



STUDIES IN YIDDISH 7

# Yiddish and the Cold War

Gennady Estraikh



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YIDDISH IN THE COLD WAR

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# Yiddish in the Cold War



GENNADY ESTRAIKH



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# CONTENTS



	Preface	ix
	Prologue: Yiddish Communism	1
1	Pain and Consolation	9
	The Progressive Yiddish Culture	9
	In Denial	13
	The Folks-Shtime Article	18
	Jewishness or Socialism?	23
	Paul Novick vs Howard Fast	29
2	Soviet Jewish Life in the 1950s	38
	Birobidzhan	38
	The Warsaw Outlets for Soviet Yiddish Writers	43
	The Literary Front	47
	The Yiddish Cadre	51
	Yiddish Concerts	56
3	Cultural Diplomacy	64
	<i>Sovetish Heymland</i> and Its Editor	64
	Poetic and Political Licenses	68
	Propaganda Warfare	75
4	Imagining Soviet Jews	86
	Towards Contemporaneity of Yiddish Literature	86
	Neo-shtetl Literature	94
	Anti-Zionist Belles-Lettres	99
	The New Jew	105
5	A Brave Face on a Sorry Business	113
	Discord in the Communist Camp	113
	Paul Novick's Expulsion	119
	The Decline of Yiddish Readership	124
	Young Growth	132
	Epilogue: The Jewish Street	147
	<i>Bibliography</i>	157
	<i>Index</i>	171



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## PREFACE



When I told one of my friends about this book, then still in the early stages of crystallization, he remarked: ‘So you’ll have a triptych’. Indeed, my two previous monographs, *Soviet Yiddish: Language Planning and Linguistic Development* (1999) and *In Harness: Yiddish Writers’ Romance with Communism* (2004), are also devoted to history of Yiddish-speaking Communist circles. However, this book is different, at least to me, because some of the events that I describe also touch the curve of my own life, which is one of the millions of episodes in Soviet Jewish history. I treat this history as a saga of surviving (or perishing) in a laboratory of large-scale social and cultural experiments; some of them targeted specifically those categories of the Jews who did not fit in the Procrustean beds of ideological desiderata.

I was born in the early years of the Cold War, in 1952, in the dead-end industrial city of Zaporozhe, in Ukraine. The city is known, if at all, for its association with a variety of Cossacks and, more deservingly, for its hydro-power station, Dneproges, built — with assistance of American engineers — in the early 1930s. I was one-month old when a court of three generals began to try the leading figures of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFK) in Moscow, and three months later, on 12 August 1952, thirteen of them, including the foremost Yiddish writers David Bergelson, Itsik Fefer, David Hofshateyn, Leyb Kvitko and Peretz Markish, were executed. It was a secret trial and a secret execution, but everyone in the Soviet Union knew that storm clouds were gathering over the Jews. Following the January 1948 assassination — staged as an accident — of Solomon Mikhoels, chairman of the JAFK and director of the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre, all the remaining Jewish cultural institutions were closed down. The Soviet press coverage of the ‘Doctors’ Plot’ and the general atmosphere in the party apparatus invited hostility towards Jews. Personnel departments calculated the percentages of Jewish employees; too many ‘Frenchmen’ (one of the euphemisms for Jews) meant that organizations or enterprises might be seen as ‘soiled’ ones. Thousands of Jewish intellectuals and apparatchiks lost their jobs, many of them were arrested. Stalin’s death in March 1953 saved many lives and careers, but for people, including my parents, Jewish life in post-war Soviet society was only a shadow of its scope in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>1</sup>

The narratives of my parents, as well as our relatives, friends and neighbours were always attached to one of the three periods in their life: Before the War, During the War and After the War. Before the Second World War, or to be precise, the Great Patriotic War which began on 22 June 1941, my family lived not far from Zaporozhe, in the Nayzlatopol (Novozlatopol) Jewish National District, one of the five Yiddish-speaking oases in pre-war south-eastern Ukraine and northern Crimea. My father came to Nayzlatopol in 1931, after graduating from the Yiddish Department of the

Zhitomir-based Volhynian Teachers' Training Institute. My mother belonged to the third generation of Jewish peasants, settled in the Ukrainian steppes in the early 1840s during a government-sponsored migration from overcrowded Belorussian and Lithuanian shtetls. The majority of the surviving former Jewish dwellers of the national district, which had been dissolved by the end of the war, moved to the surrounding cities of Zaporozhe, Dnepropetrovsk, Lugansk and Donetsk. Yiddish — predominantly its Lithuanian dialect — continued to be spoken by many of the new urbanites, particularly in such extended families as mine. My grandfather, a rabbi's son, practiced as an unlicensed religious butcher, *shochet*, killing poultry in the manner prescribed by Jewish law. He did it in the bathroom of our flat, using a Solingen straight razor which my father had brought from Germany as a war trophy. I never heard my grandparents speaking any language other than Yiddish.

My grandfather, Yerukhem Margolin, was a tragic figure, somewhat similar to the rabbi in Elie Wiesel's play *Zalmen, or the Madness of God*, whose prototype was the chief rabbi of Moscow, Reb Yehuda-Leyb Levin.<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, the Moscow rabbi's brother, a dogmatic *homo sovieticus*, belonged to the Zaporozhe circle of former Nayzlatopolers, and my parents always laughed at him for disowning his 'retrograde' brother. My parents, staunch atheists, tolerated the old-timers' religious feelings, but did not allow them to influence the younger generation's life style. As a result, my pious grandparents lived out the remainder of their kosher days, surrounded by their pork-eating and nothing-observing offspring. In 1960, a year before his death, my grandfather went to the office of our house management administration (which was an important unit of the surveillance society), where he announced that he had had enough of living together with Communists. Luckily, in the ambience of Nikita Khrushchev's 'Thaw' such pronouncements by an 83-year-old man were qualified as a symptom of senility rather than a political protest.

The wail of the siren on the roof of our eight-storey building, towering over other houses in the central part of the city, remains one of the most memorable sounds of my Cold War childhood. From time to time, the Zaporozhers had to demonstrate that they knew how to behave if the American or other imperialists went completely mad and sent their aviation or missiles to bomb the peace-loving Soviet Union. I remember asking my father why the Red Army had not occupied the whole of Europe rather than leaving the western part of the continent in the hands of monstrous capitalist regimes. My father, a commissar during the war, explained that after defeating the Germans our army simply had no manpower to fight with the relatively fresh armies of the United States, Britain and France. (Incidentally, his generation never fully forgave Roosevelt and Churchill for their laggardness in starting full-scale military operations against Hitler.) My uncle, a retired colonel, would tell me the same. The brothers had not spoken several years following the Six-Day War, which turned my father into an ardent patriot of Israel, while nothing could shake my uncle's devotion to Communism. Rampant anti-Zionism was rather common among that generation of Soviet Jews.

In 1961 we had surprise visitors: the Yiddish writer Khaim Melamud and his wife. Melamud used to edit the small-circulation Yiddish newspaper published in Nayzlatopol. He and my father were called up on the same day in August 1941.

Since the end of the war the Melamuds had been living in Chernovtsy and came to Zaporozhe with an exciting piece of news: a Yiddish journal called *Sovetish Heymland* (Soviet Homeland) had been established in Moscow. I remember how happy my parents were when they got the first issue. They were also surprised that after not seeing a Yiddish text for so many years (their library had perished during the war) they initially found it somewhat difficult to read the journal. I also wanted to read it and easily learned the letters. In reality, I began to read the journal regularly and Yiddish books only in the late 1960s, when my father had cataracts in both eyes and asked me to read him periodicals and books. The first Yiddish novel that I read aloud was Peretz Markish's *Trot fun doyres* (March of Generations), published posthumously in 1966.

Another surprise visitor, Comrade Gostinsky, gave one more strong impulse to my Yiddish interests. Later my parents realized that they did not remember his first name as colleagues addressed each other 'Comrade Such-and-Such' according to the pre-war Soviet Yiddish etiquette. Gostinsky had illegally emigrated from Poland, studied in Moscow at the Yiddish Department of the Communist University of the National Minorities of the West,<sup>3</sup> and come to Nayzlatopol at the same time as my father. In 1937 he was arrested, allegedly as a Polish spy, and spent sixteen years in the gulag. In 1970 he came to Zaporozhe from the Siberian city of Novosibirsk, where he had settled after his liberation, to visit his friends and colleagues. On the day of his out-of-the-blue visit, I played truant and spent the whole day listening to the horrifying story of Gostinsky's life. It was the first and the last time when I saw that man, though his presence I would feel for many years to come. The thing is that Gostinsky's old friends arranged for him subscriptions to the Warsaw Yiddish newspaper *Folks-Shtime* (*People's Voice*) and the Parisian Communist Yiddish newspaper *Di Naye Prese* (*New Press*). He would peruse the newspapers in Novosibirsk, the last station in his life, and later mail them to my father. I also became an avid reader of the out-of-date issues. Given the information dearth on Jewish-related topics, each of the Warsaw and Paris newspapers was a window, even if a narrow one, in the Jewish world. Later I found out that *Folks-Shtime* and, to a lesser degree, *Di Naye Prese* and the Bucharest *Revista Cultului Mozaic din R. P. R.* (*Journal of the Mosaic Cult in the Romanian People Republic*) played a similar role for many Soviet enthusiasts of Jewish culture.

When I moved to Moscow in the mid-1970s, I began to write to my parents in Yiddish. I concentrated on writing in Yiddish more seriously after becoming a *refusenik* in 1979 and, especially, after joining an unofficial group of young enthusiasts of Jewish scholarship. Paradoxically, this essentially dissident group, the Jewish Historical and Ethnographical Commission, was loosely linked with *Sovetish Heymland*, whose editor, Aron Vergelis, sought to attract young authors of belle-lettres and popular scholarship. To make a long story short, in 1988 I became the managing editor of the journal and worked on its staff during the heady *perestroika* years, until the summer of 1991, when I moved to Oxford. By that time, the journal had lost the hitherto generous financial assistance from the Soviet Writers' Union and struggled to find new sponsors. In fact, after 1991 the era of *Sovetish Heymland* was over, because the disintegration of the Soviet Union and exodus of Soviet Jews

had deprived the journal of the vast majority of its readers. Even the name itself sounded atavistically, and Vergelis renewed his publication, now partly western-assisted, under the title *Di Yidishe Gas (Jewish Street)*.

In the 1990s, a couple of times I found myself in Moscow and visited the editorial office. It occupied only a small part of its premises. All the other rooms were rented to the Moscow bureau of an American firm. I was told that the bureau was run by a Russian apparatchik from the former Anti-Zionist Committee. In October 1998 I phoned the editorial office, because I had been asked to write an obituary on Vergelis for a New York newspaper. That was the last time I spoke to Vergelis who was, in the event, alive and had just returned from a reception at the Israeli Embassy. Six months later, however, information about his death was not bogus.

A few people encouraged me to write about *Sovetish Heymland*, most notably Prof. Chimen Abramsky, Prof. Khone Shmeruk, Prof. Wolf Moskovich and Dr. Howard Spier. The former associate editor of *Sovetish Heymland*, Khaim Beider, helped me immensely with various materials. Ultimately, I broadened the scope of my research into a study of Yiddish Communist circles and their role in the Cold War. I do not overestimate the importance of the Yiddish sector in the Cold War — this war within the war remained predominantly invisible on the huge expanses of the general theatre of propagandist combats. However, events in this sector played a central role in Yiddish cultural life of the second half of the twentieth century and therefore they deserve to be chronicled and analyzed.

The publication of this book was supported by the New York University's Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, where I have the privilege to work. Boris Sandler, editor of the New York Yiddish Forward Newspaper, and its art director Boris Budiyanskiy helped me to find the illustrative material. Dr Graham Nelson, managing editor of *Legenda*, and Dr Avery Willis, my copy-editor, worked wonders, transforming my text into a book.

## Notes to the Preface

1. For insights in the anti-Jewish climate in the post-Second World War Soviet Union see, in particular, Shimon Redlich, *War, Holocaust and Stalinism: A Documented History of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the USSR* (Luxemburg: Harwood, 1995); Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir Naumov (eds.), *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Jonathan Brent and Vladimir Naumov, *Stalin's Last Crime: The Plot Against the Jewish Doctors, 1948–53* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).
2. Elie Wiesel, *Zalmen, or the Madness of God*. Adapted for the stage by Marion Wiesel (New York: Random House, 1974); Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea* (New York: Knopf, 1995), pp. 405–15.
3. For this university, known in Yiddish circles as *Mayrevke* (from *mayrev*, 'west'), see, for instance, the memoirs of its students: Aron Yerusalimski, 'Di "mayrevke" — undzer kleyner internatsyonal', *Sovetish Heymland*, 2 (1974), 168–73; Hersh Smolar, *Fun ineveynik* (Tel Aviv: I. L. Peretz, 1978).

## PROLOGUE: YIDDISH COMMUNISM



Yiddish Communism was a peculiar stream in the Marxist-Leninist current. Although internationalism was the clarion call of Communism, many Jewish Communists were essentially nationalists. Joseph Stalin's interpretation — *circa* 1930 — of Leninism provided their ideology of Leninist Yiddish-ness (or *Yiddishkayt*) with the perfect fodder (emphasis in original):

Firstly, Lenin never said that national differences must disappear and national languages become fused in one common language within the boundaries of a single state, before the victory of socialism on a world scale. [...]

Secondly, Lenin never said that the abolition of national oppression and the fusion of the interests of nationalities into a single whole is equivalent to the abolition of national differences. [...]

Thirdly, Lenin never said that the watchword of developing national culture under the proletarian dictatorship is a reactionary watchword. On the contrary, Lenin was always in favour of helping the people of the U.S.S.R.<sup>1</sup>

Importantly, Yiddish, rather than the 'bourgeois-cum-clerical' Hebrew, was regarded as the language of the disadvantaged Jewish population, the *horepashnikes* (toilers). Like Zionists, Communists dreamt about a modern Jewish nation, but they rejected the Zionists' romanticism of pan-Jewish melting pot and limited their nation-building programmes to transforming the toilers into Yiddish-speaking denizens of the Communist dreamland populated by egalitarian peoples. To a considerable degree, this was a cultural project, in which writers and literary critics played central roles. While Communist ideologists, particularly in the Soviet Union, were generally obsessed with literature, Jewish intellectuals also inherited literature-centrism of ideologists in such Jewish socialist mass movements as the Bund, Labour Zionism and Territorialism. The Bund shunned overt nationalism, but the other two political formations envisaged territorial concentration in Palestine (Labour Zionists) or elsewhere in the Diaspora (Territorialists) as the only way to create a Jewish socialist state. Following the 1917 revolution in Russia, many Yiddishist-socialists climbed on the Communist bandwagon.

Cultural mythologies of all these ideological currents often shared the same iconic figures, such as the writers Sholem Aleichem and I. L. Peretz. In the Communist Jewish cultural tradition, many places of honour belonged to the Kiev Group of Yiddish writers, most notably such (partly notional) companions as David Bergelson, Der Nister, David Hofshiteyn, Leyb Kvitko and Peretz Markish. The aura of originators of the Soviet Yiddish and, more generally, 'progressive' literary tradition was created around this outstanding literary circle mainly by its former congenial activists: Moyshe Litvakov, who was to become editor-in-chief

of the Moscow Yiddish daily *Der Emes* (*Truth*); the Soviet literary critics Yekhezkel Dobrushin and Nokhem Oyslender; and their colleague Nakhman Mayzel, who continued the Kiev Yiddish modernists' tradition as an influential Warsaw and later New York literary critic and editor. The Kiev Group's writers played significant roles in the *Kultur-lige*, or Culture League — the multifunctional, pan-Yiddishist organization, established in Kiev in 1918 and modelled in scores of East and West European urban centres.

In 1920, when Kiev, that changed hands many times during the civil war, finally became a Soviet city, its Yiddish literary landscape became deserted, because the sense of anti-climax drove many literati to either emigrate from Soviet Russia or migrate to Moscow, where three Kiev men of letters, Dobrushin, Oyslender and Aron Kushnirov, launched the first significant Soviet Yiddish literary journal, *Shtrom* (Stream). Its inaugural issue, with a cover designed by Marc Chagall, then a Moscow dweller, appeared in February 1922. *Shtrom's* five issues, published in 1922–24, represented a weighty part of the slight Yiddish literary output in the civil war-ridden country. Yet from the mid-1920s onwards, burgeoning Yiddish cultural circles, including beviess of young writers, emerged in Moscow, Kharkov, Kiev, Minsk and several other towns in the three Soviet republics which saw an unprecedented development of Yiddish culture and education: Ukraine, Belorussia and Russia.

In the meantime, Yiddish Communism assumed organized forms in the Soviet world of Byzantine bureaucracies, divided into institutions with Newspeak-abbreviated names. The Jewish Sections of the Communist Party were the best known and most lasting of these bureaucratic setups. Popularly known as *Evseksii* (their Russian portmanteau definition), they epitomized Jews-related Communist organizations.<sup>2</sup> In truth, the appearance of the *Evseksii* did not exactly stand to reason for a political movement, whose leaders did not see Jews as a 'historical nation'. After the revolution, however, the Bolsheviks had to accept Jews as a constituency with specific linguistic, cultural and social peculiarities. In addition, the party regarded nation-building as an arch-important component of the general socialist construction,<sup>3</sup> therefore in the mid-1920s a few breeding grounds for the Yiddish-speaking Soviet Jewish nation-in-the-making were allotted in the European part of the country, most notably in the south-eastern part of Ukraine and in the Crimea. Ultimately, however, the Soviet government selected for this purpose a little populated area in the Far East. From the end of the 1920s this place began to be called Birobidzhan. Characteristically, the name glued from two toponyms — the Bira and the Bidzhan were tributaries of the river Amur — sounded in harmony with some other national territories in the Soviet Union, such as Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan.

Yiddish-language Communist press was a central constituent of the so-called *yidishe arbet*, or regime-sponsored Jewish work/activities, which targeted primarily the less assimilated cohorts of the population, who could not consume propaganda in Russian, Ukrainian or Belorussian. Significantly, the *yidishe arbet* shunned non-Yiddish-speaking Jews, because, Communist apparatchiks argued, for Soviet Jewish institutions to host any activities in non-Jewish languages would mean to

disseminate a nationalist (rather than national) culture.<sup>4</sup> Nation-building too could be tolerated only among some backward parts of the Jewish population, whereas the majority was supposed to embrace assimilation.

The central Soviet Yiddish daily first emerged in Petrograd, on 8 March 1918, and was called *Di Varhayt* (Truth). The organ of the Jewish Commissariat at Lenin's government and chronologically the first Yiddish Communist newspaper, it appeared sporadically till May 1918. After the clinical death, caused by the lack of trained journalist cadre and by the Jewish Commissariat's moving from Petrograd to the new Soviet capital, Moscow, the paper was resuscitated in August 1918 under a synonymous, but more idiomatic, name: *Der Emes*. It was phased out at the close of 1918, re-launched on 7 November 1920 (the third anniversary of the Revolution), and endured for 18 years, until 1938, as the trend-setting, if relatively small-circulating, Yiddish Communist daily.

Two schools of thought competed in Soviet Yiddish press and, generally, language planning, mirroring opposing visions of the task of the *yidische arbet*. 'Internationalists', many of whom previously espoused Bundism, regarded Yiddish primarily as a linguistic facility for conducting indoctrination, therefore they were inclined to use the most understandable, colloquial registers of the language rather than to be involved in coining and employing sophisticated neologisms. The view of 'nation-builders', represented by former Jewish nationalists of various hues, was not that the literary language had to model the vernacular, saturated with borrowings from co-territorial languages, but that the level of the readers should be made to rise to the necessary standard. While the former prominent Territorialist Moyshe Litvakov was a central figure among the 'nation-builders', many Yiddish papers' editors tried to narrow the gap between the literary and spoken varieties of Yiddish, arguing that their readers simply could not understand the highbrow language of *Der Emes*, edited by Litvakov. As a result of bitter fights among various cliques of Yiddish language planners, the purist approach prevailed, especially as Communist ideologists generally scorned light, entertaining reading.

Apart from introducing numerous new coinages, Soviet Yiddish language planning experiments included respelling of words of Hebrew origin and abolishment of word-final allographs. Such radical innovations, coupled with dullness and secondariness of published materials, discouraged many people from reading the Soviet Yiddish press. Yet the number of Yiddish periodicals, all of them state-sponsored, was considerable. Seventeen titles with a total circulation of almost 150,000 represent only the most important Soviet Yiddish newspapers published in 1931. In addition, some industrial and agricultural enterprises with large numbers of Yiddish-speaking workers were allowed to publish their own Yiddish newspapers. For instance, the factory newspaper *Shtolene Nodl* (*Steel Needle*) of the Tiniakov clothes factory in Kharkov had a readership of about 1,500. Smaller organizations, such as schools, would produce wall newspapers. In 1927, the reported number of Yiddish wall newspapers in Ukraine alone was 319.

Kharkov, Soviet Ukraine capital until 1934, became a hub of Yiddish press: by 1930, the city was the home of nine Yiddish periodicals, including two literary journals — *Di Royte Velt* (*Red World*, 1924–33) and *Prolit* (*Proletarian Literature*),

1928–32).<sup>5</sup> In 1930, Kharkov hosted the second conference of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers — the literary arm of the Communist International (Comintern). The conference also adopted a resolution on Yiddish literature.<sup>6</sup> By that time, Yiddish Communism had formed a peculiar sub-culture in the international Communist movement. Yiddish-speaking Communists played conspicuous roles in many national parties, such as the American, Canadian, Argentine, French, Polish, Palestine, Belgian, Austrian, Uruguayan and Romanian, which developed organizational structures modelled on the lines of the Soviet party's Jewish Sections. Regardless of their country of residence, Communists of East European Jewish vintage represented a rather homogeneous group of people imbued with a semi-religious attitude to the USSR. Many of them were at home in Russian. Their devotion to the geographically distant proletarian fatherland often had additional nostalgic significance of their *alte heym* (old home) turned into a dreamland of freedom and equality. In contrast to predominant anti-Sovietism of Russian émigré intellectual circles, pro-Soviet literati represented a sizeable part of the international world of Yiddish letters, and Communist Yiddish periodicals became centres of gravitation for many pro-Soviet writers. Many of them regarded themselves as 'Soviet foreigners', to borrow a definition given by Hirsh Bloshtein, an Argentine and later Soviet Yiddish poet.<sup>7</sup>

Although Yiddishism was something of a dirty word among Communists who condemned too much attention to Yiddish as a mainstay of Jewish nationalism, it was, ironically, the Soviet Union of the 1920s and 1930s where many a Yiddishist dream seemed to come true, particularly when the Soviet government initiated Jewish territorial projects. Despite its less than modest achievements, Birobidzhan became the alluring symbol of a successful solution of the Jewish question. In various countries — such as Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Holland, Latvia, Lithuania, South Africa, Sweden, and even Palestine — Communists created organizations, providing support for the Soviet answer to the Zionist colonization of Palestine. Hundreds of foreign enthusiasts, most notably from Poland and Lithuania, come to the Soviet Union in order to participate in building the promised Jewish republic.<sup>8</sup>

Argentina, where as early as 1919 a group of Jewish left-wingers accepted the Comintern programme, was one of the strongholds of Yiddish-speaking Communists. On 7 November 1923, on the fifth anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution, they launched their newspaper *Der Royter Shtern* (*Red Star*) and later published a few journals, one of which, *Der Yidisher Poyer* (*Jewish Peasant*), was dedicated to Jewish agricultural projects in the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup> In Uruguay, Yiddish-speaking Communists grouped around the newspaper *Unzer Fraynt* (*Our Friend*), sponsored by the Soviet embassy and edited by Ber Halpern, later a Soviet writer.<sup>10</sup> In the early 1930s, illegal Yiddish periodicals were published by Communists in Lithuania, Latvia and Poland.<sup>11</sup>

On 20 April 1934, a pro-Soviet newspaper, *Fraynd* (*Friend*), was launched in Warsaw under the management of Boris Kletzkin, one of the best-known and respected members of the Yiddish publishing world. It was the most successful attempt to issue a legal Yiddish newspaper sponsored by the underground Polish

Communist party. Edited by the prosaist and playwright Alter Katsizne, the newspaper had among its active contributors such writers as Kadie Molodowsky, David Mitsmakher, Khaim Grade and Elkhonen Vogler. The latter two belonged to the literary group Yung Vilne (Young Vilna) that united a few members and sympathizers of the illegal Communist party. The party's representative, David Sfarid, was given power to prescribe what the paper could or could not publish.<sup>12</sup>

The strongest and most numerous circle of pro-Soviet Yiddish literati emerged in the United States. Comintern functionaries realized that the American Jewish left-wingers were easy marks for Communism and dispatched to them a few operatives, recruited among the post-1917 returnees from the USA. In April 1922, one of the Comintern agents, Shakhno Epshteyn, helped to set up in New York the longest-running Yiddish Communist newspaper, *Frayhayt* (*Freedom*), later called *Morgn-Frayhayt* (*Morning-Freedom*).<sup>13</sup> Epshtein edited *Frayhayt* together with Moyshe Olgin. Both of them turned from Bundism to Communism and were reputable Marxist literary critics. They envisaged their paper as a forum for the most trenchant prose and poetry of their time, thereby continuing the tradition of earlier Jewish socialist organs with strong belletristic departments. Among the founders of *Frayhayt* was Morris Winchevsky, the legendary journalist and sweatshop poet, who as early as 1884 edited in London the first socialist newspaper in Yiddish, *Poylisher Yidl* (*The Humble Polish Jew*). His contribution to the international labour movement was marked by a Soviet state pension and red carpet receptions during his May 1925 visit to the Soviet Union. In the leftwing mythology he was regarded as the 'grandfather' of Yiddish and Hebrew worker poetry, similar to Mendele Moykher Sforim's general grandfatherly position in modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature.<sup>14</sup> *Frayhayt* also recruited such popular writers as Abraham Reisen, H. Leivick, Isaac Raboy, Lamed Shapiro, Menakhem Boreisha, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, Moyshe Nadir and David Bergelson.

With such a galaxy of literary lions, the *Frayhayt* editors initially did not pay much attention to young aspirants, mainly recent immigrants, who combined their toiling at sweatshops with literary efforts. In 1924, a few of them founded their own publication called *Yung Kuznye* (*Young Smithy*). From issue 3 the editors naturalized the spelling of *Yung Kuznye*, applying to all lexical items, including the Hebrew ones, the same phonetic and morphological rules. This Soviet-style spelling would never be implemented in the large-circulation *Frayhayt* or books published under its imprint. Rather, it would remain a trademark of American Yiddish proletarian publications for the initiated. In the mid-1920s, the 'young smiths' were given a party assignment to organize the worker correspondent movement, but the leader of the group, Alexander Pomerantz, had to admit later their failure to achieve any success in replanting the Soviet experience.<sup>15</sup>

In the Soviet Union, all newspapers took part in the worker correspondent movement, purporting to draw newspapers closer to their readership. The Kiev *Komunistishe Fon* (*Communist Banner*) established at its editorial office the first group of Yiddish worker correspondents in 1922. This campaign brought in the literary profession many people, including those of little talent. Litvakov, the gadfly of the Yiddish cultural circles, was one of the first who voiced reservations

about the numerous outgrowths from the lowest form of literary life. Nonetheless, promotion of third-raters, whose careers of Communist hacks originated in the worker correspondent movement, became part and parcel of Soviet journalist and literary life.<sup>16</sup>

Yiddish Communist environment had radically transformed in 1929, or the year of the Great Break as it was called in Soviet Newspeak. In the new climate, Soviet Jewish functionaries made much less penetrable the barriers between Soviet and non-Communist western literary milieus. Relations with the West turned even more confrontational following the Arab riots in Palestine, when the Soviet Union had sided with the Arabs and blamed the Zionists. As a result, a number of writers, including Abraham Reisen and H. Leivick, reconsidered their relationship with the Communist movement, especially as the Comintern's relations with its fellow travellers began to deteriorate from the outset of the year. Meanwhile, hot American Communist literati formed an organization, called Proletpen — the biggest Yiddish Communist writers' organization outside the Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup> The name of Proletpen was coined as an antonym to the Yiddish PEN Club that professed ex-territoriality and non-partisanship of Yiddish literature. After 1929 Yiddish Communist literary world was populated by its own cohort of writers, partitioned off from the non-Communist spheres and contributing to the sectarian publications.

Yiddish Communist circles were not great in number. In the United States, for instance, they boasted only 40,000 people (in 1934), including a couple of thousand of card-carrying Communists, while the other were 'sympathizers' — members of such front organizations as the International Workers Order or Workers Musical Alliance.<sup>18</sup> The Communist constituency shrank in 1939, after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Among those who left the movement were several writers, including Moyshe Nadir, who in 1935, during the (pro-Soviet) American Writers' Congress, declared that American proletarian writers 'love[d] America as one of the most beautiful flowers in the bouquet of the world Soviets of tomorrow'.<sup>19</sup> At that moment Leivick, too, broke off his relations with the Communist movement, with which he again collaborated in the framework of the YKUF (World Alliance of Yiddish Culture) — a product of the World Yiddish Culture Congress in Paris in September 1937.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, the Comintern was potent enough to force the majority of its Jewish following to praise, gritting their teeth, the Soviet-German treaty.

In the meantime, the Soviet Yiddish cultural world was undercut by general Stalinist repressions and by closing of almost all educational institutions. *Der Emes* was phased out in 1938; its editor Litvakov and some other Moscow and provincial Yiddish journalists were executed or banished to the gulag. The wave of arrests fell predominantly upon the most militant Yiddish intellectuals, but spared such writers as David Hofsheyn, Der Nister, Leyb Kvitko, Peretz Markish and David Bergelson, though they had been for many years severely criticized as Symbolists, nationalists and petty-bourgeois. Nonetheless, Stalin's regime still needed Yiddish literature, both for the internal and foreign readership, especially as Yiddish-speakers constituted a great proportion of some foreign Communist parties. Characteristically, such components of the Yiddish cultural world as the theatres and literary institutions remained almost intact. In Ukraine, Belorussia, Moscow

and Birobidzhan, Yiddish writers had their outfits, with literary periodicals for each of the regional organizations. It was also allowed to train young actors and writers. On 27 January 1940, three young Birobidzhan Yiddish writers, Emanuel Kazakevich, Buzi Miller and Aron Vergelis, were accepted as members of the Soviet Writers' Union.<sup>21</sup> By that time Kazakevich and Vergelis already lived in Moscow; the former had successfully played cat and mouse with the secret police, fleeing imminent persecution (migration sometimes helped people to avoid summary arrests), while the latter studied at the Moscow Teachers' Training Institute. Buzi Miller, on the other hand, settled in Birobidzhan as late as 1936, after graduating from the same Moscow Teachers' Training Institute.

The regime made a use of Yiddish education and media in the Baltic counties and the areas of Poland and Romania annexed in 1939 and 1940. In October 1940, a new Yiddish political and literary monthly *Ufboy* (*Construction*) began to appear in Riga. The almanac *Bleter 1940* (*Miscellanea*, 1940), published in Kaunas under the imprint of the Yiddish Writers' Union of Lithuania, featured works by such authors as Khaim Grade, Abraham Sutzkever, Hirsh Osherovitsh, Meir Yelin, and Yakov Yossade. An active group of Yiddish writers from Poland had concentrated in Bialystok, which had been annexed by the Soviet Union. David Sfar, a functionary among them, distinguished later two parallel lines in Soviet politics towards national minorities. On the one hand, the central authorities wanted to minimize the national culture's influence on the corresponding national group, but at the same time they stimulated further development of the culture proper.<sup>22</sup> *A token national culture of an assimilated ethnic group* was the strategy pursued by the authorities from the late 1930s. This may give us an explanation why many vociferous advocates of Yiddish mass literature vanished in the gulag, whereas their counterparts from the camp of highbrow intellectuals were granted a decade-long grace. In 1939 six Yiddish writers became holders of high Soviet decorations: Peretz Markish, Leyb Kvitko, David Hofshiteyn, Itzik Fefer, Yekhezkel Dobrushin and Shmuel Halkin.

During the Second World War, Yiddish literati played central roles in the activity of the JAFK, an outlet for Soviet propaganda. Their license expired during the witch-hunt in the last years of Stalin's tyranny. Anti-Semitism began to be visible in the highest echelons of Soviet society. According to Mikhail Romm, the Soviet film director, 'until 1943 we had no anti-Semitism... Somehow we managed without it... Signs of it began to appear in 1943.'<sup>23</sup> These 'signs' became much more ominous in the late 1940s. At that initial stage of the Cold War, the JAFK's international and domestic activities, particularly its geopolitical initiative to establish a Jewish republic in the Crimea, alarmed Stalin and his pragmatically intolerant or congenitally bloodthirsty courtiers, who did not hesitate to crush Yiddish culture and its leading personalities.

## Notes to the Prologue

1. Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question* (London: Martin Lawrence, 1936), pp. 257–59. See also Alexander Bittelman, *A program farn kiem fun yidish folk: di kommunistishe shtetung tsu der yidisher frage* (New York: Morgn-Frayhayt, 1947), p. 27.
2. Zvi Y. Gitelman's *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics: The Jewish Sections of the CPSU, 1917–1930*