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## The Politics of Yiddish in Tsarist Russia

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In 1897, Tsarist Russia conducted a census in which it recorded the nationality and language of its inhabitants. Of the 5,215,000 Jews living in the empire, 97% declared Yiddish as their native tongue. Only 24.6% claimed to be able to read Russian.<sup>1</sup> Given this impressive degree of Jewish linguistic cohesion upon the threshold of the twentieth century, one would expect to have found a lively and developed modern Yiddish culture in Russia at the time, in the spheres of literature, the press, periodical publications, theater, education, as well as social and cultural organizations. In fact, however, there was not a single Yiddish newspaper, daily or weekly, and not a single Yiddish literary journal in all of Tsarist Russia in 1897. Nor were there any established, well-known Yiddish theater ensembles, any modern Jewish schools with instruction in Yiddish, or any social or cultural organizations operating in Yiddish. Few other languages in central or eastern Europe could "boast" such a paucity of cultural institutions.

Whereas Yiddish fiction, published in book or pamphlet form, was a substantial force in Russian-Jewish life from the 1860s on, the other institutions of modern Yiddish culture lagged far behind it in their historical development. The Yiddish short story and novel were among the most important vehicles by which Jewish intellectuals expressed themselves and communicated with the Jewish public. Tens of

<sup>1</sup>Solomon M. Schwartz, *The Jews in the Soviet Union*, Syracuse, New York, 1951, pp. 12-13.

thousands of Russian Jews flocked to their local book-peddlers to obtain the belletristic writings of Isaac Meyer Dik, Mendele Moykher Seforim, Isaac Yoel Linetski, Nokhem Meyer Shaykevitch (Shomer), and the young Sholem Aleichem. The spread of Yiddish belle lettres altered the reading habits, leisure activity, and – most of all – thinking patterns of a broad segment of the Russian Jewish community. But in the areas of press, periodical publications, theater, and schooling, Yiddish activity was sparse, sporadic and flimsy at best. During the 1890s it was virtually non-existent. Not until the first decade of the twentieth century did a multi-dimensional modern Yiddish cultural system (i.e. not only belle-lettres, but also the above mentioned spheres of cultural endeavor) emerge, and begin to have an impact on a sizeable segment of Russian Jewry. This fact has often gone unnoticed because of the remarkable literary achievements of Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz during that very period of time. Indeed the very term "Yiddish culture" did not gain currency until the early years of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

The retarded development of modern Yiddish culture demands a historical explanation. After all, the nineteenth century was a period when the languages of so many nationalities in eastern and central Europe came into their own – the flourishing of Polish-language theater, the rise Russian-language education, the development of a strong and diverse Czech and Hungarian periodical press.<sup>3</sup> Yiddish would have all of this too, but only much, much later than its co-territorial languages.

Those who have addressed the question directly or indirectly have offered two complementary explanations. The first maintains that Russian Jewry underwent minimal economic, social, and cultural modernization during the nineteenth century. The vast majority of Russian Jews continued to live in small market-towns (*shtetlekh*), and their every-day lives conformed to traditional pre-urban, pre-industrial cultural patterns. The need for knowledge, information, moral guidance and spiritual enrichment, entertainment and leisure-activity were satisfied by the kheyder, beys medresh, Hasidic *shtibl* and Hasidic court, and of course in home and neighborhood settings. Only on the verge of the twentieth century did a significant proportion of Russian Jewry become urbanized, industrialized, and secularized.

<sup>2</sup>Chaim Zhitlovsky may have been the first to use the coinage "yidishe kultur" in his "Tsionism Oder Sotsialism" (1898) *Gezamlte Shriftn* vol. 5, New York, 1917, p. 72.

<sup>3</sup>Ricardo Piccio (ed.), *Aspects of The Slavic Language Question in the 19th Century*.

The complexity and impersonality of urban life, and the spread of a secular, rational world-view made the adoption of modern European cultural forms, such as the newspaper, magazine, theater, and modern school, possible and indeed necessary for Russian Jewry. The requisite social and economic conditions for the rise of a modern Yiddish culture did not exist until the turn of the century.<sup>4</sup>

The problem with this macro-sociological explanation is that it flies in the face of many facts. Its static and simplistic view of Russian-Jewish life in the nineteenth century is untenable. The urbanization and industrialization of Russian-Polish Jewry was well-apace by the 1860s, as was its cultural transformation. To cite just a few major developments: the secularizing influence of Haskalah-ideology was pronounced in such centers as Vilna, Kovna, Berdichev and Odessa. There emerged a sizeable Russified Jewish intelligentsia in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Odessa, and Kiev, and by the 1870s, the number of Jews in Russian gymnasias and universities superseded the number of yeshiva students. In Warsaw, a Polonized Jewish bourgeoisie assumed key positions in the Jewish community and, more strikingly, in Polish cultural life. A spectrum of modern-Jewish schools – state-sponsored, private, and communal – arose, combining Jewish and general studies, and the Hebrew press (including, as of 1886, two dailies) flourished.<sup>5</sup> However, these modern cultural trends expressed themselves overwhelmingly in Russian, Polish and Hebrew; not in Yiddish.

At this point, the second explanation is usually raised. The Maskilim and Jewish intelligentsia viewed Yiddish with disgust and contempt, as the living embodiment of the much-hated medieval past. The Maskilim created their cultural outlets in Hebrew, which they worshipped as "the beautiful tongue, our last remaining remnant" (*ha-safa ha-yafa ha-serida ha-yehida*), whereas the intelligentsia enthusiastically embraced Russian as the language of its periodicals, schools and organizations. Yiddish was supposed to wither and die, the sooner the better. At best, it was viewed as a necessary evil and relegated to the limited, transitory role of spreading enlightenment

<sup>4</sup>This is the impression conveyed by Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog in *Life is With People*, New York, 1952; Avrom Menes' erudite and evocative study "Di Mizrekh Eyropeishe Tkufe In Der Yidisher Geshikhte," *Algemeyne Entsiklopedye – Yidn* vol. 4, New York, 1950, pp. 275-430, suffers from the same misconception.

<sup>5</sup>Steven Zipperstein, "Haskalah, Cultural Change and 19th Century Russian Jewry: A Reassessment," *Journal of Jewish Studies* vol. 34, no. 2 (1983) pp. 191-207, and his *The Jews of Odessa: A Cultural History*, Stanford, California, 1985; Jacob Shatzky, *Geshikhte fun Yidn In Varshe*, vol. 3, New York, 1953.

among the older generation of unlettered Jews, for whom it was too late to acquire another language. With such a negative attitude toward the language, there was no ideological basis for the emergence of a modern Yiddish culture. Only at the turn of the century, primarily under the influence of the Jewish labor movement and its political arm, the Bund, did a segment of the Jewish intelligentsia change its attitude toward Yiddish, and begin to view it as a valued cultural medium or as a national cultural treasure. That is when the Yiddish press, school, and theater burst forth onto the historical arena.<sup>6</sup>

This ideological explanation, which was especially popular among Bundists who wished to lay claim to the emergence of modern Yiddish culture, is much too smooth and easy. From the 1860s on, a growing number of writers and intellectuals endorsed the use of Yiddish as a tool for spreading enlightenment. Alexander Zederbaum, S. J. Abramovitch, Moshe Leyb Lilienblum, Abraham Ber Gotlober, and Abraham Goldfaden are only the most famous early examples. They may have felt uneasy about writing in the despised "jargon," and have doubted its long-term viability and desirability, but nonetheless they plodded ahead, in the face of rather vociferous opposition. Even some Russified intellectuals such as Iyla Orshanski and Menashe Margulis saw merit in advancing enlightenment by means of the folk-idiom.<sup>7</sup> After the pogroms of 1881-2, a sizeable segment of the Jewish intelligentsia shed its embarrassment or ambivalence toward the language. The view that Yiddish was a legitimate cultural medium with an invaluable role to play in both the present and long-term future gained greater acceptance. Sholem Aleichem and I. L. Peretz were the pre-eminent converts to this view during the 1880s, but many others followed in

<sup>6</sup>"The Bund created a Yiddish culture...it turned the market jargon into a language in which serious scientific affairs can be discussed. Furthermore, the Bund taught the Jewish masses how to read. Before...only the enlightened understood Mendele Moykher Sforim, only a few read Peretz's *Bletlekh*. The Bund created a great circle of readers which needed good books and newspapers, and it created a new literature for that circle." This tendentious statement by a Bundist newspaper is taken by Samuel Portnoy to be an accurate summation of the Bund's contribution to Yiddish culture; Vladimir Medem: *The Life and Soul of A Legendary Jewish Socialist* New York, 1979, pp. 475-6.

<sup>7</sup>One can even point to I. J. Linetski and Y. M. Lifshits as writers who insisted on Yiddish as the sole valuable vehicle of enlightenment and mockingly disparaged the use of Hebrew; on Margulis, see Peter Shaw, *The Jewish Community of Odessa: A Social and Institutional History*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1988, on Orshanski, see below; cf. Miron, *A Traveler Disguised*, New York, 1973, pp. 1-66.

their aftermath, including Y. H. Ravnitsky, Simon Dubnow, and Yankev Dinezon. A comprehensive study of the subject would, in my opinion, reveal that the favorable change in the attitude toward Yiddish occurred first among a segment of the "bourgeois" intelligentsia (in the 1880s), and only later among the Marxist and radical intelligentsia (in the 1890s).<sup>8</sup>

If the requisite socio-economic and ideological conditions for the flourishing of a modern Yiddish culture were in place perhaps by the 1860s, and certainly by the 1880s, then why was there no broad cultural renaissance until considerably later? In my opinion this delay ought to be attributed to an "external" factor, which has been much neglected; i.e., the problematic political status of Yiddish in Tsarist Russia. The Tsarist policy of banning and outlawing Yiddish in various contexts prevented the full scale flourish of modern Yiddish culture until the prohibitions were relaxed or removed. It is to this subject, the Imperial politics of Yiddish, to which we now turn.

### Periodical Press

During the nineteenth century, there was only one Jew in all of Tsarist Russia who was successful at obtaining a state permit to publish a newspaper in Yiddish – Alexander Zederbaum. Zederbaum had the necessary political connections in the government chancellories, and was an accomplished "shtadlan" who knew how to persuade, reassure and bribe Imperial officials. Nonetheless even he encountered considerable official opposition to his publication of *Kol Mevasser*, the first modern Yiddish newspaper (Odessa, 1862-1871). His initial request to publish the weekly was rejected by the Ministry of Interior. He was only able to secure a legal status for the paper by issuing it as a "supplement in Jewish German to *Ha-Melitz*," the Hebrew weekly of which he was editor and publisher. For years, *Kol Mevasser* labored under the legal fiction that it was a supplement to *Ha-Melitz*, and that it was in German. In 1868 the Imperial censor nearly discontinued publication of *Kol Mevasser*, when it realized that, contrary to the original permit, the weekly was not in German with Hebrew letters, but in Yiddish. It took months of lobbying with the authorities, and an

<sup>8</sup>See E. Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture; the Story of the Yiddish Language Movement*, New York, 1987, pp. 45-70, and on the polemic generated by the publication of Sholem Aleichem's *Yudishes Folks-Bibliotek* in 1888, see G. Kresel "A Historishe Polemik Vegn Der Yidisher Literatur," *Goldene Keyt* no. 20 (1954) pp. 338-355.

apparent editorial decision to recommit itself to "Germanizing" the language of *Kol Mevasser*, to save the paper from forced closure.<sup>9</sup>

When Zederbaum obtained permission to move *Ha-Melitz* from Odessa to the capital city of St. Petersburg, a similar petition to relocate *Kol Mevasser* was refused. Zederbaum was forced to leave the Yiddish paper behind, in the hands of an inept editor who sealed its fate rather quickly. Once in St. Petersburg, Zederbaum faced an iron wall of bureaucratic opposition to his issuing a Yiddish newspaper in the capital. For years, his interventions were to no avail. Finally, during Count Nikolai Ignatev's brief term of office as Minister of Interior (March 1881 – June 1882), Zederbaum obtained a permit for the publication of the weekly *Dos Yudishes Folksblat* (1882-1890). Zederbaum and Ignatev were long-standing personal acquaintances.<sup>10</sup>

The existence of a Yiddish language press in Russia depended entirely on this one man's luck and perseverance. When *Dos Yudishes Folksblat* closed down (after it too was placed in the hands of an inept new editor), the 5.8 million Jews of Tsarist Russia were left again without a single newspaper in Yiddish. All other applicants met with total failure. Mendele Moykher Seforim was frustrated time and time again during the 1860s, 70s and 80s in his efforts to obtain permission to edit a Yiddish news-paper.<sup>11</sup> I. J. Linetski faced failure more ingeniously. He crossed over into neighboring Galicia (in the Habsburg Empire), joined forces with Abraham Goldfaden, and began publishing *Yisrolik* (Lemberg, 1875-6), a newspaper expressly intended for readers in Russia. But before long, the Tsarist authorities prohibited the mailing of the newspaper into Russia, and having lost its clientele, *Yisrolik* closed down. Mikhoel Levi Radkinzon followed Linetski's lead, and published *Kol La'am* (Koenigsburg, 1876-1879) from neighboring Prussia, with a Russian Yiddish readership in mind.<sup>12</sup> It seems likely that already in the 1870s, the Ministry of Interior had adopted a ban on Yiddish newspapers in Russia as a matter of policy (rather than mere bureaucratic obstructionism and foot-dragging). At least one contemporary observer, Aaron Lieberman, the father of modern Jewish socialism, believed such a ban was in effect. Writing to

<sup>9</sup>S. L. Tsitron, *Di Geshikhte Fun Der Yidisher Prese*, Vilna, 1923, pp. 9, 63; also chapter on Zederbaum in *Dray Literarische Doyres*, vol. 3, Warsaw, 1928, pp. 96-129.

<sup>10</sup>Tsitron, *Geshikhte* p. 117; Dubnow "Dos Yudishe Folksblat in Peterburg," *Fun Zhargon Tsu Yidish*, Vilna, 1929, pp. 10-16.

<sup>11</sup>Chone Shmeruk, *Sifrut Yiddish – Prakim Le-Toldoteha*, Tel Aviv, 1978, pp. 289-290.

<sup>12</sup>Tsitron, *Geshikhte* pp. 89-116.

the Russian socialist V. Smirnov to explain why he was publishing his journal *Ha-Emet* in Hebrew rather than Yiddish, he stated:

Since we are talking about a legal newspaper, the Hebrew language had to be chosen. Zhargon [i.e., Yiddish] is suppressed by the Russian government in order to Russify the Jews; and zhargon publications issued abroad encounter insurmountable hardships, regardless of their content.<sup>13</sup>

Lieberman's assumption that the ban on Yiddish periodicals was designed to further the Jews' linguistic Russification may well have been on the mark.

The picture is much clearer for the 1880s and 1890s. Y. Feoktistov, the official in charge of press-affairs at the Ministry of Interior, repeatedly turned down applications to issue Yiddish dailies or weeklies with the flat declaration that "there will never be a Yiddish newspaper in Russia." In his memoirs, Feoktistov claimed that Yiddish newspapers would be impossible to control, since one couldn't find reliable censors for them. No one in the office of press-affairs knew the language, and experience proved that Jews, even converted Jews, simply couldn't be trusted with the job of censorship. His successor, Soloviev, likewise opposed licensing any Yiddish newspapers, and warned that "Yiddish is extremely dangerous from the state's point of view." Since Jews were well-known to be revolutionaries, Yiddish newspapers would, if published, undoubtedly spread revolutionary ideas. He cited the underground Yiddish press of the Bund as proof.<sup>14</sup>

As a result, the requests to publish a Yiddish daily newspaper by Mordechai Spector in 1894, S. Rapoport (a partner in *Ha-Melitz*) in 1896, Eliezer Kaplan (chief of the Warsaw publishing house "Ahiasaf") in 1898 and later, by Leon Rabinovitz (editor of *Ha-Melitz*) in 1900, and Zvi Prilutski in 1902, were all rejected. According to one account, the ministry of interior had 35 such requests on file in 1902.<sup>15</sup>

With no hope for a governmental permit, Kaplan resorted to an old ploy of Linetski and Radkinzon. His Warsaw-based publishing house

<sup>13</sup>K. Marmor (ed.), *A. Lieberman's Briv*, New York, 1951, p. 141.

<sup>14</sup>S. Ginzburg, "Di Ershte Yidishe Tegleke Tsaytung in Rusland – 'Der Fraynd,'" *Amolike Peterburg*, New York, 1944, pp. 185; Dovid Druk, *Geshikhte Fun Der Yidisher Prese* (In Rusland Un Poyln), Warsaw, 1927, pp. 9-10. Forty issues of the Bundist *Arbeiter Shtime* appeared in Russia between 1897 and 1905; see Y. S. Herz "Di Umlegale Prese Un Literatur Fun Bund," *Pinkes Far Der Forshung Fun Der Yidisher Literatur Un Prese*, vol. 2 (ed. Chaim Bass), New York, 1972, pp. 294-366.

<sup>15</sup>Druk, *Geshikhte* pp. 14-15, 20, 21, 23; Niger, *Yitskhok Leybush Perets*, Buenos Aires, 1952, pp. 228-9.

issued a Yiddish weekly, *Der Yud* (1899-1903), which was edited by Y. H. Ravnitski in Odessa, but was printed across the Austro-Hungarian border in Cracow. From there it was mailed to readers in Tsarist Russia.<sup>16</sup>

Salvation came from unexpected quarters. When Vyacheslav von Plehve became Minister of Interior, in 1902, he decided to permit a single Yiddish daily in Russia as an experiment, in an attempt to counter the influence of the Bundist underground press. That is how *Der Fraynd*, the first Yiddish daily in Russia came into being. A true explosion of Yiddish dailies and weeklies occurred during and after the revolution of 1905, when a greater measure of freedom of expression was instituted, and mass circulation dailies such as the *Haynt* and *Moment* appeared on the scene.<sup>17</sup>

But the internal social conditions for the emergence of a Yiddish-language daily press existed long beforehand. In Rumania, with a fraction of Russia's Jewish population, but without the interference of Imperial authorities, a Yiddish daily first appeared in 1877, and numerous weeklies engaged in fierce competition during the late 19th century. And in Russia itself, there were two Hebrew dailies from 1886 on – *Ha-Melitz* in St. Petersburg, and *Ha-Tsefirah* in Warsaw. (A third daily, *Ha-Yom*, was short lived.) No doubt Yiddish, with its larger potential readership, could have sustained at least as many dailies, were it not for the Tsarist ban on Yiddish newspapers during the late 19th century. The ministerial policy toward Hebrew was more lenient, precisely because Hebrew newspapers reached a much more limited reading audience.<sup>18</sup>

The same policy applied to literary and other journals in Yiddish as well. According to Tsarist administrative regulations, all periodical publications – regardless of frequency, format, or subject matter – were subsumed under the category of newspapers. Hence there were no Yiddish magazines of any sort in 19th century Tsarist Russia. Sholem Aleichem's *Yudishes Folks-Bibliotek* (1888, 1889), and Mordechai Spector's *Hoyz-Fraynd* (1888, 1889, 1894, 1895, 1896) were not journals

<sup>16</sup>Druk, *Geshikhte* pp. 23-30; after half a year of publication, Ravnitsky was replaced as editor by Dr. Yosef Luria, a resident of Warsaw, thus simplifying the complicated logistics involved in the newspaper's publication.

<sup>17</sup>Druk, *Geshikhte* p. 15; on "Der Fraynd" see Ginzburg, "Di Ershte Yidishe..."; on the subsequent explosion of newspapers see the comprehensive listing of Avrohom Kirzhnits, *Di Yidishe Prese In Der Gevezener Rusisher Imperye*, Moscow, 1930.

<sup>18</sup>Volf Tambur, *Yidish-Prese In Rumene* Bucharest, 1977; relaxity toward Hebrew, Ginzburg, "Di Ershte..." p. 185; Druk, *Geshikhte* p. 9.

(although they are occasionally referred erroneously to as such), but thick literary almanacs, which appeared no more than once a year. As such, each volume was considered by the Tsarist authorities to be a separate book. The publication and censorship of books belonged to a separate section of the Ministry of Interior; there was no administrative policy prohibiting the publication of books in Yiddish.<sup>19</sup>

The impossibility of publishing a Yiddish periodical of any sort led I. L. Peretz to a rather ingenious idea. He issued a series of pamphlets in 1894-6, each one ostensibly in honor of a different Jewish holiday or fast, and was thereby able to publish a de facto magazine, which historians of Yiddish literature refer to as the "Yontev Bletlekh." Legally and administratively, each pamphlet was a separate book, with its own title ("the Shofar," "Hoshanah," "Hamisha Asar," "Greens for Shavuot" etc.). The only signs of continuity between one pamphlet and the next were the inscription "Peretz publication" on the title page, and the type-face. Other Yiddish writers attempted similar projects.<sup>20</sup>

But such pseudo-journals were difficult to negotiate through the censorship bureaucracy. The Ministry of Interior may have been wise to the schemes used to circumvent the ban on Yiddish periodicals. In any case, the longer lead-time for books between their composition and their review by the censors was an impediment against such devices. As a result, Yiddish magazines and journals only began to appear in the first decade of the twentieth century, when the press-policy changed.

### Theater

The most sensational Tsarist decree against Yiddish was the comprehensive ban on Yiddish theater issued in August 1883. A secret memorandum from the Ministry of Interior to all provincial governors announced:

Taking into consideration that certain plays in the Yiddish language which were permitted to be performed are absolutely inappropriate, it

<sup>19</sup>The three volumes Peretz's literary almanac *Di Yudishe Bibliotek* (two in 1891, one in 1895) were likewise considered by the censors as separate; see Niger, *Perets* pp. 204-222.

<sup>20</sup>Niger, *Perets* pp. 229-246; Linetski had published a series of 11 pamphlets on a monthly basis, each under a different title, in 1887; Z. Reisin, "Yitskhok Yoel Linetski," *Leksikon Fun Der Yidisher Literatur, Prese, Un Filologye*, vol. 2, Vilna 1930, p. 171.

has been deemed necessary to prohibit the performance of plays in Yiddish in the theaters.<sup>21</sup>

Enforcement of the ban was put in the hands of the police-authorities.

This curt and categorical directive is of little help in uncovering the motives and reasons for the theater-ban. It has been suggested that the ban was the result of denunciations by members of the Russified Jewish bourgeoisie in St. Petersburg, who were offended and embarrassed by the performance of Yiddish productions to packed halls in the capital city. Others have suggested that Goldfaden's operetta *Bar Kokhba*, which idealized the ancient Judean uprising against Rome, was taken by the authorities to be a veiled allegory in favor of revolution in Russia.<sup>22</sup> The latter explanation strikes me as more convincing, given the official paranoia over revolutionaries and, specifically Jewish revolutionaries. It also seems to be supported by the text of the ban, which alludes to permitted plays which ought not have been performed.

In any event, the more important question is why the Ministry of Interior vigorously enforced the ban on Yiddish theater for seventeen years (until 1900), reiterated its validity in 1888, 1891, 1897, and 1900, and frequently invoked its authority in later years as well.<sup>23</sup> There was certainly no sustained denunciation-campaign against the Yiddish theater on the part of the Russified Jewish bourgeoisie for nearly two decades! Bureaucratic inertia can be given some share of the credit, but broader political considerations of "state security" must have been involved as well. Since the official memoranda are silent on the subject, we can only surmise. Jews were viewed in official circles as treacherous, treasonous, plotting to destroy Russia, and the stage was recognized as the most uncontrollable of public forums. Texts (of books, newspapers, and even plays) could be censored, but who could control the content of what people actually said on the stage, in front of a large audience? The fear of revolutionary propaganda being spread via the Yiddish stage must have loomed large. The ban of 1883 dealt a devastating blow to the brief flourish of Yiddish theater in Russia which began in 1879, when Abraham Goldfaden, the father of modern Yiddish theater, brought his troupe from Rumania to Odessa. His plays were smash hits,

<sup>21</sup>Y. Riminik, "Redifes Kegn Yidishn Teater in Rusland in Di 80er un 90er Yorn," *Teater-Bukh*, Kiev, 1927, p. 87, S. Ginzburg, "Der Farbot Fun Yidishn Teater," *Historishe Verk* vol. 1, New York, 1937, p.167.

<sup>22</sup>The former hypothesis is pursued by Riminik "Redifes..." the latter is mentioned by Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, New York, 1977, p. 62.

<sup>23</sup>Ginzburg, "Der Farbot..." p. 170, Riminik "Redifes" p. 88.

and before long Goldfaden's company was performing in cities and towns throughout the Pale, and even in Moscow and St. Petersburg, where the general Russian press reviewed his work favorably. Rival theater-groups sprung up, some of them off-shoots from Goldfaden's original cast, and plagiarized the master's repertoire. Odessan Jewry was in the throws of a veritable theater-mania when the ban was issued. Goldfaden traveled to St. Petersburg and appealed to the authorities to reverse their decision, but had no success.<sup>24</sup>

The effects of the ban were felt rather quickly, and before long, the best Yiddish actors (e.g., Jacob Adler, Boris Tomashevsky, Zigmund Mogulesko) left for England and the United States. Goldfaden moved to Warsaw in 1886, where enforcement of the theater-ban was lax during the first few years. His company was able to perform there on a quasi-legal basis, it being officially subsumed as part of a licensed Russian theater-company, with which it shared facilities. But by 1887 Goldfaden found this arrangement and the overall condition of Yiddish theater in Russia intolerable, and he too left for America.<sup>25</sup>

One of the few remaining Yiddish theater directors in Russia, Avrohom Fishzon, is credited with developing the stratagem of presenting Yiddish plays under the mask of "German" theater, which saved Yiddish theater from extinction. He submitted translated German texts (of Goldfaden's operettas!) to the censors, and applied to local police officials for permission to stage German plays in town. This guise became the life-line of wandering Yiddish theater troupes in Russia during the 1880s and 90s. But it was far from a panacea. In most cities and towns, police officials weren't willing to play the fool, and refused to grant permits to the bogus "German" performances. The larger Jewish cities (Warsaw, Vilna, Berdichev, Zhitomir and others) were closed to Yiddish troupes. According to the memoirs of writer Yankev Dinezon, there was no Yiddish theater in Warsaw for 18 years. Yiddish performances ■■■ could not be staged in entire gubernias (Kiev, Chernigov, Vohlyn, Poltava, Grodna et. al.) where police officials strictly enforced the ban. Wandering Yiddish theater companies had better chances of obtaining (or, more accurately, purchasing) a permit in small God-forsaken towns, where the local

<sup>24</sup>B. Gorin, *Di Geshikhte Fun Yidishn Teater*, New York, 1918, vol. 1, pp. 204-256; B. Vaynshteyn, "Di Ershte Yorn Fun Yidishn Teater in Ades Un Niu York," *Arkhiy Far Der Geshikhte Fun Yidishn Teater Un Drame* (ed. Jacob Shatzky), New York-Vilna, 1930 pp. 243-254; Zalmen Zilbertsvayg, "Avrohom Goldfaden," *Leksikon Fun Yidishn Teater*, vol. 1, New York, 1931, pp. 302-312.

<sup>25</sup>Gorin, *Geshikhte* vol. 2, chapter 10; Jacob Shatzky, "Goldfaden In Varshe," *Hundert Yor Goldfaden*, New York, 1940, pp. 1-16.

constable was less fearful of being caught by his superiors. Thus, Fishzon's troupe performed in the small town of Zvil [Russian: Novograd-Volynski] for half a year, but couldn't find anywhere else to go.<sup>26</sup>

There were problems even when permits were granted. The local constable usually required that the performance be in German, and would send a spy or come by himself to check what language was being used on the stage. If the actors weren't speaking something approximating German, he would annul the permit after the first performance, or even worse, interrupt the play and confiscate the box office. If, on the other hand, the actors did their utmost to speak German, the audience couldn't understand what they said, and after one or two performances people stopped coming to see the show. Bribes were essential to the existence of the Yiddish theater in those years, and the burden of paying a quarter or even a half of the box to the constable led most troupes into bankruptcy.<sup>27</sup>

Yiddish theater existed in Russia under these severe constraints for close to twenty years. All the while, waves of aspiring young actors and actresses kept emigrating to America. What kind of "brilliant career" could they hope for in Russia with the doors of Warsaw, Odessa, St. Petersburg and every other major city closed to Yiddish theater, and actors leading a life resembling that of fugitives on the run? The lure of emigration contributed further to the instability and short-livedness of ensembles.

Officially, Yiddish theater was still contraband in Russia on the eve of the revolution in 1917, and as late as 1904, the Russian senate considered (and rejected) an appeal by Fishzon to formally lift the ban. But in fact, the police began to relax their enforcement of the ban in many parts of the Empire in the year 1900. That is when the first reviews of Yiddish plays began to be published in the Russian-Jewish periodical press. Shortly thereafter, impresarios started arranging

<sup>26</sup>The most important source on Yiddish theater in Russia after the ban are Fishzon's memoirs, "Fuftsik Yor Yidish Teater" (Zikhroynes) which appeared in serialized form in the *Morgen Zhurnal* on Fridays, October 10, 1924 to May 1, 1925, October 23, 1925 to November 13, 1925, December 11, 1925, January 15 and 22, 1926. See in particular the installments of October 23, 1925 and November 13, 1925; also Yankev Dinezon, "Dos Yidishe Teater," *Zikhroynes un Bilder*, Warsaw, 1927, p. 222, Noyekh Prilutski "Di Rekhtlekhe Lage Fun Yidishn Teater," *Yidish Teater*, Bialistok, 1921, pp. 73-77.

<sup>27</sup>Fishzon, "Fuftsik Yor..." *loc. cit.* and January 15, 1926; Prilutski, "Di Rekhtlekhe Lage"; Y. Lubomirsky, "Der Yidisher Teatr In Tsarishn Rusland," *Teater-Bukh*, Kiev, 1927, pp. 95-98.

special guest-tours for actors and troupes from America. In 1904, the censors at the Ministry of Interior began to review scripts in Yiddish, without requiring that the texts be submitted in German.<sup>28</sup>

The renaissance of Yiddish theater in Russia began in 1905. The Kaminski-theater starring Ester Rokhl Kaminska, which had been for many years one of the struggling, wandering troupes in the Empire, acquired its own building in Warsaw; several popular ensembles revived the Goldfaden repertoire and staged the melodramas of Jacob Gordin and others, with considerable financial success. And in 1908, the "Hirschbein Troupe" with its literary repertoire was founded in Odessa, and launched a successful tour throughout the major urban centers of the the Russian Pale.<sup>29</sup>

The crucial factor behind the theater explosion of 1905 and later was political. The Tsarist authorities loosened its reigns, and allowed pent-up cultural forces to flow.

### Schooling

Yiddish was the language of instruction in thousands of Khadorim across the the Russian empire whose curriculum consisted almost exclusively of "khumesn un gemore" (the Pentateuch and Talmud). But modern Yiddish schooling was a negligible phenomenon in Tsarist Russia until shortly before World War I. By modern Yiddish schooling, I mean schools where general subjects (such as mathematics, geography, and natural science) were taught in Yiddish, or alternately new Jewish subjects (such as Jewish history, Yiddish language and literature) were taught in Yiddish. The total absence of the children's native language, Yiddish, in some capacity, is a striking feature of modern Jewish education in Russia in the nineteenth century. Classes were conducted in Russian, from the earliest grades on, although this created tremendous pedagogical difficulties. The idea of providing modern Jewish schooling in Yiddish first occurred to Ilya Orshanski, the Odessan Jewish lawyer and historian, who wrote a memorandum on the subject to the Society for the Dissemination of Enlightenment Among the Jews of Russia ("Hevrat Mefitse Haskalah").<sup>30</sup> Others may have shared

<sup>28</sup>Ginzburg, "Der Farbot..." pp. 170-172; B. Gorin, *Geshikhte* vol. 2, pp. 190-197; N. Oyslender, *Yidisher Teater 1887-1917*, Moscow, 1940, pp. 7-52, 315.

<sup>29</sup>Oyslender, *Yidish Teater...*; Zalmen Zilbertsvayg, "Avrom Yitskhok Kaminski," *Leksikon Fun Yidishn Teater*, vol. 6, Mexico City, 1969, pp. 5254-5281, "Hirshbeyn Trupe," vol. 1, New York, 1931, pp. 612-613.

<sup>30</sup>Orshansky's memorandum is mentioned in passing in A. Golomb's "Di Yidish-Veltlekhe Shul (Algemeyner Iberzikht)," *Shul Almanakh*, Philadelphia,

Orshanski's opinion that teaching young children in a language they hardly knew was counter-productive, but there was little they could have done, given the educational policy of Tsarist Russia. After the Polish uprising of 1863, the Tsarist Ministry of Education imposed Russian as the sole language of instruction in all elementary and secondary schools in the Kingdom of Poland and the western provinces of Russia (including the Ukraine). This step was primarily designed to uproot Polish and combat the spread of Polish nationalist sentiments among the younger generation. Secondarily, it was intended to pre-empt the independent cultural development of other small Slavic languages, such as Ukrainian and Lithuanian. But it also had a direct impact on modern Jewish schooling, and their use of Yiddish.<sup>31</sup>

In the second half of the nineteenth century, there were three main types of modern Jewish schools: (a) the network of state schools for Jewish children, originally established under Nicholas I; (b) private and association-sponsored schools, led and underwritten by Maskilim, intellectuals, and philanthropists; (c) Talmud Torahs, financed by Jewish communal funds and intended for the poorest children. According to state directives, Talmud Torahs were required to provide a program of general studies. All three types of schools were subject to the supervision of the Tsarist Ministry of Education, which certified their teachers and regulated their curriculum. Like all other elementary schools in the Empire, the mandatory language of instruction was Russian. An exception was made for the Talmud Torah, which was a hybrid institution, half-kheyder, half-modern school. For half a day, general studies were taught in Russian, and half a day, the traditional khumesh un gemore were taught in Yiddish.<sup>32</sup>

In the Jewish state, private, and association schools, teaching in Yiddish was totally prohibited. Hirsh Abramovitsh, who studies in a state school in the early 1890s, writes:

All studies in the Jewish state schools were conducted in Russian, even religion ('zakon bozhi' [God's law]) and the prayers before the beginning of class....The children, especially in the first grade, didn't know a word of Russian. There was a regulation that in the first grade (and only in it) one could translate into Yiddish in an emergency, if a

1935, pp. 19-20; I have not yet located the original document in Rosenthal's or Cherikover's histories of "Mefitse Haskalah."

<sup>31</sup>Piotr S. Wandycz, *The Lands of Partitioned Poland*, Seattle, 1974, pp. 196, 243.

<sup>32</sup>Zvi Scharstein, *Toldot Ha-Hinukh Be-Yisrael Ba-Dorot Ha-Ahronim* vol. 1, New York, 1945, pp. 320-321, Sabina Levin, "Toldot Bate Sefer Ha-Yehudi'im Ha-Hiloni'im Be-Polin Be-Arbai'm Ha-Shanim Ha-Ahronot Shel Ha-Meah Ha-19," *Gal-Ed* vol. 9 (1986) pp. 77-90; H. S. Kazhdan, *Fun Kheyder Un Shkoles Biz Tsisho*, Buenos Aires, 1956, pp. 194-202.

child couldn't understand. But the teachers, including Gozhansky, almost never availed themselves of that regulation. They struggled long and hard in order to avoid using Yiddish.<sup>33</sup>

Dr. Zemach Shabad similarly reported that "the Tsarist government severely suppressed the teaching of 'zhargon' in the schools. Only one language of instruction was permitted – Russian."<sup>34</sup>

The traditional kheyder, on the other hand, was a bastion of Yiddish, thanks to the fact that it was exempt from ministerial regulation. In 1859, Imperial law recognized the kheyder as a strictly religious institution, and from then on the authorities did not interfere in the kheyder's affairs, including its language of instruction. The Russian Zionists took advantage of this loophole in the law to create the "Heder Metukan" in the 1880s and 90s. Since these schools were registered as khadorim, they were not subject to the supervision of the Ministry of Education. This enabled them to construct their own curriculum, and more importantly, utilize Hebrew as the language of instruction in classes of Hebrew language and literature, Jewish history and Bible. Scores of such Khadorim Metukanim functioned in Russia at the turn of the century, and formed the basis for the modern Hebrew schools of the "Tarbut" network.<sup>35</sup>

The modern Yiddish school had a much more difficult time emerging than its Hebrew equivalent. Since these schools did not teach any religious subjects, they could not pass as khadorim and register themselves as such. (Usually such registration required a certification from the local Crown Rabbi concerning the religious character of the school.) The first Yiddish schools were illegal, underground institutions. Avrom Reisin visited such a school in Warsaw in 1900, with 20 to 30 students, which functioned clandestinely in the building of a legally registered private Jewish school. In Nesviezh, a school in which all studies were conducted in Yiddish (with 60 students), existed from no more than two years before the police closed it down in 1903,

<sup>33</sup>Hirsh Abramovitsh, "S. Gozhansky," *Farshvundene Geshtaltn*, Buenos Aires, 1956, pp. 33-34. I would like to thank Ms. Dina Abramovitsh, Research Librarian at the YIVO Institute, for drawing my attention to this reference.

<sup>34</sup>Zemach Shabad "Di Yidishe Shuln In Vilner Kant (A Kuk Oyf Tsurik)," *Shul-Pinkes*, Vilna, 1924, p. 43.

<sup>35</sup>Scharfstein, *Toldot Ha-Hinukh* pp. 305-6, 377-410; Rahel Elboim-Dror, "Temurot Ba-Hinukh Ve-ba-hevra Ha-Yehudit," *Ha-Hinukh Ha-Ivri Be-Eretz Yisrael 1854-1914*, Jerusalem, 1986, pp. 11-57. Elboim-Dror's contention that there were 774 Hadarim Metukanim in Tsarist Russia in the early 20th century seems to be exaggerated, but there is no doubt that this type of schooling had spread across scores of Jewish communities, whereas Yiddish schooling was a negligibly small phenomenon.

and confiscated all its possessions. Other underground Yiddish schools existed for short spans of time in Mir, Baranovitsh, Gorodeya, Stoipits, Zamir, and elsewhere. The first secret teachers-conference of Yiddish language schools was held in Vilna in 1907, at which time the police arrested the participants, and their deliberations continued in prison.<sup>36</sup>

The first larger, stabler Yiddish language schools in Russia arose in the years before World War I in Demievka, a suburb of Kiev, and in Warsaw. Both had several grades of classes and over 100 students. Their impact was limited, given the fact that they could not be written about in the then-flourishing Yiddish press. Because of their questionable legal status (the Demievka school was registered as a kheyder, the Warsaw school – as a Talmud Torah), it was considered wise not to attract too much publicity and attention. As a result, few Jews in Russia knew about their existence. A correspondent of a Bundist newspaper lamented in 1913 that there ~~was~~ not a single Yiddish-language model-school in Russia. "Despite all the obstacles," he wrote, "it would not be impossible to establish such a school," apparently unaware that it had already been done.<sup>37</sup>

### Conclusions

The suppression of cultural, educational, and social activity in Yiddish was an integral feature of Tsarist Russia's repressive policies toward the Jews. Official Judeophobia expressed itself not only in the policies of restricting Jewish residence-rights and occupations, instituting quotas on Jews in higher education, condoning and supporting outbursts of violence against Jews and so forth, but also in the prohibitions against Yiddish in print, on the stage, in schools and in other public forums.<sup>38</sup> Yiddish was, in a word, part of the "Jewish question" in Tsarist Russia.

The struggle for the rights of Yiddish in Russia was taken up by virtually all the Jewish political movements, including the Russian Zionist movements in its Helsinsfors platform (1906). It also underlay the key resolution of the 1908 Czernovitz conference for the Yiddish language, which is rarely cited in its entirety:

The first conference for the Yiddish language recognizes Yiddish as a national language of the Jewish people, and demands for it political, social, and cultural equal rights.<sup>39</sup> [emphasis added]

It would be false to leave the impression that Yiddish was the only language which was persecuted by the Tsarist regime. Polish was systematically hounded out of the schools, and excluded from all official governmental functions in "the Kingdom of Poland." But the suppression of Polish was not as comprehensive; Polish theater flourished in Warsaw and other cities during the late nineteenth century, and the number of Polish-language periodicals grew from 22 in 1864 to 92 in 1894. The treatment of Ukrainian was harsher. In 1876, the Tsarist regime proscribed the use of Ukrainian in print – books, newspapers, journals, everything – and banned Ukrainian theater (with certain very limited exceptions). The use of Ukrainian in schools was, of course, prohibited. If one is to find an analogue to the Tsarist policy toward Yiddish, it is Ukrainian.<sup>40</sup>

But Jews as a group were more modernized than Ukrainians – more urbanized, secularized, in contact with modern culture and science. The prospects for a rich, modern cultural sphere in Yiddish were greater than for Ukrainian. If such a culture did not come into existence until the early twentieth century, the delay should be attributed first and foremost to the politics of Yiddish in Tsarist Russia.

<sup>39</sup>Di Ershte Yidishe Shprakh-Konferents, Vilna, 1933, p. 108; for the text of the Russian Helsingsfors platform, and its demands concerning the rights of the "national language" (Hebrew) and the "spoken language" (Yiddish) see Yehuda Reinhardt and Paul Mendes Flohr, *The Jew in the Modern World*, Oxford, 1980, p. 343-344.

<sup>40</sup>Wandycz, *Lands of Partitioned Poland*, pp. 253, 264, 267; George Y. Shevelov "The Language Question In The Ukraine In The Twentieth Century (1900-1941)" *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* vol. 10 no. 1-2 (1986) pp. 70-171; more generally see Riccardo Piccio, *Aspects of the Slavic Language Question In the Nineteenth Century*.

<sup>36</sup>Kazhdan, *Fun Kheyder un Shkoles....* pp. 178-184, S. Niger, *In Kamf Far A Nayer Dertsung*, New York, 1943, chapter 1.

<sup>37</sup>Kazhdan, *Fun Kheyder Un Shkoles....* pp. 186-193.

<sup>38</sup>Police also suppressed the use of Yiddish at public meetings, and disrupted, for instance, the meetings of legal trade unions in 1906, ordering that Russian be spoken; *Di Geshikhte Fun Bund*, vol. 2, New York, 1962, pp. 426, 433.