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March 26, 1993

To: Richard Siegel
National Foundation for Jewish Culture
FAX: 212-629-0508
FROM: David G. Roskies
FAX: 011-7095-975-2160
RE: Yiddish Theater Revival in Russia

What I am transmitting to you is a rough translation of a prospectus-manifesto for a professional Jewish theater in Russia. I have met twice with Josef Lefkovitch, the director and mastermind of this project and am truly impressed by his honesty and energy. He is 62 years old, but doesn't look a day over 50. He has worked all his life in the theater and ever since the summer of 1948, when the entire network of Yiddish theaters was closed down, has dreamed of this moment in time. What most impresses me is his perception that the new Jewish theater must be trilingual — though the tradition since Day One has been to make the Jewish theater the exclusive domain of Yiddish. What he envisions is a repertory ensemble that would perform initially ten times a month, and every few months would add something new to its repertoire. He insists that the \$14,000 is all he needs to put his theater on its feet and that it would be self-supporting from thereon in. He believes that each actor would take home 15,000 rubles/month just on the sale of tickets. I have no reason to doubt his sincerity. Based on my own experience during the past 6 weeks, a few dollars go a very long way. The question, then, is whether there's a donor out there, or a community, willing to adopt this project as its own. If \$14,000 is all it takes — it's the biggest bargain since the sale of Manhattan Island!

Perhaps you could have someone retype the proposal so as to make it more presentable. Of course you are free to edit. I'll try to get you whatever additional information you need.

Memorandum

From: Yosef Lefkovitch
 Artistic Director, Free Jewish Stage "Sahkan"
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 Russia

In present-day Russia, despite the extraordinary revival of Jewish national self-awareness, the material and spiritual culture of the Jews in general and their theatrical culture in particular are on an abysmally low level. Once upon a time, this Russia of ours gave the world unsurpassed examples of theater arts and such great names^{as} Granovsky, Mikhoels, Zuskin, Goldblat, Chagall, Tishler, Falk, and many more. Yet today, the few ^{as-it-were} "existing" theaters have been turned into a ^{pseudo-} Russian, ^{pseudo-} Yiddish ~~but rather~~ stammering ersatz theater that's busy cashing in on ^{phony-} Jewish themes. Not infrequently, this theater degenerates into ~~then~~ a venue for bad taste and even anti-Semitic jokes.

We are a group of professional Yiddish actors who have spent many years trying to revive the national ~~the~~ Jewish theater ^{that} ~~was~~ brutally suppressed in 1949 ^{and ~~then~~ has existed from hand-to-mouth} following the attempted ^{therefore} revival in 1962. We have decided to establish our own, ensemble independent free of any ~~and off~~ state apparatus and have chosen ~~decided~~ to call it "The Free Jewish Stage Sahkan." It is our desire to build upon the best traditions of the old theater in Russia and the millennial traditions of Jewish culture in order to revive and to further strengthen an authentic cultural ~~and~~ edifice for the benefit of Russian and world Jewry.

In order to further our purely cultural goals and a range of not-for-profit activities, we have established a corporation called "Neshome" ~~whose~~ ^{designed} job it will be to ~~underwrite~~ provide financial ~~backing~~ support for our various endeavors through a tightly controlled budget and bank account.

Thus far the permanent staff of our theater is made up of only four actors. Given our present need for mobility and our extremely limited resources, our four-person ensemble is the ideal configuration. Once our operational base expands, however, with the addition of a professional support staff

of musicians and technicians, the number will surely grow until it reaches a natural plateau. ~~Additional talent is indeed waiting~~
A pool of additional talent indeed already exists, as a significant number of actors from the Moscow Yiddish Theater group Shalom and from the Yiddish Musical Theater of Birobidzan (which is also based in Moscow), would gladly join our collective should the conditions be favorable.

To inaugurate our theater and put it on the map we have chosen a production called "The Living Branch" that will lay out the aesthetic and ethical principles by which we will henceforth be guided. The production is made up of individual scenes, monologues, songs and poems drawn from the repertoire of the Moscow Yiddish theater where we previously worked and which took on the name of "Shalom" three years ago. Holding these disparate pieces together are monologues, poetry and song written expressly for our production, ^{and} designed to dramatize the tortuous ~~exist~~ path followed by our fledgling theatrical collective from ~~the~~ 1962 until the present day. Its form is episodic, but its theme is continuity.

The cornerstone of our future repertoire will be original dramatic works that reflect Jewish themes and issues of the present century. This new repertoire will be made up ^{both} of original works, especially commissioned for the theater, and adaptations of modern and ancient classics, as well as of world literature that deal with Jewish themes. In addition to "The Living Branch," the following six productions are already in the planning stage:

1. Menakhem-Mendel by Sholem Aleichem - a classic work on the eternal tragicomical struggle between Jewish dreams and Jewish reality;
2. Stop this Plane! by Ephraim Sevela - a one-man show about the barren existence of the contemporary "little man;"
3. Song of Songs adapted by Moyshe Teyf and Khayim Beder on the power of love to overcome Jewish suffering in modern, as in biblical times;
4. Shusha by I. B. Singer - a contemporary classic set in interwar Poland on the love of two young people caught between the destructive, deadly forces of Hitler and Stalin;

5. Kaddish - a dramatic commemoration for the victims of Stalin's terror, 1948 - 1953;
6. Purim-shpil - a biblical farce playing off the socio-political problems of today.

Other literary works that we are considering include: David Bergelson's historical drama Prince Reuveni, F. Kandel's The Gates of Our Exodus, F. Kandel's Tit for Tat, K. Gamsun's The Polish Jew, Lessing's Nathan the Wise, L. Trauberg's dramatization of Sholem Aleichem's Tevye, Thomas Mann's Joseph and his Brothers, Leon Feuchtwanger's The Jew Süß, ~~and Feuchtwanger's~~ The Family Oppenheim, The Jewess of Toledo (or The Spanish Ballad), A. Kuprin's Shulamith and K. Gutkov's King Saul.

And so you can see ^{how high} ~~that~~ we have set our ~~knights~~ sights. ^{This is because,} Although we have just taken our first steps, our theater has already attracted an extremely talented collective of dramatists, composers, directors and ~~the~~ crew. In contrast, our financial resources to produce the costumes, stage decorations, the lighting, sound, to rent ~~a~~ space [&] rehearsal space, not to speak of salaries are next to none. We simply have not found any sponsorship. All we have going for us is the absolute certainty that there is an audience out there hungry for our repertoire and this knowledge fuels our optimism. Sooner or later our moral and artistic potential will be realized. Of this we are certain.

Yosef Lefkovitch
Artistic Director
The Free Jewish Stage, Sahkan

Projected Budget for a Three-Month Run of
The Living Branch

(All figures in \$ US dollars)

1. Salary	3,625
Mandatory benefits	1,415
Sub-total	<hr/> 5,040
2. Rent for rehearsal space	1,670
3. Transportation	1,170
4. Publicity	1,000
5. Sound & recording	1,000
6. Administrative costs (typing, copying, postage, telephone, office equipment, bank fees, registration fees, unforeseen expenses)	1,000
7. Materials (costumes, fabrics, shoes, make-up, lighting, building materials for props & set design)	3,270
Total	<hr/> 14,150

Signed: Y. Lefkovitsk
Artistic Director

L. Pievskaya
Chief Accountant, Neshome Ltd