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ONE HUNDRED YEARS IN RETROSPECT

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William J. Fishman
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The Second Annual Avrom-Nokhem Stencl Lecture in Modern Yiddish Literature delivered before the Oxford Summer Programme in Yiddish Language and Literature on 9 August 1984

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S. S. Prawer's impression of Winchevsky

When my final sunset comes
and some kindly, loving hand
plants upon my silent grave
a tear fed small 'forget-me-not',
then, if love oblivion overcomes,
let this volume take the stand
witnessing that he who gave
you this, in return kindness got.[1]

A love poem by Morris Winchevsky, but perhaps a more fitting epitaph for both him and Avrom-Nokhem Stencl. Their combined output in poetry and prose spanned a century, and in the Yiddish literary tradition they registered much in common. Both were sons of the *shtetl* (Jewish village in pre-World War II Eastern Europe) who shared a formative Talmudic education. Both fled from persecution to settle, and to receive social and spiritual nourishment in Whitechapel, which would sustain them throughout their long years. For it was the Jewish East End of London that sharpened their creativity, as they adapted both Yiddish lore and Talmudic precepts as a means of explaining the daily burdens of the *griner* (newcomer) confronted by the dramatic culture shock accruing from the changeover from the old country to the new.

To elucidate how and why Winchevsky emerged as one authentic voice of the immigrant, we turn to his background. He was born Lipe Ben-Tsien Novakhovitsh in 1856 at Yanove near Kovne, one hundred and twenty-eight years ago today. From his own and other memoirs we can detect the influences that directed him along the road towards his own concept of a Jewish based socialism.

> His grandfather, Reb Yitskhok, took part in the first Polish uprising and was executed for it.
>
> His grandmother, Tsile the widow, led a saintly life, becoming a mother to the many orphans and poor children in the village. She fed, washed and combed them. She knew of every misfortune and that was her duty. High and low, it was only the human being that counted for her. Much repeated in

> Winchevsky's memoirs is her comment that unwashed hands can wait. The woman in labour cannot.
>
> His father, Reb Zisl Novakhovitsh followed in Grandmother Tsile's footsteps with this outlook, a love for the poor masses and every artisan. Himself a learned man in the traditional books, he could easily have taken *smikhe* [rabbinic ordination] had he not felt an animosity towards the rabbinate. Reb Zisl befriended shoemakers and tailors. Although a *misnaged* [adherent of the Lithuanian based *misnagdim*, opponents of Chassidism], he felt an attraction towards the Chassidim deriving from their brotherly bond with each other. Earning hardly enough to keep himself, he was generous to the needy.
>
> In such an atmosphere of humanity and organized dedication was reared Morris Winchevsky. At the age of ten, he emulated *di bobe Tsile* [Grandmother Tsile] and went around collecting alms for the poor children in the village.[2]

It was not surprising, therefore, that after entering the Vilna Seminary at thirteen years of age, he eventually underwent the then not unusual conversion from a marginal piety to radical atheism. He responded to Aaron Lieberman's *Call to Jewish Youth*, quit Russia in 1877 and settled in Königsberg, where he obtained employment as a bookkeeper to Feinberg, a Kovne merchant banker, an experience that would serve him well in his London years. Here M. L. Rodkinson, a noted publisher of Hebrew and Yiddish periodicals, soon commissioned the twenty-one year old Winchevsky to edit his new radical Hebrew periodical *Aseyfas khakhomim* ('Assembly of the Wise'), and he exploited the young writer mercilessly. In 1878 during the German round-up preceding the nihilist trials, Winchevsky was arrested but thanks to the intervention of his banker patron, who bribed the authorities to release him, he made his way to London via Paris. There he met up with his Jewish revolutionary hero, Aaron Lieberman, himself recently released from prison. Lieberman, the first Jew to formulate both a Jewish socialist manifesto and separate party constitution in the *mame loshn* ('mother tongue' = Yiddish), was a formidable influence on the

political conversion of the young Winchevsky. With Lieberman's departure for the United States in 1880, where he was to commit suicide in November after a sordid love affair, Winchevsky assumed the role of folk propagandist for his people in London, most of them ensconced within the insalubrious slum ghetto of Whitechapel.

Winchevsky first lodged there with his student friend Margolis, who was subsidized by the Jewish Educational Aid Society. Its secretary, the humane Albert Löwy, noticed during a visit to Margolis a book on socialism with erudite criticisms pencilled in alongside various paragraphs. He asked to meet the scribbler and was shocked to find Winchevsky in a state of desperate poverty. Löwy undertook to introduce him to Seligman, a member of the well known banking family, in the City of London, who offered Winchevsky a job as bookkeeper, which he accepted under the name Leopold Benedict. Winchevsky was the pseudonym he adopted as a political expedient. It would conceal his true identity, on the premise that his bourgeois employer would not take too kindly to his extraneous activity.

Those initial five years in Whitechapel strengthened Winchevsky's affirmation as both poet and radical. The troglodytes, racked in body and spirit by interminable toil in the sweatshops, who came up for air at night, became his *khaveyrim* (friends). He had suffered with them in their grinding poverty. Their common cry was *shver un biter iz dos lebn* (life is hard and bitter). He shared with them the threats of homelessness and anti-Semitic violence as well as the hopes and strivings, beyond survival, of the better life. He was convinced that Jewish workers needed a newspaper that would undertake certain obligations. It would be printed in Yiddish, the language of the Jewish masses. It would need to meet the urgent need for radical education, which although not exclusively socialist, would introduce the reader to 'the principles of socialism'. Winchevsky eschewed religion, but would not be averse to drawing on Biblical or Talmudic analogies, with which every reader was intimately

familiar, to illustrate his arguments. He was shrewd enough to have learned one lesson from the failure of Lieberman's previous Socialist Union: that overzealous indulgence in anti-religious sentiment was counterproductive. It offended and thereby alienated the majority of workers in whom orthodoxy was inculcated from birth. In their reckoning, aptly reinforced by rabbinic fulminations from the pulpit, atheism and even apostasy were equated with socialism. By treading warily one could counteract this. The main purpose was to present an all-embracing picture of immigrant life with which the reader could identify and, therefore, respond sympathetically, with political indoctrination more subtly applied.

One hundred years ago, on 25 July 1884, Winchevsky and his friend E. Rabinowitz produced the first issue of the *Poylisher yidl* ('The Little Polish Jew'), arguably the first socialist newspaper in Yiddish.[3] The address of its publishing office was given as 137 Commercial Street, E.1., in the heart of the immigrant settlement. The editorial explained its functions in down to earth terms. It proposed a three sided approach to the reader: as a man, as a Jew, and as a worker. Its major objectives were also threefold.

> To instruct and support our brothers who know little or nothing of other languages; to help immigrants who have recently arrived and are seeking work; to give its men and women readers some insight into world affairs.

A further, unexpressed aim was a new mode of presentation, divorced from the usual dilettantism of a folksy press but rarely effected. Sixteen issues appeared, and Winchevsky's distinctive style may be discerned throughout, with its regular alternating sweep from pathos to bitter irony.

Although he and his fellow contributors concentrated on the many sided local picture of contemporary immigrant life, features included national and world news. There was regular correspondence from the other great Jewish centre in Leeds and

weekly dramatic criticism of the current show at the Yiddish theatre. Above all there was a didactic appraisal of the harsh conditions of Jews, with practical suggestions for their amelioration.

The *Poylisher yidl* turned its attention continually to the vice ostensibly indulged in by Jewish workers, gambling. The opening issue reports a hilarious scene of Jews engaged in their weekly ritual.

> Leeds workers and small masters, as soon as they are paid run straight to the pubs and bet on horses. The main centre for these pursuits is Swan Street, the Leeds workers' main rendezvous. Here 6 to 1 is offered for 'Tsadik' which Charles Ward will ride; 3 to 1 elsewhere, while another shouts and makes hand signals. Cries of 'Little Dog!' and 'Cleopatra!' for the winners. Everyone has a *Sporting Chronicle* in his hand to learn whether he can retrieve from the horse the week's wages he has laid out in bets, counts with his fingers and questions, talking English like a born Russian. In short, the Jewish workers hand over the money and the bookmakers take it gladly. Everybody is happy. Everyone thinks he has backed a winner. The day speeds on. The Holy Sabbath has arrived. The bookmakers and Jewish workers are still there in Swan Street. The pub is there; beer, rum, brandy and whisky, all there. *Lekhayim* [Cheers!] to 'John Jones', *lekhayim* to 'Tsadik', *lekhayim* to all good horses. The clock strikes four, a quarter of an hour to go and the telegraph will bring luck to the happy crew. The fifteen minutes are up. The telegraph is here. Everyone leaps up, runs, cries 'Well!', 'Where!', 'What!' and noses are buried in papers. Suddenly one shouts out a pair of words and they all lower their noses and murmur 'An outsider'.
>
> And he who was lucky enough to hit the jackpot is the bookmaker, a welsher, as the local saying goes, that is a swindler, who will not pay up. And you cannot force him to as betting is illegal. Thus is everyone's living wage squandered away.[4]

A poem by Ben Nets (that is, Winchevsky) strikes a more solemn note on the evils resulting from card playing. In 'A Character

Sketch of Jewish Life in London', he tells of a young mother with a sick child, living in a small, dirty room, anxiously awaiting on the eve of *Shabes* (the Sabbath) the return of her husband. She hopes he will bring home money to buy food. The child coughs incessantly. The woman waits in vain. For her man is:

> In another street,
> dirty and small,
> in a fine house,
> full of Jews,
> wages and silver watch gone,
> while sitting by a table
> both lost in cards.[5]

Gambling, therefore, is no recipe for the easy life. For here in England the worker has some control over his own destiny and can reject such evil indulgence.

In job opportunities he has no such choice. He is a prisoner of his environment where alternatives are scarce. The *Poylisher yidl* confronts us with the burdens endured by contributors, who are personally involved at the work bench. It casts a jaundiced eye on the masters, the 'wide boys' who feed on innocent Jews equipped only with their trade craft and no one to advise or help them. The bosses sit on the backs of the workers and the paper warns them to 'ride for a time' but not to 'take liberties with the horse'. In essaying to mirror the lives and fortunes of its clientele, it probed into those areas of experience with which every immigrant was familiar. The reader could readily identify himself in such articles as 'The Woeful Tale of the *Griner* in London'.[6]

> We must ask the question: Is the *griner* here better off than the dispossessed Jew in Russia? It is a most pertinent question for London Jews who have not yet forgotten. They are a pitiful sight. See the many hundreds walking outside at night (it is illegal to sit down), with swollen lips for they may not have eaten or drunk for three days and are barely clad. Nobody cares.

> After being robbed and beaten in Russia the poor Jew comes to London without a kopek, and if one of the hundreds still has a couple of rubles, this will be shared between the man who takes him off the boat and the one who minds his belongings while the poor *griner* tries to find his family or *landslayt* [people from his home town]. He must even bargain with four old shirts, which even the poorest in Russia wouldn't touch, to hold the bit of ground allotted to him for an hour. When he finds his *landsman*, he is confronted with an immediate '*Sholem aleykhem*' [Hello!], followed by warnings of backbreaking labour and the admonition, 'Why have you come here? What will you do? You will be unable to take the hunger.' He is not even offered a drink of water, and departs with an aching heart, thinking to himself, 'What do I do now? Hang or drown myself?' Amidst these thoughts he is struck on the head with a stone. Full of pain, he looks to see where it came from, and observes the blackguard taking aim again. So he continues day and night with bruised lips, helpless.

Although one must not generalize from this example as most newcomers did find hospitality and ready aid motivated by the age old practice of the poor helping the poor, it appears to have been a common enough experience. So too was the approach by a strange figure who accosts the lone traveller and tempts him with food and shelter for the night.

> Sometimes a certain person meets him in the street, inquires about his means, then gives him a shilling and an address, whence he could call for aid. The poor one recognizes him as a missionary, and is reluctant to go. But first, he thinks that one cannot be so rude to such a benefactor who is one's saviour for the night; and second, what else can one do other than to continue counting stones in the street?

So he succumbs to the inducement. The *griner* who after all these adversities has managed to hold on to some money, or has found *landslayt* in Whitechapel, congratulates himself on his good fortune. But not for long.

> Some close friends, after hard efforts, get him a job as apprentice machinist, presser, furrier's blocker or the like. Then comes the crunch. A pound or two must be paid for learning the trade. Four to six weeks is spent as free labour. During this time he makes the fire, cleans the stove, acts as tea or water carrier and must wheel the work away in a barrow. Reduced to a weakened state, the Russian craftsman soon breaks down, choked by the English fog.

Any hope accruing from the possibilities of the first pay packet is quickly dispelled.

> Then the master tells him, 'You haven't understood the work and still don't know it. But I'll have mercy on you and pay you four shillings a week.' He must be satisfied with that. For he knows that he has been taken for a ride and will not argue, since the master can get another *griner* plus another two pounds on top. He has certainly worked diligently and on the eve of *Shabes* he gets his first reward — four shillings — and a second. The master informs him that he does not need him anymore because it is very slack. Thus is he beset with new troubles. No money, no prospects. He is sunk.

It could be argued that most contemporary immigrants suffered such visitations of Job, which the *Poylisher yidl* faithfully records. In a later article the chronicler fixes his eye on the lodgings scene, on another predator who feeds on the misfortunes of the desperate hand.

> The landlady (lodging missus) is looking forward to the lucky day when he will begin to earn and then she knows that she will receive his income for half a year. She had obtained a large golden ring from a traveller, and promised to pay with the *griner*'s wages. What terrible trouble here, as we listen to her groans and pleas. But the ring returns to the traveller, and she remains with the *griner*'s old shirts. In anger, she gives him notice to quit. Perhaps she means a week's notice. No fear! That very night he has nowhere to lay his head.
>
> A few pieces of dirty washing left. Anything else is hidden

> with the local pawnbroker. For all he has now is in trust with the landlady. Perhaps some day he will redeem his washing.[7]

The sense of pathos is reinforced by a poem by Winchevsky, 'The Sad Tale of the *Griner* in London', in which the poet suffers with the victim.

> Have you seen a young man
> hungry and dirty,
> passing here, and seeking
> all through the night
> a small shelter —
> a door, a hole in the pavement
> where he can lie down and rest,
> it is terribly cold and wet.[8]

An earthy image of Jewish tailoring life is conveyed in the mood and language of the hands themselves. The curse of the local trade is the insecurity deriving from the ebb and flow of seasonal demand.

> Two seasons befall the London tailors — busy time (full employment) and slack (hunger).
>
> Slack time the tailor must undergo twice a year. Both are a plague; perhaps busy time is worse.
>
> So when you come to London on *Shabes*, take a stroll to the well known *khazer mark* ['pig market'] and you will see masters (you can distinguish them by their fat bellies), scuttling about like a plague of mice between the poverty stricken workers, calling 'Jack! Are you a machinist? John! I need a presser. Jim! I need a hand.' This is how they address the worker, not as a whole man, but by his hand or his foot. Eventually you will discern a belly grab an arm just as a wolf seizes a lamb. As for those unfortunates who are left without a master, they gaze with baleful eyes which could consume belly and hands together. They are upset because they must remain here with their impoverished families, without work for the week.

As for the fortunate ones they are next observed within the

confines of the sweatshop, trapped in an endless round of production. To maximize output even the sacrosanct half hour early breakfast is imposed upon as the master's wife brings each hand a cup of coffee which must be drunk as he works; and the whole shabby scene of crude exploitation instigated by the boss is exposed by a raconteur who has evidently been on the receiving end.

> But the coffee, or muddy water concoction, remains near each person, until it is either cold, poured away or filled with fag ends, since there is not time to drink. The master stands over his coats, shouting: 'That's enough! Look sharp! What's all this then, a coffee house? A restaurant? On *Shabes* you'll have plenty of time to drink coffee, not now! Quick, that's enough.'
>
> The men work on without a pause like horses, until ten or eleven at night. How much more is there? The machinist looks at the clock and is amazed. Instead of the small hand standing at XI it stands at IX and the master is putting more work beside him which will last another three hours. 'The clock shows nine o'clock only and the work must be finished.'[9]

The inevitable results of overwork in foetid and overcrowded conditions are more telling. The writer invites us to view the full damage wrought by the busy season as we observe 'these same people carting home bottles of medicine from various hospitals. One has already lost a lung, another a heart.' No exaggeration here, for such diseases were traditional killers in the trade.

Slack time is, marginally, less hazardous, as the workers face only one danger — hunger. The noise of machines is muted in the dark attics while 'the master sits in his office and fares well on a lump of meat and a loving wife'. Among the unemployed only one man is doing a roaring trade now. It is Uncle — the pawnbroker — with the three brass balls. The *Poylisher yidl* watches a housewife 'carrying rolled up in her pinafore, a bundle containing a pair of trousers, a petticoat, and child's garments'. Uncle offers a miserable shilling for the lot. The woman has no choice and says, 'What can I do? Give me the shilling. My children are crying for food, my

husband is hungry, and I can't even spit out my soul.' But she does not get the whole shilling. The pawnbroker pulls out a heap of coins and counts the pennies on the counter, totalling eleven and a half in all. He casually retains a halfpenny for himself. The woman does not seem to notice, for she has already snatched up the money and rushes out to buy bread for her children. Outside there is the spectacle of hundreds of unemployed tailors milling about, shabby, collarless, trembling with cold.

> As hungry as wolves they run from one coffee house to the other, perhaps to meet an acquaintance who will treat them to a cup of coffee to wet their dry tongues.

The gay wantonness of youth is crushed under the harsh realities of want.

> These young men, at one time, sweated in their ovens, that is, during busy time. Then they could clang two pennies in their pocket. They laughed at the whole world and no body of men was more carefree. They haunted the music halls with no thought for the future. Today, these same people walk about with gaping wounds.[10]

In the last resort, the hungry can turn to the 'committees', ad hoc centres set up by established Anglo-Jewry to dispense charity. According to contributor Isaac Stone, they were not all motivated by *rakhmones* (compassion), and their acts of benevolence were scarcely free of insensitive patronizing. Such was the legend, that any prospective supplicant anticipated a painful and humiliating confrontation from such benefactors.

The *Poylisher yidl* held a watching brief on anti-Semitism. By 1884, those local labourers who were directly affected by the expanding ghetto, with its peculiar subculture, were already adopting violent postures towards the aliens. Such manifestations were first perceived by editor Winchevsky who expressed his own trepidation.

> The Jews have freedom of entry, rights and so forth. But do the English like the Jews? The answer is no!
>
> Go any *Shabes* afternoon to Whitechapel and stand for a few moments in a doorway where some English workers lounge with their pipes in their mouths, and you will hear, every time a Jew passes by, the call 'Bloody Jew'. Is this a token of love?
>
> At the same time in Brick Lane you will often see dolled up Jewish women, girls with golden rings on their fingers sitting outside in the street. Look into the eyes of the passing Englishman and can't you discern the look that is half indicative of a pogrom?
>
> When you seek to rent a house you will find many who will ask if you are a Jew. If you say yes, you will not get the house.
>
> A pogrom in Brick Lane, at the crossroads of Commercial Road, can be a more bloody and terrible affair than one in the Baltic.[11]

This may be an exaggeration but the warning is explicit. For the editorial diagnosis of anti-Semitism was not uncritical of the Jews themselves who could be part cause of the disease. The journal claimed that it was derived from two sources: the nature of the English temperament ('a sullen people who suspect foreigners'), and from those aberrations attributable to Jews. Commenting on the latter, the editor called upon the Jews to be honest with themselves. They helped sustain the poison of anti-Semitism by the misdeeds and follies perpetrated by both classes in the Jewish community. One letter chides Jewish workers for strike breaking, while condemning the generalization made from the incident by anti-Semites.

> Listening at a meeting near the 'Dublin Castle' in the Mile End Waste, one could hear the speaker tell how Jews had broken a strike of coat finishers. Jews took the work out of the shops to finish it at home, and did well out of it. 'The Jew', he continued, 'is always the enemy of the Christian and is never thankful to the land that grants him freedom. How should a Christian country deal with such enemies of humanity? Through an Anti-Jewish Society succeeding in England, and exporting the Jews to Palestine, as they are of no use to Europe.'

> Not one voice was raised against all this anti-Semitic rhetoric.[12]

Underlying the self-criticism is the notion that assumptions against Jews are accepted by non-Jews as self-evident truths, hence the vital importance of exemplary behaviour. The major part of the blame is, however, apportioned to the affluent minority within the Jewish community.

> Jews are mixed up in business enterprises and bankruptcies with much discredit. Many, to our shame, soon took to getting rich quickly in England. The most scandalous English newspaper, which is written to popularize dissolute behaviour and demoralize young people, is issued weekly by a Jew. At the Stock Exchange, which the British worker quite rightly calls the 'Gambling Den', you can find maybe twenty when the Jews constitute but a fraction of the population. Among the assistants one finds dealers in gold sovereigns who seek to accumulate gold and get even richer. These, to our misfortune, are also Jews. The worst part is that those guilty are our elite. They are the leaders, the gentlemen. They are ashamed of their own kind.[13]

This was the voice of Winchevsky himself, who long after, in his *Memoirs*, repeated the same sentiment.

> They are ashamed of us, not as one is ashamed of poor relations, but as one is shamed by a leper, an outcast, a black sheep, and their charity always has the flavour of riddance payment.

The *Poylisher yidl* illuminated other facets of ghetto life. We learn of the performances of the new Yiddish theatre group run by the popular young actor-director Jacob Adler, who operated a drama group at 9 Raven Row. He was continually advertising for young men and women trainees, and regular dramatic criticism of the group's efforts appeared in the paper. Productions based on traditional themes included *Shulamis* and *Bar Kokhbe*, written by classic Yiddish playwright Avrom Goldfaden. The Adlers — Jacob and Sarah — laid the foundation of a Yiddish theatre, which

continued to flourish here, long after the pioneer troupe had moved on to greater triumphs on New York City's Lower East Side.[14]

Editorial policy also aimed to enlighten readers on national and international affairs. The Franchise Bill sponsored by Joseph Chamberlain was critically assessed and the Liberals dismissed as 'people who are neither fish nor fowl, who are afraid to take the final step', namely the abolition of the House of Lords. There was regular coverage of the condition of Jews in Central and Eastern Europe against the background of national politics. A personal account of the life of a cantonist purports to nullify the myth of a unitary Jewish people within the *shtetl*. The rich members of the *kehile* (organized Jewish community), whose money has bought them freedom from Tsarist conscription, are caricatured 'with Havana cigars jutting from their mouths, playing cards after a full meal, and fulminating in unison against those young men who run away from conscription as a disgrace to the Jews'.

As part of its educational function, the *Poylisher yidl* encouraged its readers to seek tuition in Yiddish literature and in English. Replying to this plea from the editor, the Jewish Tailors' Union, located at the 'Brown Bear', Leman Street, wrote to inform subscribers that English classes were already offered by a society of the Union, and that 'our secretary, Isaac Stone, and also Mr Lewis Lyons, offer their time and knowledge to undertake the task of teaching gratis'. It hammered away ceaselessly for the formation of unions among the few crafts. The final issue advertised a meeting called by the Builders' Union at 11 Weaver Street, Brick Lane, to enrol more workers. And it added a broader commentary on the transatlantic Jewish world. There are two promising reports on ethnic agricultural colonies in the USA — at Painters Wood, near Bismarck in North Dakota, and Vinland in New Jersey, in contrast to the ever pessimistic accounts of the Jewish condition in Central and Eastern Europe.

On 31 October 1884, a special announcement declared that 'because of difficulties in selling in Russia under the present name' it was to be changed to *Tsukunft* ('Future') with effect from 16

November. The reality was the fundamental split in ideology between the editors. Winchevsky, as a committed socialist, resented the introduction of advertisements, religious and commercial, by Rabbinowitz. The latter was assuming a more nationalistic stance, and the split came when he accepted an advert from the local Liberal Jewish candidate, Samuel Montagu. Winchevsky opposed this final surrender to the 'bourgeois mores'. The partnership ended abruptly. But continuity was effected with the foundation of a new Yiddish monthly journal, the *Arbeter fraynd* ('Workers' Friend') under Winchevsky's editorship in the following year.[15] For there was no going back after the *Poylisher yidl*. It had initiated a tabloid for Jewish self observation and criticism, as well as providing a sounding board for those few artisan intellectuals dedicated to bringing social consciousness to their fellow workers.

It had also established the reputation of Winchevsky as a leading folk poet, whose people's lives are set against the backcloth of Victorian London. Contrary to those who would look back nostalgically on the virtues of that time, and who call for a return to those 'values', Winchevsky presents us with some damning evidence of a poverty ridden despairing majority, resulting from a society operating on such 'values'. In '*Der yoseml*' ('The Little Orphan'), a homeless boy, dirty and half naked, bemused by the poet's exhortations to him to clean himself up and go to school, replies, in effect, that he has no time to spend on such civilized graces. All his efforts are devoted to getting food. '*Vashn zikh? Lernen zikh? Ikh muz fardinen mayn broyt*' ('Wash? Study? I must earn my bread'). In '*A khoydesh on arbet*' ('A Month Without Work'), an unemployed craftsman pleads only for honest work to ply his trade.

> Ikh bet nit nedoves
> fun vegn zkhus oves,
> farhoreven vil ikh mayn broyt;
> fun arbet nor reyd ikh,
> ikh vil nit geyn leydik
> bafrayt mikh durkh arbet fun noyt.[16]

In '*London banakht*' ('London at Night'), he describes the tribulations suffered by the destitute — young or old — seeking food and shelter for the night; the girl at the hospital gates, her mother long since dead, her father dying within, and five hungry children at home, awaiting the breadwinner who will never return. An old *griner* is doomed to nocturnal wanderings. He has been refused aid by the London Jewish Committee and spurned by the rich who, as Winchevsky cynically observes, have their own sons and daughters to keep.[17]

Winchevsky's 1884 poem that brought him his most widespread and lasting acclaim was '*Dray shvester*' ('Three Sisters'). Perhaps somewhat marred by oversentimentality in the idiom, it does expose one sordid feature of city life, well known to his *khaveyrim*: three young women struggling to exist in an uncaring society, where one must sell her body for bread. The lyrics speak for themselves, and the poem set to music could be heard in the streets of cities throughout the world, wherever expatriate East European Jews were settled.

In england iz do a shtot lester,
in london iz do aza skver,
in skver shteyen teglakh dray shvester,
di meydlakh — zey ken ver-nit-ver.

Di klenste farkoyft dortn blumen,
di mitlste — bendlakh fun shikh,
un shpet in der nakht zet men kumen
di eltste, vos handlt . . . mit zikh.

Di yingere beyde batrakhtn
di eltere shvester on has;
den ale dray meydlakh farakhtn
di velt, mit der shtot, mit der gas.

Un dokh ven di kleyne tsvey kumen
tsum nest vos zey rufn a heym,
banetsn zey bendlakh un blumen
mit trern, vos blaybn geheym.[18]

One could argue that Winchevsky would have been a greater poet had he extended his themes beyond the narrowing confines of social and political sermonizing. But that is to anticipate. For he did so, and in broadening his interests so did his poetry mature accordingly. We detect that his earlier style and rhythm were influenced by two poets: Ebeneezer Elliot (the Corn Law rhymester and so called 'poet of the people') and, of course, Thomas Hood, whose 'Song of the Shirt' he published in Yiddish translation that year. When he eased himself out of those constraints, he made a far more profound impact on his fellow Yiddish *littérateurs*, including Y. L. Peretz, one of the three classicists of modern Yiddish literature, with whom he exchanged poems in the 1890s.

Did both Winchevsky and the *Poylisher yidl* really mirror the lives and fortunes of the East End immigrant? Only partly. The culture of poverty evolves its own, albeit ephemeral, satisfactions, even joys in adversity. We learn little of the religious life pursued by the majority, with its concomitant sense of personal fulfillment expressed in the communal practice of Jewish traditions within and without their *shtiblakh* (little prayer houses, usually in private homes). Impressionistic portraits of many aspects of everyday life, including weddings and other *simkhes* (traditional happy occasions), interethnic concerns and tensions, and contemporary picaresque Whitechapel characters, are noticeably ill defined or absent. These we must leave to Winchevsky's successors such as Zangwill, in his kaleidoscopic vignettes, and that which is implicit in the mystical allusions and Biblical analogies employed by Stencl in his own creative perceptions of his people in their Whitechapel locale.

Both Winchevsky and Stencl share a complete social identification with the people of their time and place. But Stencl, unencumbered by political concern, probed wider and deeper into the human condition within the Whitechapel *shtetl*. The six million victims of the *khurbn* (Holocaust) are gone. But their unique language and culture remain as alive and vivid to us today as they were yesterday, thanks to such examplars as Winchevsky, the *zeyde* (grandfather) of the workingman's branch of modern Yiddish literature, and his gifted literary

eynikl (grandchild), the anarchical mystic A. N. Stencl. Those of us who walk the streets of East London today in the footsteps of both, can still conjure up in the imagination that lost world of the penniless immigrant, so poignantly evoked by the two poets whose lives collectively spanned its totality, Morris Winchevsky at its beginning, Avrom-Nokhem Stencl at its dying fall.

Notes

[1] Yivo Archive, Kalmen Marmor collection, no. 306/26095–100.
[2] Yivo Archive, Kalmen Marmor collection, no. 325/27771. Biography in a series of articles in the *Frayhayt*, commencing 10 August 1928. See also Winchevsky's memoirs, *Erinerungen*, published Moscow 1926 and New York 1927.
[3] 'Arguably' because of the first, albeit ephemeral, Yiddish socialist paper, founded in Switzerland in 1881. Cf. e.g. Abraham G. Druker's introduction to Ber Borochov, *Nationalism and the Class Struggle: A Marxian Approach to the Jewish Problem*, New York 1937, p. 21.
[4] *Poylisher yidl*, no. 1, 25 July 1884, 'Correspondence in Leeds'.
[5] *Poylisher yidl*, no. 4, 15 August 1884.
[6] *Poylisher yidl*, no. 2, 1 August 1884.
[7] *Poylisher yidl*, no. 7, 5 September 1884.
[8] *Poylisher yidl*, no. 8, 12 September 1884. Entitled '*London banakht*' in Winchevsky's collected *Lider un gedikhte* ('Songs and Poems'), New York 1910, pp. 145–147.
[9] *Poylisher yidl*, no. 10, 26 September 1884, 'Busy time in the Workshops'.
[10] *Poylisher yidl*, no. 11, 3 October 1884, 'Workers slack — *Uncle* busy'.
[11] *Poylisher yidl*, no. 11, 3 October 1884.
[12] *Poylisher yidl*, no. 13, 17 October 1884.
[13] *Poylisher yidl*, no. 12, 10 October 1884.
[14] One of the last announcements printed in no. 14, 31 October 1884, is 'The opening of the Russian Hebrew Workmen's Club and Institute, 10 Houndsditch, E.C.' in which 'Mr Adler and Co will entertain members three times weekly: Saturday night, Sunday and Monday'.
[15] The *Arbeter fraynd* first appeared on 15 July 1885 and lasted, with occasional stoppages due to financial difficulties, until 1932. It extended the dimensional possibilities of its predecessor, and gathered round it a formidable group of talented Yiddish journalists. After 1891 it became an Anarchist organ and reached the zenith of its literary and political influence under the editorship of Rudolf Rocker — a German gentile who mastered the Yiddish language.
[16] *Lider un gedikhte* ('Songs and Poems'), pp. 91–92.
[17] *Lider un gedikhte*, pp. 145–147.
[18] *Lider un gedikhte*, p. 156.

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1. S.S. Prawer, *A. N. Stencl: Poet of Whitechapel.* Oxford 1984.
2. William J. Fishman, *Morris Winchevsky's London Yiddish Newspaper: One Hundred Years in Retrospect.* Oxford 1985.

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