

**УВАЖАЕМЫЙ ТОВАРИЩ!**

Правление Центрального Дома  
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посвященный 70-летию со дня рождения

**ПЕРЕЦА МАРКИША**  
(1895—1952)

Председательствует

**С. С. Наровчатов**

**ВЫСТУПЛЕНИЯ ПИСАТЕЛЕЙ  
И ДЕЯТЕЛЕЙ ИСКУССТВ**

**ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННАЯ ЧАСТЬ**



די משפחה מאדקישי

# THE FAMILY MARKISH

**A Case Study in the  
Struggle of Soviet Jewry**

The Soviet Jewry Committee  
Jewish Community Council of Metropolitan Boston  
72 Franklin Street  
Boston, Massachusetts 02110  
United States of America  
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The cover illustration features a picture of the distinguished Soviet Jewish poet Peretz Markish, and an invitation to an evening held in his memory in Moscow, 1965. Twenty years after Stalinist Russia assassinated Peretz Markish, a holder of the Order of Lenin, his family is still struggling to fulfill a basic human right Markish fought for in his own career, the right to live as Jews.

During the second week in April, 1972, Esther Markish, wife of the Yiddish poet, suffered a stroke which resulted in the paralysis of her right arm. According to the Soviet doctor's own diagnosis, the stroke was caused by the emotional stress she has undergone in her continually frustrated efforts to leave the Soviet Union. On returning home from the hospital, Esther received the sixth "categorical refusal" from the Soviet officials who suggested the possibility of her ultimate release pending "good behavior." Neither Esther nor her son David could be intimidated so easily.

The government, however, had other plans in store. Two weeks later, David Markish, along with thirteen other Soviet Jewish activists, received notice to report for a medical examination. In order to "keep them out of trouble" the government had decided to induct them into the Red Army. Due to illness, David did not report. Then, on May 7, the unexpected happened: Each of the fourteen men renounced his Soviet citizenship, declared himself to be an Israeli citizen and promptly WENT INTO HIDING. These young Jews refused to be silenced or censored just at the time when Richard Nixon would be making his crucial visit to the Soviet Union. They pleaded for the American President to speak on their behalf. Subsequently, three men have been arrested and a maximum penalty of seven years imprisonment hangs over each of them. No word has been heard since from either David or Esther Markish. All telephone communication has been blocked.

We urge you to appeal by telegram, telephone and letter to all relevant Soviet and national officials for the Markish family's immediate release.

August 12, 1972 will mark the twentieth yortsayt of the murder of Peretz Markish, David Bergelson, Itsik Fefer, David Hofshteyn, Shmuel Persov, Leyb Kvitko -- a generation of Jewish writers and artists. It is hoped that this pamphlet, The Family Markish, will aid you, your school, publication or community to commemorate the date publicly. This unprecedented crime must be remembered and condemned. The orphans of the crime, David Markish and all young Jews left without a model, without a trace of Jewish cultural creativity, must be rescued.

PERETZ MARKISH was born on December 7, 1895 in Poland in Volhynia. His parents were poor. He studied in cheder until he was ten. From the ages of 9-11 he lived with his parents in the town of Romanov (which he subsequently described in his famous poem Volin). He left home and lived in Berditshev, Odessa, and Moidavia. For a while he became a "meshoyer," a choirboy in a Berditshev synagogue. He also worked as a bank clerk, a private tutor and a daytime labourer. During the first world war he was drafted into the Czarist army and was wounded on the front. He was freed from the military during the February Revolution and settled in Yekaterinoslav.



At age 15 he began writing poems in Russian (his widow also discovered a notebook of his youthful poems in Hebrew). He made his literary debut in Yiddish in 1917 with a poem entitled "Fighter" published in the Yekaterinoslav Der Kemfer. In 1918 he wrote his poem Volin. His first book of verse appeared in Kiev in 1919 entitled Shveln and soon afterward his books Pust un Pas, Shtiferish, Nokhn Telerl fun Himl, In Mitn Veg, works that immediately established his position among the forefront of modernist Yiddish poetry. His poetic language was colloquial and bombastic--a radical departure from the romantic, controlled verse that so characterized his predecessors. Here is a poem from his first volume Shveln (Thresholds):

I don't know whether I'm at home  
or homeless,

I'm running, my shirt  
unbuttons, no bounds, nobody  
holds me, no beginning,  
no end

my body is foam  
smelling of wind

ווייס איך נישט, צי כ'בין אין דר'היים,

צי אין דער פרעמד —

איך לויף!...

צעשפיליעט אז מ'זען העמד,

ניטא ז'אייף מיר קיין צוים,

כ'בין קיינעמס נישט, כ'בין הפקר,

אז אן אנהייב, אז א סוף...

מ'זען גוף איז שוים,

און ס'שמעקט פֿון אים מיט ווינט;

מנין נאמען איז: „אצינד“...

NOW

צעווארף איך מיניגע הענט,  
דערלאנגען זיי די וועלט פֿון איין עק ביון צווייטן,  
די אויגן כ'לאז געווענדט,  
פֿארטרינקען זיי די וועלט פֿון אונטן ביז ארויף!

is my name. I spread my arms, my hands  
pierce the extremes  
of what is. I'm letting my eyes roam around  
and do their drinking from the foundations  
of the world

מיט אויגן אָפֿענע, מיט אַ צעשפּילעט העמד,  
מיט הענט צעשפּרייטע,  
ווייס איך ניט, צי כ'האָב אַ הייס,  
צי כ'האָב אַ פֿרעמד,  
צי כ'בין אָן אַנהייב, צי אַ סוף...

eyes wild, shirt ballooning,  
my hands separated by the world, I don't know  
if I have a home  
or have a homelessness,  
or am a beginning or an end.

translated by Aramand Schwerner

During the Civil War and the ensuing pogroms against Jews in the Ukraine, rumours were spread that Peretz Markish had perished and obituary notices appeared about him in the Yiddish press.

### REBEL AND REVOLUTIONARY

At the end of 1921 he left Russia and came to Poland where he published his famous poem (on the Ukrainian pogroms) Di Kupe (The Dung Heap), and his book Radio. Along with Uri Zvi Greenberg and Melech Ravitch (both alive today), he founded and edited the journal of Yiddish expressionism Khaliastre (The Gang).

Markish was idolized by the young Jews of Warsaw, especially by leftist circles and by women. The impact he made in those Warsaw years has recently been described in the following terms: "A man enters the scene who storms the old way of life. For such a one as myself, Markish was the only Yiddish writer who knew what he wanted. And the first Yiddish writer who spoke to us in Warsaw loud and clear in the name of the October Revolution. In Poland, Markish gave the impression that he personally, in his fiery speeches and his poetic utterances, represented the Russian Revolution. We saw in him the messenger of the new Jew from 'over there' from the other side of the Red border....." <sup>1</sup>

Peretz Markish (lower) with Avrom Sutskever, the editor of the leading Yiddish literary journal published at the present time, Di Goldene Keyt, (The Golden Chain). Published in Tel-Aviv.

In late 1922 and early 1923 he visited Paris and London. Ilya Ehrenburg wrote in his memoirs that when he and Markish would walk together through the streets of Paris, French women would stop and exclaim: "Look, Byron!" In August 1923, Markish moved to Berlin where he lived in abject poverty and at the end of that year he visited Palestine. He is said to have declared during that visit that two great things were being created in the world: the Russian revolution and the Jewish settlement in Palestine. Nevertheless, he was drawn more to the former than to the latter.

In 1925 he returned to Poland where he was extremely active in the journal Literarische Bleter which he had helped found the year before. At the end of 1926 he left Poland for the Soviet Union where he soon experienced a severe crisis and a deep despair about the possibilities of creating a Yiddish literary and cultural centre under Soviet conditions. For a while, he even considered leaving Russia once and for all. However, in a letter written to Melch Ravitch in October, 1928, he was full of hope that he would be able to continue his literary career unfettered. His hopes were short lived.



#### THE ARTISTIC STRAIGHT - JACKET

On May 11, 1928 Markish published a chapter of his poem Nit Gedayget (Keep Your Chin Up) in the Warsaw Literarische Bleter. Immediately, the wrath of the "proletarian" Yiddish establishment descended upon him. Markish was severely censored for the "sin" of having contributed to a foreign Yiddishist publication, which "sin" he was forced to recant in public. On May 27, 1929, at an evening in honour of Markish's Dor Oys, Dor Ayn (The Generations Go On) and Briders (Brothers), M. Litvakov (editor of Der Emes) said of these works that their revolutionary heroes were "ideologically fettered by nationalistic shortcomings" and he complained that "the heroes... are almost exclusively Jewish." Markish replied: "No one ever criticizes a Russian novel... for dealing exclusively with Russian revolutionaries." Itsik Fefer attacked Markish's collection of verse Farklepte Tsiferblatn (Pasted Dials) for having smuggled in a "certain Zionist contraband."

Markish was the leading personality in Soviet Yiddish literature. His plays were performed in the Yiddish State theatres of the Soviet Union and he continued to write prose and poetry prolifically. In 1939 he was awarded the Order of Lenin.

#### AFTER AUSCHWITZ

Markish reacted profoundly to the German occupation of Poland and especially to the plight of Polish Jewry as can be seen from his poem "Tsu a Yiddisher tentserin" (To a Jewish Dancer). This, and other works expressing his national sentiment, could not be published after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was signed. In May 1941 his new play Kol Nidre was produced in Russian on the stages of Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev. 2

The return to the classic tradition of Yiddish literature became clearly evident in the columns of Heymland, a literary publication that made its appearance in 1943, at the height of the struggle against the Nazis. The first issue published an epic poem by Markish, The Jewish Warrior, full of reference to the Prophets and the heroes of past Jewish generations. Its leit-motif was the eternal nature of the Jewish people: "As long as one Jew remains on earth/ There will be a Jewish people that will live forever." 3

Markish's revolutionary enthusiasm had waned in the grim reality of Soviet socialism and deep Jewish feelings had surfaced. There is a description of him at a memorial gathering for Polish Jews held in Moscow after the war. Markish "buried his face in his delicate hands--the proud figure sagged, and from the eyes burst a flood of tears. When Itsik Feffer stated that the gathering demonstrated 'the friendship of the Jewish peoples,' Markish remonstrated 'there are no two Jewish peoples. One cannot split up the Jewish people into Polish Jews and Russian Jews. Everywhere we are and shall remain one entity.'"

In 1948, the first incident occurred that was a harbinger of the disaster to come: Shlomo Mikhoels, director of the Moscow Yiddish State Theatre, was run over by a car in Minsk. Markish, a close friend and a colleague of Mikhoels, was the first person to acknowledge this act as premeditated murder. He wrote a long elegy in memory of his friend entitled:

"S. Mikhoels--a ner-tomid oyf zayn orn" (S. Mikhoels--An Eternal Light over his Coffin). One of the concluding stanzas goes as follows:

Der forhang lozt zikh nit arop,  
Nit far dem toyt shlisen di oygn dayne zikh  
atsinder tsu shoyn.  
Es vet a dor a gantser trogn shtolts dayn gob,  
Vi du fun folk--di goldene yerushe.

(The curtain does not fall/Not in dying do your eyes close now/  
An entire generation will bear your gifts with pride/As  
you once bore the golden legacy of our people.)

From left to right: Mendl Elkin, Peretz Hirshbeyn, Uri Zvi Greenberg, Peretz Markish, Melech Ravitch and I. J. Singer.



### IMPRISONMENT and DEATH

Markish was tortured over a period of four years in the notorious Lubyanka prison and was murdered on the night of August 12, 1952, together with 23 other leading Jews. The ghastly deed slipped into history without proper recognition. It was the culmination of Stalin's destruction of the Yiddish cultural elite during "the black years." From 1948 to 1953, 238 Yiddish writers, 87 painters, 99 actors, and 19 musicians--a total of 443 leading creative Jews, perished at the hands of Stalin.

An eyewitness describes Markish during the four years in the dreaded Lubyanka prison: "Markish could no longer stand and was reduced to crawling on all fours. On one occasion I was unable to recognize him--mangled, swollen, bloody. Despite the frost of December 1949, he had no shoes. He was so mutilated however that he was unable to feel the cold of his cell. A young Jewish boy, who shared the cell with him, fed him and tended his wounds."

The final trial took place July 11-18, 1952. It is said that, despite everything, Markish showed special courage. He defended himself in a dramatic and forceful speech and went so far as to claim that his accusers were the real criminals.<sup>4</sup>

As a young girl of 17 years, ESTHER MARKISH knew no Yiddish. One evening, she returned home from a party with the news that she had just met an exciting Yiddish writer named Peretz. "Impossible!" exclaimed her father, "Peretz has been dead for years!" The father, of course, was thinking of I. L. Peretz, the leading figure of modern Yiddish literature. After their marriage, Esther still refused to recognize "Peretz" as a proper first name and forever after referred to her husband as "Markusho." Esther and her two small sons were imprisoned at the time of her husband's arrest. It was not until Stalin's death that she was informed of her husband's torture and death. All of her belongings and complete library were confiscated.



Esther Markish is in her own right an accomplished French-Russian literary translator. Her credits include French classics from Zola, Romain Rolland, and Saint-Beuve. Modern French writers translated by Esther Markish for Russian readers include Georges Simeon, Robert Escarpit, Armand Lanoux, Pierre Gamarra, Henry Allegre, Assia Djebar, Louie Aragon and others. She has been allowed in the past no less than three trips to France and has many contacts in the European literary community. For the past 15 years Mrs. Markish has been supported by the stipends for her translations and by a pension granted after the "rehabilitation" of her murdered husband. Both sources of income are now in jeopardy due to relinquishment of Soviet citizenship. She and her son David share a 4-room Moscow apartment with another family. Their two rooms are completely empty. In November, 1971, after receiving permission to emigrate, all belongings were sold. At the last moment their visas were revoked. David's wife, Irina Markish, was allowed to leave the Soviet Union at that time.

The phone, an acknowledged KGB listening device, is prominently situated in their apartment. Nevertheless, each telephone conversation begins with "Shalom" and is ended with, "Nu, l'shana hazot." Both David and Esther Markish are active participants in a Moscow Hebrew ulpan.



DAVID MARKISH, 34 years old, is a Russian poet and playwright. Several volumes of his poetry, including Russian translations of his father's master works in Yiddish, have been published in Russian, French and Hebrew (the latter under pseudonyms). David Markish's last play concerning certain ambiguities of Jewish life in the second half of the 20th century was condemned and closed 2 years ago for being, allegedly, anti-Semitic---a devilish irony. David Markish worked for over a year in a Moscow bakery, a profession quite common for Soviet Jewish radicals these days. In fact, one bit of Russian Jewish folklore predicts that if the Jewish bakery workers ever call a strike in their fight for immigration, all of Moscow will starve. He is now unemployed and reported to be working on a novel that he hopes to complete in Jerusalem.



The following are selections from two poems by the young writer. The first, "Citizen of the World" is part of a cycle entitled "Songs of the Exodus." This poem was written in March of 1971 when a group of Soviet Jews, having won permission to leave for Israel, were arrested in the reception hall of the USSR Supreme Soviet. The second selection, "The Prophet of Moses," was written in 1958, demonstrating that his desire for emigration is at least over 13 years old--hardly a recent phenomenon.

From: "Citizen of the World," 1971.

My path  
has come full circle.  
I stand by the Wailing Wall--  
hot forehead  
to warm stone.  
For the first time  
in two thousand years  
I am not prey  
to a worm of doubt:  
on the roads of a tortuous world  
I left a dangerous gift--  
I scattered the seeds of doubt.

Translated by Peter Zimmerman.

From: "The Prophet Moses," 1958.

The desert sand creeps beyond the horizon,  
Quietly it screens the blue air.  
A snake with empty bulging eyes  
Slinks after the sun with his head,  
As the shadow of the gnomon on a sundial  
Follows inexorably after the sun.  
And beyond the river a parched valley  
Guards the joints of dried up bushes...

The land which God gave the Jews,  
Lay, in concealment, beyond the river.  
It lay, breathing of mystery,  
Promising troubles, and peace,  
Promising shelter, and blood, and death, and laughter.  
Promising failures, and success...

The Jews have come to the native threshold  
A man-prophet has led them here.

Moses stood by the Jordon  
And smiled broadly and strangely.  
He leaned on his staff with his breast  
And listened, listened to the song of the Jordon:

"You have returned to your foresaken land  
You have come to Canaan.  
Here the mute, overgrown hills  
Heed the silence of the sky."

Translated by Peter Zimmerman.

David's most powerful poem to reach the West is "The Insane Asylum" which describes the most nightmarish of all Soviet penal institutions. Indeed, this poem stands on par with Kafka's "The Penal Colony" as a timeless evocation of man's methodical, premeditated subjugation of other men. But Markish's poem, unlike Kafka's story, ends on an unequivocal note of hope:

Come, sweet slavecamp,  
scream me to sleep,  
anything's heaven  
but the drug-needle deep.  
With a hangman for doctor  
and a spy for a nurse  
it's a hospital heaven  
I'd exchange for a curse.

[ Practical Titov Officer - -

9-12-77

Their lectures on homelands  
are classic and clear --  
I'm convinced that I have one  
but it's nowhere near here.  
With a hangman for doctor  
and a spy for a nurse,  
I'm a ship-wrecked survivor  
who's drowning of thirst.

In a glut of lost homelands  
my saviours declare  
their Siberian Zion  
impaled in the air.  
But I'll dance the barbed wire  
and scream them to sleep  
if it saves me from madness  
and drug-needle deep.

In a forest of needles  
you must sing such a dirge  
to resist all betrayal,  
so strong is the urge.  
In the thousands of needles  
it's hard to see home,  
to remember sweet Zion  
in the somnolent foam.

But the needle-point ocean  
where I thrash in the brine  
will not drown my remembrance  
of this promise of mine,  
of the dry-land encounter  
with Jacob of old,  
who limps toward me now  
through the needle marsh cold.

In his uneven footstep  
is the path I will go  
till the forest turns ocean  
turns desert turns snow,  
till the face of my father  
and lover and kin  
all return to that place  
where redemptions begin.

A free translation by Joel Harris

Today, as David Markish languishes in prison, he has every reason to hope for "redemption," for unlike his father twenty years ago, David is not alone in his struggle. His call is that of a people reawakening and as such, it can never be stifled or stilled. It is a call to free men the world over to support the undaunted struggle of Soviet Jews to achieve their cultural and spiritual self-determination.

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Washington D.C. NA 8-8548 Wash. Amb.  
202-882-5829 -

PM We recommend calls, telegrams and letters to the following persons and organizations:

Your Senators, Congressmen or M. P. 's

President Richard Nixon  
The White House  
Washington, D. C. 20036 USA

Amnesty International  
200 West 72nd Street  
New York, N. Y. 10023

Premier Alexei Kosygin  
The Kremlin  
Moscow, USSR

American Red Cross  
150 Amsterdam Ave.  
New York, N. Y.  
(or your local American Red Cross)

Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin  
USSR Embassy - Comm. Division  
1125 16th St, N. W.  
Washington, D. C. 20036

United Nations Commission on Human Rights  
United Nations  
New York, N. Y. 10017

Soviet U. N. Ambassador Yakov Malik  
Soviet Mission to the United Nations  
136 East 67th St.  
New York, N. Y. 10021 UN 1-4900

754-1234

Secretary General Kurt Waldheim  
United Nations  
New York, N. Y. 10017

We would also urge calls and telegrams of solidarity sent to:

Esther and David Markish  
64 Gorky St. Apt. 67  
Moscow, USSR

Irina Markish  
Ulpan Etzion  
8 Gad Street - Baka.  
Jerusalem, ISRAEL

telephone: 250-56-06

#### NOTES

1. Esther Rosenthal (Shneiderman) "Arum der Markishyade," Di Goldene Keyt (Tel-Aviv, 1968) no. 64, pp. 218-219.
2. Markish's literary biography is based on M. Pyekazh's account in A Shpigl oyf a Shteyn ed. Kh. Shmeruk (Tel-Aviv, 1964), pp. 751-755.
3. S. L. Shneiderman, "Sovietish Heimland and its Editor, Aron Vergelis," Midstream, October, 1971.
4. From a fact sheet issued by the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry. (August 3, 1971), New York.

Photographs on pp. 3, 5, 8, courtesy of Melech Ravitch (Montreal);  
The invitation of p. 1, courtesy of Esther Markish and on pp. 10 and  
11, courtesy of Irina Markish, Jerusalem.