

Soviet-Yiddish Writers

ASHES OUT OF HOPE. Fiction by Soviet-Yiddish Writers, edited by Irving Howe & Eliezer Greenberg. Schocken, N.Y. 1977. \$10.95. 218 pp.

Reviewed by
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The advent of the Bolshevik Revolution was, for Russian Jews, a time of exquisite promise. Certainly things could not get any worse than under the Tsars. And the Communists spoke of a new freedom. Those involved in the shaping of Jewish culture took heart. These were men who thought of books as rare rubies. Now, finally, they were to be given the opportunity of untrammelled creation.

But the initial hope in the world of Hebrew letters was short-lived. Hebrew books, periodicals and day schools succumbed to the anti-Zionist and anti-clerical edict of 1919. Today Hebrew survives in the USSR only as part of the curriculum of the Soviet Intelligence community.

For Yiddish culture the prospects seemed vastly brighter. About 850

ISIDORE HAIBLUM discussed "Growing Up Yiddish" in our pages last year.

Yiddish books were published in the Soviet Union between 1917 and 1921, "a quantity quite remarkable," as Howe and Greenberg point out in their superb introduction to *Ashes Out of Hope*, "when one remembers these were times of hunger and bitter fighting." Yiddish newspapers and literary journals flourished. Yiddish became the official language of the Jewish national minority: in White Russia almost one-half of all Jewish school children were instructed in Yiddish. Major universities in Moscow, Kiev, Kharkov and Minsk had Yiddish studies sectors. Shlomo Mikhols fashioned the Moscow Yiddish Theatre into a shimmering bastion of drama which became world renowned. . . .

In short, while penury haunted the Yiddish world in Poland and America, Yiddish culture blossomed in the Soviet Union, *subsidized by the government*.

The Bolsheviks began putting the pressure on as early as 1924. Freedom of expression was deemed anti-state. By the mid-30's repression was in full command, the dream in ruins.

Ashes Out of Hope contains five stories of three martyred Yiddish authors: David Bergelson, Moshe

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Kulbak and *Der Nister*, a pseudonym for Pinchas Kahanovitch. In these pages we are witness to the promise and to its ultimate, heart-breaking betrayal.

David Bergelson was one of the most gifted of Yiddish writers in or out of the Soviet Union. His style was impressionistic, lean, modernistic—the mood which permeated much of his fiction, glum. “Joseph Schur,” a tale of pre-revolutionary Jewish life in Russia, portrays the dissolution of the old Jewish milieu, the vulgarity of the new. Bergelson’s “The Hole Through Which Life Slips” and “Civil War” are moving, ambivalent stories of a society torn by revolution.

Bergelson was executed by the Soviets in 1952.

Moshe Kulbak’s “Zelmenyaner” is a grand comic novella about the efforts of a delightful, lovable group of eccentrics to adjust to the new Soviet order.

Kulbak, poet, teacher, writer of distinguished fiction, “vanished” in the late 1930’s.

“Der Nister,” was a master

symbolist, steeped in Jewish tradition. His “Under a Fence” is a nightmarish story — not unlike Kafka — of the fate of the artist under Communist dictatorship. He died in a Soviet prison in 1950.

The sole crime of these three gifted artists was that they wrote in Yiddish.

