

FROM CZAR TO GLASNOST: YIDDISH IN THE SOVIET UNION

by

SCHNEIER LEVENBERG

*Joint President of the Zionist Federation of Great
Britain*

The Sixth Annual
Avrom-Nokhem Stencl Lecture in Yiddish Studies
delivered before
The Seventh Annual
Oxford Summer Programme
in Yiddish Language and Literature
on 15 August 1988

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S. S. Prawer's impression of Dr Levenberg

Soviet Jewry is the third largest Jewish community in the world, after the United States and Israel. Yiddish has deeper roots in the Soviet Union than in any other country. It is not a language imported by immigrants who aim at linguistic assimilation. The past, present and future of Yiddish in the USSR is therefore a major issue in the modern history of Yiddish.

The overwhelming majority of Jews in the Russian Empire lived in restricted areas collectively known as the Pale of Settlement (in Yiddish *tkhum hamoyshet*), which had been set up after the Partitions of Poland of 1772, 1793 and 1795. Yiddish was the natural language of its Jewish inhabitants. At the end of the nineteenth century, it was even used by the twelve thousand in St Petersburg (now Leningrad) and the five hundred in Moscow. According to the first census carried out in the Russian Empire, in 1897, there were 5,250,000 Jews in the country. Ninety-seven percent recorded Yiddish as their mother tongue.

Nineteenth century Jewish writers who preached adjustment to the Christian majority had no choice other than to use Yiddish in order to reach the Jewish population. It is not accidental that Yiddish played a central part in the movement of the *Maskilim* ('Enlighteners') in czarist Russia. Alexander Zederbaum (or Tsederboym, 1816–1893), the publisher of *Hamelitz*, the first Hebrew newspaper, which began to appear in 1860, recognized the importance of Yiddish. He decided to publish a supplement for the Yiddish-speaking masses. Called *Kol Mevasser*, it was issued from 1862 to 1871 and symbolized the emergence of Yiddish as a modern literary language. Zederbaum helped launch the magnificent Yiddish literary career of Mendele Moykher Sforim (Sholem-Yankev Abramovitch, c. 1836–1917). Mendele, formerly a Hebrew writer, started to publish in Yiddish in Zederbaum's *Kol Mevasser*, in November 1864. Mendele explained his decision as follows:

I observe the life of our people and would like to describe it in our Holy Tongue. But the great majority of our people do not understand Hebrew. What, then, would be the use of all my efforts? (...) The question for whom do I write gave me no rest. (...) The thought that I shall have to descend to write in Yiddish troubled me but the desire to be useful conquered the false pride. I said to myself: 'Come what may, I shall serve my people'.

Mendele was born in the townlet Kapulye, near Minsk, in White Russia. His father was a leading member of the community, respected both for Jewish learning and knowledge of worldly affairs. He gave his son an excellent Jewish education and helped him develop a keen realistic mind, a lively imagination and a sense of beauty. The future writer enjoyed happiness until the age of thirteen when his father died. Later on, he experienced great poverty, wandered from place to place and suffered a great deal until he settled down as a teacher. It was during these years of hardship that Mendele visited many Jewish communities in White Russia and the Ukraine and observed Jewish life. The material collected during that period formed the basis of his works which are now classics of Jewish literature. His main novels were written prior to the upheavals of late nineteenth century Russian Jewry: the pogroms of the 1880s and the emergence of modern Jewish nationalism and Jewish socialism. The last four decades of Mendele's life were spent in Odessa, a city renowned as a Jewish literary centre where Achad Ha'am, Bialik, Jabotinsky and Usishkin had left their impact. The 'grandfather of modern Yiddish literature', as Mendele is also known, kept somewhat aloof from the stream of modern Jewish life. Neither Zionism nor socialism formed an important part of his spiritual make-up. Nevertheless, his works, imbued with both social and national ideas, are indispensable for any student of Jewish life in the czarist Empire.

Sholem Aleichem (Sholem Rabinovitsh), the internationally celebrated Yiddish author, was a son of Ukrainian Jewry. Born in a typical Jewish *shtetl*, in 1859, he lived in Kiev, visited various European cities and died in New York in 1916. He described the life of the ordinary people and was a passionate

Zionist. He wrote in Hebrew, too, but described his attitude to Yiddish, in 1889, as follows:

Every objective person has to admit that the revival of *Zhargon* is the best evidence that the self-awareness of the Jewish people is growing. The success of Yiddish attests to our writing not for a handful of elite individuals but for an entire people. The people understand us. Our ideas and opinions penetrate the hearts of our brothers. What more need we ask?

Yitskhok Leybush Peretz (1852–1915) was the third pioneer of modern Yiddish literature. For many years he lived in Warsaw, which was a Polish-Russian city in his lifetime. Peretz, too, wrote in Hebrew and at first had a critical attitude to Yiddish. Later, he changed his mind and became one of the most articulate literary spokesmen for the Jewish masses. Peretz read the writings of many European authors and studied history. His famous Yiddish stories acquired a universal character and appealed to the younger generation. While not a political person, he was close to those who fought for equality and justice.

Sholem Ash (1880–1957), another leading Yiddish author, was born in the Polish-Russian *shtetl* Kutne. At first, he described the surroundings with which he was familiar but later became a universal writer who came to grips with religious and moral issues; he described pioneering life in Eretz Israel, too. His novels dealing with the origin of Christianity were a subject of great controversy. Although he lived in Western cities, he was essentially a product of Polish-Russian culture. He died in London and was buried in Israel where a Sholem Ash Museum was established in Bat-Yam, near Tel Aviv.

One hundred years ago, in 1888, the great Russian-Jewish historian Simon Dubnov wrote as follows:

Before our eyes a transition, which makes us rejoice, is taking place in *Zhargon* literature: from flimsy primitive works, which the masses were given of necessity, to serious books which stimulate thought and convey a fertile refreshing stream to the popular mind. We see talented authors who are coming forth with spirit. We notice the rise of a periodic press which satisfies the needs of a section of the reading public. We are witnesses to a folk literature

in the process of organization which is filled with a variety of sincere efforts and which appreciates the responsibilities and needs of the modern age. What makes Yiddish worse than Bulgarian or the minor Slavonic, Germanic or Roman dialects which no one denies the right to possess a literature? Is the number of Jews who speak *Zhargon* smaller than the number of Czechs and Bulgarians who have their own literature? (...) *Zhargon* is more suited to the depiction of Jewish life than Russian or Hebrew.

The famous Yiddish Language Conference held in Chernowitz, Bukovina, eighty years ago, in August 1908, was attended by a number of prominent writers from czarist Russia. Indeed, a multitude of twentieth century Yiddish writers and journalists in Western countries were born and educated in the czarist Empire. Some of their most important writings were a product of their experience in various parts of Russia during the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. One of them, Avrom Reyzen (1876–1953) of Koydenov, White Russia, who arrived in New York at the age of fifteen, became one of the most popular Yiddish poets to express the suffering and yearnings of the Jewish workers. *A Family of Eight* is one of his well-known poems. The translations I cite of this and other Yiddish poems are by the late Joseph Leftwich.

*A family of eight
And beds only two
When the night comes,
What can you do?
Three with their father,
And three with their mother
Feet and hands entangled
In each other.
When the night comes,
Time for going to bed,
The mother wishes she was dead.
She knows the grave
Is narrow too
But at least you lie separate
All of you.*

The first Jewish revolutionaries in czarist Russia were assimilationists who had no interest in Jewish issues. Their propaganda was in Russian and many scarcely knew Yiddish. It was only the emergence in 1893 of a strike movement among the Jewish workers in the Pale of Settlement that made the language problem an acute issue. It became obvious that in order to speak to the Jewish masses in Vilna and other cities it was essential to use Yiddish. At first Yiddish was used for opportunistic purposes and those who used it were apologetic. It was quite some time before Yiddish was recognized by the Russian-speaking Jewish revolutionaries as a legitimate medium of self-expression for the Jewish workers. Gradually, the first socialist pamphlets in Yiddish made their appearance. This was followed by the formation of Yiddish 'workers' libraries'. Jewish radical writers such as Yitskhok Leybush Peretz and Dovid Pinski wielded great influence during the initial stages of the Jewish Labour Movement. They described the plight of the Jewish working man and woman and encouraged them in the struggle for a better future.

During the last years of the nineteenth century an illegal socialist literature in Yiddish made its appearance in Vilna, Minsk and other cities. These were mainly leaflets and short pamphlets. The large majority of Jewish revolutionaries, who belonged to the educated classes, spoke Russian; only a few were able to write in Yiddish. This was the reason why many Russian and German words were used in the first illegal leaflets. Only gradually did the leaders of the Jewish social-democratic movement acquire a good knowledge of Yiddish, a language which was becoming ever more vital for their political and educational work among the growing masses of Jewish workers in the Pale of Settlement.

At the end of December 1896, the Jewish social democrats began to publish, from abroad, their own publication, *Der Yidisher Arbeter* ('The Jewish Worker'), which later became the official organ of the *Bund* and was published until 1905. It was a theoretical journal. The influence of the Yiddish publications

emanating from London and New York among the Jewish workers in czarist Russia was limited for a number of reasons. They were addressed to a different audience, their preaching of 'cosmopolitanism' did not appeal to nationally conscious readers and obtaining periodicals from abroad was in any event not an easy matter.

The *Bund* or 'General Jewish Workers' Union of Lithuania, Poland and Russia' was formed at a secret conference held in Vilna from the 7th to the 9th of October 1897. From the Lithuanian and White Russian provinces where the trend to assimilation was less pronounced, the new movement gradually spread to Poland and the Ukraine. The Bund issued the *Arbeter Shtime* ('Worker's Voice'), an illegal publication. It reached its peak during the Russian Revolution of 1905, when it began to publish a daily Yiddish newspaper under various names, including *Der Veker* ('The Awakener') and *Folks Tsaytung* ('People's newspaper'). At first divided on its Jewish national programme, the Bund developed into a champion of educational activities in Yiddish, and as a supporter of Jewish literature and theatre. Although anti-Zionist and anti-Hebrew, the Bund helped to strengthen the national consciousness of Jewish working people and their love for Yiddish culture. Its policy arose at first not so much from theoretical principles but from the realization that, while assimilation was making headway, Yiddish was the key to the hearts and minds of the Jewish proletarian masses.

The Bund was active in czarist Russia and, later, after the victory of communism, in Poland and Latvia. But the Zionist socialist movement, from its early stages onward, had worldwide ramifications. It is significant that Nachman Syrkin's *The Socialist Jewish State* (1898) was published in German; his famous *Call to Jewish Youth* (1901) appeared in Russian. Similarly, Ber Borokhov's first studies on Marxist-Zionist issues were written in Russian. The first publication of the Labour Zionist movement, *The Jewish Worker*, appeared in German (Vienna, 1898). But, like the Bund, the Poale Zion groups and

their leaders soon realized the importance of Yiddish for the Jewish working masses. Syrkin became a prolific writer in Yiddish. Borokhov emerged as the great founder of modern Yiddish linguistics. Other leaders of the various Zionist socialist groups underwent a similar transformation. They issued their first publications in Russian, then switched to Yiddish.

It would be a mistake to underestimate the influence of Yiddish in the development of the old *Yishuv* in Eretz Israel and its impact on the pioneers and middle class settlers prior and subsequent to the establishment of the State of Israel. A huge proportion of the settlers were of Russian origin. All the presidents of the State of Israel, from Chaim Weizmann to Chaim Herzog, spoke Yiddish, including Yitzhak Navon, who was born in Israel of Moroccan origin. All of Israel's prime ministers, from David Ben Gurion to Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Shamir, have been Yiddish speakers. The development of Yiddish literature in Israel in spite of difficulties due to the struggle for Hebrew as the official language is a separate issue which merits further study. Many of the novelists, poets and journalists who wrote in Yiddish during the development of the new *Yishuv* had a Russian-Jewish background. A significant, and very recent development is the contribution of new Soviet immigrants to Yiddish culture.

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A new flourishing of Yiddish in various parts of the former Russian Empire followed the overthrow of czarism in March 1917. Restrictions were abolished, censorship discontinued and the national spirit revived. Yiddish was the dominant Jewish language both in free Russia and the newly independent Baltic republics which emerged after the First World War. A new situation developed when Lenin came to power in November 1917.

Historically, it is essential to differentiate between the development of Hebrew and Yiddish in the Russian Empire, and

later, in the USSR. Modern Hebrew literature is older than the emergence of the three Yiddish classicists, Mendele, Sholem Aleichem and Peretz. It may be traced to 1785 when the first Hebrew publication *Hameasef* ('Anthology') was issued. The first stimuli for the revival of the Hebrew language came to Russian Jewry from Germany and Austria but it later took on a specific character within Russia. The publication of the Russian-Hebrew novel *Ahavat Zion* ('Love of Zion') by Abraham Mapu in 1853 was of pivotal importance. The first Russian-Hebrew periodical *Hamagid* appeared in 1857. Among the prominent Hebrew writers in the czarist Empire were Peretz Smolenskin (1842–1885), Achad Ha'am (1856–1927), Chaim Nachman Bialik (1873–1934) and Shaul Tshernichovsky (1875–1943). Hebrew has deep historic roots in the various republics which now form the USSR, but after Lenin came to power, everything possible was done to hamper its development. The only notable exception was the establishment of the *Habima* theatre which functioned for several years. While the language of the Bible was never declared 'illegal', its use was discouraged *de facto*. Today there is no Hebrew publication in the USSR but the language is still alive among certain Soviet-Jewish groups. Today, Yiddish is considered the language of the Jewish nationality while Hebrew is looked upon as the language of Israel, a country with which the Soviet Union has had no diplomatic relations since 1967.

It is important to appreciate the theoretical approach of the Bolsheviks to the Jewish problem when they acquired power over seventy years ago. Lenin formulated his view as follows:

The idea of a Jewish 'nationality' is definitely reactionary not only when expounded by its consistent advocates (the Zionists) but likewise from the lips of those who try to combine it with the ideas of social democracy (the Bundists). The idea of a Jewish nationality runs counter to the interests of the Jewish proletariat, for it fosters among them, directly or indirectly, a spirit hostile to assimilation, the spirit of the 'ghetto' (*Iskra*, 1903).

Lenin, who opposed both 'isolation' and anti-Semitism, preached assimilation of the Jews in his *Critical Remarks on the*

National Questions. He believed that whoever put forward, directly or indirectly, the slogan of Jewish 'national culture' was an enemy of the proletariat, a supporter of all that is outmoded and connected with caste among the Jewish people, an accomplice of the rabbis and bourgeoisie. Stalin expressed similar views in his *Marxism and the National Question*. Neither Lenin nor Stalin was an original thinker on the Jewish problem. They shared the views of many socialist leaders prior to the First World War but for both, ideology was always mixed with pragmatism.

When the communists acquired power, Stalin became the 'People's Commissar for National Affairs'. A 'Jewish Department' established local 'sections' known under the Russian name *Yevsektzia*. The purpose of the Jewish sections was to establish the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' among the Jewish masses, in other words to conduct communist propaganda. From the historical point of view, the *Yevsektzia*, which existed until 1930 when it was liquidated, had both negative and positive elements. On one hand, it did everything possible to undermine Jewish religious and cultural life, it fought against Zionism and Hebrew, and it led a violent campaign against Jewish communal institutions. On the other hand, it cultivated Yiddish and issued newspapers, pamphlets and books. The liquidation of the *Yevsektzia* and its leadership was a move toward assimilation and annihilation of Jewish culture.

In the census of 1926, over 70% of Soviet Jews listed Yiddish as their mother tongue. Yiddish was particularly strong in the two areas of the Soviet Union which contained concentrated Jewish communities, the Ukraine and White Russia. Some 74% of the total Jewish population lived in these two republics. In the Ukrainian Republic, 70% of Jews listed Yiddish as their mother tongue. In White Russia the figure was 90%. On the other hand, only 47% of Jews in the Russian Republic reported their mother tongue to be Yiddish. There is no doubt that for a large number of Jews in the USSR today, Yiddish is a familiar language. This must have some impact upon their children.

In 1926 there were 750 Yiddish schools with a total number of 115,000 pupils in the Soviet Union. Between 25,000 and 30,000 Yiddish textbooks were distributed in that year. The vast network of Soviet Yiddish publishing included a scientific and educational literature, high quality literary periodicals and three Yiddish dailies, *Emes* ('Truth') in Moscow, *Shtern* ('Star') in Kharkov and *Oktyaber* ('October') in Minsk. In 1932, there were four Yiddish publishing houses, fourteen state supported Yiddish theatres and thirty-five Yiddish periodicals. Yiddish programmes were broadcast on Soviet radio, Yiddish was used in the courts of the Ukraine and White Russia, and a Yiddish teacher's seminary in the Ukraine and two in White Russia provided professional training. Three and a half thousand students attended the teachers' seminars and studied at the Yiddish departments of various universities.

The following table of books and pamphlets published, compiled by Professor Chone Shmeruk, provides a picture of the scope of Yiddish publishing in the Soviet Union between 1932 and 1949.

1932	668
1933	391
1934	348
1935	437
1936	431
1937	356
1938	348
1939	339
1940	359
1941	202
1942	2
1943	24
1944	18
1945	14
1946	19
1947	52
1948	60
1949	0

The liquidation of Jewish cultural activity began prior to the Second World War. Many Yiddish writers and cultural workers perished during the purges of the late 1930s. The three dailies were closed, *Emes* in 1938, *Shtern* and *Oktyaber* in 1941. But in 1940 the number of Yiddish books and pamphlets published in the Soviet Union was still over 350.

Soviet spokesmen have claimed that the Nazi invasion of June 1941 and the extermination of a large part of the Jewish population brought about the liquidation of Jewish cultural life. This can only be considered to be a half truth because the war brought about both destruction and revival of Jewish activities. In 1942 the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was established. It became a 'central address' for the Jewish population. Its newspaper, *Eynikayt* ('Unity') began to appear first in Kuibishev, where Soviet institutions were evacuated, and later, in Moscow. Prominent Yiddish authors contributed to it. This was followed by the publication of Yiddish literary journals in various parts of the Soviet Union.

The Jewish public responded with enthusiasm to the revival of cultural activities. The sale of books and periodicals soared. Four Jewish theatres functioned in 1948, in Moscow, Minsk, Odessa and Chernowitz. There were, in addition, many amateur acting groups. Jewish consciousness was on the increase after the nightmare of Nazi extermination. New contacts were established with Jewish communities abroad. The United Nations vote of 29 November 1947 in favour of the establishment of the State of Israel, won with the support of the Soviet Government, created an atmosphere of enthusiasm and optimism among the Jewish population. It seemed that a new era of Jewish revival in the Soviet Union had begun.

The first blow came with the death, in mysterious circumstances, of Shloyme Mikhoels on 13 January 1948. He was the head of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, a famous personality in artistic circles, one of the great Soviet actors, and the driving force behind the Jewish State Theatre. Mikhoels was a noted intellectual and a widely respected and beloved figure in

Moscow's public life. He was well-known in the United States and Britain where his visit in 1943 together with Itzik Feffer, during the dark years of the war, helped to engender support for a Soviet Union engaged in a life and death struggle against Nazi Germany. I met Mikhoels in London during the visit. He was a sad man but he played his role as Soviet emissary to Anglo-Jewry with great skill. He was no ordinary speaker. He was an actor and his impact was considerable.

At the end of 1948, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was suddenly liquidated and its publication shut down. Shortly afterwards a campaign against 'rootless cosmopolitans' was launched; it was clearly directed against Jews. This was followed by widespread arrests reaching many hundreds and embracing people who had any connection, however remote, with Jewish cultural activities or communal life. The campaign of persecution spread all over the country reaching Birobidjan, the so-called 'Jewish Autonomous Region'.

Jewish writers, well known communists, were branded as 'homeless' without attachment to their native soil. They were arrested in the middle of the night. Every Jew in the Soviet intellectual world was under suspicion, even people like Ilya Ehrenburg and Boris Pasternak. An atmosphere of panic spread among Jews throughout the Soviet land. It reached a climax in the so-called 'Doctors' Plot' of January 1953 when a number of famous Jewish medical men were accused of trying to poison their patients who were members of the Soviet establishment. A show trial was in preparation. It never took place because of Stalin's death in March 1953. But for five years, starting in 1948, Soviet Jewry went through sheer hell.

With hindsight it is now clear that the Soviet Government treated its support for the creation of Israel and the internal problems of Soviet Jewry as two separately compartmentalized issues. The two preliminary shots in the so-called 'Anti-Zionist Campaign' were the elimination of Mikhoels and the notorious article by Ilya Ehrenburg written 'at the request' of the editor of *Pravda* and published on 21 September 1948. It is now obvious

that the article was an official warning to Russian Jews not to look to Israel but to their Soviet Homeland.

How did Mikhoels die? We now have the evidence of three Soviet witnesses. Ilya Ehrenburg wrote in his memoirs:

Mikhoels was killed. At the time we were told that he had gone to Minsk with Golubov-Potapov on some assignment for the committee which awarded Stalin Prizes. One evening he was invited to some people, and, accompanied by Golubov-Potapov, was walking along a street in the suburbs when they were either set upon and killed by bandits or, according to another account, run over by a lorry. In the spring of 1948 either version was credible, but six months later both began to be doubted. When Zuskin (a well-known Jewish actor) was arrested, everybody asked: How did Mikhoels really meet his death? Not long ago a Soviet paper published in Lithuania reported that he had been killed by Beria agents. (. . .) I went to the funeral service at Mikhoel's theatre. His mutilated features had been made up with grease paint. (. . .) A crowd stood outside in the street and many people wept. On the evening of May 24th a commemorative meeting was held. I made a speech but cannot remember what I said. I felt very bitter. Still I did not foresee what was to come.

Svetlana Alliluyeva, Stalin's daughter, relates in her book *Only One Year* how she heard her father giving an order over the telephone to report Mikhoels's death as 'an automobile accident'. But the next day at university, a fellow female student whose father had worked for a long time in the Jewish Theatre told her, weeping, how brutally Mikhoels had been murdered while travelling through Byelorussia in a car. The newspapers, of course, reported the event as an 'automobile accident'. Svetlana Alliluyeva adds:

'He had been murdered and there had been no accident. 'Automobile accident' was the official version, the cover-up suggested by my father when the black deed had been reported to him. My head began to throb. I knew all too well my father's obsession with 'Zionist' plots around every corner. It was not difficult to guess why this particular crime had been reported directly to him.

Roy Medvedev, the Russian historian, relates in his remarkable account of the 'great terror in the Soviet Union', *Let History Judge*, how Stalin, on Kaganovich's advice, invited Mikhoels to play the role of King Lear for him in 1946. This great actor was repeatedly invited to give private performances of Shakespearean roles at the Kremlin. On each occasion, Stalin thanked Mikhoels and praised his acting. But in 1948, with Stalin's knowledge, the artistic genius of the Jewish Theatre was killed in Minsk. A few years later he was posthumously labelled 'a spy for Anglo-American intelligence.'

There was one man who had no doubts how Mikhoels was killed. That was his friend Peretz Markish, who suffered a similar fate four years later. Markish wrote in a poem devoted to the great actor:

*The wounds of your face are covered by snow.
So that the black Satan shall not touch you.
But your dead eyes blaze with woe.
And your heart they trampled on cries out against the
murderous crew.
I shall come to your defiled threshold, eternity.
With murder marks on my face, and blasphemy.
So that you see how my people live in this five-sixth of the
earth
With hate and the hangman in the land of their birth.
Read the marks, cut them into your memory
And let remembering never stop
For every mark the murderers left on me,
A mother and her child escaped the hangman's rope.*

Peretz Markish, one of the twenty-four leading writers executed in 1952, was born in 1895. A famous Yiddish poet, novelist and playwright, he received a traditional Jewish education, served in World War I and, in 1917, acclaimed the Lenin Revolution. But in 1921 he left the Soviet Union and for five years he lived in Poland and France, also visiting England

and Palestine. While abroad, he wrote moving poems about the anti-Jewish pogroms in the Ukraine during the Civil War. In 1926, Markish returned to the Soviet Union where he wrote both poems and novels, following the Communist Party Line. In 1939 he was awarded the Order of Lenin. In 1940 he, like a number of other Soviet authors, wrote 'An Ode to Stalin'. During World War II, he showed his strength as a poet depicting Soviet patriotism and expressing sorrow at the extermination of the Jews. His novel on the heroism of Polish Jewry under the Nazis was posthumously published in 1966.

The Jewish writers who perished during the post-war Stalin period broadly consisted of two groups: those who started their literary activities prior to 1917 and those who were 'children of the Revolution'. Typical representatives of the first group, who were greatly influenced by Jewish upbringing and traditions were Der Nister, Dovid Bergelson, Leyb Kvitko and Yekhezkl Dobrushin.

Der Nister ('the hidden one') was the pen-name of Pinye (Pinkhes) Kahanovitsh who was born in the typical Ukrainian-Jewish city of Berditchev in 1884. He too was led to slaughter by Stalin's hangmen. Der Nister began his literary activities in 1907 and was greatly influenced by the Russian school of symbolism whose elements he combined with Jewish mysticism and folklore; he tried to show the split in man's soul. Many of his short stories and his famous novel *Di Mishpokhe Mashber* ('The Family Mashber') are a product of his deep interest in Chasidism. After the Revolution he lived in Berlin for several years but returned to the Soviet Union, like a number of other Jewish writers, attracted by the great opportunities for Jewish cultural development during the late 1920s. He also wrote poetry. The following verses from his 'At the Doors' were an expression of his bewilderment and yearning for spiritual values:

*Who will show us where
Are the world's doorways?
Who will lead us blind.
In our ageing days.*

Woe to us, the old.
Woe to body and sin.
Us, the last generation,
Childless, without kin.
Aged and alone, we grope,
But we cannot find.
We, the last generation,
Lost and poor, and blind.
Film upon our eyes,
Sin upon our head,
Stumbling on our road.
Who is there to lead?

Dovid Bergelson, too, was a son of the Ukraine. He had a worldwide reputation as one of the great Jewish novelists in the old classical tradition. Born in the year 1884, like Der Nister, he made a great name with his novels *Arum Vokzal* ('By the Station') in 1909 and *Nokh Alemen* ('End of the Story') in 1913. He travelled widely and visited many Jewish communities. His pre-revolutionary novels were pessimistic, depicting the decline of individual initiative in a period of stagnation. In the mid-1920s, his writings show an identification with Soviet ideology but he continued to reside in Berlin. In 1934 he settled in Moscow where he adapted himself to 'socialist realism'. Some of his writings were still deeply Jewish. He was purged at the age of sixty-eight.

While officially following the communist line, the older Jewish writers were unable to free themselves of their deep devotion to Jewish values and old loyalties. These sentiments are clearly expressed by Leyb Kvitko who hailed from a rabbinic family. Born in 1893, Kvitko joined the revolutionary movement at the age of eighteen. He wrote:

That is how we grew,
How we were brought up,
In the ancient vineyard.

*Planted by our grandfathers.
 So we honour age.
 And we guard the wine press.
 And we love the vineyard,
 That was planted by our grandfathers.*

Yekhezkl Dobrushin, another of Stalin's victims, expressed sentiments not unlike those of Kvitko. He too was born in the Ukraine but he joined the socialist movement in France where he studied Law at the Sorbonne. Answering the call of the Revolution he returned to Kiev where he was appointed to a chair in Yiddish literature. The following verses show his deep nostalgia and pride in his own people.

*I have a treasure in my heart,
 A secret is there as well.
 I would give my wealth away,
 But it is held by a magic spell.
 I have gems and jewels there.
 Flashing with many a golden ray,
 But I cannot move a single thing.
 The spell lets nothing be taken away.
 So the riches lie in my heart,
 And God's grace guards them silently.
 And since nothing I can give away.
 I can only speak of the mystery.*

The second group, the Jewish writers who were 'children of the Revolution' were deeply imbued with the communist creed. They had no doubts about 'Leninism' and 'Stalinism'. The poet Itzik Feffer was a prominent representative of this group. He was seventeen when the Bolsheviks took power in Russia and wrote his first poem at the age of twenty. He blindly followed the party line in his writings and public activity. He too wrote a well known ode to Stalin. When I met Itzik Feffer in London, in 1943, he had the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Red Army. In

contrast to Mikhoels, who was a sombre looking man with hardly a smile on his face, Feffer was cheerful, friendly, open, ever-ready with an answer in accordance with the line laid down by the Communist Party. But he was intensely Jewish in his appearance and sentiments. Feffer's Jewishness became clearly noticeable during the Second World War when he was secretary of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and the man responsible for its publication *Eynikayt* ('Unity'). But his faith in communism made him oblivious to the growing threat to Soviet Jewry. At the end of September 1948, shortly before his arrest, he took issue with a misreported statement by Dr Nahum Goldmann that the State of Israel was not the responsibility of the World Jewish Congress, which represented the various Jewish communities, but the Zionist movement. He wrote:

This is a false and pernicious conception. The State of Israel is a matter that concerns the entire Jewish people, and not the Jewish people alone. The entire progressive world followed with sympathy the birth of the new state, and no progressive person can remain indifferent to what is happening on the soil of that state.

Feffer was of the opinion that the sentiments which he expressed were in accordance with the Party's line but he was behind the times. He was also behind the times when he wrote his poem *Shadows of the Warsaw Ghetto*, a moving tribute to the victims of the Holocaust. The most powerful expression of Itzik Feffer's national credo is contained in his famous war poem, *I am a Jew*:

*I am a Jew.
The wine of enduring generations
Strengthened me on my wanderer's way.
The evil sword of pain and lamentations
Nothing that I hold dear could slay –
My people, my faith, and my head unbowed.
It could not stop me being free and true.
Under the sword I cried aloud:
'I am a Jew!'*

Pharaoh and Titus, Haman made their aim
 To slay me in their times and lands.
 Eternity still bears my name
 Upon its hands
 And I survived in Spain the rack.
 The Inquisition fires too.
 My horn sounded this message back:
 'I am a Jew!'

When Egypt walled my body round,
 I felt agonies.
 But I sowed my pain upon the ground,
 And saw the sunrise.
 Under the sun a road lay spread.
 Where thorns and prickles grew.
 And as they pierced my eyes, I said:
 'I am a Jew!' [. . .]

My eyes are dazzled with the sunset glow
 Of a painting by Levitan.
 The road that Mendelev trod I go.
 And meet the bayonet of a Red Army man.
 The sickle shines on the ripe corn.
 I am a son of this Soviet land where I was born.
 And, too,
 'I am a Jew!'

From Haifa Harbour answeringly.
 From London comes the response to me.
 From Buenos Aires and New York
 Come songs from Jews who fight and work
 And even from the Berlin hell
 Comes a shuddering I know well.
 In them all one word runs through:
 'I am a Jew!'

I am a Jew who has drunk up
 Happiness from Stalin's cup.
 To those who would let Moscow go

*Under the ground, I call out – No,
The Slavs are my brothers, too.
'I am a Jew!'*

*I am a ship against both shores,
Into eternity my blood pours.
On my pride in Sverdlov I depend.
And Kaganovitch, Stalin's friend.
My young go speeding over the snows.
My heart bombs and dynamite throws.
And everywhere the call comes through:
'I am a Jew!'*

*I am not alone! My strength is growing.
Battle is now my daily bread.
I send the storm raging and blowing.
And the Brown enemy falls dead.
Gorelik and Papernik too.
Cry from under the earth:
'I am a Jew!'*

*Despite the foe who comes destroying,
Under the Red Flag I shall live.
I shall plant vineyards for my enjoying.
And on this soil will thrive.
Whatever the enemy may do.
The liberty of the world we shall save.
I shall dance on Hitler's grave.
'I am a Jew!'*

Feffer paid dearly for his 'deviationism' as well as for the warm cable of greetings which he and other colleagues of the 'Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee' sent to Dr Chaim Weizmann on the establishment of the state of Israel. He and his fellow communists of Jewish origin paid dearly for their illusions of, as his poem puts it, 'happiness from Stalin's cup'.

The accused writers were charged with being:

1. plotters who wished by armed rebellion to separate Crimea

from the Soviet Union and establish there a Jewish National Bourgeois Zionist Republic.

2. agents of American Imperialism.
3. National Bourgeois Zionists.
4. enemies of USSR.

Was the liquidation of Jewish cultural life which occurred in 1948 an isolated episode? No, it was an integral part of a policy toward the Jews which began to take shape around 1930. That was the year when the Jewish Section of the Communist Party, the *Yevsektzia* was liquidated by Soviet authorities. The policy of facilitating Jewish cultural development, as long as its communist base is upheld, was gradually coming to an end long before the outbreak of the Second World War. A wave of arrests of Jewish writers and artists in 1936 was part of a 'general purge'. Nevertheless, it had its own specific motivation: the liquidation of Jewish cultural autonomy. The general decline of Yiddish cultural life can be traced in good measure to the years 1937 and 1938, when much of the intellectual elite of Soviet Jewry was arrested. Victims include S. Dimantshteyn, a close collaborator of Lenin during the early Revolutionary period; Moyshe Litvakov, editor of *Der Emes*; Esther Frumkin, a noted revolutionary figure; authors Moyshe Kulbak and Izi Kharik; literary historians Max Erik and Yisroel Tsinberg (Zinberg), and many, many more.

The process culminated in the infamous execution of the twenty-four leading Yiddish writers on 12 August 1952. The sole survivor of the 1952 massacre at Moscow's Lubianka prison was Lena Shtern, the only woman member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, affectionately known as 'Einstein in a skirt'. She was an American Jewish woman who settled in the Soviet Union during the 1930s, made a great reputation for herself as a specialist in children's illnesses and became the head of a research institute that employed 259 scientists. She was a famous professor deeply respected for her scientific achievements as well as her great human qualities. In his book *Mission*

to Moscow, written in Hebrew, Mordechai Namir, who succeeded Golda Meir as Israel's Ambassador to the Soviet Union, relates how courageously Lena Shtern fought pressure by Soviet authorities to limit the number of Jewish scientific workers at the institute. She refused to give way to anti-Semitism and racial discrimination. When she was released after Stalin's death Lena Shtern avoided discussing her bitter experiences. She died in 1968.

Jewish national consciousness in the Soviet Union was brutally suppressed under Stalinism. In her moving account 'The Babi Yar of Jewish Culture', published in the Tel Aviv Yiddish literary journal *Di Goldene Keyt* in 1970, Esther Rosenthal-Schneiderman paints a shattering picture of how the Kiev libraries were emptied of Jewish books. She lived in the Soviet Union for thirty-two years and worked in the Jewish Research Institute at the Kiev Academy of Sciences. She describes how, in the 1950s, books by Mendele, Sholem Aleichem and Peretz, including translations in Russian and Ukrainian, were confiscated. Some of the Jewish books were later used in grocery shops for a variety of purposes, some were eaten up by moles in their 'hiding places', others burned. This was the 'Babi Yar of Jewish Culture'.

The 'period of liberalization' in the Soviet Union did not lead to a revival of Jewish cultural activities. Not one Jewish literary publication appeared for eleven years (1948–1959). Hebrew books were still considered 'counter-revolutionary'. During his famous speech of 1959 denouncing Stalin's atrocities Khrushchev made no reference to the anti-Jewish campaign. The Jewish victims were never officially and publicly 'rehabilitated' and no explanation was given for the murders of 12 August 1952. The executions were never put on public trial. The murderers are still at large.

In the census of 1959, 461,770 Soviet citizens, 20.8% of the total Jewish population, listed Yiddish as their mother tongue. This is a respectable number. Yet, only nineteen Yiddish books appeared between 1959 and 1967, which works out at about three books per annum. The titles are of some interest.

1. Y.L. Peretz, *Stories*, 1959
2. Mendeley Moykher Sforim, *Writings*, 1959
3. *Sholem Aleichem*, 1959
4. *Birobidjan* (an anthology), 1960
5. Osher Shvartsman, *Letters and Poems*, 1961
6. Dovid Bergelson, *Collected Writings*, 1961
7. Moyshe Beregovski, *Yiddish Folk-songs*, 1962
8. *This is How We Live* (an anthology), 1964
9. E. Shekhtman, *On the Eve*, 1965
10. N. Lurye, *Heaven and Earth*, 1965
11. Moyshe Teyf, *Poems and Ballads*, 1965
12. *Horizons* (an anthology of poetry), 1965
13. Mashe Rolnik, *I must tell*, 1965
14. Peretz Markish, *In the Footsteps of Generations*, 1966
15. Shmuel Halkin, *Writings*, 1966
16. Leyb Kvitko, *Writings*, 1966
17. Z. Vendrof, *Short Stories*, 1967
18. Mendeley Lifshits, *Poems*, 1967
19. Itzik Feffer, *Poems and Ballads*, 1967

It is not insignificant that all were printed in Moscow. There was no Yiddish publishing activity in the Ukraine, White Russia, Moldavia, the Baltic States and other Jewish centres.

Eight years after Stalin's death, in 1961, the Yiddish literary journal *Sovetish Heymland* ('Soviet Homeland') was launched. At first bimonthly, it became monthly in 1965. Since 1961 it has been edited by Aaron Vergelis who grew up in Birobidjan, took part in the Second World War and now lives in Moscow where the journal is based. Although it has always followed the official communist line, its literary pages are of considerable value and should be more widely known in various parts of the Jewish world. The journal is sponsored by the Union of Soviet Writers. It has contributors and readers in a number of cities.

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What about Yiddish in the Soviet Union today? It is a difficult problem with which to come to grips. In order to assess the

current importance of Yiddish in the Soviet Union, it must be remembered that Yiddish was particularly strong in the new territories incorporated into the Soviet Union in the years 1939 to 1945. There are still many Jews in the Soviet Union who know Yiddish and many more who long for Yiddish. True, the process of assimilation, encouraged by the authorities, takes its toll. But it would be a mistake to underrate the Yiddish heritage among the Soviet Jewish population, especially in those areas of the Soviet Union where grandfathers and grandmothers, fathers and mothers of the present generation, spoke or speak Yiddish.

Beyond these general observations lie the facts specific to each region. To cite one example, Birobidjan, the 'Jewish Autonomous Region' in the Russian Republic, established in 1934, now has 10,000 Jewish inhabitants, constituting a small minority of the general population, slightly over 5%. Jewish settlers of Birobidjan played a certain part in the development of Yiddish throughout the USSR, not only in the 'Region'. Some left Birobidjan and became active in other parts of the country. In the census of 1959, 32.2% of Birobidjan's Jews listed Yiddish as their mother tongue. In the 1970 census 17.2% listed Yiddish and almost 15% considered it their second language. A Yiddish newspaper *Birobidjaner Shtern* appears and a local library bears the name of Sholem Aleichem. There are Yiddish radio broadcasts and a Jewish theatre, but no Yiddish schools. In the census of 1979, 13.4% of the population recorded Yiddish as their mother tongue and 8.9% considered it their second language.

Today, Soviet readers interested in the problems of their fellow citizens of Jewish origin will look in vain for an authoritative study on the subject. There is no Russian book published in the USSR dealing with Jewish history, Jewish literature or the present day socio-economic structure of the Jewish population. Neither is there a Soviet scholarly journal specializing in issues of Jewish interest. There are no institutions of higher Jewish learning, no research institutes for Jewish subjects. Information relating to the Jewish population is

carefully collected by the authorities but used only for internal security purposes and propaganda abroad. The *Novosti* articles about Jewish subjects are intended for foreign journals. It is paradoxical that readers abroad are much better informed about Soviet Jewry than residents of the USSR. This applies to both Jews and non-Jews. The literature on the subject is on the increase in various countries around the world.

It may be true that there is something similar in the fate of all the USSR's minorities, but there is a difference between territorial and non-territorial groups. What makes the problem of Soviet Jewry *sui generis* is the fact that while numerically large, it is a minority spread all over the USSR. The specific character of the Soviet Jewish problem is understood by some of the best representatives of the Soviet intelligentsia, Jewish and non-Jewish. A remarkable piece by Andrei Voznesensky, the famous Russian poet, in his *The Cry of the Lake*, tells of the lake to which the Nazis brought Jews from the nearby ghetto. They were murdered and buried there. Later, it became a place for fishing and camping. A young man sits on the banks of the now-peaceful lake. Suddenly he sees visions of horror hiding beneath the mirror-like smoothness of the water.

The Jewish roots of Soviet writers whose origin is never or rarely mentioned are much deeper than is revealed to the public. It appears that Samuel Marshak (1887–1964), the famous Russian poet and translator, was in his youth a member of *Poale Zion*. It is never mentioned that he published his poetry in Russian Jewish journals, that he had deep national sentiments, and was forced to escape from Yalta because of his association with Zionist socialist circles during and after the Revolution of 1905. The well-known Russian poetess Margarita Aliger quoted her mother as telling her 'We are Jews. How did you dare forget this?' Margarita tells her mother that until the war she thought of herself as purely Soviet but now remembers that she is Jewish as well. It is well known that Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* has Jewish elements. The young Russian poet Joseph Brodski, sentenced to forced labour for 'parasitism', wrote a long biblical

poem *Isaac and Abraham* as well as *A Jewish Cemetery near Leningrad*. He now lives in the USA.

In December 1985, the Institute of Jewish Affairs in London published a report entitled *Jewish Culture in the USSR Today*, prepared for participants in the Cultural Forum of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe held in Budapest from 15 October to 25 November 1985. The report begins with the observation that the official 1979 census figure of Jews in the Soviet Union, 1,818,879, is far too low and suggests two to two-and-a-half million as far more realistic. The cultural position of Soviet Jewry was reported as follows:

1. There is no Jewish education: no Jewish schools and no schools in which Jewish subjects are taught. Equally, there are no facilities for private teaching.

2. Jewish languages have not been taught in Soviet schools since 1948 (with the exception of Birobidjan since 1980). Hebrew is taught only at three specialized academic institutes to which Jewish students have little access.

3. There are no Yiddish language courses outside the established educational institutions.

4. A Yiddish primer and a Russian-Yiddish dictionary existed and the publication of a Russian-Yiddish dictionary was announced (and has since appeared). The 1963 Hebrew-Russian dictionary is out of print.

5. There are only two Jewish periodicals in the entire USSR, *Sovetish Heymland* in Moscow with a print run of 7,000 and a four-page paper, *Birobidjaner Shtern*, which appears five times a week in Birobidjan.

6. In 1981 eight Yiddish books and fourteen translations from the Yiddish appeared. These are the last two years for which data are available. Other books on Jewish subjects are extremely rare, with the exception of anti-Zionist and anti-religious works.

7. There is one Jewish library in the whole of the USSR, in Birobidjan. A general library in Moscow has a Jewish section.

8. There is one Jewish museum, in a town in the Ukraine. There is no Jewish art centre, gallery or exhibition hall.

9. A specifically Jewish Holocaust memorial exists outside a cemetery in Latvia.

10. There are two professional theatre companies, but neither has premises of its own. They travel throughout the country and give a small number of performances each year. There are some amateur companies and occasional Jewish concerts. There are no guest performances by Jewish companies or artists from abroad.

11. There is no Jewish club, reading room or comparable communal cultural institution in the USSR.

12. Efforts at private cultural activities, including seminars, language courses, and private performances of plays or music, have generally been suppressed. Even when tolerated, they were on a miniscule scale.

In the 1970 census, 17.7% of Soviet Jews listed Yiddish as their mother tongue (25.4% declared that they could read and write Yiddish). In Lithuania the figure was 63.2%; in Moldavia, 52.2%; in Latvia 49.4%; in Tadzhikistan 21.2%; in the Ukraine 20.3%. There is less knowledge of Yiddish in the major cities where the assimilation process is stronger. It is 7.6% in Moscow, 5.1% in Leningrad and 8% in Kiev. No such breakdown is available for the census of 1979 which revealed an overall 14.2% of Jews who listed Yiddish as their mother tongue. This is not a small figure if we bear in mind the attitude of the Soviet regime to Jewish culture and the effects this attitude is likely to have on census responses.

According to the 1979 Soviet census, 1,811,000 Jews live in the USSR, making Jews the sixteenth largest nationality in the country. They are almost entirely an urban population and the largest non-territorial group. Since 1979, the size of the Jewish population has changed due to emigration and natural increase. Hopefully, in the spirit of *glasnost*, the next official census due in 1989 will produce more truthful figures than those released during the Brezhnev period.

If Soviet Jews were able to learn Yiddish freely, if use of the language were to be encouraged, if adequate teaching materials

were to be made available, Yiddish would flourish in the USSR, especially in certain republics. This would depend both on internal developments and on encouragement from supporters of the language abroad.

The anti-Israel and anti-Zionist political commentaries in *Sovetish Heymland* are much less frequent than they used to be. The publication has lately denounced the anti-Semitic organization *Pamyat* and the dark years of Stalinism. In an article in the July 1988 issue of *Sovetish Heymland*, editor Aaron Vergelis openly writes about the repression and murder of Jewish writers under Stalinism, about the difficulties in maintaining Yiddish among the younger generation and the ways to develop Yiddish culture on the eve of the twenty-first century. It is a mistake to underestimate the literary importance of *Sovetish Heymland*. It helps to keep Yiddish creativity in the Soviet Union alive.

Yiddish lives in the Soviet Union. But the Leninist and Stalinist ideas about Jewish assimilation are still Soviet practice. Will Soviet policy change in light of the new debate in the USSR on the 'nationalities problem'? Gorbachov's ideas about *glasnost* and 'democratization' must be welcomed but without illusions, in view of Soviet Jewry's tragic history.

Mikhail Gorbachov's statement on the 'nationalities problem' was delivered at a meeting of the Supreme Soviet on 18 July 1988. It includes the following:

Each question has its own dynamism, its own development. This also applies to the problem of the relationship between nationalities. Today, 90% of our people were born during the Soviet period. Each people has its own intelligentsia, its own scientific strengths, its own culture, its own language. This is excellent. This is our richness, it is not a deficiency. A new generation has emerged which learns its own history: What is the origin of its people, its own language? What relationship does it have with its past, what is its image today, how does it envisage the future?

Will the debate on nationalities in the Soviet Union change the attitude to Jewish culture? Will it influence the position of Yiddish in the USSR? These are vital questions. We must wait and see.

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