church robbery, only to hand him over to the Christian authorities, who then torture and execute him on direct orders of Sirkis. But the sociological scheme of the novel leaves Shepsl in an ambivalent position. On the one hand, as a wandering Jewish artisan, he is a victim of the medieval socio-economic order, an embodiment of the large Jewish underclass of paupers, who have no place in the communal structure. The naturalistic portrayal in *Kolev Ashkenazi* of the Jewish underclass as a "state within a state" has parallels in Yiddish literature, from Mendele's *Fishke the Lamb* to Der Nister's *The Family Mashber*. On the other hand, Shepsl, like some of his literary counterparts, symbolizes the eternal values of justice, morality, and vitality, which many Yiddish writers ascribed to the collective psyche of the Jewish people, and for which there is no room in Marxist sociology.

Kolev Ashkenazi and the Ideological Battles of the 1930s

To understand the polemical significance of Wiener's interpretation of Jewish history in *Kolev Ashkenazi*, we should turn back for a moment to his 1929 review of Weinreich's edition of Shloyme Etinger. Wiener

began his analysis with a sharp attack on Weinreich's introduction, accusing him of disregarding the broader socio-historical context of Etinger's life and concentrating instead on inconsequential details and personal circumstances. Wiener regarded Weinreich as an heir to the petit-bourgeois tradition in Yiddish literary scholarship, which extolled national virtues but played down class conflicts in Jewish society: "it is clear that Weinreich wants Etinger to be regarded as a great-grandfather not just of Yiddish literature, but also of the entire bourgeois Yiddishist style of life and thought."³⁵ Wiener and Weinreich shared the conviction that the study of Yiddish literary history is directly relevant to contemporary affairs, but they differed in their understanding of this relevance. In the charged ideological atmosphere of pre-war Eastern Europe, Yiddish literary history was turned into another ideological battlefield between Soviet Marxists and Polish Yiddishists.

One particular episode in *Kolev Ashkenazi* suggests that Wiener used his fiction as a vehicle for his polemics against Weinreich. When Vrome Drukens is arrested by the city's Christian authorities for his role in the church theft, the communal leadership begins to prepare for his future sanctification as a martyr. This task is entrusted to Yoyzl Brandayz, the intelligent but shameless communal secretary. In the name of the community, Brandayz declares a public fast and composes special *kines* (liturgical elegies) for the occasion. The narrator sarcastically remarks that "owing to their beauty they were included in some of the rare prayer books" (191). Brandayz bribes the prison guards so that Vrome can get kosher food and arranges for prayers to be read at the site of the execution. At the same time, Vrome is cruelly tortured to prevent him from telling the truth about the real culprits, Sirkis and Brandayz. Brandayz's "beautiful *kine*" was "recited in all synagogues and at the gallows at the moment of Vrome's execution." In short, Yoyzl Brandayz "has done everything to ensure that Vrome will not be angry in the afterlife and the communal administration will be satisfied" (192).

The detail about composing special elegies for martyrdom seems to be aimed directly at Max Weinreich. In his book *Shturemvint*, Weinreich argues that Yiddish historical songs and legends must be recognized by scholars as an important historical source, because sometimes they are "the only witness to a historical event."³⁶ Among the examples

of historical legends that Weinreich discusses as evidence of true historical events is a story about a certain pious Jew named Reb Avrom from Moshchisk who was falsely accused of thieving from a church: "once they caught a thief who stole the sacred vessels from a church. This was a good opportunity to blame the Jews, and they told the thief to say that the Jews asked him to rob the church because they needed the consecrated bread which, according to the Christian faith, is the body of Jesus."³⁷

Another song (written in 1682), also mentioned by Weinreich, tells the story of the martyr Reb Shakhne, "who was arrested and sentenced to death for purchasing sacred objects stolen from a church by two non-Jewish youngsters, who confessed and were put to death. Reb Shakhne suffered various tortures designed to make him convert, but withstood them all and was executed."³⁸ As Judith Levin has convincingly demonstrated in her study of the historical sources of *Kolev Ashkenazi*, it was this song, in Weinreich's retelling, that served as "the source from which Wiener derived his idea for the plot of his novel."³⁹

However, Wiener's use of this martyrdom motif in *Kolev Ashkenazi* functions as a direct critique of Weinreich's "bourgeois-nationalist" approach to Jewish history. In his fiction, Wiener claims to re-create "true" reality by showing how the supposedly "historical" songs were produced from ready-made clichés by a hired writer in the service of the communal oligarchy. Wiener turns the relationship between history and fiction on its head. His fiction claims to be true because it conforms to the Marxist scheme of history, whereas any historical evidence that contradicts this scheme can be dismissed as concocted. As Levin has shown, Wiener applied a similar approach to other historical sources, such as the *takones* (ordinances) of the Jewish community prohibiting business partnership between Jews and Christians. Adopting these materials for the novel, Wiener modified the original texts to emphasize the elements of social conflict within the community.⁴⁰

It would certainly be an oversimplification to reduce the complex and ambiguous ideological content of *Kolev Ashkenazi* to a straightforward Marxist critique of the "bourgeois-nationalist" concept of Jewish history of Dubnov, Balaban, and Weinreich and its literary adaptation by Yiddish historical novelists in America and Poland. Underneath the

class-oriented Marxist apparatus is another layer of critique, aimed at the notion of the master narrative as an instrument of ideological domination. By deconstructing national myths, Wiener invites his reader to question the validity of all ideological interpretations of history that are produced by a dominant group, “bourgeois-nationalist” or otherwise. He describes in great detail how the authorities manipulate other people’s lives, covering up their own crimes by turning victims into martyrs and then controlling the use of that “usable past.”

Writing a novel that even implicitly challenged the idea of authority per se was a risky enterprise in the Soviet Union of the 1930s. Wiener took the necessary precautions by locating the action of his novel in seventeenth-century Cracow and building into it an explicit, orthodox-Marxist interpretation. But it does not require much imagination to see parallels between 1670s Cracow and 1930s Kiev, Minsk, or Moscow: old and new leaders struggle for power, innocent people suffer, and history is constantly rewritten, with new myths fabricated every year. Yesterday’s criminals are celebrated as today’s martyrs, only to be erased from historical memory tomorrow. The only successful people are unscrupulous *apparatchiks* like Yoyzl Brandayz, equally ready to serve their master and betray him.

All these ideas are present in the new ending added to the 1938 edition of the novel. Sensing death approaching, Kolev retreats from worldly affairs after the demise of the “martyrs” but retains Brandayz as his companion. Kolev despises Brandayz for his opportunism but is attracted by his intelligence. Taking stock of his life, Kolev realizes that he has left no legacy. A great scholar, the spiritual leader of Polish Jewry, and the powerful banker of the King of Poland, he will be replaced by a non-entity like Yoyzl Brandayz. Kolev comes to accept this fate as a punishment for his evil deeds; nonetheless, he believes that they were necessary for the good of the community. In a desperate attempt to lift the depression of his final days, Kolev tries to explain himself to his loyal servant Vaybl Bas, but the servant remains silent, an allusion to the silence of the people as the ultimate sign of disapproval of the ruler in the final episode of Pushkin’s historical drama *Boris Godunov*.

Shepsl Gets personifies the unlimited freedom and indestructible vitality of the folk. The ideological conflict between Kolev and Shepsl fol-

lows the conception of Jewish history in the Soviet Yiddish critics of the early 1920s such as Litvakov, who opposed the organized communal structure, *klal-yisroel*, to the organic unity of the people, *am-yisroel*. The character's name Shepsl-Shabbatai suggests a messianic aspect to his personality. But unlike his namesake Shabbatai Zvi, Shepsl Gets has no ambition to lead a messianic movement. Instead, his messianic mission is to keep alive the free creative spirit of the Jewish people. He creates protest songs (based, as Levin has demonstrated, on "vagabond songs," with which Wiener was familiar through Max Erik's study of the old Yiddish literature), which is contrasted, as a "genuine" folk song, to the "official" elegy composed by Brandayz.⁴¹ Characters like Shepsl Gets and Sruli Gol in Der Nister's *The Family Mashber* embody the hopes of Soviet Yiddish writers who found themselves having to negotiate the minefield of the 1930s. They represent the indestructible collective core of the Jewish people, which transcends historical and social reality, its transcendental "super-ego." Such was the mission of the Jewish writer as formulated in 1940 by Der Nister in his essay, "A Letter to David Bergelson":

All that the people have experienced at a certain time, the most joyful as well as the most painful, should be recorded and embodied in types and half-types which are created by the artist's writing. This writing is the people's witness, which is unearthed from the people's innermost treasures, polished and clarified with the help of every means with which the people's artist and plenipotentiary representative is endowed.⁴²

The issue of historical "truth" and its moral validity is a central problem in *Kolev Ashkenazi*. Using the Marxist methodology of socio-economic analysis, Wiener deconstructs the national myths so important for other Yiddish writers and scholars of his time. He draws both the factual material and elements of the plot from historical sources, but he also subjects these sources to Marxist "critique" by modifying their meaning and twisting their message according to his vision of the past. But his critique of the historical notion of truth does not stop at that point. In his artistic reconstruction of historical reality, he creates a conflict between fictional and historical truths. As an artist, Wiener is highly skeptical of the veracity of historical documents. He shares this attitude with his fellow novelist Iurii Tynianov, who, like Wiener, was

also a prominent literary historian and theoretician. Tynianov once said: “there are ceremonial (*paradnye*) documents, and they lie like people.”⁴³ Like Tynianov, Wiener distrusts the official, “ceremonial” side of life and seeks to uncover the “real” truth beneath it by revitalizing the metaphorical discourse of the age in his fiction. For Wiener, the metaphor is closer to truth than the historical records, because the records are often constructed by the authorities for their own purposes. This real “truth” can be recovered by looking into the depths of the collective creativity of the people, by studying and analyzing the symbolic language of folklore and literature. The true custodians of the national historical heritage are the beggars and the outcasts who live outside the official discourse.

Unfinished Epilogue:

Leon Modena and Venetian Politics

Wiener turned to the problematic phenomenon of the intellectual in politics in his next novel, *Baym mitlendlishe yam* (*At the Mediterranean Sea*), about the famous seventeenth-century Venetian rabbi Leon Modena. Only the first installment, chapters 1 and 2, ever appeared in print, and a fragment of chapter 3 survived in manuscript form in the archives. The available text is too short to support any opinion about the plan or the characters of the entire novel, but it offers interesting insights into Wiener’s way of portraying politics. There are some parallels between *Baym mitlendlishe yam* and *Kolev Ashkenazi*: both novels are set in the biggest Jewish communities of seventeenth-century Europe, both have prominent scholars and communal leaders as their central characters, and both deal with political issues.

Baym mitlendlishe yam is one of the few works in Yiddish literature set in a non-Ashkenazi environment. Wiener could have conceived the idea of writing a novel about Italy during his Italian journey in 1923. Simultaneously with *Valenty Gulviets*, he wrote a novella entitled *Saako Modena* and tried to publish it in Warsaw and Paris, but without success. Later *Saako Modena* became the first chapter of the novel. The protagonist of the novella is Leon Modena’s son Isaac/Saacco, who returns to Venice after a series of sea adventures in the eastern Medi-

terranean to exact revenge for the murder of his brother Zabulone, a victim of a complicated political intrigue. Saacco becomes entangled in a struggle between two political parties associated with the powerful families of Colonna and Gambare. The Gambare party is portrayed as a group of patriots who want to maintain the independence of the Venetian republic, while their treacherous opponents promote the interests of the Pope and Spain.

Saacco is portrayed as an ambiguous character, bold and vulnerable at the same time. One of his problems is that, as a Jew in Christian society, he is not allowed to cultivate a strong aristocratic sense of honor. He can frighten his enemies to death but is not capable of killing them. Violence features prominently in the first chapter of the novel. As a historian of the Venetian Jewry of that time, David Malkiel, points out, physical violence was an everyday occurrence on the streets of Venice, and particularly in the ghetto: "the level of public indecency, i.e., violent, criminal behavior, was such that the average person could not be expected to react with outrage to a shoving match or even a few blows. As his nose was desensitized to the malodorous smells of urban life, so was his spirit habituated to the indignity of physical rudeness."⁴⁴ Wiener portrays people who refused to behave like "average persons" and put up with the indignity. The event that triggers the story, the murder of Zabulone Modena, was, as Malkiel tells us, "probably the best known example" of that culture of violence.⁴⁵

As a Jew of no social standing in Christian society, Saacco can be a useful agent in the political struggle, and he has powerful protectors among the high and mighty. He shows up in Venice at a moment of political and economic crisis, when the republic is losing its competitive edge in the eastern Mediterranean sea trade. The Colonna party blames all of the problems on Jews who have taken over the trade, the finances, and industry of the republic. The Gambare family believes that Venice benefits from the Jews, who do not export their capital from Venice but attract more trade to the city by exploiting their connections among their co-religionists abroad, unlike other foreign merchants, such as the Greeks and Armenians. Moreover, Jews are the only people in this decadent city still willing and able to risk dangerous ventures. The old Count Gambare proclaims Jews to be the only hope for

the future of Venice and puts Sacco Modena in charge of his five galleons preparing for the exploration of Brazil.

The Jewish “masses” feature less prominently in *Baym mitllendishn yam* than in *Kolev Ashkenazi*. In the second chapter, echoing Saacco’s return, a sailor named Sandro Benincasa comes home from a long journey to the East. He finds his mother dying and learns from his father of the murder in Livorno of his two brothers, who took part in the assassination of Zabulone Modena and were exiled from Venice. Unwilling to take over his father’s cobbling workshop, Sandro decides to leave Venice with the first ship, but not until he is reconciled with the Modena family. Sandro’s father sums up the common Jew’s attitude to politics: “When the powerful fight, why do the simple people need to be involved?”⁴⁶

The unpublished third chapter presents a philosophical conversation in Conte Gambara’s palazzo between Leon Modena and two Christian scholars, the humanist philosopher Francesco Zicconia and the devout monk Fra Pietro Bel-Occhio.⁴⁷ They discuss the insecurity of human existence and the relation between faith and reason. Bel-Occhio defends faith, putting it before reason, while Modena rejects Christian belief in Jesus as irrational: “Reason is not given to us in order to comprehend these wonders. For that, God gave us faith. The most wondrous mysteries surround us from birth till death and after death. If faith is removed from the heart, how can the mysteries and wonders be explained?” For him faith and miracles have little significance even in his own religion: “It is not Moshe’s wonders which confirm my faith, but rather the profound insights of the divine philosophers Maimonides, Gersonides, Don Isaac Abarbanel and Messer Leone.” The conversation then moves from Giordano Bruno’s heretical ideas to the question of intellectual honesty and courage in challenging conventional wisdom. Modena admits that his scepticism prevents him from holding firmly to his views: “I lack neither courage nor steadfastness, only steadfast, courageous knowledge. My courage is as steady as my knowledge.” His general view of humanity is pessimistic: “That was then, with Adam, in the infancy of man and world. Our age, however, is like the somber days of autumn. The world is hoary and grey and approaches its winter, and who knows, perhaps its very downfall and end?”

At this point Wiener's manuscript ends, and one is left to conjecture whether Modena's melancholic skepticism is a projection of Wiener's feelings about his own situation. The beginning of the novel might be interpreted as a kind of warning against assimilation, aimed at the high-ranking Soviet political figures of Jewish origin, a historical lesson demonstrating that Jews who cut themselves off from their roots in folk culture and dream of playing for high political stakes inevitably end up being used by others and have no chance of survival. But we should be wary of interpreting Wiener's fiction in a nationalist key. In the published chapters of the novel, he lashes out sarcastically at Yiddishism for being a variety of clericalist nationalism. A certain Rabbi Shmoyl-Shmuel from Moravia visits Venice on his way back from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and comes to pay his respects to the famous Rabbi Leon. But the real reason for his visit is to collect gossip about Modena's freethinking opinions and spread it round the world. A caricature of Weinreich and other Yiddishists, he insists on speaking Yiddish and rebukes Venetian Jews for forgetting "their" language.

Both historical novels can be read as a disguised critique of the adventurism of Soviet Jewish communists, as well as criticism of Jewish politics per se, that is, any attempt at Jewish political activity in a world that is run by the Machiavellian rules. In this respect Wiener can be seen as the follower of Mendele, probably the most skeptical and pessimistic author in modern Jewish literature. This kind of attitude is evident in the wisdom of the old Rabbi Leon: "The new patricians fight with the old aristocratic families, and the rich urban merchants are on hand to help strip them of their birthrights. Why would a Jew want to get mixed up in something like that?"⁴⁸ Saacco, however, respectfully disagrees with his father: "Someone like me or someone like you"—he bowed before his father—"could not aspire to become a member of the old aristocracy, but only to become a new patrician. The old guard are greedy for every crumb of their ancient rights, and you know this as well as I, signor Leone."⁴⁹ But the father knows better than his son, who, as other young Jews, has been deceived by his powerful friends and used as a pawn in their perilous game.

Nine Life Writing

Between the Usable and Unusable Past

Habsburg Memory

The Habsburg Empire collapsed in 1918, but the Habsburg mythology continues to flourish. Just as the Austrian and Hungarian Jews were among the most loyal subjects of their emperor and king, so Jewish writers, such as Joseph Roth, Stefan Zweig, Arthur Schnitzler, and Franz Werfel, became some of the most loyal custodians of the Habsburg memory. The Habsburg past has exerted its romantic charms not only over German-speaking Jews but also over those who have written in other languages, such as Polish (Bruno Schulz), Hebrew (Shmuel Yosef Agnon), and, most recently, even American English (Michael André Bernstein). One of the advantages of the Habsburg Empire for Jews was, as Hans Kohn put it, that “Austria was neither an ethnic nor territorial but a cultural and historical concept.”³¹ There were obvious reasons why liberal and cosmopolitan Jews like Stefan Zweig and Hans Kohn, or monarchists like Joseph Roth, or even Zionists like Agnon, felt nostalgia for the lost paradise of a multinational empire ruled by the benevolent emperor. But what could possibly attract the communist Wiener to the imperial past?

A clue to this question may lie in a peculiar quality of the Austrian cultural identity, which Claudio Magris describes as follows:

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It may be that to us today old Austria often seems a congenial country because it was the country of men who doubted that their world could have a future. They did not wish to resolve the contradictions of the old empire, but rather to postpone their solution, because they were aware that any solution would have meant the destruction of a number

of elements essential to the multifariousness of the empire, and hence the end of the empire itself.²

The Jewish cultural memory has preserved the Habsburg past as a repository of various traditions and customs that could peacefully coexist in the tolerant atmosphere of the multinational empire as long as none of them tried to assert a political or ideological hegemony at the expense of the others. Certainly the communist ideology, in contrast to the last Habsburg monarch, never pretended to be tolerant. But many, in particular Jewish intellectuals, regarded communism as the only viable alternative to the xenophobic nationalism that held sway in Central Europe after World War I. Inevitably, their perception of both the communist ideal and the Soviet reality was affected by their past experience, while their view of their past was diffracted by the prism of their Soviet present.

Georg Lukács, perhaps the most prominent representative of post-Habsburg communist intellectuals, opened his autobiography with a somewhat paradoxical statement: "Of pure Jewish family. For that very reason: the ideologies of Judaism had no influence on my intellectual development."³ When asked to elaborate on his reasoning, Lukács explained: "I always realized that I was a Jew, but it never had any significant influence on my development" (29). The only moment that mattered in his life was the discovery of the communist ideology and its final goal, the dictatorship of the proletariat: "My moving towards Communism was the greatest turning-point in my life. Whereas hitherto at best a loose ideological collaboration had been possible—as in the fine arts—now an alliance was forged in which the practical preparations for the dictatorship of the proletariat, the implementation of the demands for democratic reforms, laid the basis for cultural achievement under the dictatorship of the proletariat" (159).

For Lukács, the conversion to communism was a kind of mystical revelation that recalls Martin Buber's existentialist concept of *Erlebnis*. The purpose of his autobiography was to tell the story of his way to that fateful event, which retrospectively bestows meaning on the past. The rest, such as his Jewish and/or bourgeois background, was accidental and irrelevant. In this type of autobiography, a personal past was fully subordinated to the collective future. And yet, the phrasing of Lukács's "dialectical" answer seems to contain some ambiguity: after

all, his Jewish origins could not be utterly unimportant if this was the very first fact about himself that he wanted to convey.

In contrast to Lukács, Wiener did not represent his life story as a direct path to communism, but rather as a slow and painful process of self-realization. Most of his autobiographical details had no political or ideological relevance from a communist point of view. The desire to preserve an “unusable” past reflected what Claudio Magris describes as a typically Austrian “distrust in history, which resolves contradictions by simply eliminating them; distrust in the synthesis which surpasses and annuls the limits of the future, which brings death closer.”⁴ The causal link between death and the future was most strikingly apparent in the Stalinist Soviet Union, where class contradictions were resolved by eliminating millions of people, and killing for the sake of the future communist utopia was an official policy sanctified by ideology. Foreigners like Wiener and Lukács were particularly vulnerable. Of course, the danger of persecution could not be averted by writing memoirs (if anything, this would make one even more vulnerable), but imagining the past could be a way of dealing with the psychological pressure exerted by the present in the name of the future.

Remembering Jewish Cracow in Soviet Moscow

Wiener took great pride in his name and family heritage. In a letter from Zurich to his younger sister Erna in Vienna, which was mentioned in Chapter 1, he expanded on their pedigree:

Your maternal ancestors were scholars of the class of learned merchants; as far as I can trace them, wholly noble men; a name of great honor, respected for centuries (Lande); likewise on your father's side (the ancestors of our Cheranov grandma were almost all rabbis, according to my written record of grandpa's testimony). The name Wiener has a positive resonance among Jews everywhere, especially in the modern scholarly world. The forefather from whom papa has taken his name was a person of fame and consequence in rabbinical circles.⁵

Nearly twenty years later in Moscow Wiener began writing his memoirs. Sixteen chapters concerning his early years in Cracow, apparently

drafted during the last years of his life, remained unpublished until 1969. Eliezer Podriatshik, who prepared the memoirs for publication in the Soviet Yiddish magazine *Sovetish heymland*, believed that Wiener intended to write a comprehensive story of his life up to his emigration to the Soviet Union in 1926, but the plan remained unrealized because of the author's untimely death. Today it is not easy to imagine how Wiener would have dealt with the diverse political, cultural, and academic interests of his pre-Soviet period.

As noted by Moyne Shulman, the copy editor of Wiener's manuscript, the narrative mode in the manuscript alternates between the first and the third person. The final choice in favor of third-person narration was made by Podriatshik and Shulman for the sake of stylistic uniformity. The device of third-person autobiographical narration allows the author more freedom than first-person narrative by enabling him to deviate from strictly biographical "factuality" when necessary. Andrew Wachtel, a student of the Russian literary autobiography, argues that third-person "pseudo-autobiography," as he defines this form, was particularly prominent in Russian literature. Situated between fiction and documentary, pseudo-autobiography sends a mixed stylistic message to the reader: "in all pseudo-autobiographical novels there is some stylistic factor which reminds the reader that there is an authorial presence controlling the 'memories' of both narrator and child."⁶ In the case of Wiener's manuscript, the author's wavering between first and third person can be interpreted as an indication of his uncertainty about the genre of his narrative.

In a comprehensive study of Jewish autobiography, Marcus Moseley analyzes this peculiarity of Wiener's memoirs, coming to the conclusion that the documentary aspect prevails over the fictional one:

Viner's constant vacillation [...] between "Yoyel" and "I" suggests a text borne of conflicting motivations, or rather an autobiography that is constantly checked/stifled by opposing forces. That the self-referential, autobiographical impulse is here primary, rather than the novelistic, is borne out by the fact that all other persons depicted in this work that I, at least, can identify, including family-members, figures of note in Eastern European Jewish intellectual life [...] are depicted by their own names and are drawn, moreover, with an eye to historical and biographical verisimilitude.⁷

At the same time, Moseley finds “moments in this work when the hand of the novelist is to the fore” (ibid.). Some of these “intrusions of fictional technique”—which Moseley otherwise regards as justified by the norms of European autobiography—are treated as elements of “ideological disruption of autobiographical memory in order to appease the external and internal censor,” that is, the Marxist ideology outside and within Wiener.⁸ As I will try to demonstrate, there were several different factors, not all of them directly due to politics, which informed Wiener’s vision of his past and affected its representation in his memoirs. Ideological fluidity, a tendency to revise and reject past “truths,” was part of Wiener’s intellectual character throughout his life. This process of constant revision did not stop after his conversion to Marxism and emigration to the Soviet Union. As we have seen in the previous chapters, during the 1930s his views on literary history changed radically.

The central figure in the first nine episodes of Wiener’s memoirs, which were published together under the title “Der zeyde Binyomin” (“Grandfather Binyomin”) by Podriatshik in *Sovetish heymland*, was his/Yoyl’s maternal grandfather Binyomin Landau, an extraordinary character who combines mystical piety and deep knowledge of Jewish sources with worldly wisdom. His mathematical mind and eye for detail enabled him to earn his living as a highly qualified professional by performing complicated financial audits and supervising the construction of buildings in Cracow without compromising his religious beliefs. Wiener described his grandfather as an embodiment of the traditional Jewish ideal of a perfectly rounded personality that combined deep piety and learning with a positive attitude to practical life.

Wiener was not unique in describing his Galician grandfather as a fortunate combination of scholarship and practicality. Nearly twenty years after Wiener’s death, Martin Buber penned a portrait of his grandfather Solomon Buber, both a renowned scholar of midrashic literature and a prosperous Lemberg businessman:

Although self-taught, he was a genuine philologist, who was responsible for the earliest and still definitive critical editions of a particular genre of Hebrew literature: the Midrashim, a unique combination of textual interpretation, sage dicta, and creative saga. By profession he

was a large landowner and additionally a grain merchant and owner of phosphorite mines on the Austro-Russian border.⁹

There was, however, one important difference between the two grandfathers. Whereas Binyomin Landau's acute moral sensibility prevented him from accepting any position of honor and responsibility in the Jewish community, Solomon Buber was a recognized communal leader:

Moreover, he was one of the leading men of the Jewish community and of the chamber of commerce, knowledgeable and self-confident. He never neglected these honorary posts; his own business affairs, on the other hand, he generally left to his wife, who conducted them all with generosity and prudence, but made no decision without consulting her husband.¹⁰

As a socio-cultural ideal, the type of the "complete personality"—*mushlam*—combining Jewish learning and business prowess with active engagement in communal and social affairs preceded the Haskalah, the Jewish enlightenment, which brought about a split between critical reason and religious belief. Although born in the age of the Haskalah and familiar with its teachings, both grandfathers remained essentially pre-modern in their belief that all problems in nature and society could ultimately be resolved within the system of traditional Judaism. Binyomin Landau's confidence in the ethical universality of Judaism is put to the test only once, when he begins to ponder the problem of social inequality:

Grandfather considered: how does it go in the religious tomes—that most people suffer because of other people? Is that perhaps supposed to be a new kind of punishment from God? Then why is there nothing about it in the religious books? Why is nothing said about it at all? Why is everyone silent about it, pretending not to know? Perhaps one must indeed question those alive today about it.¹¹

Unable to get an answer from the familiar sources, he decides to pay a visit to the communal library Ezro, a hotbed of modern freethinking. The librarian tries to determine the correct conceptual category for the problem that has brought this unusual visitor to his library. He suggests Zionism, literature, Haskalah, Hasidism, or halakha, but nothing quite fits, and the grandfather is about to leave. Then the librarian makes one

last desperate guess: “Grandpa, perhaps you mean socialism?” (*zeydenyu, ir meynt efsher sotsializmus?*). The grandfather gets angry at the very suggestion: “Grandfather usually heard that word as verbal abuse by wanton youths (*zidderay fun hefker-yungen*). God forbid (*khasvesholem*)!” (105). Here Wiener the author skillfully maneuvers his grandfather to the threshold of socialism but prevents him from crossing over. It was left to the grandson to make the fateful step over the gap that separated Jewish tradition from socialism, a step which eventually led him to the Soviet Union. In another fragment that Wiener decided not to include in the final draft of his memoirs, he tried to push his grandfather even closer to socialism: he had his grandfather read the *Communist Manifesto* and recognize that his views were not so very different from those of Marx and Engels.

Moseley interprets episodes like these as examples of the submission of autobiographical memory, “whether consciously or not it is impossible to ascertain, to the distorting imperative of ideological demands.”¹² Without denying the validity of this interpretation, I wish to go deeper in order to explore the complexity of Wiener’s narrative strategy of mixing “reality” and “fiction.” Portraying his pious grandfather as a naive near-socialist probably was a distortion on Wiener’s part. But this distortion was caused not so much by the “ideological demands” of official Marxism-Leninism, as Moseley asserts—Soviet communism had little interest in tracing its ideological pedigree to Kabbalah and Maimonides—as by Wiener’s own vision of the Jewish cultural past, which, by the end of 1930s, had crystallized in his fictional and academic writing. In his literary research and historical fiction and now in his memoirs, Wiener endeavored to re-create an idealized folk type, an embodiment of values and qualities that throughout the ages had secured the historical and moral continuity of the Jewish people. Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye the dairyman was one example of such a type: “in Tevye the masses are embodied in the most general way;”¹³ another example was the Jewish vagabond Shepsl Gets from *Kolev Ashkenazi*. Grandfather Binyomin also belonged to this category of ideologically backward but spiritually strong and morally pure folk characters. The fictional distortion of this character was probably caused less by Wiener’s desire to appease an internal or external censor than by his sincere commitment to a synthesis of Marxist utopianism and Jewish ethics.

Wiener's memoirs pay little attention to his parents and their middle-class milieu, focusing instead on all kinds of unusual characters that impressed him in his youth. These people form a bridge connecting the young Wiener directly to a romantic, pre-modern past, bypassing the bourgeois present. One of them is his 105-year-old great-grandmother, who must have been born when Cracow was still part of pre-partition Poland, and whose mind remained in the early nineteenth century. Wiener's Cracow was a multilayered city whose medieval Jewish quarter still flourished, along with its inhabitants. One day his grandfather ventured deep into the Cracow slums, entering an "ancient house in the former Jewish ghetto (*uralt boyz fun der amoliker yidisher geto*)," which was now inhabited by Jewish beggars.¹⁴ In accordance with his custom, the grandfather regularly invited them to a meal in his house. This time the meal had symbolic significance as a ceremony at which the grandfather passed his legacy, the city beggars, to his grandson: "Grandfather asked Yoel to come first thing in the morning and stay with him the whole day. And grandfather arranged the meal to insure that Yoel would be there."¹⁵ Each beggar exemplified a certain trait that was so exaggerated that it made him a remarkable character but disqualified him for normal life: one had an extraordinary appetite; another was extremely shy; a third was possessed by overwhelming fears.

Wiener acknowledged that his portraits of the beggars made them appear as literary rather than real characters:

I know that many of the characters whom I describe here remind one in their particular traits of Jewish beggars that have previously been described by other Yiddish authors. I swear, however, that all of these characters about which I write were real people whom I saw in our city and whom I knew well, and if they remind one of other beggars described elsewhere, that is no more than a sign of how widespread they were and how similar one was to the other.¹⁶

The images of the beggars in Wiener's memoirs can be classified as "truth-creating devices," which Michael Riffaterre describes as "an outside commentary on the truth of fiction, symbolizing it in a different discourse."¹⁷ The function of these devices in literature is to establish a connection between fiction and reality. Beginning with Abramovitsh,

the *kaptsn* (poor man) has been a central figure in modern Yiddish literature, attesting to the “truthfulness” of literary imagination—realist, neoromantic, and expressionist alike. The collection of beggars in Wiener’s memoirs resembles an allegorical portrait of the whole of humanity, with each person representing a certain aspect of human nature, exaggerated and taken to absurdity, in accordance with medieval, as well as expressionist, aesthetic principles of the grotesque. Wiener’s first-hand familiarity with this phenomenon helped him establish his credentials within Yiddish literary tradition, as well as the tradition of social criticism. Beggar figures appear in most of Wiener’s Yiddish fiction, where they often serve as the embodiment of the power of redemption.

Stylistically the portrait of beggars in Wiener’s memoirs resembles the collection of dead characters from Peretz’s symbolist play, *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark* (*A Night in the Old Marketplace*, 1907), each one of whom is metonymically portrayed through one particular feature that outlives the complexity of the pre-mortem human being. This is not the only parallel between Wiener and Peretz. Analyzing several other instances of Wiener’s artistic indebtedness to Peretz, who “of all of the classic writers in Yiddish literature, was accorded the most problematic reception in the Soviet Union,” Moseley concludes:

It is a supreme irony that the Yiddish literary critic who, perhaps more than any other, reflected in his scholarly writings the treacherous cross-winds of Soviet literary ideology, should have added a link to the Peretzian ‘Golden Chain,’ precisely at the point where this ‘chain’ severed its links most decisively with the ideological demands of engaged Jewish literary criticism of all stripes.¹⁸

It is certainly true that in the early 1930s, Wiener, along with other prominent Soviet Yiddish scholars, subjected Peretz to an ideological flogging. But, as we have seen, this attitude changed in the late 1930s.

Another personification of the *folkstimlekhkayt* concept in Wiener’s memoirs is his older friend Yoysi Rotenberg, a prodigy who on his own mastered the entire Western philosophical tradition. As Moseley noted, this character is endowed with

all of the key-characteristics of the mentor/muse archetype as this is developed in the Yiddish autobiographical tradition: an obscurity of

origin; familiar, yet strange [...] he escapes categorization within the familiar taxonomy of Eastern European Jewish culture; the muse is possessed of spiritual and/or physical charisma which exerts an almost magically irresistible attraction upon all who come within its orbit; and finally it is the naïve, childlike quality which draws to the muse adult and child alike.¹⁹

It is important to add to that insightful description that Yoysi also represents the ideal of the *folksmentsb* as described by Wiener himself in his critical studies of Yiddish literature and portrayed artistically in *Kolev Ashkenazi*. Born and raised in the most backward corner of the Habsburg Empire, a Carpathian village, Yoysi acquires an incredible expertise in all areas of philosophy, enabling him to stay abreast of the latest trends. That is, he performs an astonishing intellectual leap from the medieval Jewish community directly to the fin-de-siècle European city, bypassing the stage of nineteenth-century bourgeois positivism and remaining untouched by middle-class sensibilities. His rejection of lucrative career offers from the rabbinical seminary in Trieste, a Zionist organization, and Christian missionaries from London, can be interpreted as testimony to the freedom of spirit that survives in the midst of the Jewish people and refuses to be harnessed by bourgeois culture.

Wiener's treatment of Zionism in his memoirs presents the most vivid example of what Moseley describes as ideological distortion. Wiener associates Zionism, along with all other nationalist ideologies, with mental and physical weakness. In his memoirs, his friend Dovid Ekshteyn is attracted to Zionism after being severely beaten by his own father for refusing to observe the rites of Judaism. For a year and a half he is confined to bed, and when he finally recovers, he has lost his fighting spirit and found refuge in nationalism. Dovid explains his new worldview to his friend Yoyl: "I am not horrified to know that I will be buried in a *tales* and *kaddish* will be said over me."²⁰ But Yoyl regards Zionism as a mere reaction to anti-Semitism with no value of its own: "Zionism was not widespread in the city. And it was foreign to Yoyl in principle. The pathos of nationalism was foreign to him and against his nature. It seemed inhuman, inhumane, primitive (*pereodemdik*) to him."²¹

Yoyl tries to explain to his broken friend Dovid the absurdity of any nationalistic dream: "When one pounds a stake into the earth and

says: 'here is a border,' is the result that people on both sides of the rod become foreign to, and enemies of, each other? Why should they stop thinking cooperatively about the future?"²² From Yoyl's point of view, Zionism is a negation of the future and a return to the parochial past.

This episode is a blatant example of the discrepancy between the real Meir Wiener and his fictional alter ego Yoyl. Unlike Yoyl, the young Wiener was a committed Zionist, a fact well attested by his publications in the press and in his personal correspondence. In a letter of March 12, 1917, for example, Wiener wrote from Zurich to his sister Franzi in Vienna:

Zionism is supposed to be unfeasible? We have learned to consider a great deal that is called impossible as quite possible and feasible. Who would have thought the World War possible? Who would have thought possible the resistance of the Central Powers to a whole world full of enemies? Anything is possible! Everything is feasible! "If you wish it, it is no fairy tale," says Theodor Herzl [*sic*].²³

In this letter Wiener professes not only his belief in the Zionist dream but also his Germanic patriotism, which he shared with the majority of the Austrian Jewry (although one should not disregard the possibility that this patriotic statement was made with a military censor in mind). Like many Austrian Jewish intellectuals, Wiener regarded Zionism as a spiritual rather than a political movement and was disappointed in actual developments in Palestine after the war. The military defeat of the Central Powers led in his view to the defeat of spiritual Zionism in its Germanic form by the practical Anglo-Saxon variety, which made the Zionist project part of the British colonial enterprise.²⁴

At this point the device of third-person, pseudo-autobiographical narration serves Wiener well. To use Wachtel's terminology, "an authorial presence controlling the 'memories' of both narrator and child" enables Wiener to cover up his own ideological "deviations" in the past without distorting the fictional truth of his memoirs. This does not imply that Wiener is insincere in his critique of Zionism when writing his memoirs. The distortion was merely chronological. As a fictional character, Yoyl expresses as a teenager the views that in reality Wiener espoused only at a later age.

From Autobiography to a Novel

Although a character named Yoyl occasionally reappears in the 450-page typescript in Wiener's papers, which contains the text of what Podriatshik calls *Der groyser roman* (*The Great Novel*), there is not much thematic and stylistic continuity between the memoirs and the novel, which takes place after the war. The typescript has no date, but it is reasonable to assume that Wiener was preoccupied with writing it for several years during his Soviet period. The spelling of Hebrew words is in the Soviet phonetic style, though occasionally they are spelled in the traditional way and then corrected by hand. However, the typescript consistently uses the final forms of letters, which were removed from Soviet Yiddish in the early 1930s and returned only after 1961. But numerous remarks, corrections, and additions in Wiener's own hand testify that the text was typed during his lifetime. In many cases the typist either could not read Wiener's handwritten manuscript or was not familiar with certain words and concepts, which resulted in many errors and omissions, only partly corrected by Wiener himself.

An earlier attempt at writing a novel, apparently soon after his arrival in the Soviet Union, ended in disappointment. Titled *Nastia*, it was intended to portray the life of the Russian lower classes, but Wiener decided to abandon this project, writing his own verdict on the cover page of the draft: "toyg in der erd arayn!"²⁵ This failure might have prompted his return in *Der groyser roman* to the more familiar terrain of Jewish artistic and literary life in Berlin, which he chose to be the theme of his largest and most ambitious work of fiction.²⁶ Although the text is only half-complete, some phrases are unfinished, and there are repetitions and inconsistencies, particularly in personal names, this typescript nevertheless gives a good indication of the scope of the project. It contains parts that probably reflect different stages of the novel, with potential for different directions of plot and character development.

On the whole, the novel portrays the world of the déclassé Jewish intellectuals and artists in European cities familiar to Wiener: Paris, Zurich, Vienna, and Berlin. The first section, pages 1–32, introduces the main character, whose name varies between Yoyl, Slovek (Mieczysław), and Kornel Lagodny. We meet him first in Paris before World War I,

where he has come from Galicia to join his elder brother and study chemistry. But even his earned doctorate does not make him eligible for a professional job in this field because he is a foreigner, so he moves to Switzerland, where he performs various menial jobs and socializes with a group of Russian social democrats who introduce him to their ideas. When the war breaks out, he is drafted into the Austrian army and is sent to the Serbian front, though, due to a series of illnesses and other calamities, he ends up spending most of the war in hospitals and auxiliary services far from the front line. After the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy in the autumn of 1918, he makes his way to Vienna, where he mixes with bohemian intellectuals and artists in coffeehouses.

Lagodny is portrayed as an oversensitive, nervous young man prone to extreme mood swings. At the beginning of the war, he is overtaken by enthusiasm, hoping that military service will redeem him from his life of marginality and estrangement, but very soon becomes disillusioned by the meaninglessness and cruelty of military service. Similarly, he is both excited and perplexed by the news about the revolutionary events in Russia and other countries, which he perceives as a “whole chain of random events without any meaning or sense” (29), rather than part of a significant historical development. The demise of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy brings his world crashing down around him and empties his life of meaning. He observes the post-1918 events as if through a “thick glass wall” (29). Lagodny goes to Vienna, where he observes the “shadow people” of the café society, as described in Chapter 2 (pages 33–51 of the manuscript), becomes disappointed in the ability of the bourgeoisie to change the world for the better, and moves on to Berlin.

Berlin, 1923: In Search of “Real” Communism

The rest of the novel takes place in Berlin. The action moves there on page 51, but after page 83 the pagination changes, apparently signalling some kind of new beginning. Judging by the exchange rate mentioned in the novel, the events take place in the second half of 1923, during the period of German hyperinflation.²⁷ Although the main characters,

Lagodny and Menter, retain their names in the Berlin part, there are some notable changes to their background. Lagodny is no longer a *galitsianer*, and the forename Yoel never appears again, probably signaling a complete break with the autobiographical persona. Now his country of origin is Russian Congress Poland, which would obviously make him ineligible for service in the Austro-Hungarian army. Instead, we can surmise, he spent the entire war in Zurich, from where he moved to Berlin; his stay in Vienna is not mentioned. On one occasion, probably due to an authorial slip, he is referred to as *slodki* (*slodki* means “sweet” in Polish, while *lagodny* means “mild, gentle”), which supports the hypothesis that this character is at least partly based on Wiener’s close friend, the artist Marcel (Marceli) Slodki (1892–1943).

Born in Lodz, Slodki studied art in Munich and Paris before moving to Zurich in 1914, where he became part of the Dada movement and designed the first poster for Cabaret Voltaire in 1916, which announced the first artistic event of the group. He lived in Berlin from 1920 to 1923, working for the radical revolutionary theater group *Wilde Bühne* (Wild Stage), and settled in Paris in 1923 or 1924. He went back to Poland in 1937, but at the outbreak of the war he returned to France to join his wife; they were denounced to the Gestapo in 1943 and deported to Auschwitz.²⁸ It is likely that Wiener met Slodki during the war years in Zurich, in one of the city’s artistic cafés. Slodki’s name appears frequently in Wiener’s papers during the 1920s, and a separate notebook of 1925 contains numerous but, unfortunately, barely legible pencil notes about Slodki’s life in Paris. Like Lagodny, Slodki’s mother died when he was young, and he was raised by his sisters.²⁹ The historian of Polish Jewish art Yoysef Sandler specifically mentions Slodki’s interest in the life of the working class and his ability to find a common language with workers in different countries.³⁰

Stylistically the Berlin part of the manuscript is more accomplished than the previous material. Wiener’s Yiddish prose might seem dry and devoid of idiomatic color, but this serves a clear artistic purpose. He does not indicate which language—German, Polish, or Yiddish—is actually spoken in a particular situation, although one can assume that all of those languages were within the capabilities of the Jewish characters. As opposed to the unidiomatic Yiddish, the German spoken by some

of the Gentile characters (reproduced in Yiddish characters) bears clear traces of the Berlin dialect, placing them firmly in geographical and social space. Parts of the novel are written in the form of an indirect inner monologue by Lagodny, a technique that was introduced into Yiddish literature by David Bergelson but is also reminiscent of the Hebrew style of Wiener's friend David Vogel. The deliberate absence of Yiddish idioms and localisms in the novel reflects the alienation of the Jewish characters, all of whom are emigrants with no roots in Berlin, and their estrangement from their surroundings.

Lagodny and Menter personify two different types of creativity, the intuitive and the cerebral. Lagodny is an artist struggling for a way to engage with reality in the most direct fashion. His artistic quest leads him to communist ideology, which he perceives as a tool that can strip off the veneer of bourgeois conventionality and reveal "true" reality through immediate contact with the lower classes. He is both attracted to and suspicious of Menter, who accepts the communist idea as an intellectual but has little human sympathy for the proletariat. In contrast to Lagodny, little is known about Menter's background and private life. He usually appears at social occasions, in conversations with his friends and colleagues. Like Wiener himself, Menter works for a publishing house and meets with writers as part of his job. He lives in an elegant apartment, furnished in the Biedermeier style. He is known to be a writer, and "even though nobody has ever seen a single line written by him, no one had any doubts about the importance of his writings" (324). This remark might also support the identification of Menter with Wiener, who at that time was not able to publish his Yiddish works.

Menter and Lagodny belong to a circle of people with links to revolutionary Russia. One of their close friends is Yume Kevitsh, a Yiddish poet from Russia with a naive childish face and friendly manners, a character possibly based on Kvitko. Menter and Kevitsh, like Wiener and Kvitko, are engaged in an ongoing conversation, which Wiener, in hindsight, describes with self-irony: "A conversation developed. One of those cordial discussions of old, in which Menter spoke a bit contemptuously, but nevertheless responded with great interest and sincerity to each of Kevitsh's naïve observations and conclusions, which were imbued with life and natural enthusiasm" (153). Yet despite the sympathy

that Kevitsh feels for Menter, there is something in Menter's appearance and manners that alienates Kevitsh: "it could occasionally happen that Kevitsh, without understanding the reason, would look at him as if he was studying him as somebody alien to him" (322). In response to the estrangement from Kevitsh, who makes fun of the good suit and white cuffs in which he attends a communist rally, Menter produces an elaborate explanation that might elucidate the logic that brought Wiener to his decision to emigrate to the Soviet Union:

What a bad feeling a bourgeois must have who has reached, by means of merciless logic, the conclusion that the fate of the bourgeoisie is completely hopeless. How helpless must a fighter for the class interests of the bourgeoisie feel when he realizes that the current of history flows against his class? And how bitter must it be for him, when the logic of his own thinking leads him to class suicide—forcing him, against his upbringing, desire and will, to fight against his own class? He cannot stand by and passively watch this grandiose struggle, and yet he hasn't the courage to give up and go over to a camp which he finds strange and repulsive. (324)

Although Lagodny likes and respects Menter, he passes a judgement on him that probably reflects Wiener's own attitude to his pre-Soviet past, by calling Menter merely a transitional figure (*ibergangs-mentsh*, possibly echoing Bergelson's description of his heroine Mirele Hurvits as *ibergang-punkt*, transitional point) who has no place in the communist future (326). Two other characters associated with Soviet Russia seem rather dubious. One is Nokhem Kizling/Kizler, an emissary who has arrived from Russia via Riga on a false passport with a cultivated air of secrecy and importance around him. He reports the recent news from Russia, dropping the names of his important Moscow contacts, Zinoviev and Radek.³¹ Menter instinctively dislikes his commercial traveller manners and suspects him of lying, although he is also scared by Kizler's apparent ability to read his thoughts. The other one is Izbitski, a successful Polish entrepreneur, who has connections in the Social Democratic government circles of the Weimar Republic, works as a technical consultant for the Soviet government, and buys real estate in Berlin, using the hyperinflation to his advantage. He betrays his bourgeois nature in a conversation with the currency speculator Angershteyn, with

whom he has dealings in the lucrative real estate market. He explains to Lagodny that as a specialist, he finds it profitable to deal with the Soviets, who pay well for his work (316). An encounter between Lagodny and the members of the Berlin arriviste Jewish bourgeoisie in Izbitski's apartment leads to another confrontation.

Urban space, usually unfriendly and dehumanized, serves as the objective correlative of the psychological state of the characters. Wiener is usually accurate in his description of a particular locality, providing street addresses and the names of coffeehouses, in which much of the action takes place. Some of them are famous for their role in literary and cultural history, such as Café Central in Vienna, Café des Banques in Zurich, and Romanisches Café in Berlin; others are inconspicuous coffeehouses with a local clientele. The café space serves primarily as an arena for the ongoing rivalry between male egos, competing for sexual, ideological, and artistic conquests, but it also offers an opportunity—often illusory—for escape from solitude.

An occasional mention of the name of an establishment can trigger a whole chain of cultural associations. For example, when Izbitski mentions a dance club named *Grüner kakadu* (Green Cockatoo), a reader familiar with Austrian culture will catch an allusion to Arthur Schnitzler's play *Der grüne Kakadu* (1898) that satirizes the bourgeois fascination with the working class and revolution. A street address can provide an important clue to the personality of the character, which in turn can become an instrument of control and domination. Menter lives in the fashionable area of Lichterfelde in the western part of the city; Izbitski has a newly acquired apartment near Alexanderplatz in the center; while Lagodny's atelier is located in a modern middle-class area near Bayerische Platz.

Street life occupies a prominent place in the novel. We see it mostly through the eyes of Lagodny, who frequently takes long walks out of habit or lack of money for transport. The view of people walking along Berlin streets adds to the confusion of his mind: "The big, healthy Germans infuriate him. They all have such robust overcoats and sensible shoes. He is, of course, already soaked to the bone, but wet shoes are the worst. They make him nervous." (290) As an artist, he is attracted by the change of scenery and occasional interesting characters. Thus,

noticing a young man near Alexanderplatz whom he promptly identifies as a *galitsianer*, Lagodny is intrigued by his miraculous ability to keep his shiny shoes free of mud in the pouring rain. Following this young man, who it turns out is a son of an inflation profiteer, Lagodny comes to Izbitski's apartment and ultimately the inevitable scandal ensues.

In contrast to the tense, withdrawn, affluent districts, the working-class neighborhoods are friendly and open, especially in the evening: "Boys were playing various games, scenes from family life were being played out publicly between men and women. A drunkard was certainly not such a rare phenomenon here as it was in the districts of Charlottenburg and Wilmersdorf" (392). Subconsciously drawn to the warm and human proletarian area, Lagodny comes to the communist worker Franz Heineke (who makes a cameo appearance in the beginning of the Berlin section), who explains to him the crucial importance of the Communist Party's practical work. He also tells Lagodny that his jealousy is a problem of the exploiting classes and has little to do with communists: "For this reason, they are keen to get nasty chest pains, to go crazy, to get ill and even hang themselves. Well, let them all hang themselves out of jealousy or for other romantic reasons"—he finished cheerfully and laughed in his low voice" (402).

Anxieties of Gender and Class

While the ideological tensions between the male characters constitute the intellectual dimension of the novel, its emotional dimension is defined by Lagodny's relationship with two female characters, Anna and Lena. The intertwining of eros and class, jealousy and communist ideology, alienation and belonging, are the central issues of the novel. Wiener re-examines the major concerns of Austrian modernist literature under the lens of Marxist ideology. Sexuality and class consciousness are closely interrelated in the world of the novel. Typically women in Wiener's fiction have a destabilizing impact on the male personality, exposing its psychological volatility and driving men to extreme actions. Women are usually represented through the eyes of

men, who perceive them as erratic, irrational beings. Women appear to be naturally attracted to any and every man, creating an atmosphere of tension, competition, and jealousy around themselves. Dependent on men for the satisfaction of their material needs, cultural interests, and sexual desires, women try to manipulate them but often end up in self-destruction. In his distrust of women, Wiener shared the cultural prejudice embedded in the Viennese modernist tradition, which found its clearest expression in Otto Weininger's famous misogynist and Judeophobic treatise *Sex and Character*.

As opposed to the rest of Wiener's fiction, Anna and Lena are fully developed characters with major roles in the action. Different in nearly every respect—socially, culturally, temperamentally—Anna and Lena share an affection for Lagodny. At the conceptual level, they represent two options available to him. Anna stands for the bourgeois sensibility with its neurotic complexes and erotic fantasies, which are inseparable from the desire for wealth, comfort, and stability. Lena opens a way to “real” life, with its undisguised raw instincts and tender feelings. Yet neither option seems easily attainable. Anna, of a middle-class Russian Jewish family, is an old friend of Menter and Lagodny from her student days in Zurich, when she moved in socialist circles and apparently was in love with Slovek. She is now married to Izbitski, but the material comfort of her nouveau-riche environment does not make Anna happy, and she still longs for Slovek's love and affection, or, perhaps, for the happiness of their student days. The reunion of Menter, Lagodny, and Anna at the beginning of the novel sets the emotional and intellectual tone of tense confrontation and mutual dependency among the uprooted middle-class emigrants.

One day, during one of his long and apparently aimless walks in the streets, Lagodny finds himself at the Stettiner Bahnhof, the major Berlin hub for eastward traffic. The authorial remark, “a station is a point where one's life is divided into two, between one location and the other” (10), acquires a deeper personal meaning in the light of Wiener's personal experience, his fateful departure from Vienna in 1926. At the station Lagodny meets Hans Getschke, a shady character who introduces himself as an unemployed musician. In a burst of affection, Lagodny treats Getschke to a meal and gives him the address of his

atelier, and a few days later Getschke begins to visit him regularly. After several visits he brings his sixteen-year-old daughter Lena and leaves her with Lagodny, disregarding his vocal protests. The father-and-daughter couple of Getschke and Lena are modelled after the similar couple of Marmeladov and Sonia in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, an allusion that plays a certain role in Wiener's novel.

Lagodny lets Lena stay and eventually becomes attracted to her. The detailed depiction of their troubled relationship occupies the greater part of the novel. At first, Lagodny is mildly curious about Lena's unhappy childhood, but gradually this curiosity develops into an obsession. He tries to find out the truth about her past, suspecting there has been much violence and abuse. He is attracted by her kindness and naivete, but at the same time distrusts her, wondering whether she had many lovers before him. He wants to possess her wholly, and yet he feels there is something that escapes him: "She had the sort of face that changes its expression instantly and, on occasion, radically—especially when she was still a young girl. The slightest feeling was immediately reflected in her face. Sometimes he liked her very much and sometimes not at all. He immediately began correcting her face, her entire essence, according to his taste" (157).

Yielding to his pressure, Lena recounts, bit by bit, a story of a miserable childhood, even though Lagodny, as well as the reader, remains unconvinced in the end that she is telling the truth rather than feeding his greedy imagination with sensational tales. She needs him as her only bulwark against the hostile world, and is prepared to do whatever is necessary to keep his affection for her, but she also sincerely adores him: "She believed in him as one believes in a god, saw in him the wisest and best of men." (159) Her entire life is centered on him: "Wherever he was, she turned herself toward him like a flower toward the sun" (170).

As a woman and a proletarian, Lena is a double "other" for Slovek. Desperate to find out the ultimate "truth" about her, he also must recognize that some things will always remain beyond his comprehension: "he always felt that she was hiding something from him" (180). His obsessive jealousy produces uncontrolled outbursts of anger alternating with periods of remorse and submission. Any man that he sees around

Lena provokes fantasies about some secret relationship that Lena might have had in the past. In contrast to Lena's sympathy, naturalness, and sincerity, Lagodny is portrayed as man at war with himself, deeply in love yet hopelessly unhappy, always suspicious of other people's words and intentions.

Their relationship degenerates into a downward spiral of scandals, punctuated by moments of remorse and reconciliation. The more he questions her, the less certain he is: "What can he believe about her? Nothing. My God, who knows who she is? Is she really Getschke's daughter? Even this he doesn't know for sure. Even whether her name is Lena Getschke. He knows nothing for sure" (238). Under his unrelenting pressure, she reveals stories of abuse and seduction by middle-class men who had some authority over her: an officer, a dentist, a foreman in a workshop. These stories excite and depress Lagodny, but do not resolve his doubts as to who she really is: "Perhaps all of her 'lies' are due only to compulsion on his part—he awkwardly forces her into them because she cannot cope with the complexities of his tormented nerves" (260).

Having apparently reached the bottom of Lena's multilayered story, Slovek discovers her most guarded secret: her mother, who died soon after her birth, was Jewish. She came to Germany with her father from Eastern Europe on the way to America, but they were turned away in Hamburg because of her father's eye problems and decided to settle in Berlin. Lena remembers her kind Jewish grandfather, a watchmaker on Grenadierstrasse (present-day Altstadtstrasse) in the heart of the poor Jewish immigrant neighborhood in central Berlin. The grandfather's shabby cellar workshop gave her refuge and comfort in the face of the abuse and violence she suffered at home from her sadistic father. Although Lagodny admits to Lena that he is also Jewish, their shared belonging to the Jewish people does not bring them closer to each other because it is class, not ethnicity, that is the defining feature of human personality. In the end, as becomes clear from his conversation with Heineke, Slovek's view of the world is shaped by the conventions and prejudices of bourgeois culture. His perception of reality is mediated by literature and art, which serve only as formidable barriers between him and "real" Lena. When he thinks about her, he also thinks of

Dostoevsky as an author who portrayed her type: “did not Dostoevsky write about these kinds of women?”—to which he responds, desperately: “away with literature . . .” (287).

Style and Ideology in Wiener’s Life Writing

Just as Slovek is unable to throw off the burden of bourgeois culture in his double quest for Lena and communist redemption, so Wiener remains firmly embedded in the very modernist tradition that he tries to overcome. The closest parallel to Wiener’s novel is probably the Hebrew novel *Khaye nisu'im* (*Married Life*, 1929) by Wiener’s close friend David Vogel. Vogel turned to writing prose after he had already acquired a modest reputation as an original modernist poet, and it was Wiener who encouraged him to do so: “You will write prose! Good one! Very good one! Don’t let yourself be discouraged by the first attempts.”³² However, it is not clear whether Wiener ever read Vogel’s novel, which was published in Tel Aviv when Wiener was already in Kiev.

Both novels are set in the urban bohemian milieu of post-war Central Europe (Vogel’s novel takes place in Vienna) and depict a troubled relationship between an immigrant East European Jewish intellectual with artistic aspirations and a Gentile woman from a different class. The marriage between the protagonist of Vogel’s novel, the Galician writer Gordweil, and an eccentric Austrian baroness with masochistic inclinations, quickly deteriorates into a grotesque travesty that ends in tragedy. In both novels, a significant part of the action takes place among Jewish intellectuals in coffeeshouses, while the relationships between the hero and the heroine are presented, with detached irony, as reflected in the male gaze. A possible model for both novels is Arthur Schnitzler’s novel *Der Weg ins Freie* (*The Road into the Open*, 1908), which also combines a portrayal of an uneasy love relationship across class borders with a panoramic, ironic depiction of Vienna’s artistic milieu.

In contrast to Vogel and Schnitzler, both of whom satirized Jewish aspirations to become aristocrats, Wiener tries to negotiate a different class division. But his artistic imagination, rooted in the Viennese tradition, cannot represent class issues outside the gender discourse. He reproduces

the old scheme of presenting a class conflict through an unequal match, trying to adjust it to a radically different situation. Whereas Schnitzler and Vogel projected the Jewish aristocratic fantasy onto the past and exposed the inability and unwillingness of Jews to foresee the coming danger of anti-Semitism, Wiener's aim was to find the seeds of the communist utopia in the hyperinflation-ridden Berlin of 1923. This created an artistic problem that Wiener could not resolve: while his ideological commitment was to communism, his literary repertoire remained modernist—suitable for the representation of alienation, anxiety, and conflict rather than proletarian unity, belonging, and enthusiasm.

The unfinished fragments of the memoirs and the novel form the most intriguing and enigmatic part of Wiener's literary legacy and can be broadly described as life writing. These works not only reveal his complex and ambivalent personality but also demonstrate his formidable artistic talents. Steeped in the writings of Dostoevsky, Rilke, and Hamsun—authors he admired in his youth but resented after his conversion to communism—Wiener was part and parcel of the post-World War I Central European culture, which was largely created by uprooted Jewish intellectuals like himself. Like them, Wiener was fascinated by paradoxes in human thinking and behavior, improbable combinations of contrasting feelings and ideas in one personality.

But Wiener also differed from his Central European peers. His choice of Yiddish as the language of scholarship and creative writing was unusual for someone of his background and aesthetic orientation; but his stylistic preferences were not typical for the Yiddish literary mainstream of that time. He rejected the neoromantic and sentimental styles popular among nationalist-oriented writers and their readership. He had more sympathy for naturalism but in the end opted for a style that was deliberately detached, ironic, cerebral, and free from colloquialisms, with a distinct cosmopolitan rather than Jewish flavor. Because Wiener's life writing remained unpublished during his lifetime, it is difficult to imagine how it would have been received. But judging by the difficulties he had with publishing his work outside the Soviet Union, and by the anemic critical response to his published works, Wiener's memoirs and the novel would have scarcely excited the Yiddish reading public outside a small circle of like-minded intellectuals.

Wiener's position in Yiddish literature can be compared to Vogel's in Hebrew. Both were born in the Galician borderlands, came to Vienna, and absorbed Austrian culture at the moment of its highest artistic and intellectual sophistication, which coincided with the decline and collapse of the empire. Inspired by that culture but choosing their own paths, Wiener and Vogel made their linguistic choices and developed their stylistic strategies, which were based largely on the rejection of the dominant taste. Vogel achieved virtuosity in his Hebrew writings but refused to embrace the ethos of contemporary Hebrew literature, which he regarded as dominated by "impostors" rather than original artists. Believing that "style begins only with the appearance of personality, with the creative individual," Vogel rejected the application of a double standard to foreign and Hebrew literature. Style for him was the ultimate expression of artistic individuality rather than the ability to imitate masters of the past.³³

Wiener's strategy was similar but even more complicated. Although ideologically he fully committed himself to communism and allowed that ideology to inform his critical methodology and, albeit to a lesser degree, his historical fiction, he nevertheless retained a substantial degree of autonomy in his life writing. This is not to say that ideological issues play no significant role in this writing. On the contrary, as we have seen, the ideological problems are central for his characters. But Wiener kept his ideology and style separate, contradicting his own position as a theoretician of socialist realism. The authorial voice in his life writing retains the ironic crispness and analytical detachment that was the hallmark of interwar Central European culture. Vogel's observation, "Sometimes style is not beautiful but rather, it can be ugly, annoying, grating on the nerves,"³⁴ seems wholly applicable to Wiener.

The communist ideology offered Wiener not only a clear solution to intellectual confusion, but also a rationale for writing in Yiddish. The ideology provided him with the sharp instrument of class analysis, which helped resolve most perplexing intellectual and psychological problems. From this point of view, Yiddish had a double advantage. On the one hand, as the language of the people, it offered a direct link to the genuine, authentic, and eternal source of folk creativity, free of "bourgeois nationalism"; on the other hand, as one of the languages of the proletariat, it had a guaranteed secure place in the future.

This position, represented by Menter in the novel, probably reflects, at least partially, Wiener's own thinking. Although his background, education, and lifestyle separated him sharply from the proletariat, Menter realizes that the laws of history will inevitably lead to the victory of the working class, which makes joining the Communist Party and, in Wiener's case, emigration to the Soviet Union a categorical imperative. Another way to communism, which leads through irrational, erotic attraction to the "other" as personified by the lower class, is represented by Lagodny. This way is more painful and is full of pitfalls, as his painful relationship with Lena demonstrates. One can come very close to the "people," but one cannot become part of the working class or even acquire genuine knowledge of it.

Conclusion

Wiener's life was full of strange twists, but undoubtedly the main one was his conversion to communism. That conversion troubled prominent Yiddish critics and scholars, such as Max Weinreich, Dov Sadan, and Elias Shulman, all of whom saw Wiener's choice as paradoxical. How could a brilliant young scholar, an intellectual of European upbringing and European tastes from a middle-class background, not only embrace an ideology they regarded as totalitarian and hostile to Jews, but also move to a foreign country in which he had no roots and to which he felt no particular attachment? Wiener's successful career in the Soviet Union as a scholar and writer seems even more paradoxical, an oddity that cannot fit into the conceptual paradigm that perceives the relationship between communist and Jewish culture as a zero-sum game.

In my study I have tried to avoid this binary opposition and consider Wiener's remarkable life story as an artist, thinker, and scholar from various vantage points. Throughout his life, all his ideological and geographical peregrinations notwithstanding, Wiener's intellectual and artistic concerns remained firmly anchored in the modernist intellectual discourse, which was shaped largely by scholars and thinkers of Central European Jewish origin. His emigration to the Soviet Union affected his thinking and expression in many ways but did not change the essence of his personality. In the face of great adversity, he succeeded in bringing that discourse to the Soviet Union and adapting it to the Soviet Marxist intellectual agenda.

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Hence, throughout his career, Wiener was preoccupied with the same issues as his fellow Central European Jewish Marxists, Walter Benjamin, Georg Lukács, and Ernst Bloch: the critique of bourgeois

society and the quest for release from its bondage. While his critical attitude toward the social class to which he belonged by birth and upbringing altered little over the course of his life, his vision of redemption underwent a dramatic transformation, from left-wing cultural Zionism to communism. Redemption was no longer associated with a particular form of individual or collective Jewish activity but acquired a universal, world-historical dimension. So, like Benjamin and Bloch, Wiener's understanding of Marxism was influenced by his understanding of Jewish history and culture, in particular of the development of Yiddish literature from the *Haskalah* to socialist realism.

But his knowledge of, and engagement with, Jewish culture was deeper and broader by far than that of any other Central European intellectual of socialist or communist persuasion who came from an assimilated background. Rather than using Jewish ideas and images allegorically, as a way of interpreting and furthering Marxist thought, Wiener used Marxist methodology as a tool for the study of Jewish culture. The originality of his concept of Yiddish literary history lies in its thorough integration of social and literary analysis and in the interpretation of the artistic evolution of individual writers in light of the larger social transformations in the Jewish society of nineteenth-century Russia. Wiener's most seminal achievement in this area is his treatment of Yiddish literary language and style as phenomena located at the crossroads of aesthetics, ideology, and sociology.

While contemporary researchers recognize the value of Wiener's Yiddish scholarship, his Yiddish fiction and his earlier writings in German have fallen into oblivion. However, as I hope my study has demonstrated, these works are important not only because they contribute to a better understanding of both Wiener's approach to literature and the spirit of his age, but also for their own artistic merit. Wiener was an innovative writer who deliberately, indeed, sometimes ostentatiously, challenged established norms and conventions. His fiction was the creation of a troubled intellectual who was attempting to negotiate the disturbing reality of his age and bring his understanding of the world into agreement with his emotional state.

In this book, I have focused more on continuities than on discontinuities, by tracing the internal logic of Wiener's intellectual and artistic

evolution. But Wiener's life is not only a fascinating modernist drama in which life and literature are closely intertwined; it also prompts us to question some of the popular assumptions about the cultural and intellectual situation of Jews in Europe before the Holocaust. Wiener and his colleagues sought to integrate Yiddish into the Marxist concept of world (albeit, in fact, European) culture, which became normative in the Soviet Union. In this process, Yiddish culture was transformed into an ideological battlefield, a contested territory between communism and its opponents. Today these ideological debates around Yiddish may look outlandish, but they brought Yiddish culture alive for many intellectuals of that age. Despite the animosity between the opposing sides, which peaked during the early 1930s, Yiddish remained, until 1948, one of the few conduits of cultural dialogue between East and West, Russia and Europe, as is demonstrated by the publication of the works of Wiener and other Soviet Yiddish writers in the United States in the 1940s.

By bringing Yiddish to the foreground of the ideological debates of his age, Wiener and his colleagues acted as cultural mediators, following the tradition rooted in nineteenth-century German-Jewish discourse. As a multinational "affirmative action empire", the pre-war Soviet Union offered more space for Jews to fulfill this role than most of the countries of Eastern and Central Europe, which became increasingly dominated by xenophobic nationalist, if not overtly fascist, regimes. Nowhere in the world before World War II did Yiddish enjoy as much formal respect and official recognition as in the Soviet Union, with its numerous cultural and educational institutions, job opportunities, and a large, though steadily diminishing, Yiddish-speaking population. Therefore, Wiener's emigration to the Soviet Union was by no means as paradoxical as it may seem: this was the only country in the world where a Yiddish scholar could get a university position, and a Yiddish writer could be assured of recognition equal to that of his peers who wrote in other minority languages. Indeed, the emigration of left-wing skilled workers, engineers, and intellectuals from Central Europe and Austria, in particular, to the Soviet Union increased during the late 1920s and early 1930s, especially during the economic depression.

As we know only too well, emigration to the Soviet Union also entailed a high risk of being sent to prison and even executed, but, equally obviously, this was less evident in 1926 than it is now. After coming to the Soviet Union, Wiener demonstrated a remarkable capacity for judicious decision-making, especially considering his volatile character, a capacity that helped him adjust to the changing political and cultural climate and retain his creativity. He managed not only to stay afloat but also to steer clear of the dangerous whirlpools of Soviet politics. He was attracted to the Soviet Union by the promise that his fiction would be published, and he would be able to continue his career as a writer; indeed, as it happened, his modernist novel *Ele Faleks untergang* appeared in print just before modernism became taboo. His transition to the newly constituted world of Soviet Yiddish academia, where he rapidly acquired a reputation as a pre-eminent expert and theoretician of Yiddish literature, helped him to weather the ideological storms that shook Soviet literature in the early 1930s. His next move, from the Kiev Institute for Jewish Proletarian Culture, which was slowly becoming a provincial backwater, to Moscow, the new and vibrant center of Soviet Yiddish culture, was equally propitious. Had he stayed in Kiev, he might easily have ended up in prison by 1937, as happened to many of his colleagues, including Max Erik and Avrom Abchuk.

Even during the years 1933–41, usually regarded as the period of decline of Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union, Wiener was highly productive. He rose to the position of Head of the Department of Yiddish Language and Literature at the Moscow State Pedagogical Institute, the highest academic post in Yiddish studies in the Soviet Union—indeed, in the entire world at that time. He hedged his bets by pursuing a literary career as a writer and editor. His position in the prestigious Union of Soviet Writers enabled him to retain his social (and financial) status after the Department was abruptly closed down in 1938. On the eve of the German invasion of the Soviet Union, Wiener was in fine creative form, completing a comprehensive history of Yiddish literature and hard at work on what might have become one of the most original novels ever written in Yiddish.

The war forced Wiener to make his final choice—to enlist in the Writers' Battalion, which virtually guaranteed death on the battlefield.

In a short piece that appeared in a collection published right after the outbreak of the war, Wiener wrote:

The bloodthirsty fascist dogs torture nations that they have enslaved, torture all working and decent people, everyone who has not lost their humanity. Wherever they set their feet, rivers of blood flow. They harbor an especially beastly hatred for our Jewish people, a savage cruelty unprecedented in history. Every sort of inquisition looks like child's play in comparison. The fascist cannibals are the enemy of our people because the best representatives of our people have always hated slavery, loved freedom, and been wholeheartedly devoted to the interests of humanity.¹

Again, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that this was probably the best death Wiener could have chosen for himself in those inhumane circumstances. It was not only a morally right and heroic decision, but also, uncanny as it may sound, the most far-sighted possible, because it helped to secure the future of his family and of his own legacy—though whether he himself saw things that way, we will, of course, never know. As a celebrated war hero, Wiener's works were not subject to censorship in the Soviet Union after his death. After the war, an American edition made his scholarship available to a somewhat wider audience abroad without jeopardizing his status in the Soviet Union. Uniquely for a Soviet Yiddish author, Wiener's papers have not only been preserved by his family, but also safely transported to Israel.

The personal, intellectual, and creative aspects of Wiener's life story are closely intertwined. For obvious reasons, Wiener left practically no evidence of what he truly thought about the Soviet reality. Indeed, it was his ability to keep his opinions to himself that was paramount to his survival. Our only way of glimpsing behind this self-constructed barrier is through his fiction and memoirs, which reveal, to use Moseley's image, a remarkable ability to write differently with two hands,² to produce works of art that defy the normative ideological aesthetics of his critical and literary-historical studies. Some critics might argue, taking their cue from the Russian formalists, that artistic imagination is an autonomous province and should not be interpreted as a reflection of reality. However, Wiener himself did not belong to this school: his own interpretation of literature was grounded in the Marxist notion of

culture as a superstructure over the socio-economic basis. It therefore seems reasonable to read his artistic writing through his own critical lenses, albeit perhaps not from the same deterministic and teleological perspective. As befits someone who belonged to the expressionist generation, Wiener regarded art, life, and intellect as closely overlapping spheres, a view that he articulated in his last pre-Soviet work *Von den Symbolen*. His fiction has strong autobiographical overtones, even when set in the seventeenth century. His preoccupations with death, true and false heroism, moral dilemmas, and utopian dreams was a trademark of Central European modernism and the avant-garde of that age, but for Wiener these concerns also had a direct bearing on his life in the Soviet Union during the rise and consolidation of Stalinism. Wiener was always an enemy of bourgeois “philistinism” and, indeed, liberalism, but at the same time, he was unable to cut himself off from the sensibility and outlook of his middle-class background. At the human level, the proletariat and its ideological spokesmen always remained alien to him, as he remained to them.

Much of Wiener’s writing, fiction and scholarship alike, touches on his anxieties in the face of his ideology’s pronouncement that he belongs to a class that is sentenced by the laws of history to extinction. The story of the rise and fall of the Jewish bourgeoisie constitutes the broader historical framework of Wiener’s literary scholarship. Thus he admires Aksentfeld’s “primitive realism,” which expresses the vigor and energy of the new class of bourgeoisie that has vanquished the old feudal oligarchy; but he also discerns, in the more artistically accomplished works of Etinger, disturbing notes of stagnation and compromise. In his analysis of Mendele and Sholem Aleichem, he demonstrates that the conflict between the ideological limitations of the bourgeois writer’s worldview, and the boundless creative energy of artistic talent, is at its fiercest in the most accomplished works of Yiddish realism. Wiener’s sharp ideological critique of the Yiddish classical writers’ inability to transcend their class limitations can be also interpreted as a peculiar kind of self-criticism aimed at his own (and perhaps other Soviet Yiddish writers’) residual attachment to bourgeois values. This sharpness, however, was thoroughly blunted toward the late 1930s by the realization that the bourgeois era in Russian Jewish history was gone, but that

disappearing along with it was the real Jewish *folk*. As a result Wiener, as well as many other Jewish intellectuals in the Soviet Union and abroad, shifted their concern to the preservation of the Yiddish cultural legacy.

Wiener's exaltation of socialist realism as a style in which the communist utopian ideal finds its fulfillment is certainly intellectually the weakest and most problematic part of his legacy. But here, too, we can discern familiar signs of messianic discourse, and therefore a strong, albeit hidden, link between the pre-Soviet and Soviet periods of his work. Wiener's notion of socialist realism as a style that transcends class limitations and produces an ultimate work of art by incorporating all of the achievements of humanity stems from his earlier theory of the evolution of symbolic expression. Depending on one's preference, Wiener's concept of socialist realism can be regarded as an ultimate secularization, or a parodic travesty, of the messianic "urge for redemption," to use the expressionist term. But it is also helpful to keep in mind that Wiener's general disposition was sarcastic, skeptical, and pessimistic. He was preoccupied with failure rather than success, and it is hard to imagine him, especially in the 1930s, as a naive believer in the triumph of the new communist utopia—rather, he was someone who viewed the Soviet Union as one of the lesser political evils of that time. His ambivalent concept of Yiddish culture as the only genuine culture of the Jewish *folk*—which he understood both in the Hegelian sense as a "historical people" (albeit, a stateless one), that is, an active agent of history, but also in the neo-Kantian sense as a transcendental entity that exists *an sich* outside concrete historical reality—is rooted in the ancient dilemma that for centuries has preoccupied Jewish and Christian thinkers, but became particularly relevant in Central and Eastern Europe after Herder: are Jews a nation like other nations, or are they *sui generis*? Not satisfied by the solution offered by the cultural branch of the Zionist movement (or "spiritual Zionism," as it was called in Russia), which he came to regard as too political and nationalistic, Wiener made an ideological leap to communism, which offered a non-nationalist concept of *folk* based in a Marxist interpretation of Yiddish culture.

Marxism offered Wiener a theoretical possibility of separating Jewish culture from modern politics, particularly from its nationalist variety. By emphasizing the significance of Yiddish as the vehicle of folk creativ-

ity, Wiener was able to present Jews as a “historical” people, that is, an ethnic group with a proper class structure, economic basis, and cultural superstructure, and to “denationalize” them by rejecting the political ideas of Zionists and diaspora nationalists, reviving, in a peculiar secularized way, the ancient and traditional theological conception of Jews as a chosen people, which in the famous words of Balaam’s blessing, “shall not be reckoned among the nations” (Numbers 23:9). Such a “dialectical” solution was possible only in the framework of the multinational and multicultural society of early Soviet communism, which promoted the “progressive” culture of every *folk* but rejected the political aspirations of any kind of “reactionary” nationalism. For Wiener, the Soviet Union was akin to a utopian “Orient,” where Jews would reunite with their primordial self and join other peoples in building a universal, messianic kingdom. Of course, this particular messianic project has been a miserable failure. But that probably would not have come as a great surprise to Wiener, given his lifelong fascination with failed messiahs.

Notes

Notes to the Introduction

1. Moshe Rosman, *How Jewish Is Jewish History?* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007), 64.
2. As Ruth Wisse claims in her insightful analysis of the situation of Yiddish literature in the mid-1930s: “But just as the Soviet branch of Yiddish culture was then cut off from the rest, so it would demand from us a separate investigation”; Ruth Wisse, “1935/6—A Year in the Life of Yiddish Literature,” in *Studies in Jewish Culture in Honour of Chone Shmeruk*, ed. Israel Bartal, Ezra Mendelson, and Chava Turniansky (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1993), 103.
3. See in particular Gennady Estraiikh, *In Harness: Yiddish Writers’ Romance with Communism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004); David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Yiddish Culture, 1918–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).
4. Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Yiddish Culture*, 216.
5. Marcus Moseley, *Being For Myself Alone: Origins of Jewish Autobiography* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 423–38.

Notes to Chapter 1

1. St. Sebastian Street connects the Old City with Kazimierz.
2. Meir Wiener Archives, Manuscript Department, JNUL, 4° 1763/1.
3. Ibid. She is referring to Benzion Rappaport, a prominent Judaic scholar and a teacher at the Cracow Jewish Gymnasium.
4. The “Czechoslovakian” firms were apparently located in the Austrian provinces of Bohemia and Moravia, as there was no Czechoslovakia at that time.
5. Letter of Franzi Gross to Max Weinreich of August 6, 1968, YIVO Archives, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
6. Ibid.

7. Letter of May 30, 1917, Martin Buber Collection, Manuscript Department, JNUL, 4^o 897/9.
8. Letter of Franzi Gross to Max Weinreich of August 6, 1968, YIVO Archives, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
9. Letter of Franzi Gross to Max Weinreich, August 19, 1968, YIVO Archives, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
10. Ibid.
11. Erna Adlersberg, "Reminiscences of My Late Brother, Meir Wiener," Meir Wiener Archives, Manuscript Department, JNUL, 4^o 1763/2, pp. 1–3.
12. Meir Wiener Archives, Manuscript Department, JNUL, 4^o 1763/1, p. 4.
13. Meir Viner, "Der zeyde Binyomin," *Sovetish heymland*, no. 9 (September): 1969, 115.
14. Ibid.
15. Emanuel Meltser, "'Sabi Binyamin Landa, ish Krakov' me'et Meir Viner—mavo vehaarot," in *Kroke-Kazimierz-Cracow: Studies in the History of Cracow Jewry*, ed. Elchanan Reiner (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Center for the History of Polish Jewry, 2001), 353.
16. Johann Gottfried Herder, *Werke in zehn Bänden*, vol. 10 (Frankfurt/Main: Deutscher Klassiker, 2000), 628.
17. Ibid., 639.
18. Ibid., 641.
19. Julius H. Schoeps, "Das kollektive jüdische Bewußtsein: J. G. Herders Volksgeistlehre und der Zionismus," in *Hebräische Poesie und jüdischer Volksgeist: Die Wirkungsgeschichte von Johann Gottfried Herder im Judentum Mittel- und Osteuropas*, ed. Christoph Schulte (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2003), 184–87.
20. Delphine Bechtel, "Cultural Transfers between 'Ostjuden' and 'Westjuden': German-Jewish Intellectuals and Yiddish Culture 1897–1930," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, 42 (1997): 72–73.
21. Martin Buber, "Jüdische Renaissance," *Ost und West*, no. 1 (1901): 7–8.
22. David Groiser, "Translating Yiddish: Martin Buber and David Pinski," in *The Yiddish Presence in European Literature: Inspiration and Interaction*, ed. Joseph Sherman and Ritchie Robertson (Oxford: Legenda, 2005), 56.
23. Ibid.
24. Laurel Papp, *Zionism and Revolution in European-Jewish Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 40.
25. Martin Buber, *Drei Reden über das Judentum* (Frankfurt/Main: Rütten und Loening, 1911), 19.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 47.
28. Ibid., 79.
29. Ibid., 101.
30. Ibid., 102.

31. Quoted in Allan S. Janik and Hans Veigl, *Wittgenstein in Vienna: A Biographical Excursion through the City and its History* (New York: Springer, 1998), 61.
32. Meir Wiener Archives, Manuscript Department, JNUL, 4° 1763/2, p. 3.
33. Letter of May 30, 1917, Martin Buber Collection, Manuscript Department, JNUL, 4° 897/9.
34. Meir Wiener Archives, Manuscript Department, JNUL, 4° 1763/2, p. 3.
35. Letter to parents of May 20, 1916, YIVO Archives, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
36. Letter to Franzl of January 26, 1918, YIVO Archives, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Letter to Erna of March 12, 1917, YIVO Archives, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
40. Letter to Erna of March 12, 1917, YIVO Archives, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
41. Ibid.
42. Letter to Erna of May 9, 1917, YIVO Archives, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
43. Letter to Franzl, May 20, 1916, YIVO Archives, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
44. Letter to Franzl, April 23, 1918, Meir Wiener Archives, JNUL, 4° 1763/54.
45. Letter to Erna of May 9, 1917, YIVO Archives, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
46. Letter of Franzl Gross to Max Weinreich, August 19, 1968, YIVO Archives, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
47. Letter to Erna of November 30, 1917, YIVO Archives, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
48. Letter to Leon Adlersberg of September 10, 1918, YIVO Archives, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
49. Letter to Erna of November 19, 1918, YIVO Archives, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
50. Postcard to Z. J. Kuk of January 30, 1919, Gnazim, The Archives of the Hebrew Writers' Union, Tel Aviv, 38 A, 88182-Aleph.
51. Postcard to Z. J. Kuk, no date, Gnazim, The Archives of the Hebrew Writers' Union, Tel Aviv, 38 A, 88184-Aleph.
52. Roy Pascal, *From Naturalism to Expressionism: German Literature and Society 1880-1918* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), 63.
53. Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. Michael Bullock (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1997), 5.
54. Ibid., 15.
55. Ibid., 131.

56. Pascal, *From Naturalism to Expressionism*, 195.
57. Kasimir Edschmid, *Frühe Schriften* (Berlin: Hermann Luchterhand, 1970), 198.
58. Quoted in Armin A. Wallas, ed., *Texte der Expressionismus: Der Beitrag jüdischer Autoren zur österreichischen Avantgarde*. (Linz: edition neue texte, 1988), 292.
59. Donna K. Heizer, *Jewish-German Identity in the Orientalist Literature of Else Lasker-Schüler, Friedrich Wolf, and Franz Werfel* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1996), 8.
60. Jakob Wassermann, *Deutscher und Jude: Reden und Schriften 1904–1933* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1984), 29–30.
61. *Ibid.*, 30.
62. *Ibid.*, 31.
63. *Ibid.*, 32.
64. Wallas, *Texte des Expressionismus*, 282.
65. Meir Wiener, “Märchensammlungen,” *Der Jude*, 1917–18, no. 4:281.
66. *Ibid.*, 282.
67. *Ibid.*, 283.
68. Eleonore Lappin, *Der Jude, 1916–1928: Jüdische Moderne zwischen Universalismus und Partikularismus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 329.
69. Meir Wiener, “Else Lasker-Schüler,” *Jerubbaal*, no. 1 (1918): 294.
70. *Ibid.*, 295.
71. Gustav Krojanker, ed., *Juden in der deutschen Literatur: Essays über zeitgenössische Schriftsteller* (Berlin: Heine-Bund, 1926), 182.
72. Wiener, “Else Lasker-Schüler,” 296.
73. *Ibid.*, 297.
74. *Ibid.*, 299.
75. *Ibid.*, 300.
76. *Ibid.*, 302.
77. *Ibid.*
78. Heizer, *Jewish-German Identity*, 37.
79. Ritchie Robertson, *The “Jewish Question” in German Literature, 1749–1939: Emancipation and its Discontents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 444–47.
80. A helpful analysis of Adler’s mythopoetic project can be found in Jürgen Egyptien, “Mythen-Synkretismus und apokryphes Kerygma: Paul Adlers Werk als Projekt einer Resakralisierung der Welt,” in *Expressionismus in Österreich: Die Literatur und die Künste*, ed. Klaus Amann and Armin A. Wallas (Vienna: Böhlau, 1994), 379–95.
81. Karl Otten, ed., *Das leere Haus: Prosa jüdischer Dichter* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1959), 627.
82. Meir Wiener, “Paul Adler,” in *Juden in der deutschen Literatur*, 251.
83. *Ibid.*, 257.
84. *Ibid.*, 258.

85. Otten, *Das leere Haus*, 605.
86. Meir Wiener, *Messias* (Vienna: R. Löwit, 1920), 20.
87. *Ibid.*, 27.
88. *Ibid.*
89. *Ibid.*, 28.
90. *Ibid.*, 34.
91. *Ibid.*, 35.
92. *Ibid.*, 25.
93. *Ibid.*, 36.
94. *Ibid.*, 37.
95. On the emergence of the legend about Joseph della Reina, see Joseph Dan, *The Heart and the Fountain: An Anthology of Jewish Mystical Experiences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 181–94.
96. Avraham Band, “Hoores tsu Sh”Y Agnons ershtn gedruktn lid in yidish,” *Di goldene keyt*, no. 46 (1963): 187.
97. Sh. Y. Agnon, “Rabi Yoysef dela Reina,” *Di goldene keyt*, no. 46 (1963): 189.
98. Wiener, *Messias*, 45.
99. *Ibid.*, 48.
100. Eugen Hoefflich (Moshe Ya’akov Ben-Gavriel), *Tagebücher, 1915 bis 1927*, ed. Armin Wallas (Vienna: Böhlau, 1999), 100–101.
101. Wallas, *Texte des Expressionismus*, 9. For more on Hatvani and his ideas about art, see Wilhelm Haefs, “‘Der Expressionismus ist tot . . . Es lebe der Expressionismus’: Paul Hatvani als Literaturkritiker und Literaturtheoretiker des Expressionismus,” in Amann and Wallas, *Expressionismus in Österreich*, 453–85.
102. Larry Wolff, “Dynastic Conservatism and Poetic Violence in Fin-de-Siècle Cracow: The Habsburg Matrix of Polish Modernism,” *American Historical Review* 106, no. 3 (June 2001): 136–37.
103. Franzi Gross remembers: “I know that our father gave Meir repeatedly a substantial amount of money to pay his debts and replenish his wardrobe.” Meir Wiener Archives, Manuscript Department, JNUL, 4^o 1763/1, p. 4.
104. Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1981), 10.
105. *Ibid.*, 22.

Notes to Chapter 2

1. Meir Wiener, “Hass und Verachtung,” *Der Jude* 2, no. 8 (1917–18): 523–31.
2. *Ibid.*, 525.
3. *Ibid.*, 528.
4. *Ibid.*
5. S. An-sky, “Evreiskoe narodnoe tvorchestvo,” in *Evrei v Rossiiskoi Imprii XVIII–XIX vekov: Sbornik trudov evreiskikh istorikov*, ed. A. Lokshin (Moscow: Jewish University, 1995), 644.

6. Wiener, "Hass und Verachtung," 529.
7. Ibid., 530.
8. Ibid., 531.
9. *Jerubbaal: Eine Zeitschrift der jüdischen Jugend*, 1918–19, no. 1:66–71.
10. David Rechter, *The Jews of Vienna and the First World War* (London: Littman Library, 2001), 163.
11. Ibid., 165.
12. Ibid., 176.
13. Letter to Franzi, December 29, 1919, YIVO Archives, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
14. Melekh Ravitsh, *Mayn leksikon*, vol. 3 (Montreal: Komitet, 1958), 226.
15. Armin A. Wallas, "Der Pförtner des Ostens. Eugen Hoeflich—Panasiat und Expressionist," in *Von Franzos zu Canetti: Jüdische Autoren aus Österreich. Neue Studien*, ed. Mark H. Gelber et al. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1996), 341.
16. Eugen Hoeflich (Moshe Ya'akov Ben-Gavriel), *Tagebücher, 1915 bis 1927*, ed. Armin Wallas. (Vienna: Böhlau, 1999), 55. Further page references are to this edition.
17. *Esra*, 1, no. 2 (1919): 45.
18. Hoeflich, *Tagebücher*, 85. The title of the proposed special issue is an obvious reference to Ahad Ha'am's famous essay "This Is Not the Way" (1889), in which he argued that the cultural revival of the Jewish people was more important than the colonization of Palestine.
19. Meir Wiener, "Ist dies noch Zionismus? (Notizen und Zitate)," *Esra*, no. 8 (1920): 226–35.
20. Ibid., 244.
21. Hoeflich, *Tagebücher*, 86.
22. Ibid., 137.
23. Ibid., 153.
24. Ibid., 211.
25. Lit. pre-March—from the time before the 1848 revolution.
26. Fritz M. Gross, "Erinnerungen an meinen Freund und Schwager Meir Wiener," Manuscript Department, JNUL, 4^o 1763/3, 1–3.
27. Hannan Hever, "Afterword," in *Collected Poems* by Avraham Ben Yitzhak, trans. Peter Cole (Jerusalem: Ibis, 2003), 78.
28. Elias Canetti, *The Play of the Eyes*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Granta Books, 1999), 140–41.
29. I am grateful to Dr. Evelyn Adunka for sharing this information with me.
30. Lappin, *Der Jude 1916–1928*, 361–62. On Müller, see further Nathaniel Riemer, "Ein Wanderer zwischen den Welten—zum 50sten Todesjahr von Ernst Müller," *David*, 62 (September 2004).
31. Shachar Pinsker, *Literary Passports: The Making of Modernist Hebrew Fiction in Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

32. Fritz M. Gross, "Erinnerungen an meinen Freund und Schwager Meir Wiener," 4.
33. Ibid., 3.
34. Ibid., 5.
35. Wiener Archives, JNUL, 4^o 1763/16, 33–51.
36. Murray G. Hall, "Der unbekannter Tausendsassa Franz Blei und der Etikettenschwindel 1918," *Jahrbuch der Grillparzer-Gesellschaft*; Dritte Folge, 15 (1983): 129–40. I am grateful to Thomas Soxberger for sharing this article with me.
37. Ibid., 134.
38. Quoted in René F. Marineau, *Jacob Levy Moreno, 1889–1974: Father of Psychodrama, Sociometry, and Group Psychotherapy* (London: Tavistock/Routledge, 1989), 33.
39. Ibid., 41.
40. Iwan Goll, "Café," *Daimon* (April 1918): 114.
41. Edward Timms, *Karl Kraus, Apocalyptic Satirist: The Post-War Crisis and the Rise of the Swastika* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 242.
42. Karl Kraus, *Literatur, oder, Man wird doch da sehn* (Vienna: Die Fackel, 1921), 77.
43. See Esther Rozental-Shneyderman, *Oyf vegn un umvegn*, vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: Hamenorah, 1978), 192–93.
44. JNUL, Wiener Collection, 4^o 1763/16, 50.
45. "Kern und Schale," *Esra*, no. 7 (1919): 209.
46. Ibid., 210. Wiener included this fragment in his introduction to the anthology *Die Lyrik der Kabbalah*, changing "das Sein" to the more essentialist "das Wesende"; *Die Lyrik der Kabbalah: Eine Anthologie* (Vienna: R. Löwit, 1920), 25.
47. "Judas Ischariot und die Anderen," *Esra*, no. 5 (1919): 152.
48. Ibid., 152.
49. Ibid., 150.
50. Ibid., 155.
51. Letter to Franzi, May 16, 1918, Wiener Collection, JNUL, 4^o 1763/54, 4.
52. Letter to Erna, March 12, 1917, 2; YIVO Letters Collection, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
53. Ibid., 3.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid., 4.
56. Meir Wiener, *Die Lyrik der Kabbalah*, 13. Further page references in the text are to this edition.
57. Meir Wiener, "Vom Wesen des jüdischen Gebets," *Der Jude*, 8 (1918), 418–26.
58. "Wiener, *Die Lyrik der Kabbalah*, 26.
59. Gerhard Scholem, "Lyrik der Kabbala?," *Der Jude* 1, (1921–22): 55–69.
60. Lappin, *Der Jude*, 367.
61. David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 29.

62. Ibid., 30.
63. Gerhard Scholem, "Abschied: Offener Brief an Herrn Dr. Siegfried Bernfeld und gegen die Leser dieser Zeitschrift," *Jerubbaal* 1918–19, no. 1:126.
64. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, eds., *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, ed. and trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 195.
65. Paul Mendes-Flohr, "The Spiritual Quest of the Philologist," in *Gershom Scholem: The Man and His Work*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 13.
66. Ibid., 14.
67. See, e.g., the quote from Scholem's 1937 letter to Salman Schocken in Boaz Huss, "Ask No Questions: Gershom Scholem and the Study of Contemporary Jewish Mysticism," *Modern Judaism*, no. 25 (2005): 145.
68. Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher 1917–1923*, ed. Karlfried Gründer et al., vol. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag, 2000), 685.
69. Huss, "Ask No Questions," 142.
70. Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, 123.
71. Eric Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 67.
72. *Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 303.
73. November 9, 1918, Martin Buber Collection, JNUL 4° 897/22.
74. Dov Sadan, "Der krokever iluy," *Di goldene keyt*, no. 109 (1982): 138–61.
75. Meir Wiener, *Von den Symbolen: Zehn Kapitel über den Ausdruck des Geistes* (Berlin: Benjamin Harz, 1924), 6. Further page references are to this edition.
76. Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art and Painting in Particular*, trans. Michael Sadleir, (New York: Wittenborn, 1955).
77. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1: *Language*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 178.
78. Ibid., 288.
79. Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe*, trans. Hope Heaney (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 21.
80. Ibid., 25.
81. Harriet Freidenreich, *Jewish Politics in Vienna 1918–1938* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 84.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid., 85.
84. On their experience, see Barry McLoughlin, Hans Schafranek, and Walter Szevera, *Aufbruch, Hoffnung, Endstation: Österreicherinnen und Österreicher in der Sowjetunion 1925–1945* (Vienna: Gesellschaftskritik, 1997).
85. Meir Wiener, "Was nützt Philantropie?" *Der Jude*, 1920–21, no. 4:231–32.
86. Marcus Moseley, "Revealing and Concealing the Soviet Jewish Self: The Desk-Drawer Memoirs of Meir Viner," in *Culture Front: Representing Jews in East-*

ern Europe, ed. Benjamin Nathans and Gabriella Safran (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 285n43.

87. Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, 97.

88. Quoted and translated in Eric Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane*, 20–21.

89. *Ibid.*, 26.

90. Eugen Hoeflich, “Meir Wiener: Messias,” *Jüdische Zeitung*, no. 17 (May 14, 1920): 4.

91. Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 185.

92. Steven E. Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800–1923* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 187.

93. Aschheim describes this phenomenon in detail in *Brothers and Strangers*, 185–214.

Notes to Chapter 3

1. On Yiddish culture in Berlin after World War I, see *Yiddish in Weimar Berlin: At the Crossroads of Diaspora Politics and Culture*, ed. Gennady Estraiikh and Mikhail Krutikov (Oxford: Legenda, 2010).

2. For more on the history of Yiddish publishing in Vienna, see Thomas Soxberger, “Zwischen Partei- und Selbstverlag: Die jiddische Literatur und Publizistik in Wien,” in *Zwischenwelt: Jiddische Kultur und Literatur aus Österreich*, ed. Armin Eidherr and Karl Müller (Klagenfurt: Drava, 2003), 250–63.

3. Armin A. Wallas, “Eugen Hoeflich (M. Y. Ben-Gavriel) und die jiddische Kultur in Wien,” *ibid.*, 81.

4. Manès Sperber, *The Unheeded Warning: 1918–1933*, trans. Harry Zorn (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1991), 51.

5. Gabriele Kohlbauer-Fritz, “Das Bild Wiens in der jiddischen Literatur,” in *Jiddische Kultur und Literatur aus Österreich*, ed. Armin Eidherr and Karl Müller, (Vienna: Drava, 2003) 159.

6. *Ibid.*, 160.

7. On Yiddish literature in Vienna, see Thomas Soxberger, “Jiddische Literatur in Galizien und Wien,” in *Nackte Lieder: Jiddische Literatur aus Wien 1915–1938*, ed. and trans. Thomas Soxberger (Vienna: Mandelbaum, 2008), 7–19.

8. Melech Ravitch, *Dos mayse-bukh fun mayn lebn, 1908–1921* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-farband fun poylishe yidn in Argentine, 1964), 490.

9. Zilburg, “Vos ikh hob aykh tsu zogn,” *Kritik*, no. 4 (October 1920): 3–4.

10. Naftole Vaynig, “In di trit fun a nayem yidishn stil,” *Kritik*, no. 4 (October 1920): 6.

11. *Ibid.*, 8.

12. Vaynig, “In di trit fun a nayem yidishn stil,” *Kritik*, no. 5 (November 1920): 25.

13. Vaynig, "In di trit fun a nayem yidishn stil," *Kritik*, no. 7 (January 1921): 9.
14. Aleksandr [Khashin], "Di kiever," *Kritik*, no. 5 (November 1920): 3–7.
15. For more on the history and activity of the Culture League, see Gillel Kazovskii, *Khudozhniki Kultur-Ligi* (Moscow: Mostly kultury, 2003); and Genady Estraiikh, *In Harness: Yiddish Writers' Romance with Communism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 30–33.
16. Moyshe Lifshits, "Literatur fun ibergangstsayt," in *Geyendik* (Berlin, 1923), 62–71.
17. A top-secret 1936 memorandum of the Comintern Cadres Department regarding the "Trotskyist and Other Hostile Elements" in the German Communist Party states that Moyshe Lifshits "had a reputation as a provocateur" and "played a suspicious role in connection with the USSR." William J. Chase, *Enemies within the Gates? The Comintern and the Stalinist Repression, 1934–1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 165.
18. See Wiener's letter to Hayim Brody of July 17, 1921 in Dov Sadan, "Der krokever iluy: tsum lebn, veg un gang fun Meir Viner," *Di goldene keyt*, no. 43 (1978): 149.
19. Erna Adlersberg, "Reminiscences," 4.
20. Letter to Erna of April 4, 1921, YIVO Archives, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
21. Erna Adlersberg, "Reminiscences," 4.
22. Franzi Gross, memoir dated May 11, 1967, Meir Wiener Archives, Manuscript Department, JNUL, Jerusalem, 4^o 1763/1.
23. Ullstein is said to have supported such Yiddish publishing houses as Klal, Velt, Yidish, Shveln, and Gesher; however, there are no direct sources to verify this claim. See Maria Kühn-Ludewig, *Jiddische Bücher aus Berlin, 1918–1936* (Nümbrecht: Kirsch, 2006), 202. Elias Shulman believes that Wiener worked for Klal-farlag; see his footnote to the Yiddish translation of Franzi Gross's memoir from the YIVO archives, "Mayn bruder Meir Viner" in *Pinkes far der forschung fun der yidisher literatur un prese*, vol. 2 (New York: Congress for Jewish Culture, 1972), 553,n3.
24. B. Kvitko and M. Petrovskii, eds., *Zhizn' i tvorchestvo L'va Kvitko* (Moscow: Detskaia literatura, 1976), 132.
25. Quoted in Gennady Estraiikh, *In Harness: Yiddish Writers' Romance with Communism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 32.
26. Estraiikh, *In Harness*, 17. See also Seth Wolitz. "The Kiev-Grupe (1918–1920) Debate: The Function of Literature." *Yiddish* 3, no. 3 (1978): 97–106.
27. Kenneth B. Moss, "Not *The Dybbuk* but *Don Quixote*: Translation, Deparochialization, and Nationalism in Jewish Culture," in *Culture Front: Representing Jews in Eastern Europe*, ed. Benjamin Nathans and Gabriella Safran (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 204.
28. See Avraham Novershtern, *Kesem hadimdumim: Apokalipsa umeshikhiyut besifrut yidish* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2003), 88.

29. On the early period of Hofshyteyn's life, see the memoirs of Nokhem Oyslender, "Yugnt, yugnt! Vi a shpilndike vel," *Sovetish heymland*, 1980, no. 2:127.

30. Estraiikh, *In Harness*, 33.

31. Kenneth B. Moss, *Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 198.

32. Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 98.

33. Kvitko, *Trit* (Kiev: Kiever farlag, 1919), 7.

34. *Ibid.*, 10.

35. Nokhem Oyslender. "In 1917," *Sovetish heymland*, 1969, no. 9:132–33.

36. Oyslender, "Yugnt, yugnt!," 138–39.

37. Novershtern, *Kesem hadimdumim*, 149.

38. *Ibid.*, 145–47.

39. Leyb Kvitko, 1919 (Berlin: Yidisher literarisher farlag, 1923), 5–6.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Sabine Koller, "'The air outside is bloody': Leyb Kvitko and his Pogrom Cycle 1919," in *Yiddish in Weimar Berlin*, ed. Gennady Estraiikh and Mikhail Kru- tikov (Oxford: Legenda, 2010) 116.

42. Novershtern, *Kesem hadimdumim*, 150.

43. Yekhezkl Dobrushin, "Dray dikhter," in *Gedankengang*, (Kiev: Kultur-lige, 1922), 79.

44. *Ibid.*, 84–91.

45. *Ibid.*, 96.

46. *Ibid.* Summing up Dobrushin's argument, Moss reiterates the connection between the "general" and the "national": "Hofshyteyn's poem transcended any parochial national frame and participated in something more 'general' and 'European'—yet it was precisely from this fact that it derived its decisive national significance." (Moss, *Jewish Renaissance*, 105). It is important to keep in mind that for Dobrushin, as for other Soviet critics, the "national" and "nationalist" had different meanings.

47. On Oyslender's early period, see Abe Finkelshteyn, "Tsum 75stn geburts- tog fun Nokhem Oyslender (bio-bibliografishe notitsn)," *Sovetish heymland*, 1968, no. 12:142–46.

48. Oyslender, "Yugnt, yugnt!," 118–47.

49. Nokhem Oyslender, *Veg-ayn veg-oys* (Kiev: Kultur-lige, 1924), 104.

50. The reconstruction follows the loose handwritten fragments in Meir Wiener Collections, JNUL, 1763/18.

51. Matthew Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi: Reclaiming Jesus and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 148.

52. Uri Zvi Grinberg, *Collected Yiddish Works*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979), 472.

53. Meir Wiener Collection, JNUL, 1763/9, 3–4.

54. "Katchen mir zikh far gelekhter, /Az men heyst im droysn blaybn/Eyn aleyn un vartn-vartn/Bay sakone in di hent./Az di rayter im derzeen,/Forn glaykh im oyf tsilinder,/Shindn im mit di nahaykes/Oyf katovesn di hoyt!" Kvitko, 1919, 151–53.
55. Letter to Erna of January 14, 1923, YIVO Archives, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
56. Letter to Ravitsh of November 27, 1923, Melekh Ravitsh Collection, Manuscript Department, JNUL, 4° 1540/67.
57. Letter to Ravitsh of December 8, 1923, Melekh Ravitsh Collection, Manuscript Department, JNUL, 4° 1540/67.
58. Letter to Ravitsh of March 3, 1924, Melekh Ravitsh Collection, Manuscript Department, JNUL, 4° 1540/67.
59. Letter to Vogel of October 8–13, 1925, Avraham Sutzkever Collection, Manuscript Department, JNUL, 4° 1565.
60. Ibid.
61. Israel Joshua Singer (1893–1944), Yiddish novelist and a coeditor of the *Lit-erarishe bleter*.
62. Letter to Vogel of October 8–13, 1925, Avraham Sutzkever Collection, Manuscript Department, JNUL, 4° 1565.
63. Letter to Vogel of November 25, 1925, Avraham Sutzkever Collection, Manuscript Department, JNUL, 4° 1565.
64. Ibid.
65. Letter to Vogel of March 27, 1926, Avraham Sutzkever Collection, Manuscript Department, JNUL, 4° 1565.
66. Letter to Vogel of February 8, 1926, Avraham Sutzkever Collection, Manuscript Department, JNUL, 4° 1565.
67. Wiener's Collection, Manuscript Department, JNUL, 4° 1763/53.
68. Quoted in Gross's letter to Weinreich of August 6, 1968, YIVO Archives, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
69. Franzi Gross to Max Weinreich of August 19, 1968, YIVO Archives, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
70. Letter to Erna of April 4, 1926, YIVO Archives, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
71. Letter to Franzi of May 15, 1926, Meir Wiener Archives, JNUL, 4° 1763/54.
72. Letter to Franzi of May 15, 1926, Meir Wiener Archives, JNUL, 4° 1763/54.
73. Erna Adlersberg, "Reminiscences," Meir Wiener Archives, JNUL, 4° 1763/2.

Notes to Chapter 4

1. McLoughlin et al., *Aufbruch, Hoffnung, Endstation*, 73.
2. Protocol of the Small Presidium of the Ukrainian Commissariat for Sciences of April 8, 1927. Tsentral'nyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Vysshikh Organov Vlasti Ukrainy (TsGAVOU), f. 166, op. 6, d. 5920, l. 138.

3. Alfred Abraham Greenbaum, *Jewish Scholarship and Scholarly Institutions in Soviet Russia, 1918–1953*. (Jerusalem: Center for Research and Documentation of East European Jewry, 1978), 36–37.
4. TsGAVOU, f. 166, op. 7, d. 697. l. 15 ob. I am grateful to Dr. Efim Melamed for providing me with this information from the Kiev archives.
5. Esther Rozental-Shneyderman, *Oyfvegn un umvegn*, vol. 2 (Tel-Aviv, 1978), 191.
6. Ibid., 193.
7. Ibid., 203–4.
8. Ibid., 201–2.
9. Ibid., 192.
10. Ibid., 203.
11. Ibid.
12. I am grateful to Julia Wiener for providing this information.
13. Rozental-Shneyderman, *Oyfvegn un umvegn*, 195.
14. Meir Wiener, Introduction to *12 dertseylungen (1922–1932)* by Itsik Kipnis (Kharkov: Melukhe farlag far natsionale minderhaytn in FSSR, 1933), 3–6.
15. Letter to Franzi, December 2, 1929, YIVO Archives RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
16. Letter to Erna, August 2, 1931, YIVO Archives, RG 107, Box 5, Folder Viner, Meir.
17. Meir Viner, “Vegn H. Leyvik lider,” *Di royte velt*, no. 7 (1927): 78–94.
18. Viner, “Vegn H. Leyvik lider,” 94.
19. Cited and translated by Marcus Moseley from *Briv fun yidishe sovetishe shraybers*, ed. Mordechai Altshuler (Jerusalem: Center for Research and Documentation of East-European Jewry, 1979), in “Revealing and Concealing the Soviet Jewish Self: The Desk-Drawer Memoirs of Meir Viner,” Nathans and Safran, *Culture Front*, 276. Moseley stresses Fininberg’s “manifest malicious intent” in spelling “Doctor of Philosophy” in Hebrew orthography. It is not clear, however, whether Fininberg was aware of the fact that Wiener had no doctoral degree.
20. Yasha Bronshteyn, review of *Di royte velt*, *Shtern*, nos. 7–8 (1927): 77.
21. Nokhem Oyslender, “An entferr (Tsu M. Viners artikl vegn H. Leyvik),” *Di royte velt*, nos. 8–9 (1927): 132–44.
22. Oyslender, “An entferr,” 136.
23. *Di royte velt*, nos. 8–9 (1927): 144.
24. Yekhezkl Dobrushin to Leyvick, August 30, 1927, in *Briv fun yidishe sovetishe shraybers*, ed. Altshuler, 71–72.
25. Estraikh, *In Harness*, 124.
26. *Di royte velt*, no. 10 (1926): 46.
27. Letter to Vogel of February 8, 1926, Avraham Sutzkever Collection, Manuscript Department, JNUL, 4^o 1565.
28. Meir Viner, *Ele Faleks untergang* (Kharkov: Melukhe-farlag fun Ukraine, 1929). All page numbers are given according to this edition.

29. Meir Viner, "Yugnt-fraynt," *Sovetish heymland*, no. 10 (October, 1969): 118.
30. Meir Viner, "Der zeyde Binyomin," *Sovetish heymland*, no. 9 (September, 1969): 115.
31. George Schoolfield, *A Baedeker of Decadence: Charting a Literary Fashion, 1884–1927* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 182.
32. Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 13.
33. Franzi Gross memoirs, Meir Wiener Archives, 4^o JNUL 1763/1, 3.
34. Introduction to *Galizien—Eine Literarische Heimat*, ed. Stefan Kaszyński (Poznan: UAM, 1987), 7–8.
35. Zoran Konstantinović, "Das Stadtbild Lembergs in der Österreichischen Literatur," in *Galizien—Eine Literarische Heimat*, 16.
36. Iwona Ewertowska-Klaja, "Überlegungen zu drei galizischen Schulromanen polnischer Autoren," in *Galizien—Eine Literarische Heimat*, 207–8.
37. *Ibid.*, 210.
38. *Ibid.*, 217.
39. Wiener, *Von den Symbolen*, 155.
40. Yankev Pat, "Ele Faleks untergang," *Bikher-velt*, no. 8 (1929): 30–32.
41. Gennady Estraiikh, "Soviet Yiddish Vernacular of the 1920s: Avrom Abtchuk's Hershl Shamaj as a Sociolinguistic Source," *Slovo* 7, no. 1 (1994): 1–12.
42. Abtshuk is vividly portrayed by Esther Rozental-Shneyderman in *Oyf vegn un umvegn*, vol. 3 (1) (Tel Aviv: I. L. Peretz-farlag, 1982), 183–255.
43. *Kegn antimarksistishe teories in der literatur-forschung* (Kharkov: Melukhisher natsmindfarlag, 1932), 113.
44. A. A., "Meir Viner. Ele Faleks untergang," *Di royte velt*, no. 9 (1929): 185–86.
45. Estraiikh, *In Harness*, 129.
46. Markish described the situation as a "psychosis concerning the right-wing 'deviation'"; see his letter to Opatoshu of January 31, 1929, in Altshuler, *Briv fun yidishe sovetishe shraybers*, 266.
47. In more detail, the events of 1929 and their effect on Yiddish literature are described and analyzed by Gennady Estraiikh, *In Harness*, 28–134; David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Yiddish Culture, 1918–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 170–77; and Chone Shmeruk, "Yiddish Literature in the USSR," in *The Jews in Soviet Russia since 1917*, ed. Lionel Kochan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 249–52.
48. "Unter a ployt," *Di royte velt*, no. 7 (July 1929): 8–34.
49. Shmeruk, "Yiddish Literature in the USSR," 254. For a reading of this story in the context of the German modernism of the 1920s, see Marc Caplan, "The Hermit at the Circus: Der Nister, Yiddish Literature, and German Culture in the Weimar Period," *Studia Rosenthaliana*, no. 41 (2009): 173–96.
50. Isaak Nusinov, "Der Nister," in *Gedakht*, by Der Nister (Kiev, Kultur-lige, 1929), xviii.

51. In more detail, Litvakov's position is discussed by Gennady Estraiikh in *In Harness*, 130–31.

52. "Partey-baratung baym kiever kreyz-partkom," *Prolit*, no. 5, (1929): 87.

53. Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Yiddish Culture*, 167.

54. *Kegn antimarksistishe teories*, 123.

55. Shmuel Godiner, *Figurn oyfn rand* (Kiev: Kultur-lige, 1929), 80.

56. *Ibid.*, 90.

57. On the notion of justice in Bergelson's novel, see Mikhail Krutikov, "Narrating the Revolution: From 'Tsugvintn' to *Midas-hadin*," in *David Bergelson: From Modernism to Socialist Realism*, ed. Joseph Sherman and Gennady Estraiikh (Oxford: Legenda, 2007), 167–82.

58. On the adaptation of Yiddish literature to the party line, see Gennady Estraiikh, "A Touchstone of Socialist Realism: 1934 Almanac of Soviet Yiddish Writers," *Jews in Eastern Europe* 3 (1998): 24–37.

59. On Litvakov's views and activities, see the following recent studies: Gennady Estraiikh, "Yiddish Literary Life in Moscow, 1918–1924," *Jews in Eastern Europe* 2 (2000): 25–55; Joseph Sherman, "From Isolation to Entrapment: Bergelson and the Party Line, 1919–1927," *Slavic Almanach* 9 (2000): 195–222; David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Yiddish Culture*, 116–59; Mikhail Krutikov, "What Is Yiddish Literary Tradition? The Soviet Marxist Moshe Litvakov versus the American Modernist Mikhl Likht," *Prooftexts*, no. 2 (2001): 204–28; and "Soviet Literary Theory in the Search for a Yiddish Canon: The Case of Moshe Litvakov," in *Yiddish and the Left*, ed. Gennady Estraiikh and Mikhail Krutikov (Oxford: Legenda, 2001), 226–41.

60. A. Abtshuk, "Vegn der literatur-kritisher arbet fun dem kh[aver] M. Litvakov," in *Farn leninism etap in der literatur-kritik: Barikhtn funem plenum fun der litseksye 25–30 april 1932 (Kharkov, 1932)*, 9–40.

61. I. V. Stalin, *Sochineniia*, vol. 13 (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1951), 84–102.

62. Hans Günther, "Zhiznennye fazy sotsrealisticheskogo kanona," in *Sots-realisticheskii kanon*, ed. Hans Günther and Evgenii Dobrenko (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2000), 283–84; see also Hans Günther, *Die Verstaatlichung der Literatur: Entstehung und Funktionsweise des sozialistisch-realistischen Kanons in der sowjetischen Literatur der 30er Jahre* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1984), 8–10.

63. Greenbaum, *Jewish Scholarship*, 65.

64. *Kegn antimarksistishe teories*, 6–9.

65. J. Arch Getty, "Samokritika Rituals in the Stalinist Central Committee, 1933–38," *The Russian Review*, no. 58 (January 1999): 52.

66. *Kegn antimarksistishe teories*, 11–14.

67. *Ibid.*, 16–19.

68. *Ibid.*, 20–22; in the February 1932 issue of *Di royte velt*, Wiener also accused the entire Boy group of Trotskyism. See Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Yiddish Culture*, 178.

69. Ibid., 66.

70. Ibid., 91.

71. Ibid., 53–56.

72. Ibid., 88–92 and 108–9.

73. Ibid., 82–87.

74. Rozental-Shneyderman, *Oyf vegn un umvegn*, vol. 3(1), 206.

75. *Farn leninishn etap*, 5.

76. The sudden turn in the Soviet literary politics was mistakenly interpreted by some writers as a step toward liberalization, but they were soon proven wrong, and most of the “proletarian” leaders quickly recovered their positions. On Bronshteyn’s political maneuvering in Minsk in response to the resolution, see Mikhail Krutikov and Viacheslav Selemenev, “Yasha Bronshteyn and His Struggle for Control over Soviet Yiddish Literature,” *Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe* 1 (2003): 175–90.

77. *Farn leninishn etap*, 184.

78. *Kegn antimarksistishe teories*, 115.

79. In his letter from Kiev of November 18, 1932, to Gurshteyn in Moscow, Kvitko sends his regards to Wiener and his wife; in a letter of December 10, he mentions Wiener’s recent visit to Kiev. Unhappy with his situation in Kiev, Kvitko also applied for a transfer to Moscow but could not get it until 1937. See “Zhisn’ byla velikolepna: pis’mo L’va Kvitko k M. Khashchevatskomu i A. Gurshteynu,” *Egupets*, vol. 9 (2001): 294–95.

Notes to Chapter 5

1. Meir Viner, ed., *Problemen fun folkloristik*, vol. 1 (Kharkov: Melukhisher nats-mindfarlag, 1932).

2. “Proyekt tsu a[n] arbetsprogram far der etn[ografisher] sektsye,” Wiener Archive, JNUL, 4^o 1763/25, 1.

3. Ibid., 2.

4. Ibid., 4.

5. Ibid., 4.

6. Ibid., 5.

7. Ibid., 6–7.

8. Dana Prescott Howell, *The Development of Soviet Folkloristics* (New York: Garland, 1992), 145–47.

9. Sokolov’s article is cited according to the anthology by Vladimir N. Morokhin, *Khrestomatiia po istorii russkoi folkloristiki*, (Moscow: Vysshiaia shkola, 1973), 253–55.

10. Howell, *The Development of Soviet Folkloristics*, 151.

11. Ibid., 152.

12. Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 53.

13. Ibid., 68–89.
14. Ibid., 80.
15. S. An-sky, “Evreiskoe narodnoe tvorchestvo,” in *Evrei v Rossiiskoi Imperii XVIII-XIX vekov*, ed. A. Lokshin (Moscow: Jewish University in Moscow, 1995), 644.
16. Ibid., 666.
17. Ibid., 684.
18. Itzik Nakhmen Gottesman, *Defining the Yiddish Nation: The Jewish Folklorists of Poland* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 16.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 16–17.
21. Meir Viner, ed., *Problemen fun folkloristik*, vol. 1 (Kharkov: Melukhisher natismindfarlag, 1932), 83–84.
22. Ibid., 85.
23. Ibid., 86.
24. Ibid., 38–40.
25. Ibid., 61–64.
26. Cited in Hannjost Lixfeld, *Folklore and Fascism: The Reich Institute for German Volkskunde*, ed. and trans. James R. Dow (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 205.
27. Cited in Lixfeld, *Folklore and Fascism*, 38.
28. Ibid., 59.
29. More specifically, on the intellectual affinity between German folkloristics and the Nazi ideology, see Hermann Strobach, “. . . but when does the prewar begin?” *Folklore and Fascism before and around 1933* in *The Nazification of an Academic Discipline: Folklore in the Third Reich*, ed. James R. Dow and Hannsjost Lixfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 55–68.
30. Viner, “Folklorizm un folkloristik,” 70–72.
31. Ibid., 89.
32. M. Viner, “Der batayt fun der nayer yidisher literatur biz tsu Mendelev,” *Shtetn* (March–April 1939): 61.
33. Ibid., 62. This view, until recently shared by many Yiddish scholars, has been convincingly challenged by Alyssa Quint in her article “‘Yiddish Literature for the Masses’? A Reconsideration of Who Read What in Jewish Eastern Europe,” *AJS Review*, no. 29 (2005): 61–89.
34. Ibid., 63–64.
35. Ibid., 66.
36. Ibid., 67.
37. Ibid., 68.
38. Ibid., 69.
39. *Tsu der geshikhte*, vol. 1, 24.
40. M. Viner, ed., *Y. Aksenfels verk*, vol. 1 (Kharkov: Literatur un kunst, 1931).

41. Ibid., vii.
42. Viner, "Introduction," *Y. Aksenfelds verk*, vol. 1, 1–5.
43. Interestingly, the copy of this book in my possession, which, according to the inscription, was given by Wiener to Aron Gurshteyn, bears a skeptical remark in Russian on the margin, presumably made by Gurshteyn: "elements of social naturalism." Ibid., 17.
44. Ibid., 18.
45. Ibid., 20–30.
46. Ibid., 38–41.
47. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 12–14.
48. Galin Tihanov, *The Master and the Slave: Lukács, Bakhtin, and the Ideas of Their Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 62.
49. Viner, "Introduction," *Y. Aksenfelds verk*, vol. 1, 41.
50. Ibid., 42.
51. Ibid., 43–48.
52. Ibid., 53.
53. Ibid., 54–55.
54. The marginal notes on p. 62 (presumably by Gurshteyn) express disagreement with the term "primitive realism," suggesting "early realism" or "proto-realism," instead, because "then this term receives a clearer social coloring."
55. Ibid., 62.
56. Ibid., 68.
57. Ibid., 69.
58. Ibid., 70.
59. Ibid., 74.
60. Ibid., 75.
61. Ibid., 77–78.
62. Ibid., 80.
63. Ibid., 81.
64. Ibid. 82–85. Interestingly, this point is enthusiastically supported by (presumably) Gurshteyn in his comments on the margins, although he disagrees with the term "primitive."
65. Ibid., viii–ix.
66. Ibid., 88–89.
67. *Kegn antimarksistishe teories*, 46–49.
68. Ibid., 49.
69. Ibid., 23–26.
70. "Di 'rekrutschine' un di haskole," in *Y. Aksenfelds verk*, vol. 1, 100.
71. Ibid., 102.
72. Ibid., 102–5.

73. Ibid., 99.
74. Ibid., 117–18.
75. Ibid., 121.
76. Ibid. 126–27.
77. Ibid., 143.
78. Viner, *Tsu der geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur*, vol. 1, 209.
79. Ibid., 211.
80. Ibid., 221.
81. Ibid., 235.
82. Ibid., 232.
83. Ibid., 233.
84. Ibid., 245.
85. Ibid., 246.
86. Ibid., 248.
87. Ibid., 264–68.
88. *Skriftn fun der katedre far yidisher kultur bay der alukrainisher visnschaftlekher akademye. Literatur un filologye*, 1 (1929): 73–129.
89. “Di rol fun shablonisher frazeologye in der literatur fun der haskole,” in *Tsu der geshikhte*, vol. 1, 276.
90. Ibid., 278.
91. Ibid., 279.
92. Ibid.
93. Ibid., 280–81.
94. Ibid., 286.
95. Ibid., 289.
96. Ibid.
97. Ibid. 290.
98. Ibid., 291.
99. Ibid., 294.
100. Ibid., 295.
101. Ibid., 298.
102. Ibid., 303.
103. Ibid., 304–5
104. Nokhem Oyslender, *Grund-shtrikhn fun yidishn realism* (Kiev: Kiever farlag, 1919), 5.
105. Ibid., 32.
106. Ibid., 47.
107. For more on Litvakov’s activities in Moscow during the early 1920s, see Gennady Estrakh, “Yiddish Literary Life in Soviet Moscow, 1918–1924,” *Jews in Eastern Europe* 2 (2000): 44–52.
108. Moyshe Litvakov, *In umru*, vol. 1 (Kiev: Kiever farlag, 1918), 73–76.
109. Ibid., 41–42.

110. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1, 190.
111. Ibid., 185.
112. Ibid., 193.
113. Ibid., 197.
114. Ibid.
115. Craig Brandist, *The Bakhtin Circle: Philosophy, Culture and Politics* (London: Pluto, 2002), 105.
116. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Izwolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 471.
117. Ibid., 465–66.
118. Viner, *Tsu der geshikhte*, vol. 1, 308.

Notes to Chapter 6

1. M. Viner, *Tsu der geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur in XIX yorbundert: Etyudn un materialn* (Kiev: Melukhe-farlag far di natsionale minderhaytn, 1940). The book had a print run of 2000 copies and was printed in Berdichev.
2. Viner, *Tsu der geshikhte*, vol. 1 (New York: YKUF, 1945), 9.
3. M. Viner, *Etyudn vegn Mendelen in di zekhtsiker un zibetsiker yorn* (Moscow: Emes, 1935). Two thousand copies were printed in Moscow.
4. Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 410–11.
5. Archives of the Second Moscow University, Tsentral'nyi Arkhiv Goroda Moskv (TsAGM), f. 714, op. 2, d. 605.
6. David Shneer, “A Study in Red: Jewish Scholarship in the 1920s Soviet Union,” *Science in Context* 2, no. 20, (2007): 203.
7. Zalmen Libenzon, “Vegn dem yidishn fakultet in Moskv,” *Oksforder yidish*, no. 3 (1995): 765.
8. At the faculty meeting on November 12, 1928, the head of the Division, Tsvi Fridland, said it was a “mistake to yield to the pressure of the students.” TsAGM, f. 714, op. 2, d. 630.
9. TsAGM, f. 586, op. 1, d. 57.
10. TsAGM, f. 586, op. 1, d. 47.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Minutes of the meeting at the director’s office on May 9, 1938, Archives of the Moscow State Pedagogical Institute, TsAGM, f. 586, op. 1, d. 52, p. 156.
14. Ibid., p. 197.
15. Ibid.
16. In her detailed study of the Mendele scholarship in the Soviet Union, Dalia Kaufman points out that Wiener “continues, although with some modifications, the approach of Litvakov” with regard to differentiating between Abramovitsh the

“writer” and Mendele the “artist”. Dalia Kaufman, *Mendele Mokher Sfarim bi-vrit ha-moatsot, 1917–1948: Mekhkar, bikoret, hotsaot ktavim* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1975), 82.

17. Oyslender, *Grund-shtrikl'n fun yidishn realizm*, 9.

18. Ibid., 17.

19. Ibid., 26–30.

20. Ibid., 136–37.

21. Litvakov, *In umru*, vol. 1, 77–87.

22. Ibid., 87.

23. Ibid., 88–95.

24. Ibid., 95.

25. Meir Viner, “Di rol fun di folklor-elementn in Mendeles stil,” *Di yidische shprakh*, no. 7 (November–December, 1927): 25–32. Further page references in brackets are according to this publication.

26. Kaufman, *Mendele Mokher Sfarim bi-vrit ha-moatsot*, 26.

27. “Problem'n fun Mendele's realizm,” *Di royte velt*, no. 5 (May 1928): 119–28; no. 6 (June 1928): 123–28. The numbers in brackets refer to the issue and to the page in that issue.

28. Libenzon, “Vegn dem yidishn fakultet in Moskve,” 766.

29. This shift is discussed in more detail in my article “Soviet Yiddish Scholarship in the 1930s: From Class to Folk,” *South African Slavic Almanach*, no. 7 (2000): 223–51.

30. The second edition simply states the fact: “After all, Mendele created modern Hebrew” (2:78), whereas the first edition is more emotional: “[A]fter all, he [Mendele] created for them [Hebrew writers: Ravnitski, Bialik, Ben Ami] the quasi-folksy, ‘modern’ Hebrew for their literature” (8).

31. This shift of the focus from social to artistic aspects is reflected in the titles of the sections: “Enlightenment and Folkism in Mendele’s Worldview” and “Mendele’s Social Views and His Literary Program” (1935) to “Mendele’s Haskalah Ideas and his Artistic Images” and “Mendele’s Views on Literature” (1940), respectively.

32. The first number in brackets refers to the page in the earlier edition, the second to the later one.

33. This particular reference to Rousseau was added in 1940 (49; 109–10).

34. The problem of balance between the “internal” criticism of the Jewish life and the “external” criticism of the treatment of Jews by the Russian government and society was a key issue of the debates in the Russian-Jewish press of the 1860s, in particular between the Odessa journalist Osip Rabinovich and the publisher Joachim Tarnopol. See Alexander Orbach, *New Voices of Russian Jewry: A Study of the Russian-Jewish Press of Odessa in the Era of Great Reforms, 1860–1871* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 24–31.

35. As Harriet Murav explains, “The ‘Jewish Question’ for Kovner has no meaning; the Russian formulation puts the problem of Russia’s Jews on an incorrect footing and precludes a true analysis of their condition,” which should deal with the general issue of poverty rather than with the specific problems of education

and enlightenment. Harriet Murav, *Identity Theft: The Jew in Imperial Russia and the Case of Avraam Uri Kovner* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 53–54.

36. Olga Litvak echoes some of Wiener's ideas, reading the novel as a critique of the failed emancipation under Alexander II and an attempt to bring "the enlightenment ethos back into the center of modern Russian-Jewish culture." Olga Litvak, *Conscription and the Search for Modern Russian Jewry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 114–15.

37. In the earlier edition, Wiener has "conscious attitude," stressing the determining role of class consciousness in shaping a writer's vision of reality (133).

38. In the second edition, Wiener speaks of "social aspirations" rather than progressive elements (165; 195–96).

39. Wiener consistently softens his criticism of *Di klyatshe* in the second edition (196–97; 218–20).

40. V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 15 (Moscow: Progress, 1973), 206.

41. Kaufman, *Mendele Mokher Sfarim bi-vrit ha-moatsot*, 126.

42. *Tsu der geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur in 19tn yorhundert*, vol. 2, 281.

43. David Bergelson, "Sholem Aleykhem," *Sovetishe literatur*, nos. 3–4 (1939): 65–78.

44. Ibid. 294–98.

45. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 478.

46. Ibid., 474.

47. *Literaturnaia entsiklopediia*, vol. 8 (Moscow: OGIZ, 1934), <http://feb-web.ru/feb/litenc/encyclop/> (accessed May 15, 2009).

48. Litvakov, *In umru*, vol. 1, 96–108.

49. *Shtern* (April 1935): 87–91.

50. Max Erik, "Tsu der kharakteristik fun der Perets-geshtalt," *Shtern* (April 1935): 67–80.

51. Dalia Kaufman, "Y. L. Peretz in der yidish-sovetisher kritik (1925–1948) un di problem fun der literarisher yerushe," *Di goldene keyt*, no. 77 (1972): 145–59.

52. Ibid., 149–54.

53. Among other publications were three poems by Peretz in Marina Tsvetaeva's translation that appeared in the May (1941) issue of one of the major Russian literary journals, *Znamia*.

54. Letters and documents related to the celebration of the Peretz anniversary. Wiener Collection, JNUL, 1763/50.

55. Letter from Fefer to Wiener, March 30, 1941. Meir Wiener Collection, JNUL, 4^o 1763/51.

56. Kaufman does not mention the celebration of 1941 in her otherwise comprehensive study.

57. Aleksandr Dmitriev, "'Akademicheskii marksizm' 1920–1930-kh godov: Zapadnyi kontekst i sovetskie obstoiatel'stva," *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, no. 6 (2007): 27–28.

58. Dmitriev, "Akademicheskii marksizm," 18–19.
59. Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture*, 216
60. In what seems today a remarkably audacious statement, Geilikman argued that by teaching Marxist theory in Yiddish rather than Russian he, as a former Bundist, tried to minimize the potential ideological harm he could inflict on Soviet students. Minutes of the meeting at the director's office on May 9, 1938, Archives of the Moscow State Pedagogical Institute, TsAGM, f. 586, op. 1, d. 52, p. 197.

Notes to Chapter 7

1. Evgenii Dobrenko, *Politekonomiia sotsrealizma*. (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2007), 38.
2. Ibid., 29.
3. M. Viner and A. Gurshteyn, *Problemen fun kritik* (Moscow: Emes, 1933), 138.
4. Katerina Clark dwells in some detail on the consciousness/spontaneity opposition, describing it as "one of the key binary oppositions in Russian culture" and "a defining tenet of Leninism and the locus of the greatest controversies about how to put theory into practice"; Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 20–23.
5. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972), 70.
6. In a footnote to one of the articles, Wiener calls it "fragments of a book about socialist realism in Soviet Yiddish literature"; "Form-problemes fun sotsialistishn realizm." ("Problems of Form in Socialist Realism"), *Shtern*, nos. 8–9 (1934): 123.
7. "Stil-frages fun sotsialistishn realizm," *Visnshaft un revolyutsie*, nos. 3–4 (July–December, 1934): 49.
8. Georg Lukács, "Roman" in *Literaturnaia entsiklopediia*, vol. 9 (Moscow: OGIZ, 1935), <http://feb-web.ru/feb/litenc/encyclop/> (accessed May 15, 2009).
9. Viner, "Form-problemes fun sotsialistishn realizm," 128.
10. Ibid., 129.
11. "Bamerkung fun redaktsye," *Shtern*, nos. 8–9 (1934): 141.
12. M. Viner, "O nekotorykh voprosakh sotsialisticheskogo realizma," *Oktiabr'*, January, 1935, 238–57. Further page references in brackets are to this publication.
13. Friedrich Engels to Margaret Harkness, April 1888, in *European Literature from Romanticism to Postmodernism: A Reader in Aesthetic Practice*, ed. Martin Travers (London: Continuum, 2002), 123.
14. Herman Ermolaev, *Soviet Literary Theories 1917–1934: The Genesis of Socialist Realism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 190.
15. On the debate between Nusinov and Rozental and its significance for the formation of socialist realism, see David Pike, *German Writers in Soviet Exile, 1933–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 259–72.

16. Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe: A Study in Elective Affinity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 204.
17. Ermolaev, *Soviet Literary Theories*, 194.
18. A. Gurshteyn and M. Viner, "Sotsialistisher inhalt un natsionale form fun der sovetisher literatur: Algemeyne batrakhungen tsu der teme," *Sovetish*, no. 11 (1940): 388.
19. I. V. Stalin, *Stat'i i rechi ob Ukraine* (Kiev: Partizdat TsK Kp(b)U, 1936), 216.
20. M. Viner, "Vegn A. M. Fuks," in A. M. Fuks, *Unter der brik*. (Kiev, 1928), 3–10.
21. M. Viner, "Vegn L. Kvitkos kinder-lider," *Di royte velt*, nos. 2–3 (March–April 1929): 169.
22. *Ibid.*, 170–73.
23. *Ibid.*, 174.
24. Meir Wiener, introduction to *12 dertseylungen (1922–1932)* by I. Kipnis (Kharkov: Melukhe farlag far natsionale minderhaytn in FSSR, 1933), 3–6.
25. M. Viner, "Mishpet ibern faynt: Vegn P. Markishes poeme 'Dem balegufts toyt,'" *Sovetish*, no. 3 (1935): 321–50.
26. M. Viner, "Dovid Bergelson. Tsum draysikstn yor fun zayn literarisher te-tikayt," *Shtern*, (May 1940): 44–56.
27. M. Viner, "Lirik un sotsializm," *Sovetish*, no. 6 (1938): 477–555. Further page references in brackets are to this publication.
28. "Di yidishe literatur in der epokhe fun groyser oktyaberisher sotsialistisher revolyutsye," ms., Meir Wiener Archives, JNUL, 4° 1763/19.
29. M. Viner, "Der eydeler dikhter," in *Osher Shvartsman: Zamlung gevidmet dem XX yortog fun zayn heldishn toyt*, (Moscow: Emes, 1940), 79.
30. "Di yidishe literatur in der epokhe fun groyser oktyaberisher sotsialistisher revolyutsye," ms., Meir Wiener Archive, JNUL, 4° 1763/19, p. 8.
31. Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 40.
32. *Ibid.*, 37.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*, 38.
35. *Ibid.*, 40.
36. Pike, *German Writers in Soviet Exile*, 269.
37. Mikhail Lifshits, in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo, 1986), 245–92.
38. *Ibid.*, 283.

Notes to Chapter 8

1. A. Chapygin, *Razin Stepan* (1926–27), trans. Cedar Paul as *Stepan Razin* (New York: Hutchinson, 1946).

2. Meir Viner, "Master epicheskogo povestvovaniia: ob istoricheskikh romanakh A. P. Chapygina," *Novyi mir*, no. 9 (1940): 218. Further references in brackets are to this publication.

3. Lukács formulated his ideas in a series of essays that appeared first in Russian in the Moscow journal *Literaturnyi kritik* in 1937 and 1938, which served as the basis for a later German monograph.

4. Georg Lukács, "Istoricheskii roman," *Literaturnyi kritik*, no. 7 (1937): 52.

5. *Ibid.*, 53.

6. Viner, "Master epicheskogo povestvovaniia," 221.

7. Lukács, "Istoricheskii roman," 64.

8. Viner, "Master epicheskogo povestvovaniia," 220.

9. *Ibid.*, 70.

10. Hegel writes: "A World-historical individual is not so unwise as to indulge a variety of wishes to divide his regards. He is devoted to the One Aim, regardless of all else." Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 32.

11. *Ibid.*, 72.

12. Quoted in Leyzer Podriatshik, "Vegn Meir Viners literarisher yerushe," *Sovetish beymland*, no. 10 (1968): 60.

13. Lukács, "Istoricheskii roman," 80–81.

14. Ellen Kellman, "Power, Powerlessness, and the Jewish Nation in Scholem Asch's *Afkidesh haShem*," in *Scholem Asch Reconsidered*, ed. Nanette Stahl (New Haven, CT: The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, 2004), 106.

15. Ruth Wisse, introduction to *Satan in Goray* by Isaac Bashevis Singer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), xl-xli.

16. Maks Vaynraykh, *Shturemvint: Bilder fun der yidisher geschikhte in 17tn yorhundert* (Vilna: Tomor, 1927), 168.

17. Barry Trachtenberg, "Inscribing the Yiddish Past: Inter-War Explorations of Old Yiddish Texts," in *Yiddish and the Left: Papers of the Third Mendel Friedman International Conference on Yiddish*, ed. Gennady Estraiikh and Mikhail Krutikov (Oxford: Legenda, 2001), 220.

18. *Ibid.*, 218.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Meir Viner, *Tsu der geschikhte fun der yidisher literatur in 19tn yorhundert*, vol. 1 (New York: YKUF, 1945), 23.

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22. Magda Teter, "The Legend of Ger Zedek of Wilno as Polemic and Reassurance," *AJS Review* 29, no.2 (2005): 238.

23. *Ibid.*, 252.

24. *Ibid.*, 263.

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28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 351.
30. Ibid., 70.
31. Meir Viner, *Kolev Ashkenazi* (Moscow: Emes, 1938), 127. Further references in brackets are to this publication.
32. Karl Marx, "Zur Judenfrage," in *Werke* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, vol. 1 (Berlin, GDR: Karl Dietz, 1976), 372.
33. Osher Margolis, "A raykhe arbet," *Sovetish*, no. 4 (1937): 341–56.
34. A. Gurshteyn, "Tsu der problem fun der geshikhtlekher teme," *Shtern*, no. 12 (1934): 85–92.
35. Meir Viner, "Shloyme Etinger, zayn ort in der yidisher literatur," in *Tsu der geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur in 19tn yorhundert*, vol. 1 (New York: YIKUF, 1945), 211.
36. Vaynraykh, *Shturemvint*, 169.
37. Ibid., 171. The Cracow city records of 1682 mention the case of a certain Jew, Mark Michałowicz, who was accused of *świętokradstwo*, buying sacred vessels stolen from a church in Bochnia, and subjected to questioning under torture: Adam Kaźmierczuk, *Materialy źródłowe do dziejów Żydów w księgach grodzkich dawnego wojewódstwa krakowskiego z lat 1674–1696*, vol. I (Kraków: Universitas, 1995), 73.
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39. Judith Levin, "Mekorot historiim vesifrutim be-yetsirato shel Meir Viner 'Kolev Ashkanzi'" (master's thesis, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2008), 32. I am very grateful to Ms. Levin for providing me with the text of her study.
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41. Ibid., 38–52.
42. Der Nister, *Dertseylungen un eseyen* (New York: YKUF, 1957), 290.
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44. David Malkiel, "Leon Modena's Altercation with His Erstwhile Pupils" in *The Lion Shall Roar: Leon Modena and His World*, ed. David Malkiel (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2003), 79–80.
45. Malkiel, "Leon Modena's Altercation," 79.
46. Meir Viner, "Bam mittlendishn yam," *Sovetish*, no. 2 (1935): 322.
47. The quotes are from the manuscript in Ms Julia Wiener's possession. I am grateful to her for the opportunity to use this text.
48. Viner, "Bam mittlendishn yam," 316.
49. Ibid., 317.

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1. Hans Kohn, *Karl Krauss, Arthur Schnitzler, Otto Weininger: Aus dem jüdischen Wien der Jahrhundertwende* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1962), 2.
2. Claudio Magris, *Danube*, trans. Patrick Creagh (London: Harvill, 2001), 39.
3. Georg Lukács, *Record of Life: An Autobiographical Sketch*, ed. István Eörsi, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1983), 144.
4. Magris, *Danube*, 39.
5. Letter to Erna, May 9, 1917, Meir Wiener Archives, JNUL, 4° 1763/55. Wiener's remark about the "positive resonance" of the Wiener name in the scholarly world might refer to the scholar of medieval Hebrew literature Meir Wiener (1819–1880), the liberal theologian Max Wiener (1882–1950), or the American historian of Yiddish literature Leo Wiener (1862–1939), the father of the famous mathematician Norbert Wiener. There is no evidence, however, that any of these were related to him.
6. Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *The Battle for Childhood: Creation of a Russian Myth* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 36.
7. Marcus Moseley, *Being For Myself Alone: Origins of Jewish Autobiography* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 428.
8. *Ibid.*, 429.
9. Martin Buber, *Begegnung: Autobiographische Fragmente* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1960), 6–7.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Meir Viner, "Der zeyde Binyomin," *Sovetish heymland*, no. 9 (1969): 103.
12. Moseley, *Being For Myself Alone*, 431.
13. Viner, *Tsu der geshikhte fun yidisher literatur*, vol. 2, 323.
14. Viner, "Der zeyde Binyomin," 106.
15. *Ibid.*, 107.
16. *Ibid.*, III.
17. Michael Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 53.
18. Moseley, *Being For Myself Alone*, 436–37.
19. *Ibid.*, 433.
20. Meir Viner, "Yugnt fraynd," *Sovetish heymland*, no. 10 (1969): 124.
21. *Ibid.*, 123.
22. *Ibid.*, 124.
23. Letter to Franz of March 12, 1917, Meir Wiener Archives, JNUL, 4° 1763/55.
24. Mikhail Krutikov, "A Yiddish Author as a Cultural Mediator: Meir Wiener's Unpublished Novel," in *The Yiddish Presence in European Literature: Inspiration and Interaction*, ed. Joseph Sherman and Ritchie Robertson (Oxford: Legenda, 2005), 73–80.
25. Wiener Archives, JNUL, 4° 1763/14
26. Meir Wiener Archives, JNUL, 4° 1763/16. Further page references in brackets refer to this document.

27. On the representations of the hyperinflation of 1923 in Yiddish literature, see Mikhail Krutikov, "Unkind Mirrors: Berlin in the Three Yiddish Novels of the 1930s," in *Yiddish in Weimar Berlin: At the Crossroads of Diaspora Politics and Culture*, ed. Gennady Estraiikh and Mikhail Krutikov (Oxford: Legenda, 2010), 239–61.

28. Yoysef Sandler, *Umgekumene yidishe kinstler in Poyln* (Warsaw: Yidish bukh, 1957), 231–34.

29. Hersh Fenster, *Undzere farpaynikte kinstler* (Paris: H. Fenster, 1951), 163.

30. Sandler, *Umgekumene yidishe kinstler*, 231.

31. Karl Radek (Sobelson, 1885–1939) and Grigorii Zinoviev (Radomyslskii, 1883–1936) were high-ranking Soviet officials purged by Stalin in 1936–37. Kizler is portrayed as a two-faced man and after 1937, an association with Radek and Zinoviev would clearly mark him as a potential traitor, which can be taken as an indication of the time when the novel was written. A possible prototype for this character could be Daniel Tsharny (1888–1959), a Yiddish journalist and activist who arrived in Berlin from Moscow in 1922 (I am grateful to Gennady Estraiikh for this suggestion).

32. Letter to Vogel of November 25, 1925, Avraham Sutzkever Collection, Manuscript Department, JNUL, 4^o 1565.

33. David Fogel, "Language and Style of Our Young Literature (1931)," trans. Yael Meroz and Eric Zakim, *Prooftexts* (January 1993): 15–20.

34. *Ibid.*, 16.

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1. M. Viner, "Dos iz a milkhome far alemens glik," in *Far heymland in shlakht!* (Moscow: Emes, 1941), 14.

2. Marcus Moseley, "Revealing and Concealing," 282.

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