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The Kharkiv Yiddish literary world, 1920s-mid-1930s

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The Kharkiv Yiddish Literary World, 1920s–Mid-1930s

Fifty years have elapsed since one of the most tragic events in the history of modern Jewish culture: the unfounded criminal persecution and execution of the five leading Soviet Yiddish writers – David Bergelson, Itsik Fefer, David Hofshtein, Leib Kvitko and Perets Markish. Earlier, other leading Soviet Yiddish cultural figures, such as the writers Der Nister and Shmuel Persov and the critics Isaac Nusinov and Yekhezkel Dobrushin, had been executed or died in captivity. In the five years 1937–41, the toll of Yiddish literati who perished in the *Gulag* was even greater, including such literary pundits as Moshe Litvakov, Abraham Abchuk, Yasha Bronshtein and Khatskel Dunets and such writers as Izi Kharik, Moshe Kulbak, Zelik Akselrod and Khaim Gildin. The losses were much higher among the functionaries who staffed the apparatus of Soviet Jewish institutions.

The purge of the late 1930s followed the two-decade-long rise of Yiddish cultural development in the Soviet Union. At the same time, these were decades of moral self-destruction on the part of the literary milieu. Divided into cliques, Yiddish writers and critics rarely missed an opportunity to finish off a colleague who had stumbled. The war of attrition took particularly ugly forms in the conflict between Moshe Litvakov, the ruthless, self-opinionated critic and editor-in-chief of the Moscow-based central Yiddish daily *Der emes* (The Truth), and the literati who strove for independence from his severe ideological-cum-aesthetic judgements. The Yiddish literary journal *Di royte velt* (The Red World), published in 1924–33 in Kharkiv (Kharkov in Russian), then the Ukrainian capital, was one of the strongholds of 'anti-Litvakovism'. In general terms, the story of *Di royte velt* represents an insightful chapter in the history of Soviet Yiddish literary life of the 1920s and 1930s.

A new Yiddish publishing centre

'After the homely, Jewish atmosphere of Kiev and the friendly Jewish students' milieu of Moscow, Kharkiv seemed to me an alien, cold city', reminisced Hersh Smolar, a young Jewish communist dispatched to Kharkiv

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in the mid-1920s as a reinforcement to the local Yiddish Komsomol activists.[1] 'It is a tough, industrial, not homely city', echoed the Yiddish writer Israel Joshua Singer, sent to Russia as a correspondent of the New York-based best-selling Yiddish daily *Forverst*.[2] In the same year, David Volkenshtein, a Kiev Yiddish writer, noted: 'Kharkiv is still a desert.'[3] Indeed, as a Soviet Yiddish cultural centre, Kharkiv emerged almost *ex nihilo*. Very few enthusiasts of Yiddish letters lived there before the First World War. Thus, in 1913 the Vilna-based journal *Di yidishe velt* (The Jewish World), which was committed to promoting modern Yiddish literature and culture, had in Kharkiv only 7 subscribers and 25 regular buyers.[4]

In Imperial Russia Kharkiv, which was excluded from the Pale of Settlement, did not play any significant role in Jewish life. The proto-Zionist group Bilu, formed in 1881 by local high school youth and university students, is the only memorable footprint left by the city in pre-First World War Jewish history.[5] During the First World War, however, the Jewish population of the city increased as a result of the influx of refugees from the western areas of the empire, in particular from Lithuania and Belorussia. In 1917, in the election to the All-Russian Constituent Assembly, over 6,000 inhabitants of Kharkiv voted for Jewish parties, including 5,300 for the Jewish National Bloc, about 700 for the Socialist Jewish Workers' Party (SERP), and over 500 for the Labour Zionists.[6]

One of the Jewish refugees, Kalman Zingman, founded in 1917 a publishing house which he called simply Yiddish. Apart from his own books, such as the utopian novel *In der tsukunft-shtot Edenia* (In the Future Town of Edenia),[7] he launched a periodical entitled *Kunst-ring* (Art Link). Its first issue appeared at the end of 1917. An editorial note reassured readers that in 1918 the *Kunst-ring* would become a monthly. In effect, its second and last issue, with a cover designed by El Lissitsky, came out in 1919. Only a few of the journal's contributors lived, at least temporarily, in Kharkiv. One of them was Moshe Taitsh, an established Yiddish writer. He edited the first local Yiddish paper, *Kharkiver tsaytung* (Kharkiv News), which began to appear as a weekly in August 1918 but did not last long. There too lived a number of novice Yiddish writers, such as Hirsh (Tsvi) Bloshtein, a refugee from Lithuania, and Khana Levin, a Ekaterinislav-born poet. Between 1917 and 1921 Kharkiv saw a number of (usually short-lived) Yiddish periodicals of the Bund, SERP, Fareynikte (the product of the merger of the SERP with the Zionist Socialists) and Folkspartey. All in all, in 1917–21 Kharkiv was the sixth most important Yiddish publishing centre in post-revolutionary Russia, behind Kiev, Odessa, Petrograd, Moscow and Ekaterinoslav, but surpassing Minsk and Vitebsk.[8]

Twice during the Civil War the Red Army had to leave the city, first from April 1918 to January 1919 and then from June 1919 to December 1919.

Local Bolsheviks, following the example of other party organizations, formed a Jewish Section, whose main task was to conduct propaganda among the Yiddish-speaking population.[9] In March 1919 the Jewish Section of the Ukrainian Communist Party published its first Kharkiv-based biweekly, *Der yidisher komunist* (The Jewish Communist). In 1920–22 the Jewish Section published the newspaper *Der komunist* (The Communist). Still, despite the fact that Kharkiv, reputed to be Ukraine's revolutionary centre, became the capital of Soviet Ukraine, the main organ of the Ukrainian Communist Party's Jewish Section, *Komunistishe fon* (The Communist Banner), continued to appear in 'nationalist' Kiev. The latter was the most significant daily in post-revolutionary Russia, a product of the May 1919 merger of two bolshevized Kiev papers, the Fareynikte's *Naye tsayt* (New Time) and the Bund's *Folks-tsaytung* (People's Paper).

At the same time, Kharkiv emerged as the centre of Yiddish Komsomol publications: *Der yunger kemfer* (Young Fighter, 1920), *Di proletarishe yugnt* (Proletarian Youth, 1920) and *Kamfs-klangen* (Battle Sounds, 1921). In 1922 Arn Kushnirov, who had matured poetically in pre-First World War Kiev and ideologically in the Red Army, edited a collection entitled *Yugnt* (Youth), presenting the young Yiddish poetry of Ukraine. The book appeared as a publication of the Ukrainian Komsomol in the Library of a Young Communard series. The magazine *Libknekhts dor* ([Karl] Liebknecht's Generation) was another attempted publication by the Kharkiv Komsomol activists. It was conceived in 1921, when Marc Chagall, then living in Moscow, was asked to design the magazine's cover. The cover, however, had to wait for over a year because the first and only issue of the *Libknekhts dor* came out in January 1923. In November 1923 the central Yiddish newspaper of the Ukrainian Komsomol, *Der yunger arbeter* (Young Worker), began to appear in Kharkiv. In the following year this newspaper was relaunched as *Yunge gvardye* (Young Guard), presumably because its previous name was reserved for the Minsk-based sister publication.

In 1924 the Kiev *Komunistishe fon* was phased out, and in 1925 the Ukrainian Jewish communists were given a new daily, based in Kharkiv and entitled *Der shtern* (The Star). In 1926 another republican Yiddish newspaper began to appear in Kharkiv: *Der yidisher poyer* (The Jewish Peasant). Kharkiv continued to grow as a centre of the Yiddish press – in 1927 the paper *Der kustar* (Artisan), in 1928 the children's paper *Zay greyt* (Be Ready) and the pedagogical monthly *Ratnbildung* (Soviet Education). Jews made up about 20 per cent of the growing population of the city: in 1920 55,500 Jews, in 1923 65,000, in 1926 81,000. By 1926 it was the third largest Jewish community in Ukraine, behind Odessa (153,200) and Kiev (140,300).[10] By 1930 nine Yiddish newspapers were being published in Kharkiv.[11] As late as May 1933 a new periodical appeared in Kharkiv – the bilingual, Ukrainian–Yiddish newspaper

Kooperovanyi shkirniak/Kooperirter ledernik (Co-operative Leather-dresser), an organ of the Kharkiv District Trade Union of Leather-dressers.

Like any other Soviet Yiddish publishing centre, Kharkiv produced predominantly periodicals and books endorsed by political organizations. No Yiddish commercial publishing houses emerged in Soviet Russia even during the NEP period, when it was permissable to open private enterprises. The prevalence of partisan propagandism and modernist experimentalism was also characteristic of the contemporary non-Soviet Yiddish book market, which lagged far behind the Yiddish press.[12] Nonetheless, nowhere else was Yiddish book production so de-commercialized as in the Soviet Union. In the eyes of Soviet Jewish activists, literature for the purpose of entertainment was anathema, a sign that all their propaganda efforts were going to the dogs; Jewish communists ruthlessly suppressed such publications. Moreover, some Soviet Yiddish functionaries generally regarded *belles-lettres* as publications of minor importance compared with political literature.[13]

Di royte velt: editors and circulation

In 1924 there arose the question of moving the Yiddish literary centre from Kiev to Kharkiv and of launching a Kiev-based Yiddish literary journal. This matter was discussed in a special memorandum of the Press Department of the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party. The head of the department, M. Ravitsh-Cherkasky, was Jewish. Motl Kiper, the head of the Ukrainian Jewish Section, backed this proposal, arguing that Yiddish literature would benefit immensely from the capital's proletarian environment, where it would liberate itself from the nationalist and Yiddishist hang-ups of Kiev. In reality, the Kharkiv Jewish proletariat was more acculturated than elsewhere in Ukraine: only 36 per cent of Kharkiv Region's Jewish trade unionists were Yiddish-speakers, compared with 89 per cent in the Berdichev Region, 55 per cent in the Kiev Region and 42 per cent in the Odessa Region.[14] It was no easy matter to create overnight a literary centre in a city which had a number of journalists but no literary lions. Moshe Taitsh, for instance, had been transferred to Moscow to reinforce the editorial staff of *Der emes*.[15] For all that, the apparatchiks' initiative resulted in creating in Kharkiv a new Yiddish literary journal, *Di royte velt*.[16]

The first editors of *Di royte velt* were Henekh Kazakevich and M.Ravitsh-Cherkasky. While the latter was a king for a day in Yiddish literature, Kazakevich was a remarkable figure in Soviet Yiddish journalism. In 1918–24 he edited various periodicals in Ekaterinoslav, Kiev and Gomel, and in 1924 he was transferred to Kharkiv. The first issue of the new journal appeared in September 1924 with a print-run of 2,000. It was labelled a 'political–social, literary–scientific bi-weekly journal'. Indeed, the first issue contained only two literary works: a poem by Itsik Fefer and a story by

Shmuel Persov. The other materials were devoted to theatre, politics, cosmology and literary criticism. Significantly, the journal stressed its international character. Among its potential contributors we find the names of the editors and writers of the New York communist Yiddish daily *Frayhayt* (Freedom) Moshe Olgin, Morris Vinchevsky, Shakhne Epshtein, Moshe Kats and Moshe Nadir. Also, it was announced that the Vilna-based Boris Kletskin publishing house was preparing for publication books by four Soviet writers listed among the journals' contributors: Arn Kushnirov, Moshe Khashtshevatsky, Ezra Finninberg and Nokhum Oislender.

All four other issues of the journal which came out in 1924 had the same polymathic character – they contained some *belles-lettres*, but also articles on chemical weapons, various technical questions, and even the metric system which was being introduced in the country. A regular writer of popular articles was Khaim Abraham Finkel, a graduate of Kharkiv University and a former Zionist Socialist. In its last issue, which came out in 1924, the editors promised to do their best to normalize the rhythm of the publication. They also announced a reduction in the subscription price.

Fifteen issues were published in 1925, though the description 'bi-weekly' disappeared only in the double, 10–11, issue, which came out in July. From 1926 the journal was published as a monthly. Another important change – the editorial board comprised Mikhl Levitan – now a leading functionary of the Jewish Section he was a founder of the SERP and a pioneer of Yiddish secular pedagogy; Ezra Finninberg, a former Zionist Socialist activist and a rising Soviet literary star; David Feldman (editor-in-chief), a communist functionary; Faivl Shprakh, editor-in-chief of *Der shtern*; and Leib Kvitko and Henekh Kazakevich.

Kvitko, a recent returnee from Germany, was one of the most significant figures in the trend-setting Kiev Group of modernist Yiddish writers who had emerged in post-revolutionary Ukraine and left an indelible mark on modern Yiddish literature by 'setting the bridges leading to the old world on fire'.[17] The Kiev Yiddish poets were related to the contemporary modernist schools of Ukrainian writers. Like the Ukrainian Symbolists, they rejected the narrow ethnographism of their predecessors and strove for a hybrid of Europeanization with national identity, though the influence of Russian Symbolists, especially Alexander Blok, and of the Imaginist Sergei Esenin was perhaps even more significant.[18] A few of them left Russia, but in 1925 and 1926 four writers of the Kiev Group returned to the Soviet Union: Leib Kvitko, Perets Markish, Der Nister and David Hofshtein. Leib Kvitko's wife, Betti Kvitko, later reminisced:

Kvitko was invited to become the managing editor of *Di royte velt*. The editor-in-chief was the communist D. Feldman, who had three other senior positions (such things often

happened at that time), and Kvitko had no choice but to take on the entire responsibility for the journal.

In one of the rooms of the Ukrainian publishing house Ukrspilka [Ukrainian Trade Unions] there were five editorial offices – five desks and one telephone for all of them. Kvitko occupied one of the desks. He and a proof-reader, who also worked at the Tsentalfarlag publishing house, were the total staff of *Di royte velt*.[19]

By the end of 1926 Feldman had disappeared from the editorial board; his place was occupied by Levitan. In the meantime, the journal concentrated on literature. The statistics published in issue 8–9, 1927 show an increase in literary materials: 36 per cent in 1924, 39 per cent in 1925, 45 per cent in 1926, and 51 per cent in 1927. In the early 1920s Soviet Yiddish literature was dominated by poetry, and without significant prose works it was difficult to fill the literary pages. The increase in the journal's literary department indicated the appearance of prose works, written either by poets such as Kvitko and Finninberg, or by new prose writers.[20] In August 1927 Dobrushin, a central figure in Moscow Yiddish literary and theatrical circles, was happy to conclude that *Di royte velt* would 'very soon become a successful journal'.[21] Nonetheless, in January 1928 its print-run was reduced by half to 1,000. It increased to 1,400 in November, but fell again to 1,250 in December. The circulation continued to fluctuate during 1929, rising to 1,500 by the end of the year. In the following years the journal struggled to obtain more readers, as did the concurrently launched Minsk literary journal *Shtern*: initially its print-run was 700, it reached 3,000 in 1927, but a year later it had only 300 subscribers, and in 1929 it stabilized its print-run on 2,000. In the March 1930 issue of *Di royte velt* the following commentary reveals the editors' frustration:

As our readers will have noticed, this issue's print-run is 2,000 copies, which is a sign that the circulation of *Di royte velt* is increasing. Nonetheless, it is still not enough. It will be possible to increase the circulation to 3,000 if the party and Soviet organizations and individual comrades demonstrate their activity in this matter.

Judging by the imprints of the journal's issues, it printed 3,500 copies only once – the April 1930 issue, which was dedicated to collectivization.

In 1929 the journal was edited by Levitan, Kazakevich, Kvitko and Kiper. From issue 5–6, however, two new names appeared on the editorial board: Shakhne Epshtein, who became the journal's new editor-in-chief, and Itsik Fefer, the main proletarian Yiddish poet in Ukraine. Issue 9 opens with photographs of all the journal's editors: Kazakevich (September 1924–June 1925), Feldman (June 1925–December 1926), Levitan (December 1926–May 1929), and Epshtein, from May 1929. This iconostasis, marking the fifth anniversary of the journal, shows a peaceful succession of editors. Epshtein,

Litvakov's predecessor as editor of *Der emes*, was in 1921 sent to the United States, where he was instrumental in organizing the Yiddish communist press. *Di royte velt*'s editorship was his first assignment following his return to the Soviet Union. He was a veteran Yiddish journalist and one of the three pre-1917 Marxist Yiddish literary critics: Shakhne Epshtein and Moshe Olgin then represented Bundist literary thought, whereas Moshe Litvakov was the leading theorist of the Zionist Socialist Party. Soon after the Revolution they threw their lot in with Communism.

Epshtein was the first full-time editor of the journal and its first own literary critic. He occupied this position until August 1931. Until December 1931 the journal was headed by the editorial board Levitan, Fefer, Kazakevich and Kiper. In December a new editor-in-chief was appointed: Khaim Gildin, the pioneer Yiddish proletarian poet in Soviet Russia. Gildin edited the journal until its phasing out after the two last issues – the quadruple number 9–12 in 1932 and, eventually, the triple number 1–3 in 1933.

Proletarian and non-proletarian writers

The two main currents – proletarian and non-proletarian – divided the Yiddish literary milieu in the Soviet Union in general and in Ukraine in particular. Representatives of the former regarded themselves as the Yiddish phalanx of the international proletarian literary movement. Their opponents also considered themselves revolutionary writers, but they believed that the Revolution had liberated literature rather than enslaved it to the agitprop.

Yiddish proletarian literature in the Soviet Union had its 'prehistoric period', associated with the Proletcult (Proletarian Cultural and Educational Organization), a militant, iconoclastic outgrowth of the Revolution.[22] It is known, for instance, that a Jewish section was formed at the Kiev Proletcult in 1920.[23] In October 1920, during the First All-Russian Congress of Proletarian Writers, Khaim Gildin, a *habitué* of Y. L. Peretz's Warsaw salon turned into a card-carrying communist, spoke as the representative of Yiddish proletarian writers. In fact, it is not clear whom Gildin actually represented. Despite all his efforts, Gildin failed to create a Yiddish proletarian literary group.[24] In April 1925, during a conference of Ukrainian proletarian writers, he complained that for four years he had been desperately fighting for Yiddish proletarian literature. Only in 1925 was a proletarian Yiddish writers' organization (with 18 members) formed at the Moscow Proletarian Writers' Association (MAPP). However, Belorussia, with its considerable concentration of Jewish industrial workers and lack of influential non-proletarian Yiddish writers, became the real stronghold of young Yiddish proletarian literati.[25]

In Ukraine the 'proletarian' and 'petty-bourgeois' currents in Yiddish literature were blurred. Soviet historians of Yiddish literature later argued that

the 'proletarians' were represented by the Kiev group Vidervuks (New Growth).[26] David Hofshtein, who edited and wrote prefaces to slim poetic collections published with the Vidervuks imprint, was the putative leader of this group, formed in 1922. Itsik Fefer, himself a new name on the literary scene, soon became another central figure among the Vidervuksniks. By 1923 the Vidervuksniks Itsik Fefer, Itsik Kipnis, Abraham Kahan, Ezra Finninberg, Moshe Shapiro and Moshe Khashtshevatsky were already regarded as established Yiddish poets and their works were included in the first anthology of young Yiddish poetry in Ukrainian translation.[27] Still, their works were hardly proletarian poetry of 'stunning revolutionary creative devices'.[28] Isaac Nusinov later argued that the Vidervuksniks began as epigones of the Kiev Group's poets.[29]

Although Hofshtein's first book came out as late as 1918, and his first poem was published in 1917, he was already regarded as a classic of a kind and he had a following among aspiring poets. Hofshtein was never a card-carrying member of the party, but he sympathized with the Bolsheviks. His sympathies became even stronger after the death of his cousin, Osher Shvartsman, a Red Army volunteer who was killed in action in August 1919. Shvartsman, conveniently both a talented poet and a Civil War hero, was canonized as the principal founder of Soviet Yiddish poetry. In 1920 Hofshtein was closely associated with the Kiev organization of the Jewish Communist Youth League, which later became part of the Komsomol.[30] For all that, Hofshtein – in Fefer's later characterization – was a 'talented poet and worthless politician'.[31] Fefer, on the other hand, was a very good politician and organizer; he perfectly combined two talents – those of a poet and an apparatchik – and was instrumental in the 'proletarianization' of Vidervuks.

Proletarian rhetoric began to be employed by the Vidervuksniks, particularly when they were invited to contribute to the Kiev daily *Komunistishe fon*. In 1922 their works often appeared in the *Komunistishe fon*'s 'literary page'; in 1923 the newspaper even introduced a special department called 'Vidervuks'. This department was an outgrowth of the worker correspondent movement, which played the most significant role in recruiting proletarian Yiddish writers. Indeed, the *Komunistishe fon*, then edited by Henekh Kazakevich, was arguably the first Yiddish paper which organized, in March 1922, a group of Yiddish worker correspondents.[32] At that time the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party and the Komsomol began to stimulate this drive.[33] The *Komunistishe fon* group was guided by the local bureau of the Jewish Sections. Archival documents of the bureau show that it paid much attention to the group, or, as it was sometimes called, 'the school of worker correspondents'. In February 1924 this group turned against Hofshtein for signing a memorandum backing Hebrew teaching in the Soviet Union.[34] The ostracised poet left the country, stayed briefly in Germany, later

moved to Palestine, but in 1926 repented and returned to the Soviet Union.[35]

All in all, Vidervuks could, at a stretch, be regarded as a proletarian group, partly because it was somewhat more iconoclastic than another Kiev literary group, Antenna. More importantly, however, the 'proletarians' essentially advocated mass literature for Yiddish-speaking industrial workers, whereas the Antenna writers abhorred the idea of pandering to the tastes of the mass reader. The Antenna group was formed at the end of 1924. Its central figures were Lipe Reznik, David Volkenstein and Noah Lurie, who wanted to develop further the tradition of highbrow national–revolutionary rather than proletarian mass literature. Interestingly, among its members we also find a few former Vidervuksniks, notably Ezra Finninberg. Antenna had much in common with the Ukrainian proletarian writers' organization Hart (Tempering).[36] While Hart's ideological pedigree was associated with the Borot'bists (the Left Ukrainian Socialist Revolutionary Party), many of the Antenna's members were former sympathizers of Jewish Territorialism or other denominations of Jewish socialism. Hart and Antenna represented the so-called national communists, those who believed in a golden age of all national cultures in the Soviet Union. Paradoxically, although Antenna claimed to target all the strata of toilers rather than only the proletarians, it was an elitist group because in this larger pool they wanted to seek out and cultivate only the sophisticated reader, the search for whom the Kiev Group had began in the 1910s.

Importantly, in the mid-1920s it was not a sin to be sceptical of proletarian culture and literature, which had been rejected by Lenin and Trotsky. At that time the communist leadership did not wish to delegate its hegemony to any of the literary groups, arguing that competition among them would help find the ultimate socialist method of creativity.[37] Ukrainian Yiddish writers, however, were not in a fighting mood, and in February 1925 Vidervuks and Antenna merged into the Association of Yiddish Writers in Ukraine. In 1926 this association produced the almanac *Ukraine*, whose contributors represented both groups of writers.[38]

A separate position was occupied by Moshe Litvakov and his literary comrades-in-arms. A product of the Kiev Yiddish literary milieu, Litvakov also dreamt about a highbrow, ideologically-loaded literature for a sophisticated reading public. In the early 1920s he, presumably under the influence of Trotsky's pronouncements, rejected the idea of proletarian literature. Later, however, he jumped on the proletarian bandwagon, but could not accept the mass character of this literary movement. Thus, he regarded the worker correspondents' literary activities as a perversion of the original idea. According to Litvakov, worker correspondents had to be vigilant reporters rather than graphomaniac literary hopefuls.[39] He nourished an ambition that his criticism might stimulate writers to create highbrow works for highbrow

workers. At the same time, he did not care that highbrow proletarian Yiddish readers were a rather rare species, arguing that Jewish workers had to rise to the necessary intellectual standard. With his head in the clouds he made numerous enemies on the ground, particularly among writers.

Civil war in Yiddish literature

In the July 1925 issue of *Di royte velt*, Nusinov, who published his 'Letters from Moscow' in the journal, announced the outbreak of 'the civil war in Yiddish literature', that is between the left proletarian writers, who had formed in Moscow the Yiddish Section of the MAPP and published the almanac *Oktyabr* (October), and the Moscow Collective of Yiddish October Writers, who published the almanac *Nay-erd* (New Land). In addition to the confusing fact that the organization containing the word 'October' was not the publisher of the almanac *Oktyabr*, it is generally difficult to understand the division between the *Oktyabr* and *Nay-erd* writers, except in so far as they were cliques. Especially as, according to Nusinov, two of the three 'most-Soviet' works, Fefer's and Kharik's poems, were published in the ostensibly less proletarian *Nay-erd*, and only one, Kushnirov's story, found a place in the vehemently proletarian *Oktaybr*.[40] Granted, Nusinov was not a reliable judge of proletarian literary production. He, at that time the main literary theoretician of the journal, was an adherent of the sociological (later disparaged as 'vulgar sociological') approach to creativity and he did not believe that writers of non-proletarian origins could create proletarian literature. He argued that Yiddish proletarian literature had hardly any social basis because the vast majority of Soviet Jews were petty-bourgeois individuals trying to find their place in the new society.[41]

In fact, the civil war in Yiddish literature began earlier, in January 1922, when Moshe Litvakov, then the new editor of *Der emes*, attacked the 'Yiddish literary emigration in Moscow'.[42] By 1925, however, literary criticism became particularly pitiless, especially as the party leadership encouraged the 'hegemony of proletarian critics in assessing literary works from the point of view of their social significance'.[43] Such critics as Litvakov and the Minsk-based younger literary pundit Yasha Bronshtein excelled themselves in proletarian bloodthirstiness. The Moscow critic and writer Yekhezkel Dobrushin even asked publicly to be protected from the Minsk critic's bruising attacks.[44]

The June 1925 appointment of Feldman as editor of *Di royte velt* apparently catalysed the proletarian–non-proletarian stratification of Yiddish writers in Ukraine. A party functionary of Trotskyist persuasion, he was a sharp opponent of proletarian literature, and during his tenure such 'proletarians' as Gildin, Fefer and Kushnirov had problems with publishing their works in the journal. Feldman, together with Kvitko, became a member

of VAPLITE (Free Academy of Proletarian Literature), which united 'qualified writers' after the disintegration of Hart and, despite its proletarian name, opposed the All-Ukrainian Union of Proletarian Writers (VUSPP). In Ukraine the proletarian–non-proletarian divide was often eclipsed by the much more significant schism between the writers who wanted to be part of the general Soviet literary process and the aggressively territorial Ukrainian writers. In the winter of 1926–27 Feldman was instrumental in founding the VAPLITE-oriented Yiddish literary group Boy (Construction) as a reincarnation of the Hart-oriented Antenna.[45] The founding of Boy brought to an end the mongrel Association of Yiddish Writers.

In December 1927 an initiative group of Yiddish proletarian writers who wanted to become part of the VUSPP was formed. Their founding meeting took place in Kharkiv. The key speaker, Litvakov, came from Moscow. The main local (Kharkiv and Kiev) initiators – Hofshtein, Fefer, Gildin, Abraham Kahan and Yankel Levin – became members of the Yiddish bureau created at the VUSPP. In its resolution the meeting drew attention to a gap between their target reader – 'the communist avant-garde of the Jewish proletariat' – and the petty-bourgeois intellectual writer. According to Litvakov's analysis, some of the petty-bourgeois intellectuals welcomed the Revolution, partly because of its nationalities politics and partly because of their hope to have also (or even predominantly) a non-proletarian readership. In the meantime, some of these intellectuals began to orient themselves towards the proletariat and to support the groups of young proletarian literati. Hence, the 'literary battles' between them and non-proletarian circles.[46] Hofshtein, one of such 'proletarian-oriented petty-bourgeois intellectuals', was an unlikely leader of the Yiddish VUSPP. On the other hand, Dobrushin, who knew him from their Kiev and Moscow periods of activity, quoted the Yiddish saying *az esn khazer iz fet* (If you start eating pork, better eat a fat one!), predicting that Hofshtein would join the proletarian movement in an effort to expiate his sins.[47] In general, according to Epshtein, the vetting of candidates to Yiddish proletarian organizations was never as rigid as in Russian and Ukrainian organizations.[48] Indeed, the American Yiddish master literary critic Shmuel Niger had problems with finding proletarian features in the almanac *VUSPP*, published in Kharkiv in 1929.[49]

In April 1928 the VUSPP published the first issue of its Yiddish literary journal, *Prolit* (Pro[letarishe] lit[eratur] — Proletarian Literature). It would, however, be wrong to see this as a publication which was irreconcilably antagonistic to *Di royte velt*, especially as Fefer, one of the editors and later the editor-in-chief of the *Prolit*, joined the editorial board of *Di royte velt* from its 5–6 issue, 1929. Still, the journals catered for different groups of writers and readers. *Di royte velt* was a highbrow periodical, following the example of Russian 'thick journals', whereas the *Prolit* was not ashamed to publish novice writers – the literary yield of the worker correspondent movement.

Such openness, however, did not make the *Prolit* a mass periodical: in 1930, for instance, its circulation was 1,500.

'The Year of the Great Breakthrough'

The climate in Yiddish literature had significantly changed in 1929 – the Year of the Great Breakthrough as it was called in Sovietspeak. In society as a whole 1929 marked the beginning of Stalin's autocracy. In literature it was mirrored by a political campaign, unprecedented in virulence and scale, that came to be known as the Pilnyak and Zamyatin Affair. The pretext was the publication abroad of works by the two writers: [Yevgeny] Zamyatin's novel *We*, and [Boris] Pilnyak's short novel *Mahogany*.'[50] In this climate, Soviet Jewish functionaries made much less penetrable the barriers between Soviet and non-Soviet literary milieus. One sign of the change was the castigation of Shmuel Gordon, then a young Yiddish writer, for sending his poems to the Warsaw weekly *Literarishe bleter* (Literary Pages).[51] In the same year, the most venerable Western Yiddish novelist, Sholem Asch, who visited the Soviet Union, was torn to pieces in Litvakov's critical articles.[52] Relations with the West became even more confrontational following the Arab riots in Palestine, when many Jewish left-wingers reconsidered their stand after the Soviet Union's pro-Arab orientation. On 4 September the writers Abraham Reisen, H. Leivick, Isaac Raboy and Menakhem Boreisha resigned from the New York communist *Frayhayt*.

Paul (Pesakh) Novick, the *Frayhayt* journalist (and later its editor), at that time in Kharkiv, reported on the meeting of local Yiddish literati, condemning the defectors. Markish and particularly Kvitko were the sharpest initiators of a wordy resolution, which stressed the rupture of their relations with the anti-*Frayhayt* group:

> We cannot have any relations with the defenders of the bloody attack in Palestine by the Zionists, who support British imperialism, or with those who have allowed themselves to be drawn into the chauvinist and nationalist hysteria fabricated by the yellow–black press as a weapon in the fight against the revolutionary labour movement, against the Soviet Union.[53]

Bickering became sharper among Soviet writers too. Thus, Lipe Reznik complained of being accused of mysticism (by Hofshtein) and decadence (by Fefer) and of general sharp criticism of his writing (e.g. by Abchuk). As a result, he was able to publish only two poems in the last two years.[54] Perets Markish was criticized for his story *Khaveyrim kustarn* (Comrade Artisans), published in 1928 (issues 10 and 11) of *Di royte velt*. The protagonist of the story, Koplman, is a propagandist working with Jewish artisans. A communist and a demobilized Red Army soldier, he is always, even on the hottest days, dressed in a military overcoat, thus keeping himself ready to return to his

regiment at short notice. He does not react to the typist Bella's persistent flirtation because he respects only one woman – Rosa Luxemburg. He successfully fulfils his mission of converting a synagogue into an artisans' club named after his beloved heroine of the German revolution. Small wonder that vigilant critics accused Markish of ridiculing Jewish party activists.[55] As a result, it was never reprinted in Yiddish, though it appeared in Ukrainian as a separate book, *Tovaryshi kustari* (Kharkov, 1930).

The most high-profile case occurred around Kvitko's poetic caricature of Litvakov as the 'stink bird Moyli' which sits unattainably high on the roof and poisons people's lives. Kvitko published a number of his caricatures in *Di royte velt* (No. 5–6, 1929) and included them in his book *Gerangl* (Struggle), published the same year in the Kharkiv Tsentrfarlag, whose editor was his friend Henekh Kazakevich.[56] After these two publications events followed thick and fast. In September 1929 the Yiddish Section of the VUSSP convened an extraordinary meeting to discuss Kvitko's 'anti-communist pasquinade' and demanded that the author be sacked from his position at *Di royte velt*.[57] Indeed, after the October 1929 issue Kviko's name disappeared from the journal's imprint. He ended up working as an apprentice lathe operator at the Kharkiv Tractor-building Factory.

Many writers saw Kvitko's case as a signal that Litvakov and his ilk were seeking total control over Soviet Yiddish literature. Litvakov did not hide his intention, condemning the Ukraine writers' 'literary protectionism' and literary 'fiefdom'.[58] Hofshtein, whose relations with the VUSPP had begun to deteriorate even before the Kviko case, sent a circular letter (eventually published in *Der emes*)[59] in which he argued that, though Kvitko had been out of line, it was wrong to humiliate him, especially as Litvakov was well known for his dictatorial character. Epshtein, too, tried to protect Kvitko, stressing that the poet could not be treated as a Yiddish Pilniak.[60] Markish too raised his voice, writing an open letter to Litvakov.[61] Kiper opposed carrying Kvitko's ostracism too far. Moreover, he used Kvitko's case to justify the closing down of the Jewish Sections, which, he argued, had become a breeding-ground for turf battles.[62] As a sign of rehabilitation, a poem by Kvitko opened the September 1930 issue of *Di royte velt*. In January 1931 an article on the popularity of Kiev Yiddish readers revealed that Kvitko was the fourth most popular Soviet Yiddish writer, behind Bergelson, Markish and the younger prose writer M. Daniel (Daniel Meierovich).[63] Kvitko used even his working experience at the factory for writing, and publishing in 1931, a new book: *In trakter-tsekh* (In the Tractor Shop).

The 'proletarian' camp, however, was not ready to pardon Kvitko. The young proletarian critic Shmuel Zhukovski defined the Kvitko case as a 'relapse' (*retsidiv*, a popular word in Sovietspeak) of petty-bourgeois views. According to Zhukovski, the case helped get rid of the petty-bourgeois

abscess in Yiddish literature. The VUSPP could not deal directly with Kvitko, who was not a member of it, but it expelled his 'accomplices', Hofshtein and Itsik Kipnis, and censured Abraham Kahan, who in a letter to the *Shtern* (published on 17 September 1929) had admitted his 'creative and ideological failure'.[64] From the November–December 1929 issue of *Prolit* Hofshtein's name disappears from the list of its editors.

Litvakov, who chronicled the development of the Kvitko case, diagnosed it as a symptom of Kharkiv (most notably Epshtein's) dissidence. He presented it as one of the three concurrent 'literary mutinies against communist guidance': (1) Pilnyak's in Soviet Russian literature; (2) Kvitko's in Soviet Yiddish literature; and (3) that of Leivick, Boreisha, Reisen and Raboy in American communist literature and press.[65] Litvakov's revenge shows through in the 1931 Russian anthology of Yiddish poetry, which he prefaced: Kvitko is represented by only one poem, whereas other poets of his stature are represented by seven poems.[66] In the introduction to Kvitko's 1933 book, published in the Emes Publishing House, we read:

> The book *Gerangl*, which came out in the year of the Bolshevik offensive on all fronts and of sharpened class struggle (1929), once again mirrors the poet's vacillations. The book in question contains motifs of the revolutionary labour struggle in Germany, motifs of struggle against the petty-bourgeois, private-owning elements and, at the same time, the infamous 'Caricatures', which expressed class-alien views concerning party guidance in the field of literature.
>
> From 1930 onwards Kvitko's poetic route becomes straighter, being directed towards organic understanding and reflecting in his creative work the Revolution and Soviet reality.[67]

Ultimately, Kvitko was saved by the leading Russian children's writer Kornei Chukovsky, who, during the 1933 Kharkiv conference on children's literature, recognised in him a unique talent and later helped him to become a household name: *Lev* Kvitko. His books in Russian, Ukrainian and other translations had a print-run of many millions.[68]

Litvakov, however, never recovered from the Kharkiv assault, which was continued in the pages of *Di royte velt*. According to Epshtein's analyses, Litvakov's method combined formalism with Yiddishist nationalism and had little to do with Marxism.[69] Litvakov's situation was particularly difficult because he was attacked also by Yiddish critics from Minsk. The scandal around Litvakov became so noisy that it attracted the attention of the leaders of the All-Union Association of Proletarian Writers, VOAPP. In its resolution it protected Litvakov from his ruthless Minsk opponents, who (Dunets for example) accused him of, among other things, praising the 'raging petty-bourgeois' poet Shmuel Halkin.[70] The Soviet literary leadership was not happy that Litvakov had become the whipping boy of Yiddish literature and

argued that – despite his 'anti-Marxist mistakes' – the Minsk critics had overshot the mark in their criticism of the Moscow editor.[71]

Nevertheless, after 1929 Litvakov's influence waned. In 1930 his newspaper, *Der emes*, the existence of which had always been precarious,[72] lost its affiliation as the central organ of the party's Jewish Sections, which had been closed down. At the same time, Litvakov was left suspended in mid-air after losing his position as literary authority of the Jewish Sections. His last collection of critical articles, *Af tsvey frontn* (On Two Fronts), came out in 1931 and dealt mainly with attacking his Kharkiv and Minsk opponents. In 1932 and 1933 *Di royte velt* continued to criticise Litvakov for his approach to Yiddish literary heritage (Abchuk) and for lack of 'serious Marxist education' and 'literary taste appropriate for a communist' (Gildin).[73]

Characteristically, Litvakov played a marginal role among the Yiddish delegates to the First Congress of Soviet Yiddish Writers in August 1934: he did not make a speech, though his arch-enemies Dunets and Bronshtein were allowed the floor. In a black, farcical finale, Litvakov was accused of leading an anti-Soviet terrorist group in Minsk (of all places!) with Dunets and Bronstein among its members. He was brought to Minsk and executed there in December 1937.[74]

Conclusion

Di royte velt survived a little longer than the *Prolit*, the last issue of which came out in June 1932. In January 1933 Yiddish writers in Ukraine were given a new periodical, *Farmest* (Challenge), which soon swallowed *Di royte velt*. Consolidation was the key word of the literary 1930s, let alone that the combined readership of a few thousand could not justify the existence of two literary periodicals.

Di royte velt was arguably the most significant Soviet Yiddish literary periodical (and one of the first long-running Yiddish literary journals in the world) published in the relatively pluralistic period of the late 1920s. Essentially, it was the pluralism of 'cliques masked with ideological principles'.[75] The 'clique' around *Di royte velt* represented predominantly the circles of Yiddish literati formed in Kiev in the 1910s and 1920s. Their squabbles, too, were mainly with the 'Kievans', most notably with Litvakov, a central figure in Jewish literary life in Kiev in 1907–21. Kiev was the only place in Soviet Russia with a significant Yiddish literary tradition. In 1928 the Kharkiv-based Ukrainian journal for literary criticism wrote retrospectively about the orphanhood of Soviet Yiddish literature: 'The younger generation of [Yiddish] writers did not have living teachers. There was only their literary legacy, [but] no direct exchange of opinions and experience with the old masters of Yiddish letters.' According to the article, 'Yiddish proletarian literature originated in Ukraine – it was written by the Kiev group of young Yiddish writers.'[76]

After the pre-First World War literary experiments,[77] the post-revolutionary almanacs *Eygns* (One's Own) and *Baginen* (Dawn), produced in Kiev in 1918–20, and the short-lived Moscow-based journal *Shtrom* (Stream, 1922–24) eventually obtained a state-sponsored forum, *Di royte velt*. In marketing terms, all these publications, including *Di royte velt*, were a failure. The general Yiddish reader was conservative and not remotely interested in the literary theories debated *ad nauseam* in the journal or in the modernist poetry which dominated its literary sections. At the same time, *Di royte velt* was the most significant Soviet Yiddish literary creche, especially if we believe Nusinov, who argued that until 1924 virtually no Yiddish literature had been written in the Soviet Union.[78] Compared with *Prolit*, where fast-rising cub writers could mature into future socialist realists, *Di royte velt* played an important role in the Soviet transmogrification of established writers such as Kvitko, Markish and Der Nister. The critics, too, became transformed year after year. Nusinov, for example, stopped negating proletarian literature and began to argue that a Yiddish section in a proletarian association was the only acceptable form of Yiddish writers' organization.[79] In the 1930s he was to head the Yiddish section of the Soviet Writers' Association.

A unique role in Ukrainian Yiddish literary life was played by Itsik Fefer, who placed himself above the divide between *Di royte velt* and *Prolit*, being on the editorial boards of both journals. It is no coincidence that he headed the unified *Farmest*, with Gildin and Kvitko among the members of its editorial board. Fefer's role underlines the fact that the two Kharkiv literary journals existed and later merged as complementary forums of Soviet Yiddish literature, which was in the making in the 1920s and early 1930s.

After 1934, when Ukraine's capital was transferred to Kiev, Kharkiv saw an out-migration of Yiddish literati, primarily to Kiev and Moscow. It was, in any event, a makeshift literary centre.

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NOTES

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4 *Di yidishe velt*, No. 6, 1913, 156.
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