

Yiddish Litterateurs and American Jews: Have They Come to a Parting of the Ways?

By Judd L. Teller

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The fate of Yiddish letters has been a checkered one in this country, but on the whole a record more of triumphs than of defeats. Certainly its contribution has been major, but now, with the dwindling of its audience, American Yiddish literature has entered upon a crisis without apparent solution. The past cannot be retrieved, and without newer, younger writers and newer, younger readers the present, too, and the future, may not be possessed. This is, in essence, what Judd L. Teller's poignant article is about.

Three deaths in recent years have special and sad relevance for Yiddish letters in America. First came the suicide of "Meyer of the Schnorrers," unemployed house painter and self-styled authority on Spinoza—having bought a Yiddish book on Spinoza from Biderman's on Second Avenue in the 1930's. Then, in a rooming house in the neat East 60's death came to "Baronchik"; his body lay undiscovered for three days. Of him it had been said as far back as four decades ago by such eminent experts in apocrypha as Sholem Asch and Moshe Nadir that he never spoke Yiddish north of 14th Street. Finally news arrived of the sudden passing of Herman Gold, thick-bearded, guileless poet and tongue-tied conversationalist, a slight man but of vigorous constitution, who used to shuttle twice daily between Café Royal and his Brownsville home, and never wore an overcoat.

Death, in recent months, has claimed some of the giants of American Yiddish literature. Yet when these three individuals died, within a few months of each other, it was as though another newspaper had shut down on East Broadway. They were among the last eccentric personalities to remind one of the era when Yiddish letters had commanded respectful and enthusiastic audiences, when poets had been young enough to ensnare attractive girls, and when girls could still be attracted by Yiddish lyrics. The East Side's literary cafés—part bohemian hangouts, part Hasidic-like courts—had then been thronged by apprentice-writers and lay Lovers of the Better Word whose adulation made any writer feel the center of the universe.

The “Schnorrers” group, now defunct, had been co-founded by Meyer in the 1920’s, and had struck terror in the hearts of the older Yiddish writers of that day. The Schnorrers had hailed the bravado verse of the late Moshe Leib Halpern, probably the ranking Yiddish poet in America after Morris Rosenfeld’s passing. They had also thrown crumbs of praise to other poets who were “promising and young.” Meyer had survived the demise of the Schnorrers by several decades and, after Halpern’s death, had transferred his loyalties to some of the “In-zich” group, the “introspective-Imagist” school of Yiddish poetry.

As far as is known, Meyer had never attempted to write himself. With so many apprentices, so many mediocre practitioners around, he had preferred to be in a class alone. He spoke proudly of himself as “a taster,” a “*genisser*,” and assumed that everyone would eventually defer to his judgment. He was arrogant, offensive, arbitrary in his verdicts. In his post-Halpern years, when his taste had become more catholic, he would feel that he was bestowing an inestimable honor when he approached a lesser or young writer and told him: “Read that last thing of yours. Some lines are pretty good. Yes, pretty good.” He made a decent living at his trade, and the fact that he bought books generously gave him added status in the cafes. But in the last fifteen years of his life he was more often unemployed than employed, had embraced Communism, and turned bitter towards writers he formerly admired. Nevertheless, they all came to his funeral.

There was nothing proletarian about “Baronchik,” whose real name was Baron. He was short, slight, immaculately groomed, with mincing walk and a kiss-your-fingertips-madam manner: a boulevardier as boulevardiers were supposed to have been back in the old days. A bachelor, he made his living as an unaggressive part-time Yiddish press agent for institutions that largely concentrated on the general press and were satisfied with only several brief mentions a year in the Yiddish papers. He flitted between Yiddish writers, Hebraist scholars, and “Up town.” He never defined the latter precisely, but indicated it by dropping the names of people of distinction, and telling of repasts at “21” and the Colony. He wrote occasional music reviews for Yiddish newspapers, held membership in the Music Critics Circle, and boasted of how his opinion carried among the latter. To substantiate this boast, he would occasionally bestow a pair of tickets to a concert upon a new appointee to the editorial staff of a Yiddish paper, or upon a poet whose latest work had been praised the day before by a Yiddish critic.

Baronchik was enthralled by success. Nobody on East Broadway having thought that his “Uptown” was real, gossips tongues clove to the roofs of their mouths when they saw a number of distinguished-looking *goyim* at his funeral—among them a genteel old lady in lace, with a lorgnette, and Olin Downes of the *Times*. They had a ready explanation, however: “It’s simple. Baronchik told the *goyim* that he was important among Jews.”

Herman Gold’s life was as weird as what he wrote. Even the ultra-modernists among Yiddish writers deserted him when he began to mix stream-of-consciousness and Dada, abjure “the fashions of the *goyim*” in Yiddish literature, and urge upon his fellow writers a “*yidishn stil*” that he could neither define nor demonstrate. He would clown deliberately and speak in rhymes only—though his published poetry was in free verse. Gold was the local color that Baronchik offered to slummers from his “other world.”

Few people knew that Gold was also an expert in certain categories of Americana and well respected in the book trade for his knowledge. He kept his stock of books in his Brooklyn apartment, always knew who was searching for what, and would deliver the item wrapped in a Yiddish newspaper, personally, and demand payment on the spot—"because I hate correspondence and bills." He never missed a day at the Royal, though in all the years he frequented it he never spent a single penny there. He would badger someone into buying him a cup of coffee, and he would always have it with cake, which he obtained by digging into someone else's portion. Yet Meyer of the Schnorrers and others said that whenever they were out of work Gold would press loans on them and then refuse repayment.

Gold used to arrive at the Royal late in the afternoon, hands in pockets and swinging his shoulders in Tom Sawyerish fashion. After sitting around for two hours, just giggling and Breaking toothpicks, he used to gulp a glass of water and go home for dinner. It was a long subway ride and he would not reappear at the Royal before ten, then to sit around till it closed. Two events sped his end. The first was the death in action of his son during the recent war—something he never told anyone about. His son had married a *shikse*, he used to sigh in explanation of his whereabouts, and had settled on a farm. The second event was the closing of the Café Royal. A few months later Gold suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and diéd.

The decline of the literary café, or *kibetzarnie*, was an effect of the decline of Yiddish letters in New York. The cafés were kept going not by what writers spent in them, but by those more numerous patrons who liked to pass evenings where writers congregated. When the number of the patrons shrunk it was a portent of doom.

The devoted readers of Yiddish literature are now so few that they could all be listed in a small address book. The news spreads quickly when one of them dies; writers take their pens and scratch the name out with a sigh: he may not have been a buyer of books, he may have been only a "taster," but there will be one less to shake a writer's hand, one less in the small audience at Yiddish literary evenings. There is pathos here, and paradox, inasmuch as Yiddish writing has never been more sophisticated, nor has it ever achieved as high a level of technical excellence, as in this country right now.

Why are Yiddish letters in America losing their audience? Over 200,000 American Jews still read Yiddish newspapers, yet even the most respected of American Yiddish writers, H. Leivick, poet and dramatist, cannot count on more than two and a half per cent of them to buy his books. Is it that the reader has become indifferent out of caprice? Or that the Yiddish writer fails to communicate any more? Or that the Yiddish- *kultur* institutions, behind their show of activity, have been remiss and unimaginative? Or is it, simply and brutally, due to the "natural" process by which all non-English tongues in this country fall out of use eventually? Each of these answers gives part of the truth.

Yiddish literature in America started out primarily as the expression of an immigrant proletariat, responsive to its impulses and urges, giving vent to its sufferings, shouting its angers, proclaiming its ideals. There was constant, intense, and intimate communication between

David Edelshtadt, Joseph Bovshover, and Morris Rosenfeld on one side, and their readers on the other: a rapport of the kind that Blok and Mayakovsky in Soviet Russia and Bert Brecht in Germany tried, unsuccessfully, to achieve by reciting “*Plakat*” (poster) poetry to audiences of workers. Rosenfeld was so highly sensitive to the moods of his readers that he became both a socialist and a Zionist—in order to voice their social grievances as well as their national aspirations. These writers were followed by novelists and short-story writers like Z. Libin, Leon Kobrin, David Pinsky, and later the younger Sholem Asch, who drew upon the stuff of immigrant life—boss-worker, child-parent conflicts; the transmutation in a new country of the economic and social relations of the *shtetl*; the change in morality; the sex triangles involving the ubiquitous go-getter roomer; the gradual Americanization of the immigrant, and the abandonment of the Lower East Side for Riverside Drive or the Bronx.

This new writing weaned the reader away from the so-called “*shund roman*,” the serialized Yiddish version of the romantic and lurid pulp novel (distinguished, however, by a moralistic orientation that was totally absent from its English and German equivalents), and from romantic escape literature in general, with its improbable characters in improbable situations speaking improbable general dialogue. The *shund* novel gave the reader a chance to shed tears, and his own plight may have warranted some tear-shedding. The new fiction of Libin and Kobrin was different: it reflected the Yiddish reader’s own life, illuminated its conditions, and instructed him by example. The *shund roman* was written in Germanized purple prose. The new *roman* and *skitze* were written in an altogether natural Yiddish. A similar development affected the Yiddish stage, whose audience was tiring of the glamorous Bowery and Grand Street versions of classical drama, “*ibersetzt und farbessert*,” resplendent with Roman togas and Bar Kochba armor as worn by muscular males like Boris Tomashefsky, and resonant with corrupt *hoch-deutsch* rhetoric, high-sounding but unintelligible. The new plays dealt with the situations and moral issues of everyday life, and were couched in the vernacular.

Hardly was the struggle between *deitshmerish* and Yiddish over, when a struggle began between “*reinem*” Yiddish and “*pleinem*” Yiddish. Abraham Cahan, seer of the *Daily Forward*, championed “*pleinem*” Yiddish in reporting, editorials, and fictional dialogue. The spoken language by all means, he argued, so why write “*fenster*” when the reader used “*vinde*,” “*podloge*” when the reader used “*floor*,” “*gass*” when the reader used “*strit*”? Kobrin, Libin, Asch held a position somehow midway between Cahan and “Die Yunge” (the Young Ones).

The Yunge were aesthetes and formalists who fashioned Yiddish verse on the models of the advanced Russian and German poetry of their day. Edelshtadt, Bovshover, and Rosenfeld, coming soon after the *badchanim* and courtyard-singers, had been unschooled, primitive voices; notwithstanding their rhetorical vigor and excellence in phrasing, they had been verbally crude, addicted to Germanisms, and almost totally indifferent to rhythmic variety—though sure masters of the few meters they did command. In Europe some progress had already been made beyond this stage; J. L. Peretz, predecessor of the Yunge and general mentor of post-Sholem Aleichem writers, had ✓ experimented with many of the modern poetic forms, but was too inexpert a craftsman, too effete a lyricist, and too limited in vocabulary to establish an effective example. Both Peretz, and Chaim Nachman Bialik in his Yiddish verse, had imitated the folk song too deliberately,

and it was left to the Yunge in America to reveal Yiddish for the first time as a poetic language of subtle imagery and rhythms. Disdainful of Rosenfeld's technical narrowness and plebian themes, they made the language sophisticated. Similarly, the prose-writers among the Yunge felt superior towards the Libins and Kobrins, and suspicious of Sholem Asch.

Abe Cahan's emphasis was on sustained narrative, fast pace, sound plot, and realistic dialogue. But David Ignatov, featured with Joseph Opatoshu in the pages of the publications issued by the Yunge, was most concerned in his prose with phrasing, rhythm, and idiom. Opatoshu, on the other hand, was torn. From the first he had an instinct for narrative plot and a plain-spoken eroticism, but was not ready, apparently, for the break with the Yunge which any abandonment of formalism and aestheticism implied.

Those were days of torrid debate in Shalom's Café on Division Street. Mani Leib's delicate imagery and soft cadences answered the moods of the Jewish semi-intelligentsia from the Russian Pale, who were more emancipated than the original first wave of East European immigrants had been. The Galicians who had come here by way of Vienna could recite Heine, knew the smug middle-class cynic Peter Altenberg, had read the "daring" works of Felix Hollander and Arthur Schnitzler, and were acquainted with Otto Weininger. They responded to Reuben Iceland's nostalgic Imagist poem about Tarnov in Galicia, to Moshe Leib Halpern's savage satire that often bordered on slapstick, to Zisha Landau's risqué celebration of females with thick legs, blunt faces, and bovine movements, and to his nihilistic moods—as, for example, when he described himself lying supinely, spitting at the ceiling, happy in the knowledge that "I am Zisha Landau." The Russian Jewish intelligentsia, familiar with Andreyev's masochistic symbolism and sharing vicariously the pessimism of post-Tolstoyan Russian literature, could sympathize with that obsession with martyrdom which H. Leivick has projected in his verse and drama as if it were the essential response to Jewish destiny throughout the ages.

But Leivick's consciousness of a mission did not sit well with the sober aesthetes. Although they never openly split, distance grew between Leivick and the Yunge. Moshe Leib Halpern, too, violated their rigid aesthetic dogma. This dogma is somewhat to blame for the present isolation of Yiddish letters, and Moshe Leib Halperin is a case in point.

Though more complex than most of his colleagues, Halpern chose to take up Yiddish poetry at the point where Morris Rosenfeld had left off. But whereas Rosenfeld spoke for the Jewish immigrant in his struggle with material circumstances, Moshe Leib was more concerned with his cultural and moral adjustment. His verse evoked the rustic charm of the *shtetl* against the overpowering beauty of the skyscraper; the "*shiksl*" maidservant as seen through the prism of stern rabbinic decree and the taboos imposed by a hostile *goyish* environment were contrasted with the *shiksl* on the beach at Coney Island, hedged round no longer by inhibitions and prejudices, no longer a symbol of the *goy* Jew relation, but simply an alluring female in a bathing suit.

Halpern was excruciatingly aware of the drabness of Jewish life, a drabness that was the outcome of denial and self-denial: that dried-up garden—"Whose garden? Our garden? What else—not our garden?" The garden with withering trees—"Whose garden? Our garden? What else—not our garden?" He was also haunted by the *shtetl* he had left behind him. Depicting savagely his grandfather's piety and hypocrisy, he reveals the moral deterioration of the *shtetl* on the eve of 1914—a theme he can be said to have taken up where Mendele left it off. The Yiddish novelist Ozer Warshawsky, in *The Smugglers*, continued it for the period of World War I, while it was left to Isaac Bashevis-Singer to describe Polish Jewry in the final stages of its deterioration on the eve of 1939. Put the writings of Mendele, Halpern, Warshawsky, and Bashevis-Singer together, and you have the savage and violent, but very one-sided, chronicle of the moral crisis of East European Jewry over the last century.

Moshe Leib Halpern's influence on the development of Yiddish poetry has probably been greater than that of any other Yiddish poet, although few of those he has influenced are generous enough to admit this. "In-zich" introspectivists, for example, appeal instead to the influence of Yehoash, and their struggle with the Yunge was so bitter that they are reluctant to admit having been influenced primarily by a writer who at any time had been connected with that group. But Halpern's approach to form and theme gave their direction to such antipodal poets and schools of poetry as the In-zichists, Peretz Markish, who became the Mayakovsky of Soviet Yiddish poetry, and Uri Zvi Greenberg, now Israel's leading Hebrew poet and lyrical high priest of the extremist nationalist groups in that country. Greenberg's early Yiddish poems were imitative of Halpern's, and even his mature Hebrew idiom carries echoes of Moshe Leib.

Unfortunately for the course of Yiddish poetry in this country it was the self-centeredness of the Yunge, and not Halpern's openness to the world, that became the main tradition of American Yiddish poetry. It is to this tradition that we may ascribe, in considerable measure, the rupture of contact between contemporary American Yiddish letters and their potential readers. The Yunge might be described as Hellenistic aesthetes whose spirit ran counter to Jewish tradition with its emphasis on the didactic function of literature and art; that tradition's attitude towards entertainment for its own sake is best given in the term *bitul zman*—time-wasting, something permitted only on the more frivolous holidays like Chanukah and Purim.

The Yunge and their successors also upheld an individualism which was antipathetic to a people who held it against Joseph, son of Jacob, that he was too fond of his own person—a people whose prayers are mostly in the plural and always emphasize the redemption of the *group*. We can see why, if the aesthetic tendency won out among Yiddish writers, it lost out among Yiddish readers. That Leivick, alone of the survivors of the Yunge, still attracts an audience is explained by his deviations from their rigid creed, by his orientation towards the collectivity. Those among the In-zichists who have lately become more popular than heretofore are precisely the ones who, without compromising their aesthetic principles, have acquired a new content and now deal with their milieu instead of solely with their own personal eccentricities.

But it would be unfair to the Yunge to regard them merely as a group of conceited young men who functioned in a vacuum. They responded, consciously and unconsciously, to trends within the environment of their day. A new idea had been born, “*weltliche yidishkeit*,” and they succumbed to it. *Weltliche yidishkeit* was the East European Jews’ brand of Reform Judaism. Even as Reform itself embraced several tendencies, from modified Orthodoxy to an extreme radicalism which teetered on the brink of Unitarianism, so were there several brands of *weltliche yidishkeit*. What bound them together was an underlying faith in the capacity of the Jews to survive and function as a people outside the frame of religious traditions; they felt they could remain Jews by mere virtue of a common language, Yiddish—and faith in the advance of socialism.

It was a secular kind of messianism, and its emphasis on language came from Eastern Europe, where linguistic and cultural autonomy was the first demand of all the national minorities. This obsession with language as a means of national survival likewise had its analogy in Reform Judaism. The radical reformer, Rabbi David Einhorn, German 1848-er and American abolitionist, had warned that unless German remained the language of *Gebetbuch* and sermons there would be no substance to Reform Judaism in America. Of course, the Jewish significance of Yiddish is quite different from that of German; though not the tongue of all Jews, or even a majority of Jews, it has always been a tongue of Jews alone. But there is still another parallel between Reform Judaism and *weltliche yidishkeit*. Both movements had adherents who preached a Jewish mission in the world, and spoke of Jewish redemption—even secular—as depending on mankind’s as a whole, thus rejecting Zionism or anything like it.

Weltliche yidishkeit, or secular Judaism, was a reality among East European Jews several decades before it acquired a label and an explicit ideology. The label itself hinted at more than the ideology actually included, for *weltliche yidishkeit*, far from looking abroad into the world, exhausted itself in Yiddishism—in language fetishism. The Yiddish writer, however, flattered by the implication that his work was the very substance of Jewish survival and continuity, began to believe that the Jews were indebted to Yiddish literature for their ethnic identity, and not vice versa. This arrogance served only further to alienate prospective readers.

At the same time an invisible barrier sprang up between Yiddishism and Zionism. Ideological friction and talk of the “misalliance” with Hebraists and “*Palestinezzer*” began to make life difficult for the Yiddishists among the Zionists and the Zionists among the Yiddishists. By gravitating towards the Yiddishists, the American Yiddish writer became estranged from the Yiddish-speaking Zionists in his audience. A man like Harry Sackler, for example, author of plays and novels in Yiddish and Hebrew, and of a novel in English, was a stranger among the writers, though well received by Yiddish critics—he was a deliberate Hebraist and a fervent Zionist, an unpardonable combination.

Nor, pledged as he was to anti-clericalism, did the Yiddish writer bother to engage the curiosity of the religious Jew, but behaved as though the latter did not exist. But he did, and in numbers sufficient to build many Talmud Torahs and yeshivas that have outlived the popularity of the Yiddishist school.

Thus the Yiddish writer was cut off from the three major trends in Jewish life—socialism, Zionism, Orthodoxy (although still pretending to a sympathy for the first). Retiring into himself, he ceased to converse with his environment, not only intellectually, but even physically. He settled in cooperative apartment houses where he could be assured of a few like-minded neighbors, and he sent his children to *yidish-weltliche* schools where the language cult was supreme, and to summer camps run on the same lines. He lived in an insulated world where he could cling to the illusion that his doctrine was taking root and would eventually overcome all other trends and tendencies in the American Jewish world. The result was a cultivated ignorance of life.

Few Jews who call themselves Jews are as oblivious as some Yiddish poets and novelists are, even today, to Jewish affairs. The name of a Jewish institution or personality reported in the Yiddish press almost daily for decades will still bemuse some of them as something vaguely familiar but hard to identify. And this state of affairs is reflected in the very substance of American Yiddish letters. It may also account for the fact that American Yiddish literature has produced relatively few fiction writers. The poet can draw upon himself better than the novelist, who depends on his milieu even when he flees it. Novels deal with many men, not with one, and with customs, not with idiosyncracies.

Yet while withdrawing from the Jewish environment in which he actually lived, the Yiddish writer strove to make contact with “the world at large,” especially “America.” “*Amerikaner kolorit*” in a poem or short story was acclaimed. A very minor Yiddish poet was long remembered reverently as “*der dichter fun die ershte tennis lieder oif yidish*” (for some reason, Yiddish writers regarded tennis as a symbol of Americanism). David Ignatov, aesthete and novelist, was regarded as an Americanizer: women with names like Lyuba, Nadya, Vera, and Sonya, used to stroll along “East Broadwayska Ulitza” in the evening, immersed in discussions of “problems” and humming Lermontov; Ignatov changed some of that by describing also another kind of woman, with an American name and an American type of occupation.

Several writers who emerged with the Yunge, or came up at about the same time, attempted a kind of Jewish-American “regionalism.” To this category belonged J. J. Schwartz’s narrative poem “Kentucky,” a short novel by A. Raboi about Jewish farmers and cowboys, and Baruch Glazman’s distinguished novel, *Oif die Felder fun Georgia*, a kind of Yiddish version of *The Temptation of St. Anthony* that tells the story of a pious peddler’s confrontation with a Negro widow who provides him a night’s lodgings somewhere “*oif die felder fun Georgia*.” For some reason, the later works of these same writers, though superior stylistically and structurally, almost never matched the realistic vigor of their first stories and novels, which were written about an America of which they were still part, and before their retreat into Yiddish fetishism.

Joseph Opatoshu is a most striking case in point. His early novel *Hebrew*, about the dominance of the *grober yung* in Jewish education, was immature, yet it recorded a part of reality. *Grand Street*, produced several decades later, in the 1930's, from the shelter of the Yiddishist ghetto, is contrived and evokes very little of the real Grand Street, just about two blocks north of the *Day*, to which Mr. Opatoshu contributes regularly, and the same may be said of a large portion of the considerable volume of his fiction about America. The fragmentary last writings of Lamed Shapiro, that tortured perfectionist, seem to indicate that he might have produced a major work about American Jewry had he lived longer. But Shapiro was quite removed, occupationally and even physically, from the Yiddish writers' ghetto.

At about the same time that Ludwig Lewisohn began moving towards the Jewish community, the Yiddish aesthetes began to go in the opposite direction—"out into the world" to produce a "non-sectarian" Yiddish literature. But they had overlooked several things. *Weltliche yidishkeit* had had meaning in Poland, where the old mores were strong and deeply rooted. But over here the Jew was shedding his traditions more rapidly than the Yiddishists realized. They counted on a language, and on that language alone, to hold the Jewish community together, yet Yiddish was one of the things the American Jew was getting rid of as excess baggage—and as unnecessary to his Jewishness. Yet only as the vehicle of Jewishness could it have had any chance of surviving. But for Yiddish to be restricted to this function was exactly what the Yiddish writer viewed as an impoverishment. In any case, it never became an issue.

In this country it is institutions and enterprises that are designed to satisfy the specific sectarian needs and yearnings of the Jewish community, not a separate tongue. The homes for the aged, Jewish hospitals and all-day Jewish schools, Jewish centers and the Jewish Museum, do not merely parallel existing non-sectarian institutions: they also give the Jew what he does not get from the larger community, and that is why they exist. Yiddish literature, once it tried to do the same thing as writing in English, became superfluous. By stressing cosmopolitanism and understating distinctive Jewish interests, American Yiddish literature became beside the point for American Jews. If the Yiddish press has fared better than Yiddish belles-lettres, it is precisely because it is sectarian.

Yiddish bohemia had just about passed its crest in the early 1920's, when the In-zich group threw down the gauntlet to the Yunge. This caused a stir, and the disintegration of Yiddish bohemia was postponed.

Against the anti-intellectualism of the Yunge, against their aversion to "ideas," their prim formalism, their "poetic" vocabulary and themes, their instinct and inspiration, the In-zichists upheld "thought" and learned references, free verse and expository statements—as Moshe Leib, of course, had done before them. The Yunge had modeled Yiddish poetry on modern German and Russian poetry—on Symbolism; the In-zichists brought it in contact with modernist post-Symbolism, with American and English verse. From Yehoash, who single-handedly transformed Yiddish through his translation of the Bible, they learned to give it a Hebraic classic luster.

Their windows were thrown wide open upon the world as far as subjects were concerned. A. Glantz-Leyeles, their ranking poet, exhibits their catholicity of interests in poems that range from Freud to Trotsky. A long poem of his, *Die Almone un Er*, in which Lenin's widow has an imaginary confrontation with Stalin after the Moscow Trials, is one of the profound contributions of this period and deserves a place near Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*. Yet there is very little in his earlier verse, aside from its language (and two historical plays and some desultory poems), that identifies him as Jewish, and almost nothing that links him specifically with the American Jewish community. Yet Glantz-Leyeles, a political commentator as well as poet—a rare combination among Yiddish poets—and also active as a territorial-nationalist, has been incomparably more aware than others in In-zich of the existence of a Jewish community. Those others seem, or seemed, to be off in some never-never land.

One can undoubtedly cite single instances of works, or writers, to refute this, but I am more concerned with the group as a whole. The fact is that the general trend of American Yiddish letters was asocial in relation to the American and worldwide Jewish community. The epithet “assimilationist,” hurled so indiscriminately by Yiddish writers, defines many of them as well as anything else could.

Some Yiddish writers, however, awoke early to the realization of their position—Baruch Glazman, the novelist, for one. Perhaps it was because he had come here as a youngster and was, it would seem, the only Yiddish writer who could switch with ease from Yiddish to English, who had worked at many trades, and seen all parts of the United States. American writers were going to Paris to live as expatriates. Glazman, too, became an expatriate, settling in Warsaw to live in streets where Yiddish was still a living tongue. He was too American, however, to feel at home there, and finally he returned.

The Yiddish Communists capitalized early on the feeling of isolation that began to haunt American Yiddish writers in the 1920's. The Communist *Freiheit*, strange to say, became known as “*an achsanya far 'n besern yidishn vort*”—an “inn for good Yiddish literature.” Cahan of the *Forward* may have been too rigid and prejudiced in his views of literature, but the *Freiheit* lifted all bolts. It printed hopeless novices along with sophisticated ultra-modernists whose words were Sanskrit to its “proletarian” readers; it feted writers and assembled dutifully enthusiastic audiences for literary evenings. The *Freiheit* also benefited from the reflected glory of the USSR, where the government at that time subsidized a Yiddish publishing house, Yiddish newspapers, Yiddish schools and theaters, and even maintained Yiddish-language law-courts and regional administrations. “West Side” Jewry would have no truck with Yiddish and the Zionists were “bigoted” Hebraists, but in Russia a government, no less, felt differently about Yiddish. Yiddish writers could not help being overcome. Several were invited to the USSR for festive tours on which they addressed rallies, were honored at banquets, and assured that their collected works would soon be issued in Soviet editions. The *Freiheit* held out all these blandishments and, at first, asked for nothing in return except the right to exploit one's name. Hence some of the most distinguished figures in Yiddish literature became associated with the *Freiheit*. But this only increased and intensified the alienation of the Yiddish writer from the general American Jewish community.

In 1929 the sky fell in. The *Freiheit* endorsed the Mufti's pogroms in Palestine. The big names said goodbye to the paper and denounced it publicly. For a while the Socialists and Labor Zionists made a fuss over them, both groups being pledged to the furtherance of Yiddish culture, and they were feted in a style almost like that of the Communists. The refugees from the *Freiheit's* hospitality started *Die Woch*, a weekly devoted to Yiddish literature and comment on the general state of Jewish affairs. This was a crucial stage in American Yiddish letters, for Yiddish writers were now groping for contact with the American Jewish mainland. But *Die Woch* did not last more than a few months. There was supposed to be internal dissension, but what was conclusive was a shortage of money.

Of the several movements pledged to Yiddish culture, none apparently made a real effort to keep *Die Woch* going. The reasons were obvious and understandable: the writers of *Die Woch* formed an independent publishing association and were intemperate, perhaps, in their independence of attitude. Weekly editorial comments, usually penned by the poet Menachem Boraisha—who, along with critic Shin Niger, was among the few Yiddish literateurs truly concerned with the problems of the American Jewish community—showed a reckless disrespect for the stale platitudes that were the stock in trade of most of the leaders of the Yiddish-speaking movements—which even today number many thousands of members. These salaried “leaders,” really functionaries, moderately capable, excessively aggressive, and inordinately ambitious, were, and are, as a rule somewhat awkward in the use of words despite their rhetorical concern with *kultur*; they profess concern for the intellectual, yet are wary of him. In the early 1920's there were Yiddish writers, outside the Yunge and In-zich, who were genuinely concerned with communal affairs, and particularly Zionism, yet the *kultur* leaders, though they complained about the uninterest of Yiddish writers, jostled them out of the way.

This may explain the inconstancy of some Yiddish writers. Their break with the *Freiheit* had certainly demonstrated their capacity for moral outrage, but their treatment in the hands of the anti-Communists soon caused a number of them to remember the Communist fleshpots with yearning. Made brittle by the indifference of professional *kultur*niks, they succumbed when the Communists in the 1930's offered them leftist audiences under neutral auspices. The neutral platforms collapsed in 1936, when the Communists endorsed a new edition of the Mufti's pogroms, but were rebuilt a year later. It took the 1939 Stalin-Hitler pact to collapse them for good. Those Yiddish writers who have since then consented to front for the Reds are either village idiots or prostitutes.

These excursions of the American Yiddish writer into public affairs along the road from East Broadway to Union Square had no real effect on the direction of American Yiddish letters. Each trip in either direction produced several sheaves of superficial poems and short stories, testimony to a shipboard romance, a toll paid for a short journey. Public affairs and issues continued to leave the average Yiddish litterateur indifferent. It took Hitler, not Stalin, to wake him up.

The places in Europe from which even the American Yiddish aesthete had drawn most of his images, allusions, and cadences were now Nazi-ruled territory, where Jews from all Europe were being herded into barbed-wire ghettos, starved to death, and massacred. Poland,

Galicia, the Ukraine had always been less remote for the American Yiddish writer than the New York in which he had been actually living for decades. Poland had a Yiddish-speaking mass audience; it was the capital and metropolis of what Leyeles once proudly called the far-flung and explosive “Yiddish empire,” the one area of the globe where Yiddish writers still hoped, like Joshua ben Nun, to stop the sun in its tracks and prevent it from setting on Yiddish. Poland had been the Zion of *weltliche yidishkeit*, and when it went up in a holocaust American Yiddish literature was brought face to face with the outside world in all its starkness.

Now the American Yiddish writer had to face up to himself, and explain himself to himself—explain his overlong dalliance in the Lotus Land of non-sectarian *yidishkeit* and his lack of concern with anything Yiddish but the tongue itself. The poet Jacob Glatstein, In-zichist (and familiar to the readers of these pages), had drawn on Eliot, Pound, Joyce, and Moshe Leib Halpern; now he published a credo in verse that gave the signal for a major change of direction in American Yiddish letters. His poem “*A Gute Nacht Velt*,” bade good night to “the stinking world” and announced the poet’s figurative “return to the ghetto.” For several years thereafter, as horrible news kept coming from Europe to eclipse all else, lament became the central and exclusive theme of American Yiddish literature. Most of it may have lacked Glatstein’s artistic discipline, but made up for that by its spontaneity.

But this effort of the Yiddish writers to communicate with their environment had come too late. They had been joined to their generation by the accident of shipwreck, but Jewish life could not go on forever in an atmosphere of catastrophe and panic. When normality was restored, the spell was broken and the American Yiddish writer was again shunted back into his isolation.

American Yiddish writers have been moved by Israel, but only fitfully and ambivalently by comparison with the rest of the American Jewish community. They were better at lamentation than at anything else, but Israel’s cause, belonging very much to the present and future, and not the past, demanded a commitment and a self-involvement that were hard to achieve after a quarter-century of self-imposed isolation and introspection. What few commitments the American Yiddish writer had made in the past, tenuous though they were, had been unfortunate. He had flirted with Communism, but Communist Russia went and singled out Yiddish writers for prison and Yiddish letters for extirpation. He had espoused *weltliche yidishkeit*, yet it is generally conceded that the Yiddishist schools have produced fewer Yiddish-speaking youths and Yiddish newspaper readers than the Orthodox all-day schools that concentrated on God instead of Peretz. He had spurned Zionism as a conventional, bourgeois movement, but Zionism went and produced pioneers who were not afraid to risk their skins. He had committed himself to cosmopolitanism, yet he screamed treason when anyone wrote “for the *goyim*”—that is, in English.

Few American Yiddish writers, barring refugees of the Nazi and postwar periods, are now under fifty. Many celebrated their fiftieth birthdays in the last several years and were hailed on these occasions as “young and promising” by elders on either side of sixty. The divisions between the In-zichists and the Yunge have long since faded. Peace has been restored between Shin Niger, the stalwart academic

critic, and the youngest of the aging “young” modernists. The only lingering sect is that of the Bronx Brahmins, “*die bronsker gruppe*” (very few of whom still live in the Bronx), writers brought together by mere physical proximity as neighbors of Leivick and Opatoshu.

The major preoccupation of the American Yiddish writer is the future of Yiddish and the absence of *nachwuks*, of new younger writers. He was not always so solicitous on this score. He has developed deep-seated resentments against: (a) “*goyim*,” (b) assimilationists, (c) Israel’s treatment of Yiddish. The terms “*goyim*” and “assimilationist” are always synonymous but are used interchangeably. When it is said of a writer that he “has gone to the *goyim*,” it may mean that a book of his has been translated into English, or it may only mean that Commentary has printed him. There is hardly a Yiddish writer, with the exception of the late Herman Gold, who has not daydreamed of taking a stroll to the “*goyim*,” but Sholem Asch will never live down the fact that he has tarried so successfully among them.

Some writers have charged that Yiddish is being persecuted in Israel, others have complained that it has been wilfully neglected there, and still others have kept silent on the subject. A theory has been advanced that those who charge persecution are the ones without hope of ever being translated into Hebrew; those who complain of willful neglect are in the process of negotiation; and the ones who keep silent have even vivid visions of Israeli editions of their collected works. This writer can vouch for the lack of truth in this theory.

The fact is that the Hebraists, with Ben Gurion not least among them, fought Yiddish as a rival of Hebrew in the pioneering days long before the state came into being. They are now no longer afraid of Yiddish because almost half the Israelis are Oriental Jews, and the other half probably dominated by sabras, Germans, and other non-Yiddishists. Nonetheless there is something offensive in the patronizing assurances made by Israeli leaders that the Yiddish writer has no ground for fear and that what is worthwhile in Yiddish will eventually “be poured into Hebrew jugs.” Prime Minister Ben Gurion is no longer worried about Peretz, but has now, it is said, launched a crusade against a somewhat more formidable aspect of Galut culture—the Babylonian Talmud. . . .

The depressing atmosphere of a convalescent home to which affluent children retire their perfectly healthy but aging parents hovers over American Yiddish letters today. These people, sound of mind and of sturdy constitution, are eager to make themselves useful, but few want their skills.

Sometime ago I was stopped in the street by one of the most sensitive of Yiddish lyricists, a man unusually remote from the world even for a Yiddish writer. After an exchange of amenities he asked: “Tell me about those Yemenites. Are they really Jews?” He was not pulling my leg. My response was in the affirmative. “Really?” he wondered. “Isn’t it the Zionist in you that’s speaking? Would they, for example, understand my poems?” “No.” “Not a word of Yiddish?” “Not a word.” “See!” he cried, and walked away confirmed in his gloom. But even if his poems were translated into Hebrew or Arabic, the Yemenites still would not understand them, really: his landscape and cadences have always been Russian, his moods about as universal as the Ukrainian steppe. But his questions revealed something of the underlying

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attitude of many Yiddish writers in America. The personal pronoun has so often stood between them and their community that Yiddish itself has become a personal pronoun.

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