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CHAIM GRADE AND HIS WORLD

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Chaim Grade

Yiddish poet and novelist Chaim Grade (1910–1982) ranks among the most important Yiddish writers of the post-Holocaust period. His unsentimental depictions of rabbinic high culture and life on the Jewish streets of Vilna both describe memorable characters drawn from different strata of society, and dramatize the contest of ideas and moral impulses that defined his community in the interwar period. Though today Grade is best remembered for the richness of his prose, he is also the author of nine volumes of poetry.

Grade was born in Vilna, where his father, an outspoken *maskil* (enlightener) and Hebraist who clashed with the rabbinic authorities, died when Chaim was a young boy. The writer's mother, Vella, who is the heroine of many of his poems and stories, sold apples in the city's alleys to eke out a living; she and Grade lived in poverty in a blacksmith's cellar. Beginning at the age of 13, Grade was shuffled between various outposts of the Novaredok Musar yeshiva, receiving a particularly extreme form of religious education that strove to educate the moral personality through self-abnegation and intense self-analysis. Though Grade excelled as a student, he was denounced for secretly reading secular literature and for trying his hand at poetry. He was also deeply influenced by his experience as a student of Avraham Yesha'yahu Karelits, better known as Hazon Ish, the outstanding Talmudic scholar who was beloved in Vilna due to his scholarship, modesty, and compassion. Much of Grade's later writing negotiates his conflicted allegiances to the models of his maskilic father and orthodox teachers.

At age 22, Grade abandoned his studies to embark on a career as a secular poet. This sudden shift away from the extreme moral education of the Musar movement provoked constant introspection. He wrote in one lyric, "I see in my weakness the pain of my generation and its shame." Grade soon found companionship and inspiration within the ranks of Yung-Vilne (Young Vilna), a Yiddish literary group that sought to synthesize secular Jewish culture, progressive politics, and influences from world literature. His breakthrough came with the publication of *Yo* (Yes; 1936), a volume that included intimate lyrics about his family (his mother is held up as a model of pious devotion), leftist political lyrics, metapoetic works that explore his poetic calling, and the cycle *Ezekiel* that attracted attention for its apocalyptic prophetic voice. The volume's title poem was an act of defiance designed to proclaim the poet's creative independence from clerical coercion by his adoption of an entirely new affirmative vocabulary: "Yes! That is the answer of my youth when it needs to escape from its own skin. . . ."

The epic narrative poem *Musernikes* (Musarists; 1939) explored the education of

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students in the Novaredok yeshiva through the semiautobiographical figure of Khayim Vilner. Its melancholy, sometimes terrifying, portrait of the struggle for moral perfection was composed in the language of the study house, a rich pastiche of Yiddish and Hebrew-Aramaic. The students' confrontations with their teachers and the outside world, and the intensity of their wrestling with their individual lusts and spiritual self-doubt, provide one of the finest windows into this corner of Jewish spiritual life in all of Yiddish literature. The Yidisher Kultur Farband (Yiddish Culture Association; YKUF) in New York acknowledged the volume with a prestigious award, immediately propelling Grade into the leading ranks of young Yiddish writers.

The Soviet occupation of Vilna was a particularly precarious time for Grade and his young wife, Frume-Libe, who was the daughter of Zionists. Local Jewish communists were eager to denounce the couple to punish Grade for his rejection of the radical cause in his lyrics and personal politics. However, when the Nazis marched on Vilna in June 1941, Grade fled to the Soviet interior, believing that the Germans would not harm women. Both his wife and mother were killed. In 1945, he published *Doyres* (Generations), an anthology that included the poems previously published in *Yo* and *Musernikes*, and also more recent poems of rage and raw memorialization of lost family and friends. Grade remained in Soviet Central Asia until 1946, then lived briefly in Poland and Paris, where he helped revive Yiddish cultural life. In 1947, he published *Farvoksene vegn* (Overgrown Paths), whose title underscores the poet's desire to recover those people and places that the forces of history had already begun to cover over. That same year he published a volume of poems composed in the Soviet Union, *Pleytim* (Refugees), that included the section "Mit dayn guf oyf mayne hent" (With Your Body in My Hands), dedicated to his murdered wife. Through the expression of personal loss, he gave voice to national tragedy and collective mourning, emerging as one of the defining Yiddish voices of a postwar canon of writing that would later come to be known as Holocaust literature.

Grade married his second wife, Inna Hecker, and immigrated to the United States in 1948. His major collections of postwar poems about Vilna and Polish Jewry include *Der mames tsavoe* (My Mother's Will; 1949) and *Shayn fun farloshene shtern* (The Glow of Extinguished Stars; 1950), the latter of which offered lyrics about former shtetls in Poland, Ezekiel in Auschwitz, the pogrom in Kielce in 1946, and a metaphysical exploration of memory in "Der gilgl fun ruinen" (The Gilgul of the Ruins). *Der mentsh fun fayer* (The Man of Fire; 1962) includes a moving elegy for the murdered Soviet Yiddish writers, lyrics about the American landscape, and the haunting voice of the dead who impress upon him the obligation to keep their memory alive. The volume *Af mayn veg tsu dir* (On My Way to You; 1969) offers redemptive impressions of the Israeli landscape.

Grade's turn to prose after his arrival in America carved out the creative space he needed to portray the lost world of his youth and young adulthood in more expansive detail. His novels and stories capture the moral pitch and material condition of Lithuanian Jewry, dramatize ideas, probe spiritual struggles, and explore simple acts of piety and charity among ordinary Jews.

Grade took up the theme of his break with Musar twice after the war as a way to continue his exploration of the tension between religious faith and skepticism. In the philosophical essay "Mayn krig mit Hersh Raseyner" (1951; translated as "My Quarrel with Hersh Raseyner"), an accidental meeting between two survivors provides the setting for one of the most pitched debates about the nature of identity in all of Jewish fiction. The Holocaust has only reinforced the humanism of the secular Yiddish writer, Khayim Vilner, and the strict religious observance of his former Musar teacher,

Hersh Raseyner. Hersh contends that in light of the destruction of European Jewry the question should not be how people of faith can continue to believe in God but rather how secularists can continue to believe in human beings. His attacks are countered by Khayim's criticism of the Musar movement's demand that its adherents withdraw from the world, and its contention that independent of the Torah all human beings will eventually be led down a path of degeneracy. The monumental, two-volume novel *Tsemakh Atlas* (1967–1968; translated as *The Yeshiva*) is Grade's richest work about the Musar world and its attempt to shape the ethical personality. Through the memorable character of Tsemakh Atlas, a tortured teacher of Musar who is trapped between its self-abnegating demands, the enticements of the secular world, and his own elemental desires, readers enter a universe of high religious ideals, intellectual and moral debate, and intense spiritual struggle.

The memoir *Der mames shabosim* (1955; translated as *My Mother's Sabbath Days*) uses personal experience as the basis for collective history and memorialization. Its three sections include vivid details about the material and political life of Vilna Jewry in the late 1930s as filtered through the life of his mother, the story of Grade's own experiences as a war refugee in the Soviet Union, and a haunting description of his return to a landscape of destruction after the war. Though Grade's other prose works also explore the traditional world of Lithuanian Jewry, they are more focused on capturing the day-to-day experience of ordinary Jews. The three novellas of *Der shulhoif* (The Synagogue Courtyard; 1958) contrast the dire material condition of Vilna's working poor against the beauty of their simple piety. *Di agune* (1961; translated as *The Agunah*) and the stories of *Di kloyz un di gas* (The Study House and the Street; 1974; translated as *Rabbis and Wives*, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize) and *Der shtumer minyen* (The Mute Prayer Quorum; 1976) explore the coexistence of the sacred and the profane in everyday prewar Jewish life. Through depictions of religious scholars caught up in their own vanities and ambitions, folk superstition, earthy, practical women, eager merchants, and fiery revolutionaries, Grade emerged as the most important prose elegist of Vilna Jewry, one who reveled in mining its social complexities. At the time of his sudden death in 1982 he was at work on an unfinished novel about his hometown on the precipice of its destruction.

—JUSTIN DANIEL CAMMY

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Yung-Vilne

Yung-Vilne (Young Vilna) was a dynamic Yiddish literary group of writers, poets, and artists who came of age creatively in Vilna in the 1930s. The group was officially established on 11 October 1929 by Zalmen Reyzen, editor of the *Vilner tog*, under the headline "Young Vilna Marches into Yiddish Literature," although a number of aspiring writers and artists had already begun gathering informally a few years earlier.

The group's principal members during its period of greatest productivity included poets Chaim Grade, Shimshon Kahan, Perets Miranski, Avrom Sutzkever, Elkhonen Vogler, and Leyzer Volf; prose writers Shmerke Kaczerginski (also the group's organizer) and Moyshe Levin; and artists Bentsye Mikhtom, Rokhl Sutzkever, and Sheyne Efron. In 1939, Yung-Vilne mentored an even younger constellation of writers (including Hirsh Glik, who composed the partisan hymn during the Nazi occupation) under the banner Yungvald. After the Holocaust, Yiddish bibliographer Leyzer Ran compiled a list of dozens of additional writers, artists, critics, and intellectuals who had been associated with the Yung-Vilne generation.

Unlike the Yiddish avant-garde groups emerging in the immediate aftermath of World War I that strove to revolutionize Yiddish literature by aligning it with modernism and political radicalism, Yung-Vilne was more a constellation of independent artists united by generation (almost all came from the city's working class), place, and a leftist, humanistic orientation. The group did not produce an artistic manifesto. Each of its members excelled at a different genre of writing or a different theme. Its productions included Volf's parodies of European and Yiddish literature, Grade's prophetic voice and explorations of the tension between the traditional world of Torah study and secular culture, Sutzkever's neoclassical modernism and joyful poems about nature, Miranski's fables, Vogler's pastoral symbolism, Kahan's earthy lyrics of the peasantry, Kaczerginski's proletarian reportage, and Levin's naturalism. The group's visual artists, especially Mikhtom, developed a local iconography influenced by Vilna's human and physical realities. The city's Yiddish-speaking intellectuals and writers encouraged the development of Yung-Vilne at various stages in its members' development, whether early on through the example of poet Moyshe Kulbak, who taught some of them in the city's secular Yiddish schools; the encouragement of Zalmen Reyzen, who published their works in his daily paper; or the leadership of YIVO director Max Weinreich, who led a Yiddishist scouting movement called Bin (Bee) in the early 1930s that promoted cultural and linguistic pride of place.



Yung-Vilne (1934), issue no.1 (YIVO)

Between 1929 and the Nazi occupation of Vilna in 1941, the group published three issues of its own little magazine, *Yung-Vilne* (1934–1936), joined with groups of fellow Yiddish writers to publish the miscellanies *Naye bleter* (1939), *Untervegs* (1940), and *Bleter 1940*, and actively contributed to the political, cultural, and literary life of the city and its communities. Its members published regularly in both the local Yiddish press and anthologies and in such leading international Yiddish journals as *Tsukunft* and *Inzikh*. Of the dozen new volumes of prose and poetry published by individual members in this period, Grade's *Yo* (Yes) and *Musernikes* (Musar Students), Sutzkever's *Lider* (Poems) and *Valdiks* (Woodlore), and Volf's posthumously collected *Lider* stand out for their poetic originality.

During the Nazi occupation of Vilna, Kaczerginski and Sutzkever worked with the partisan underground in the ghetto, rescuing hundreds of the city's most valuable literary treasures through their secret work as members of what came to be known as the Paper Brigade. An evening dedicated to Yung-Vilne was one example of the ways in which the group contributed to cultural resistance in the ghetto. Sutzkever's writings from this period are among the most important poetic interpretations of the destruction of European Jewry

available in Yiddish, while Grade's postwar fiction recreates the lost world of Vilna Jewry. The decimation of the group during the Holocaust and the international dispersion of its surviving writers (Grade to New York, Miranski to Montreal, Kaczerginski to Buenos Aires, Sutzkever to Tel Aviv, Vogler to Paris) effectively put an end to its collective activities, even if the idea of Yung-Vilne was kept alive in the Yiddish cultural imagination by such publications as Leyzer Ran's *Finfun tsvantsik yor "Yung Vilne"* (Twenty-Five Years of Young Vilna; 1955) and a special issue of *Di goldene keyt* (1980) devoted to the group.

—JUSTIN DANIEL CAMMY

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Yiddish Literature

Cultural Ferment and Literary Dynamism: 1905 to the Early 1920s

The years between 1905 and 1914 were a time of unprecedented growth and development in Yiddish literature. The decline of political activity after the defeat of the 1905–1907 revolution in Russia led political movements, socialist and Zionist alike, to pay more attention to culture and education in Yiddish and Hebrew. The limited liberalization in Russian political life opened new venues for Yiddish creativity, particularly in the press and the theater. Yiddishists, Hebraists, and assimilationists of various shades offered competing visions of Jewish future. The Czernowitz Conference of 1908 gave a boost to the Yiddishist movement and drafted guidelines for a modernization of Yiddish culture. At the same time, emigration, often as a result of direct involvement in revolutionary politics, drained Eastern Europe of young talents who later flourished in America or Palestine.

Warsaw, the largest Jewish city in Europe, became the major center of Yiddish cultural production, with numerous periodicals, publishing houses, and theater companies. From the 1890s on, literary life revolved around Y. L. Peretz, whose magisterial presence attracted young talent not only from Congress Poland but also from the whole Pale of Jewish Settlement. By 1910, his authority was challenged by the more traditionalist poet and essayist Hillel Zeitlin. In Vilna, the leading literary journals *Literarische monatshriftn* and *Yudishe velt*, as well as the Yiddish publisher Boris Kletskin, established themselves and were dedicated to publishing quality contemporary literature. Little appreciated in those days, but important for the future development of Yiddish culture, was the emergence of Kiev as a new center of Yiddish creativity. In that city's Jewish suburbs, budding prose writers, poets, and critics designed ways of shaping Yiddish culture along the lines of the modernist concepts of European high culture (writers included Dovid Bergelson, Borekh Glazman, and Pinkhes Kahanovitsh [Der Nister]; poets were Dovid Hofshiteyn, Osher Shvartsman, and Arn Kushnirov; critics were Nakhmen Mayzel, Yekhezkl Dobrushin, Nokhem Oyslender, and Moyshe Litvakov). In eastern Galicia, the young neoromantic poets (Shmuel Yankev Imber, Melech Ravitch, Dovid Kenigsberg, and Uri Tsevi Grinberg) drew inspiration both from traditional Jewish sources and from the cultures of the Habsburg Empire.

The classical writers reached their peak in popularity between 1905 and 1914, while

a younger generation, inspired by contemporary European culture, was searching for new aesthetic ideas. Dovid Bergelson represented elitist culture and paid meticulous attention to the style, rhythm, and structure of his prose; at the same time, Sholem Asch's eclectic mixture of melodramatic sentimentalism, nationalist romanticism, and topical sensationalism catered to the appetite of the middlebrow audience. East European Yiddish poets (Peretz, Shimen Shmuel Frug, Leyb Naydus, Eynhorn, the Kiev modernists, and the Galician neoromanticists), although less modern and self-confident than their American counterparts, experimented with a variety of contemporary forms and styles in search of a Yiddish idiom that would be both authentic and contemporary. A new era in Yiddish theater began after 1905 when the ban on Yiddish performances in Russia was lifted, and new companies sprang up across the Pale of Settlement. Plays by Sholem Asch touched the nerve of contemporary life, and were also performed in translation by leading modern troupes in Saint Petersburg and Berlin.

Yiddish criticism and scholarship, which developed in close connection with political ideologies, made great progress during that period due to the efforts of Bal-Makhshoves, Sh. Gorelik, and Shmuel Niger. Ber Borokhov, the founder of the Labor Zionist movement, laid the foundations of Yiddish philology, which he regarded as a nation-building academic discipline. The ethnographic expeditions of S. An-ski, which presented Jewish folk traditions to the acculturated urban Jews of the Russian Empire in a new light, had a lasting impact on modern Jewish art and literature. *Der pinkes* (The Record Book; 1913), the first and only volume of the annual devoted to Yiddish literature and linguistics, as well as the first comprehensive *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur un prese* by Zalmen Reyzen (1914) summed up the achievements of the most dynamic period in Yiddish cultural creativity, which came to a halt with the outbreak of World War I.

World War I, the Russian revolutions of 1917, and the Russian Civil War, as well as the Polish-Soviet and Polish-Ukrainian wars, were accompanied by deprivations, expulsions, and anti-Jewish violence, dealing a severe blow to Jewish life in Eastern Europe. In the territories under Russian military control during the war, the use of Yiddish even in private correspondence was generally prohibited by the military censorship. The German and Austrian command looked at Yiddish more favorably, regarding it as an antiquated German dialect and its speakers as potential allies. As a result, a new cultural and educational network emerged in Poland and Lithuania (which fell under German control in 1915), whereas in Russia Yiddish culture was suppressed and Yiddish speakers were often treated as enemy aliens until 1917. Between 1915 and 1920, modern Yiddish literature lost most of its patriarchs (Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, Peretz, An-ski, and Dinezon). A number of younger writers of promise, such as A. Vayter and Shvartsman, fell victim to war and violence.

The dominant theme of Yiddish creativity of that period was the catastrophe of East European Jews, who were caught between the fighting sides. Shortly before his death in 1920, An-ski recorded his eyewitness account of the sufferings inflicted by the Russian army on the Jewish population of the front zone and completed his most famous work, the mystical symbolist play *Der dibek* (The Dybbuk), which was to occupy a prominent place in the Yiddish and Hebrew repertoire. In Ukraine and Galicia, where the distress of the Jewish population was especially severe, young poets forged a new expressionist idiom that would push forward the frontier of Yiddish literature. From New York, Sholem Asch responded to the Ukrainian pogroms with *Kidush ha-shem* (The Sanctification of the Holy Name [Martyrdom]; 1919), a novel about *gzeyres takh*, the Khmel'nyts'kyi massacres of the seventeenth century.

The new independent Polish Republic became home to the largest and most diverse Jewish community in Europe. Warsaw preserved its unrivaled hegemony in Jewish life and culture, but such provincial centers as Vilna and Łódź (formerly Russian), and Lwów and Kraków (formerly Austrian) possessed distinct cultural identities of their own. The first Yiddish literary and artistic group with its own publication was Yung-yidish, created in Łódź in 1919 by the poet Moyshe Broderzon; it presented the works of young avant-garde and modernist poets and artists, including Yitshak Katzenelson, Yankl Adler, Yitskhok Broynier, Henryk Berlewi, and Marek Szwarc.

Despite dangerous conditions for Jews, Yiddish cultural activity in Kiev flourished under the various political regimes. The Yidishe Kultur-lige far Ukraine (Jewish Cultural League for Ukraine) was established in 1917 with far-reaching ambitions to become a model for a comprehensive institutional framework across Eastern Europe. Significant literary productions included the almanacs *Eygnis* and *Baginen*, which secured the place of the Kiev group in modernist Yiddish culture. Kiev's Yiddish theorists began to develop their visions of a new Communist and proletarian Yiddish culture to be built on the ruins of the old, petit bourgeois and nationalist culture.

The new border between Soviet Russia and its western neighbors divided the once densely interconnected East European Jewish communities into two parts, which grew increasingly estranged from each other. Yiddish creativity under Soviet control was subordinated to the task of revolutionary construction, although stylistic experimentation was tolerated and sometimes even encouraged during the first postrevolutionary decade, and some freedom of movement for people, books, and ideas was still possible. In Poland, Romania, Lithuania, and Latvia, where Jews were promised relative cultural autonomy, Yiddish writers had to build their institutions and form their relationships within the new state structures, local cultural establishments, and Jewish political movements.

Flourishing and Fracturing: The Interwar Years

Political, ideological, and cultural differences between Poland and the Soviet Union directly affected the paths that Yiddish culture took after the end of hostilities. Whereas the Polish state allowed Jews and other minorities some freedom in the areas of religion, culture, and education but tried to marginalize Jews socially, politically, and economically, the Soviet government proclaimed the end of ethnic discrimination and inequality and offered support to national cultures, on the condition that they accept the leadership of the Communist Party and abandon religion and nationalist ideologies. On both sides of the divide, Yiddish creativity during the 1920s was characterized by a relatively optimistic mood and a search for new forms.

During the first half of the decade, some Yiddish writers from Eastern Europe, especially Ukraine, found temporary refuge in Berlin, which for a few years was a lively center of Jewish creativity. Vienna attracted Yiddish and Hebrew authors from Galicia, whereas Paris became a magnet for Polish and Russian writers and artists. New publishing houses, journals, and institutions sprang up during the 1920s across all of Europe. By the late 1920s, however, most of these migrants had left the German-speaking countries and returned either to Eastern Europe or moved farther west.

During the 1920s, the Warsaw literary community was the locus of Yiddish literary developments, and it maintained contacts with other centers in the Soviet Union, Central Europe, Palestine, and North and South America. The city attracted a diverse group of creative personalities whom the war and the revolution had scattered. Such

luminaries of modernism as Uri Tsevi Grinberg, Itsik Manger, Perets Markish, Melech Ravitch, and Israel Joshua Singer made Warsaw their temporary home. Writers living in America, including Sholem Asch, Yankev Glatshteyn, Borekh Glazman, H. Leyvick, and Yoysef Opatoshu, visited Poland; some stayed for prolonged periods. An impressive array of institutions uniting Yiddish writers and journalists along professional and political lines was established in Warsaw and other cities, among them the Association of Jewish Writers and Journalists in Warsaw and the PEN club in Vilna. Poland also emerged as the world's largest market for Yiddish literature, the only country in which successful authors were potentially able to support themselves by the sales of their works. From the late 1900s, Warsaw was a major center of Yiddish theater, serving as the base of such world-famous companies as the Vilner Trupe, the Warsaw Yiddish Art Theater (VIKT), and the New Yiddish Theater, as well as for sophisticated review and cabaret theaters. Their core repertoire included plays by Yiddish authors such as Sholem Aleichem, Asch, An-ski, Pinski, and Hirshbeyn; world classics by Molière and Shakespeare; and contemporary plays.

Most of the artistic and ideological trends of the day had their adherents among Yiddish writers in Poland. The iconoclastic expressionism of the short-lived Khalyastre group had a powerful impact on the young generation both inside and outside the country. The raw naturalism of Vaysenberg attracted young followers, such as Oyzer Varshavski, who found the style appropriate for depicting the cruel reality of the time. The mystical neoromanticism of Arn Zeitlin sought to express Jewish spirituality in accordance with new philosophical trends. The modernist fiction of Alter-Sholem Kacyzne combined photographic details with fresh metaphoric imagery. Łódź, the second-largest city of Poland and its major industrial center, served as the setting for one of the most original novels of the decade, *Di gas* (The Street; 1928) by Yisroel Rabon, which dealt with the existential condition of an uprooted and alienated Jewish individual in postwar Eastern Europe, as well as for one of the most famous works of Yiddish realism, I. J. Singer's *Di brider Ashkenazi* (The Brothers Ashkenazi; 1936) which was started in Poland but completed in New York. The city was also home to Miryem Ulinover, whose refined and deceptively simplistic poetry bridged the gap between traditionalist and modernist branches of Yiddish literature.

Realism prevailed in Yiddish prose writing: Shimen Horontshik described the condition of the Jewish working class in Poland; I. J. Singer gradually cast away the influence of Bergelson's impressionism to emerge as a leading sociopsychological novelist of the age; Sholem Asch, who spent most of the interwar period in Europe, produced a gripping trilogy about the Russian Revolution that brought him world fame, a medal from the Polish government, and the wrath of Soviet Communists. Writing from a historical perspective, Polish Yiddish novelists drew a literary balance of the "long nineteenth century" in East European Jewish history, which ended with the catastrophic demise of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires. A highly popular writer of that time was Zusman Segalovitsh, whose numerous sentimental novels and stories addressed the concerns and hopes of the lower middle classes. Popular among Yiddish readers were translations of Russian, German, English, French, Polish, and Scandinavian writers. A new literary phenomenon saw a diverse array of female voices, from traditionalist to avant-garde: Rokhl Korn and Dvora Vogel in Galicia, Rokhl Oyerbakh and Kadia Molodowsky in Warsaw, and Miryem Ulinover in Łódź. Some of them wrote in both Yiddish and Polish.

A variety of periodicals catered to all tastes and ideological persuasions, from the intellectuals and adepts of high culture (*Literarishe bleter*) to the mainstream (the

dailies *Haynt* and *Der moment*) to simplistic mass audience (*Undzer ekspres*, *Radio*), from the Orthodox Hasidic press to the Bundist *Folks-tsaytung*, which regularly published works of Yiddish and world literature. Warsaw's literary life was colored by intense ideological and aesthetic debates about the relationships between politics and literature, high and popular art, nationalism and universalism.

Vilna, a multicultural center of creativity in the Russian, Polish, Lithuanian, Belorussian, and Yiddish languages, became part of Poland as a result of hectic political bargaining in 1920–1921. The Vilna Jewish community, although smaller than that of Warsaw, possessed a strong sense of Litvak identity that set it apart from the majority of Polish Jewry. There, for the Jewish intelligentsia and middle class who were predominantly Russian speaking, Yiddish offered a viable form of cultural identification in a new situation. Vilna became home to a number of cultural institutions of worldwide standing, such as YIVO, Hebrew and Yiddish teachers' seminaries, the communal Strashun library, and the Kletskin press (the leading publisher of serious literature, which later relocated to Warsaw). The avant-garde poet Moyshe Kulbak turned into a cult figure among secular Yiddish-speaking youth, and his influence was felt long after he left Poland for the Soviet Union in 1928;

the literary scholar and journalist Zalmen Reyzen single-handedly composed the comprehensive four-volume *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese un filologye* (1926–1930), which remains the main reference work on Yiddish literature for that period. Yung-Vilne, a loose association of modernist leftist writers, poets, and artists, had a great impact not only on Yiddish literature in Poland during the 1930s but also on the postwar development of Yiddish culture. Those of its members who survived the Holocaust—the poets Avrom Sutzkever, Perets Miranski, Elkhonen Vogler; the prose writers Chaim Grade and Shmerke Kaczerginski—became major cultural figures in Israel, Canada, France, the United States, and Argentina. Throughout the 1930s, Vilna, along with Warsaw, retained its position as the preeminent center of Yiddish scholarship. Whereas historical research flourished in Warsaw, it was Vilna, thanks to YIVO, that became the center of literary and linguistic studies, as well as of pioneering research in social psychology.

The deteriorating economic and political situation in Poland throughout the 1930s and the rise of Nazism in Germany caused Yiddish authors, among them Manger, Nakhmen Mayzel, Molodowsky, Ravitch, and the Singer brothers to leave the country. As a result of the 1929 economic crisis, the Yiddish publishing industry went into a depression, forcing the Kletskin press into bankruptcy. As in the Soviet Union, the novel dominated Yiddish literature in Poland during the 1930s. Sholem Asch responded to the rise of antisemitism by turning to traditionalist themes in his monumental novel *Der tilim-yid* (The Psalm-Reciting Jew [translated into English as *Salvation*]; 1934), which presented an idealized image of a simple and righteous Jew. The novel was immediately translated into German



Lantern in vint (Lantern in the Wind), by Itsik Manger (Warsaw: Farlag Turem, 1933). (YIVO)

and English. In his realist novels *Iber di khurves fun Ployne* (Over the Ruins of Ployne; 1931) and *Bay di taykhn fun Mazovye* (By the Rivers of Mazovia; 1937), Mikhl Burshtin painted a dark picture of the decline of the Polish shtetl. Yeshue Perle revived his childhood memories in the subtle psychological novel *Yidn fun a gants yor* (Everyday Jews; 1935). Of two debuts that were awarded literary prizes—the seventeenth-century historical fantasy *Der sotn in Goray* (Satan in Goray; serialized in 1933; published in book form 1935) by Isaac Bashevis Singer and the realistic shtetl novel *Di mentshn fun Godl-bozhits* (The People of Godl-bozhits; 1936) by Leyb Rashkin—one became famous as the first step in the most successful Yiddish literary career of the twentieth century, whereas the other fell into oblivion because its author perished in the Holocaust. Still, Warsaw retained its leading position as the world's center of Yiddish literature, which by then it shared with New York. While political and cultural relations between Poland and the Soviet Union reached their historical low by the late 1930s, a lively exchange between Poland and other parts of the Yiddish cultural universe continued until the outbreak of World War II. The United States loomed large on the Polish Jewish cultural horizon as a safe haven, a provider of economic support, and, to a lesser degree, a potential audience. This link was strengthened by the emigration to North America of major figures such as the Singer brothers, Mayzel, and Molodowsky.

A new cultural center emerged in Romania, which after World War I absorbed the large Jewish population of the former Austrian, Hungarian, and Russian provinces of Bucovina, Transylvania, and Bessarabia. The German-speaking Jewish intelligentsia of Czernowitz (Rom., Cernăuți; now Ukr., Chernivtsi), where Yiddish was in 1908 proclaimed “a national language of the Jewish people,” began to look more favorably on Yiddish as a means to preserve cultural identity under Romanian rule. A major role was played by the poet and educator Eliezer Shteynberg, who, despite his modest output, helped to raise the prestige of Yiddish as a sophisticated language of high culture. The young Itsik Manger absorbed the unique multicultural atmosphere of Czernowitz before he left it for Bucharest and later Warsaw. Kishinev, once the main city of the backward Russian Bessarabia, had a number of young talents in Yiddish and Hebrew, but as a cultural center was overshadowed by the major Jewish centers of the Russian Empire. Under Romanian rule, Bessarabia, along with Bucovina and Polish Galicia, became the main exporter of Yiddish cultural cadres to Bucharest. Two Bessarabian enthusiasts, Yankev Shternberg and Yankev Botoshanski, took the city by storm in 1918 with their witty musical reviews. Botoshanski immigrated to Argentina in 1926, whereas Shternberg—a poet, playwright, and theater director—became a major figure of modern Yiddish culture in interwar Romania.

While Russian Jewry was recuperating from its sufferings and adjusting to the new regime, the Bolsheviks consolidated their control over public life. Moyshe Litvakov, the editor of the Moscow Communist daily *Der emes*, was vigorously pushing forward his ideological agenda, which combined commitment to communism with elements of secular Jewish nationalism. During the early 1920s, Moscow, the rapidly growing new Soviet capital, emerged as the center of Yiddish creativity (with examples such as the literary magazine *Shtrom*, *Der Emes* publishing house, and the State Chamber Yiddish Theater), but by 1925 its leading role was rivaled by the capitals of the Belorussian and Ukrainian Soviet Republics, where the majority of Soviet Jews lived. Two leading literary periodicals were established in the mid-1920s: the Minsk journal *Shtern* became the organ of the proletarian critics who treated Yiddish literature as a form of propaganda, while the former modernists of the Kiev group set the tone in the Kharkov magazine

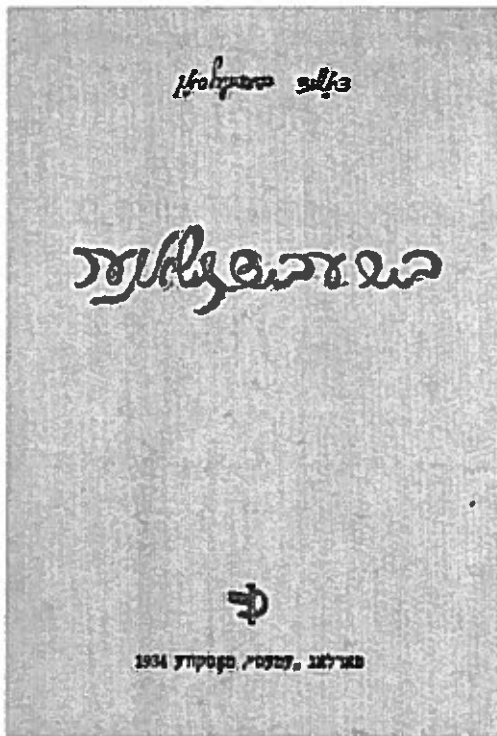


Yiddish writers in a café or restaurant, Poland, ca. 1930s. (Left to right) Yoysel Tunkel, Israel Joshua Singer (in profile), unknown, Borekh-Vladek Tsharni, and others. (YIVO)

Di royte velt, which was regarded by its Minsk opponents as the stronghold of so-called fellow-traveler literature. While sharing in the general enthusiasm for the revolution, the fellow travelers refused to accept the dictates of the proletarian ideologists on issues of form and style. The themes of revolution, civil war, and socialist construction were prevalent in Soviet Yiddish literature, with poetry, the short story, and reportage as prevalent forms.

Along with Dovid Hofshateyn, Leyb Kvitko, Perets Markish, and Shmuel Halkin, who entered literature as champions of modernist and avant-garde experimentation, there emerged a new phenomenon of politically engaged poetry that was accessible to mass readership. This trend was represented by Itsik Fefer, Izi Kharik, and their followers, who often combined ideological commitment to communism with sentimental nostalgia for the shtetl, giving preference to simple imagery and romantic poetic forms such as the narrative poem and the ballad dealing with the heroism of the revolution and civil war, as well as the mass enthusiasm of socialist construction. The concerns of women were usually more domestic. Rive Balyasnaya, Rokhl Brokhes, Rokhl Boymvol, Shifra Holodenko, and Khane Levin captured in their lyrical poetry rare intimate moments of everyday life of the young generation of Jewish builders of communism.

The revival of prose in the Soviet Union began during the second half of the decade: among its examples were the short novel *Khadoshim un teg* (Months and Days; 1926) by Itsik Kipnis, a seemingly naive story of a pogrom in the author's native shtetl that in a subversive way questions some of the certainties of the Soviet internationalist ideology; and the novel *Der mentsh mit der biks* (The Man with the Rifle; 1928) and short stories



Birobidzhaner, by Dovid Bergelson (Moscow: Farlag Emes, 1934). (YIVO)

by Shmuel-Nisn Godiner, which infused realist depiction of postrevolutionary reality with symbolist codes. Der Nister continued to write and publish his symbolist stories, but critical campaigns, launched in 1929 against several prominent fellow travelers (Markish, Kvitko, and Der Nister himself), signaled the end of the liberal period. Dovid Bergelson, who stayed abroad until 1934, publicly allied himself with the Soviet regime both in his articles and works of fiction from 1926 on.

Literary critics Yekhezkel Dobrushin, Nokhem Oyslender, Yitskhok Nusinov, and Moyshe Litvakov were busy squaring secular Jewish nationalism and universalistic modernist aesthetics with Communist ideology. Marxist literary scholarship, strengthened by the immigration to the Soviet Union of two top literary historians and critics of the time, Meir Wiener and Maks Erik, produced impressive studies of Yiddish folklore and nineteenth-century literature, securing the reputation of Kiev and Minsk as major centers of Yiddish literary scholarship. Yiddish culture was incorporated within the framework of state-supported cultural, educational, and academic institutions that provided Soviet Yiddish literature with unprecedented status and prestige.

At the early stage, Soviet Yiddish scholars were still able to conduct an intellectual exchange with their colleagues abroad, but by about 1930, academic freedom was curtailed and the dialogue deteriorated into ideological abuse.

Total party control was firmly established in all branches of Soviet literature by 1934. The period that followed was characterized, on the one hand, by the thorough ideologizing of literary process; on the other hand, there was a calming down of political battles within Yiddish literature. Ironically, as a result of this process, the proletarian group from Minsk lost its influence to the more moderate and traditionalist Kiev critics who by now had moved to Moscow; it was mostly those proletarian zealots who became victims of the Stalinist purges of the late 1930s. For a short period, Birobidzhan showed some signs of cultural activity, with a few publications and a number of reports by visiting luminaries, but not a single eminent personality from the Soviet Yiddish establishment chose it as a permanent residence.

The major achievements of Soviet Yiddish novel were three epic works: Kulbak's *Zelmenyaner* (1929–1935), a family saga that unfolded in Minsk against the background of Sovietization; Bergelson's autobiographical *Bam Dnyeper* (At the Dnieper; 1932–1940) depicting the narrator's drift from affluent childhood toward revolution, and Der Nister's *Di mishpokhe Mashber* (The Family Mashber; 1939, 1948), a historical-philosophical family novel set in Berdichev in the 1870s. In poetry, Shmuel Halkin, Dovid Hofshsteyn, Perets Markish, Itsik Fefer, Arn Kushnirov, Ezra Fininberg, as well as Izi Kharik, Zelik Akselrod, and Moyshe Kulbak, continued to dominate the stage; Kvitko was forced out of adult

literature after a scandal caused by his biting satire on the powerful Moyshe Litvakov. He became instead a household name in Soviet children's literature in many languages, including Russian and Ukrainian.

When the State Chamber Yiddish Theater returned from a European tour in 1928 without its artistic director Aleksandr Granovskii, it reinvented itself under the charismatic leadership of Solomon (Shloyme) Mikhoels and soon emerged as one of the best Soviet companies. State Yiddish theaters were established in provincial centers according to the Moscow model, and their repertoire was dominated by the works of Soviet Yiddish authors. Along with the state-subsidized periodicals (a new prestigious annual almanac, *Sovetish*, was launched in Moscow in 1934) and publishing houses, theater provided Soviet Yiddish writers, artists, and critics with a stable income. But the growing isolation from the rest of the world, the rapid decline of the traditional lifestyle, and the purges had a depressing effect on sensitive Yiddish authors, casting doubts over the prospects for Yiddish in the Soviet Union. Yiddish education at all levels outside Birobidzhan was practically terminated in 1938 as a result of a comprehensive educational reform of national minorities. The Stalinist terror of the 1930s hit Yiddish literature worst in Belorussia, virtually eradicating the top echelon. Yashe Bronshteyn, Khatskl Dunets, Zelik Akselrod, Izi Kharik, and Moyshe Kulbak in Minsk; Moyshe Litvakov from Moscow; and Maks Erik and Avrom Abtshuk in Kiev were among the victims of the purges. The last representative of prerevolutionary Russian Jewish scholarship, the encyclopedic literary historian and a prominent chemist, Yisroel Tsinberg, who worked in Leningrad in isolation from the official institutional framework, had come close to concluding his monumental life work *Di geshikhte fun der literatur bay yidn: Eyropeishe tkufe* (A History of Jewish Literature: The European Period; 1929–1937) when he was arrested in 1937.

The Holocaust and World War II: 1939–1945

The outbreak of World War II spelled the end of the rich and diverse Yiddish culture in Eastern Europe. During the months between the occupation of Poland by Germany and the Soviet Union in September 1939 and the German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, there was some revival of Yiddish cultural life in the Soviet Union, which by the summer of 1940 controlled the large territories of eastern Poland, the Baltic states, and the Romanian provinces of Bessarabia and Bucovina. The political needs for the rapid Sovietization of that population required active participation of Soviet Yiddish cadres. Yiddish writers from Moscow, Minsk, and Kiev were delegated to Vilna, Lwów, Bialystok, Kishinev, and Czernowitz to carry out the new cultural policies. Although aware of German atrocities against Jews, Soviet writers could not express their grief openly during the brief period of rapprochement between Stalin and Hitler. A number of Yiddish writers and activists from Poland and Romania found refuge in the Soviet Union. The most fortunate among them survived the war and left the Soviet Union immediately thereafter, including Chaim Grade; others, such as Moyshe Broderzon, were put in prison but survived and left years later. The less fortunate were captured by the Germans or murdered by their collaborators (such as Alter-Sholem Kacyzne); died in the evacuation (such as Leyzer Volf); or perished in the gulag (such as Zalmen Reyzen). Under German occupation, Yiddish cultural activities continued to play an important role in the ghettos of Warsaw, Łódź, Vilna, and Białystok for as long as the ghettos existed. Literary creativity in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Polish in a wide range of genres from poetry to chronicle and reportage, by Rokhl Oyerbakh, Herman Kruk, Mordkhe Gebirtig, Yitshak Katzenelson,



Portrait of Chaim Grade, drawing by Y. Benn (from Chaim Grade, *Pleytim* [Refugees], poems written in the USSR, 1941–1945 [Buenos Aires: Tsentral-farband fun poylishe yidn in Argentine, 1947]).

Yoshue Perle, Emanuel Ringelblum, Simkhe-Bunem Shayeveich, Yesha'yahu Shpigl, Avrom Sutzkever, and others bear the witness of spiritual dignity of people on the verge of destruction.

Immediately after the German attack on the Soviet Union, Yiddish culture and its activists were mobilized for the war effort. Among those killed in action during the first months were Meir Wiener, Aron Gurshteyn, Shmuel-Nisn Godiner, and Moyshe Khaschevatski. Many Yiddish writers fought in the Soviet Army as soldiers and officers. The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, created in 1942, became a consolidating force in Jewish life. Among its members were eminent Soviet Jews, including the most prominent Yiddish writers. In the extreme situation of the war, Soviet Yiddish authors were able to revitalize Jewish motifs and images and to speak openly about their grief and sorrow. To the most remarkable works of this period belong novellas of Der Nister about Jewish martyrdom and heroism in occupied Poland, stories by Bergelson, and poems by Halkin, Hofshiteyn, Fininberg, Kushnirov, and Markish. (Markish's major prose work,

the novel about the Warsaw ghetto *Trot fun doyres* [The March of the Generations], was published only posthumously in 1966.)

After the Holocaust

The optimistic enthusiasm that energized Soviet Jews after the defeat of Nazi Germany lasted until 1948, when a fierce antisemitic campaign launched by Stalin's regime hit Jews who were active in both Russian and Yiddish culture. All Jewish institutions were closed by 1949—among them the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, the State Yiddish Theater, Jewish publishing houses, and the Jewish press (with the exception of the provincial newspaper *Birobidzhaner shtern*). Among the victims of the antisemitic campaign were virtually all prominent Yiddish cultural figures: Mikhoels's brutal murder by the secret police was presented as an "automobile accident"; Markish, Fefer, Hofshiteyn, Kvitko, Bergelson, and Shmuel Persov were accused of high treason and sentenced to death; and Der Nister, Dobrushin, Nusinov, and Elye Spivak died in prison. Many other writers were arrested and released from prison after Stalin's death in 1953, but no Yiddish publications appeared in the Soviet Union between 1949 and 1959.

Although Communist regimes had been installed by the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe by 1948, the small groups of Yiddish intelligentsia in Poland and Romania were

not subjected to the same severe purges as in the Soviet Union. Yiddish theaters were open, Yiddish books and newspapers were published with state subsidies, and Jewish schools even operated in some cities. In Poland, the revitalization of Yiddish culture was carried out by committed Jewish Communists, such as Lili Berger, Dovid Sfarad, and Hersh Smolar, who hoped that socialist Poland would recognize the immense suffering of the Jews and support their culture. Under Smolar's editorship during the 1950s, the Warsaw newspaper *Folks-shtime* served as the main source of information about Jewish culture behind the Iron Curtain as well as a publishing outlet for Soviet Yiddish writers. The hopes for a revival of Yiddish culture in Poland were crushed by the antisemitic campaigns of 1968 that forced the majority of remaining Jews, including most of the writers, to emigrate. In Romania, Yiddish cultural life revolved around the periodical almanac *Bukareshter shriftn* and the Yiddish theater in Bucharest.

As a result of the political "thaw" and pressure from abroad, the new literary magazine *Sovetish heymland* was launched in Moscow in 1961, under the editorship of Arn Vergelis, who combined a good sense of Yiddish language with staunch adherence to the party line. The new magazine consolidated scattered survivors of the Stalin era and enabled them to return to creative work in Yiddish. But the aging audience was shrinking due to the absence of Yiddish education. In accordance with the general spirit of Soviet literature, Vergelis gave preference to texts that expressed optimistic views on Soviet life and did not dwell on tragedies of the past. Despite its ideological limitations, *Sovetish heymland* published a number of important works: novels by Der Nister, Tevye Gen, Shmuel Gordon, Note Lurye, Eli Shekhtman, and Nosn Zabara; short psychological prose and literary criticism of Rivke Rubin; critical and scholarly essays by Khayim Beider, Nokhem Oyslender, Leyzer Podriadchik, Arn Raskin, Hersh Remenik, Yisroel Serebriani, and Yankev Shternberg; and poetry by Rokhl Boymvol, Shike Driz, Motl Grubian, Yoysef Kerler, and Arn Vergelis. The magazine became increasingly politicized after the Israeli-Arab War of 1967, when the Soviet Union broke diplomatic relations with Israel and mass Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union began. Among the authors who left the country at that time were Boymvol, Kerler, Hirsh Osherovitch, Podriadtshik, and Eli Shekhtman. After the demise of the Soviet Union, *Sovetish heymland* reinvented itself as the bilingual Russian-Yiddish magazine *Di yidishe gas*, which existed until 1996. The first issue of a new Yiddish small magazine, *Der nayer fraynd*, appeared in Saint Petersburg in 2004.

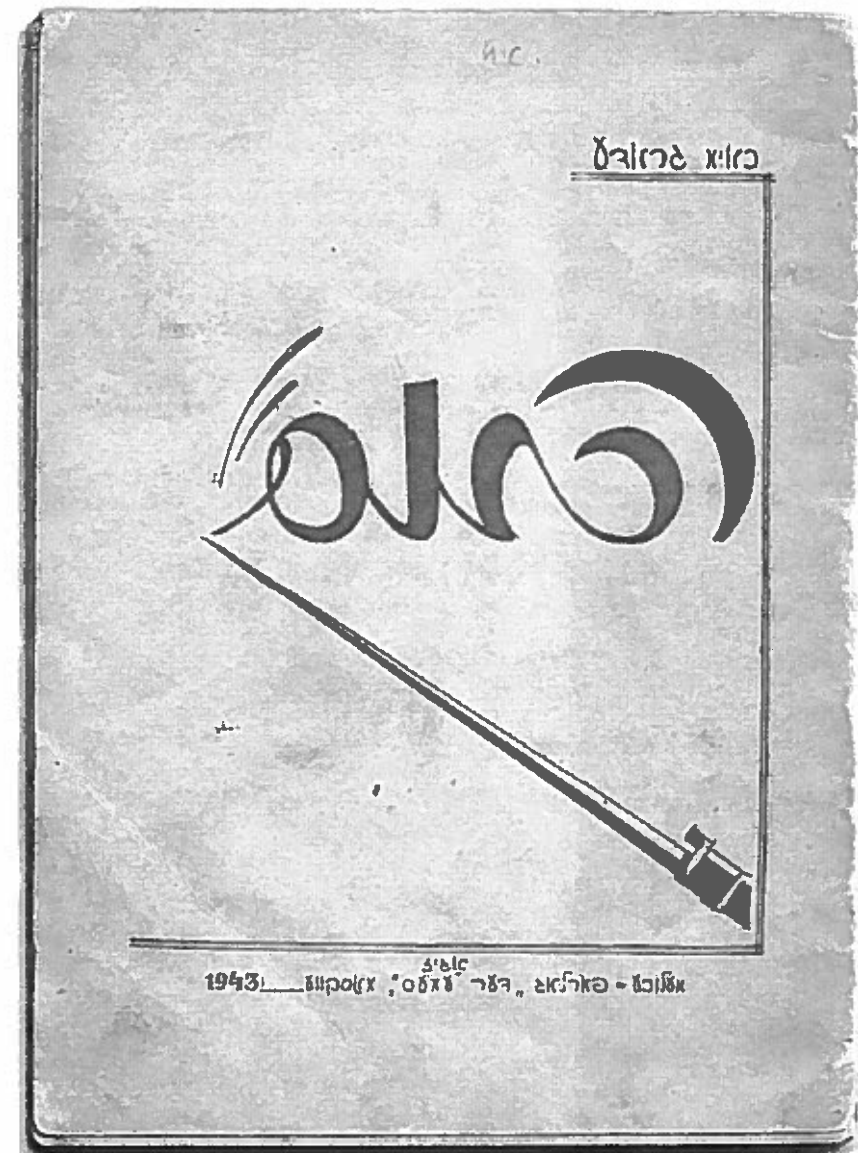
—MIKHAIL KRUTIKOV

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חיים גראדע



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