

The Haskalah & its Discontents

ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER

Concerning Yiddish Literature
in Poland (1943)

1

① THE JEWISH SHTETL IN POLAND did not experience the Haskalah, or Enlightenment, at the same time or in the same evolutionary form as did Russia and Lithuania. Until 1914 the majority of Jewish market towns in Poland were traditionally pious. Life went on as it had a hundred years before. In the larger, and even smaller, cities there were isolated Maskilim—adherents of the Haskalah—as well as small groups of socialists, but Jewish life in general remained as it had been. The Haskalah as a mass movement arrived only with the First World War, but because of its lateness and momentum it assumed nearly epidemic proportions. The revolution in Russia, the occupation by the Germans and Austrians, the establishment of the Polish state, the Balfour Declaration—all had a simultaneous effect. Processes that elsewhere had developed over decades materialized here literally overnight. Young yeshiva students who had not yet shed their slitted gaberdines and little caps, and who were still up to their necks in the legacy of generations, suddenly decided that waiting for the Messiah was not for them; that the shops in which their fathers stood were a contemptible and unreliable source of livelihood; that it was altogether unpleasant to have gentile rowdies throw stones and shout “Jew” after you; that in the little shtetlekh one lived in filth, in ignorance, and that something had to be done to extricate oneself from the mire. Education or home study could not be the sole answer to

= The Little Shoemakers

quoted
in
Album

נישטערן אין אונדזער ארכיוו. ער וועט אנטדעקן פאר זיך א ברייט, רייך לעבן, וואס איז פאר דער שיינער ליטעראטור געבליבן א קרקע-בתולה. ער וועט דערזען, אז זיינע נישט-ליטערארישע אור-עלטערן האבן אים איבערגעלאזט מינעס, פון וועלכע מען קאן גייסטיק רייך ווערן. אויב מען איז בכוח צו גראבן אין דער טיף. מיט אנדערע ווערטער: דער אידישער שרייבער וועט אנטדעקן אידישקייט אין גאר איר פראכט. די יעניקע אידישע טאלענטן, וואס שטרעבן אומבאדינגט ליטעראריש מיטצוגיין מיטן היינט, וועלן מוזן — אדער זיך באנוצן מיט א פרעמדער שפראך, אדער זיך באזעצן אין ארץ-ישראל און זיך אויסלערנען העברעאיש, וואס איז איצט דארטן א לעבעדיקע שפראך. ווי פארדאקסאָל דאס זאל נישט קלינגען: העברעאיש איז איצט מער א שפראך פון דער קעגנווארט, מיט אלע אטריבוטן, ווי עס איז אונדזער מאמע-לשון, אידיש.

מיר שאצן דא נישט אפ די לאגע פון א סאציאלן שטאנדפונקט. דאס זאלן טאן סאציאלאגן און פאליטיקער. מיר אליין גלויבן, אז אונדזער צוגעבונדנקייט צו דער פארגאנגענהייט האט גארנישט צו טאן מיט רעאקציע, שימל, זומפ. מיר גלויבן, אז פארקערט, די אידישע צוגעבונדנקייט צום עבר גייט צוזאמען מיט גרויסער פראגרעסיוויטעט, ווייל די געשיכטע פון דעם אידישן פאלק איז די געשיכטע פון א פער-מאנענטער רעוואלוציע אקעגן די כוחות פון פינצטערניש. ווען אונדזערע פראפעסיאנעלע רעוואלוציאנערן רעדן אין איין אטעם וועגן רבנים און גלחים, וועגן דער שול און דער קירך, פעלשן זיי געשיכטע. עס איז די ערן-אויפגאבע פון דער אידישער ליטעראטור צו מאכן אז עק צו אט-דער מיספארשטענדעניש.

אונדזער מאמע-לשון איז אלט געווארן. די מאמע איז איצט שוין א באבע און עלטער-באבע. זי האט מיט אונדז געוואגלט פון דייטשלאנד קיין פוילן, רוסלאנד, רומעניע. זי איז איצט אין אמעריקע, אבער גייסטיק לעבט זי מיט דער אלטער היים, מיט אירע זכרונות. זי הויבט אן פארגעסן איר אייגן לשון, זי מישט שוין איצט אריין און פארגרייזט א סך ענגלישע ווערטער, זי מאכט קאמישע טעותים און פארדרייט די יוצרות. אבער דאס איז נאר דאמאלס, ווען זי וויל זיין מאדערן, מיטגיין מיט דער צייט, ווייזן איר וועלטלעכקייט. ווען זי הויבט אן שמועסן וועגן דעם אמאל (דורך דעם מויל פון אן אמתן טאלענט), שיטן זיך פון אירע ליפן פערל. זי געדענקט בעסער און שארפער וואס עס איז פארלאפן מיט פופציק יאר צוריק, ווי וואס עס איז געשען מיט איר היינט אינדערפרי. . . .

with our ancient treasures, rummage through our archives. He will discover a rich, wide world—virgin soil from which the beautiful literature can grow. He will find that his unliterary forebears have bequeathed him mines from which he can draw untold spiritual wealth, if only he is able to dig deeply. In other words, the Yiddish writer shall discover Judaism in all its splendour. The other Yiddish writers, those who struggle vainly to keep up with the literary times, will either have to gain proficiency in another language or settle in the Land of Israel and master Hebrew, which has become a living language there. What a paradox! Hebrew is now more a living language, with all the attributes, than is our mother tongue, Yiddish.

We have not evaluated the situation from a sociological perspective. That we leave to sociologists and politicians. We ourselves do not believe that our attachment to the past has any hint of mold, mildew or reactionary ideas. On the contrary, we believe that the Jewish attachment to the past can accommodate an extremely progressive outlook, for the history of the Jewish people is the history of an ongoing revolution against the powers of darkness. When our professional revolutionaries speak in one breath of rabbis and priests, of the synagogue and the church, they falsify history. It is the noble task of Yiddish literature to put an end to such misconceptions.

Our mother tongue has grown old. The mother is already a grandmother and a great grandmother. She wandered with us from Germany to Poland, Russia, Rumania. Now she is in America, but in spirit she still lives in the old country—in her memories. She is beginning to forget her own language, mixing in many corrupted English words, making comical mistakes and confusing one language with the other. However, this is only when she tries to be modern, to keep pace with the times and show her worldliness. When she starts talking about the past (through the mouth of a true talent), pearls drop from her lips. She remembers what happened fifty years ago better and more clearly than what happened this morning.

Translated from the Yiddish by ROBERT H. WOLF

all these problems, as in the early days of the Haskalah when only one person in a town or two in a family had been caught in the net. Here in Poland, entire houses of study were emptied overnight. The Zionist, socialist, and communist movements snatched most of the young people. Organizations, clubs, and libraries sprouted like mushrooms after a rain. Jewish Poland, in these first years after the war, experienced a spiritual revolution.

The spiritual revolution brought with it a spiritual hunger. Since the majority of young Jews knew little Hebrew and little Polish, it was natural that they should have turned to the Yiddish book. The literary marketplace, however, was not prepared for such demand. The works of the "classical" authors were quickly devoured, and the few translations could not quell the appetite. The truth was that this hunger was more for science than for belles-lettres, but it was in this respect that Yiddish literature was poorest. Jewish youth in Poland were stymied by a bitter truth: the old forms were lost, yet nothing new had replaced them. Nothing they could call their own, at any rate. In their naïveté and despair, the young people looked to the writer for leadership. After all, he was at least partly responsible for the heresies that had spread through the Jewish towns. However, there were none who could lead. Peretz had died during the war. Asch was somewhere in America, besides which, he was not among those who had the inclination or ability to be a leader. Nomberg had, after lengthy deliberation, reached the age-old conclusion that all is vanity. Frischmann was, in principle, opposed to getting involved in communal affairs. Weissenberg was for some reason, or for a number of reasons, already angry at everybody, himself included. Hillel Zeitlin harked back to the study house, but young Polish Jews could not yet understand this sort of romanticism. They were looking for a way not to return to the study house but to escape it. . . .

For a time Jewish circles were excited by the sort of writing that then went under the misnomer "futurism." The works of Peretz Markish, Moyshe Broderzon, Melech Ravitch, Uri Zvi Greenberg, and Alter Katsisne had a powerful impact. The byword that the old world was going to ruin along with the old cultural forms was a consolation for one's sense of personal ruin. The mixture of florid literary and florid ultraradical styles acted upon the imaginations of restless young men and women. Those writers who did not allow themselves to become intoxicated by this pseudo-Sturm und Drang were labeled reactionaries. Inflation of words accompanied monetary inflation. It was consoling to the disciples of Grójc and Tomaszow to know that the classic European authors were a band of used-up babblers, and that the Revolution, after crushing and pulverizing all of them with its gigantic boot, would effect a miracle heretofore unseen. . . . However sad the situation was, it nevertheless lent Yiddish

literature a certain importance. It meant that the people were awaiting the great work, the momentous word. Even fathers and mothers took part in discussions about literature. If a Jewish mother wanted to indicate that her son was a little disturbed, she would say he was a futurist. Hundreds and perhaps thousands of Yiddish-speaking young people took to the pen. From the countless manuscripts that editors tossed in the garbage, there emanated a spiritual energy that overflowed its bounds and could find no fulfillment.

This literary Sabbateanism failed to produce a truly great revolution. Its chief consequence was that to the two existing types of Yiddish writer, the scholar and the salt of the earth, it added a third: the radical intellectual. Of these, some had been bewitched by the revolution in Russia, while others were simply radical by disposition. The majority had little Jewish knowledge, hardly any grasp of folk culture. The radical intellectual was a neo-Maskil who built his program not on education but on class consciousness. For the first time, there appeared in Yiddish literature in Poland a sharp distinction between the traditional Jewish collective (*klal-Yisroel*) and the Jewish proletariat.

This doctrine, in literature as well as in life, was particularly ill-suited to conditions in Poland. It was a thoroughly imported product. Markish's *Kupe* (The Heap) and "Radio" were written in a language almost unintelligible to a Polish Jew. They transmitted a piece of unprocessed Russian chaos, in a Yiddish that was filled with Russianisms. For the first time, the Yiddish reader came up against a literature that, although written with Yiddish letters, was somehow not Jewish. Equally strange-sounding were the poems of Hofstein, Kvitko, and the other Russian-Jewish poets appearing at the time in Yiddish journals in Poland. There was something foreign and cosmopolitan in Ravitch's naked poems, which smacked of Vienna and Germanic literature. Alter Katsisne borrowed the title of his book *Der gayst der melekh* (The Spirit of the King) from Slowacki's work *Król Duch*. Such borrowing was characteristic of the entire school of writing. Uri Zvi Greenberg's poem "Mephisto" was intended to recall Mephistopheles and *Faust*. All these young writers introduced new concepts, new rhythms, but somehow the bridge leading from the old to the new remained unseen. It was as though Yiddish literature had fallen asleep, like Hōni hame'aggel, only to wake up in a strange world. Modern Yiddish literature could go only so far in ignoring the familiar way of life, but concerning style it also took a shortcut. I. J. Singer's stories "Perl" (Pearls) and "Altshot" (Old City) were a new phenomenon in Yiddish prose. No one until then had handled the verbal material so cleanly, without a trace of garrulousness, without the usual folkloristic narrative persona. The themes and conception were also unfamiliar. Startling in his dense imagery was A. M. Fuchs, who, although he lived in

Blanket
indictment
of tid.
modernism
all 2nd
hand

heavy
irony

Vienna at the time, could also be counted among the group of young prose writers in Poland after the First World War. Even the naked naturalism of Oyzer Varshavsky's *Shmuglares* (Smugglers) was different from all that one was used to in Yiddish literature, and it caused a sensation. This young generation arrived with external influences and a new slogan: Yiddish literature must emerge from behind the stove. It was self-evident that the Yiddish reader, the young Jew, would have to emerge as well, emancipate himself, come out of the so-called darkness, "become a human being."

It was the old Haskalah, but dressed in new clothes.

The Politics of Yiddish: 2 The Optimists vs the Pessimists

The slogan of the Maskilim, that one should be a Jew in the home and a human being outside, could be realized neither in tsarist Russia nor in reconstituted Poland. The rulers, not wanting Jews to become "human beings," refused to give them human rights. Following the optimism of the initial period of Poland's statehood, the mood darkened from year to year. Trade with Russia ceased. Taxes rose. Antisemitism took on increasingly menacing forms. Many Jews were ready to give up everything and move to the Land of Israel, but not enough certificates were available. Young Jews took off for North and South America, France, and Africa, but consuls in every country seemed to have agreed not to give visas. Why deny it? The Jewish ghetto, with its evils and afflictions, was coming into existence even then. The situation was already quite hopeless.

The only optimists on the modern Jewish street were the socialists and communists. The latter guaranteed that there would soon be a revolution, while the former believed that any day the Polish masses would get wise and grant Jews national autonomy. Both demanded that the Yiddish writers should help them, join them. However, the Yiddish writers did not share in their optimism. The shouters of Yiddish literature had quickly shouted themselves into silence. Yiddish literature, the radicals believed, had crept back behind the stove. Party representatives directed long complaints to the writers, accusing them of lacking ideas, of conveying in their work only the negative and the outmoded, nothing that could serve the reader as a comfort or an inspiration. Day in and day out, the radical press lectured Yiddish writers for not joining the masses in their struggle. They demanded of the author that he should at least provide a picture of "reality," venture a diagnosis if he could not give a cure. But the Yiddish writers went off in very different directions.

It is hard to say whether Sholem Asch was at the time an American-Yiddish or a Polish-Yiddish writer. Whichever may be, his works—*Kidush hashem* (Sanctification of the Name), *Di kishef-makherin fun Kastilye* (The

Witch of Castile), *Gots gefangene* (God's Captives), and others—had little to do with the scheme of proletarian literature. The same was true of Opatoshu's *[In] poylishe velder* ([In] Polish Woods) and Leivick's *Golem*, which appeared then in Poland. After several years of silence, I. I. Singer came out with the novel *Yoshe Kalb*, which described the old Jewish way of life: rabbis, rebbes, Hasidim, and kabbalists. While Futurism was still raging on the Jewish street, Aaron Zeitlin published a work in sharp contrast to the secular and revolutionary tendencies. His poem "Metatron" was in answer to Uri Zvi Greenberg's "Mephisto": instead of the borrowed gentile devil, Zeitlin produced an angel, the Prince of the Countenance. In form, this poem was hypermodern, full of bold experimentation, but its real tendency was traditionally Jewish: conflict and struggle occur not only in the lower sphere, among men, but also above, among the angels who are the custodians of the world; as long as the human spirit remains dark and sinful, it assists the powers of evil and hampers redemption. This profoundly religious current continued in his collection of poems *Shotns oyfn shney* (Shadows on the Snow) and in his dramas *Ester un Kazimir* (Esther and Kazimir), *Brenner*, *Yankev Frank* (Jacob Frank), and others. Moshe Kulbak, who was to perish so tragically in his attempt to yoke his muse to the Revolution, had written *Meschiek ben Efrayim* (Messiah the Son of Ephraim), *Montog* (Monday), and other works based on old Jewish beliefs and legends. It is enough to glance through the names of Yiddish authors in Poland between the world wars to realize that the great majority owed nothing to the Futurist "revolution." H. D. Nomberg's last story concerned a rebbe's grandson. Y. M. Weissenberg branded the Futurists and radicals as . . . Litvaks. He coined a new slogan: Turn back to folk sources. H. L. Zhitnitski's best work remained *Dem zeydn hayzl* (Grandfather's Cottage), in which the old lifestyle is portrayed. Shlomo Gilbert busied himself with kabbalistic tales or with spiritism. Jacob Preger came out with the historical dramas *Der nisoyen* (The Temptation) and *Shloyme hameylekh* (King Solomon). Ber Horowitz wrote hasidic stories in archaic Yiddish, in the style of *Kool khasidim*. Y. M. Neiman came forth with the folkloristic drama *Shabes-oybst* (Sabbath Fruits). A. M. Fuchs described a way of life that had remained unchanged for hundreds of years. Joel Mastbaum told fantastic tales about glassworks, gypsies, serpents, and fiddles. . . . Z. Segalowitch wrote sentimental novels about wild girls named Tsilke, fickle women, and lamentations on his own eternal solitude. Efraim Kaganowski stuck to his thieves and draymen from Stawek Alley and, above all, busied himself with the romantic tragedies of pale seamstresses. Underworld types also figured in the work of F. Bimko.

Although in his monographs and pamphlets J. I. Trunk continued to remind us that secular Jewish culture was our renaissance and that it was

the Jewish worker who bore this renewal on his shoulders, in his belletristic work he "glanced backward," describing ancient Greeks and Romans or such nonproletarian heroes as Jesus and Buddha. Joshua Perle devoted himself excessively to the "rotting petite bourgeoisie," while Simon Horontchik, for the most part, made his protagonists small-time shopkeepers and peddlers, all consigned in the Marxist viewpoint to the dung heap of the Revolution.

Poetry was not much more topical. True, a number of younger poets wrote to "socialist specifications." Some of them gathered around the Bundist literary journal *Vokhnshrift* and later at the *Foroys*, others around the leftist labor Zionist and communist publications. For a while, the poets Kadia Molodowsky and Rachel H. Korn identified strongly with this side. We should also recall the poets B. Olitzky, J. Papiernikov, Y. L. Kahn, Kalman Lis, Y. Rubinstein, Sh. Volman, Israel Ashendorf, Ber Shnaper, Bunem Heller, and B. Shudrich. Still, in general poetry also resisted the yoke. Aaron Zeitlin, the most important Yiddish poet in Poland, sang of *oylem he'atsilus* (one of the Four Worlds specified in medieval kabbalah), the ten *sfiros* (divine emanations), and the kabbalist Yosef Della Reina. Another religious poet was Israel Shtern. Itsik Manger, who came to Poland from Rumania, tended in his writing toward romanticism. Israel Rabon brilliantly played the wag and renegade. Miriam Ulianover wrote poetry redolent of the prayer book. The poets, more than the prose writers, sought new forms, but poetry, too, in its tone, diction, and general content, adhered to the values and images created by the Diaspora. Even those who screamed and hollered about revolution did so, you might say, to the tune of traditional invective. Some swore by their figurative beards and sidelocks that their fathers were blacksmiths and their grandmothers herded cows, but nobody was convinced. Indeed, although Yiddish literature was theoretically worldly, it did not even reflect the impoverished worldliness of the Jewish streets. In the Yiddish prose written in Poland, Jewish doctors and lawyers, teachers and party functionaries, gymnasium (i.e., secondary school) scholars and students hardly figured at all. No works will tell you the adventures and remarkable transformations of the Jewish communist; nor will you see the pioneer, the revisionist, the assimilationist, the Bundist, the Jewish legionnaire and follower of Pilsudski, the Galician doctors, the grandes dames at the spas, or the elegant young Jewish women who filled the Polish theaters, cafés, and cabarets, not suspecting until the last minute that they were doomed along with their pious grandmothers. Something happened with Yiddish literature in Poland—and not only in Poland—that is in contrast to every other literary history and literary philosophy.

The truth was that Polish-Yiddish literature could be neither proletarian nor capitalist. It was easy for Linetski, Mendelev, and Sholem

The Classicists

Aleichev to ridicule and criticize Kabtsansk, Yehupets, and Tuneyadevke (Mendele's mythological towns), but much more difficult for their literary grandchildren to touch upon the material possessions and values that had developed outside of Kabtsansk and that in themselves represented the very essence of worldly existence. It was simple to be worldly by negating the old manners, but quite a different thing to be worldly in a positive way. In this regard, Yiddish literature in Poland lacked the most elementary conditions. First of all, the Yiddish writer had few external experiences. His life, in brief, consisted of religious school, study house, shop, and, finally, the streets of Jewish Warsaw. He could not write—assuming that he did not want to simply fabricate—about peasants, hunters, fishermen, coal miners, sportsmen, railroad workers, mechanics, policemen, military personnel, ships, airplanes, horse races, universities, salons, and a thousand other objects and people that *make up* a secular life. Second, the language that he used lacked names for the tens of thousands of objects and activities to which all these things are connected. He could not even designate in his Yiddish the flowers he once admired in a shop window or God's creatures that he saw when he toured the country.

The Yiddish word was still less capable than the Jew himself of penetrating *oylem hamayse*, the world of deed. It was even difficult for the Yiddish writer to describe his brother, the Jewish intellectual (or rather, quasi-intellectual), who was poor in customs, naked in tradition, without a Sabbath or a holy day, extirpated from his home, foreign in language (if not bilingual), lacking a characteristic costume, lacking any of the identifying traits that help lend form to a character and distinguish it from other individuals. Bergelson had wanted to depict the Jewish intellectual in *Opgang* (Decline), in *Penek*, but no clear figure emerged. H. D. Nomberg, I. J. Singer, A. M. Fuchs all tried. Attempts were made in America and elsewhere, but never with success. The entirety of Soviet Yiddish literature collapsed because of the writers' determination to universalize it at any cost. More responsible than anything was the fact that the secular Jew in no wise evoked the inspiration of the Yiddish writer. The synthesis of Jew and Gentile, or of Jew and human being, could speak to his sense of logic, but not to that subconscious spring that is the source of creativity.

Two alternatives remained for the Yiddish writer: either he, too, could ridicule the despised and tragic Kabtsansk, to which he was linked by fate; or he could dig into the depths, look backward, seek in poverty the great, the profoundly Jewish, the eternal. Peretz had chosen the latter. With talent, one can ridicule only once. On the other hand, the work that Peretz had begun was pathbreaking. It revealed the beginning of the road that Yiddish literature would have to take if it were to exist at all.

Still, whether one went back to mocking the impoverished Jewish way of life or mastered the ancient idiom, sought its hidden beauty,

themselves
cut off
from
secular
life

2518
2518

X

No
grasp
what's
ever

shaped it and dramatized it—Yiddish literature remained limited in theme, marginal, exceptional. To the pious Jew it contained nothing but mockery. The radical did not understand why he was being crammed with so much paraphrased and distorted piety that, no matter which way he looked at it, still seemed stale and reactionary. The Yiddish writer occasionally attempted to flee these constraints and become "European," but the formal deficiency of the Jewish intelligentsia, the writer's own inexperience, and the inappropriateness of the Yiddish language drove him back. Here, in the ghetto, he at least had something of his own. As Christians had for generations used the names and concepts of Greek Hellenist mythology in their secular institutions, so the modern Yiddish writer had to utilize the concepts and vocabulary of a Judaism in which he no longer believed. He tried to fashion a culture out of borrowings, allusions, quotation marks. Its content was religious, but its ends were secular. It was a culture of "as ifs," a syllogism in which the premises were false but the conclusion nevertheless had to be correct. Modern Yiddish literature did not represent either a new beginning or true continuity; it was rather the aftergrowth of a great and rich culture. Its creators were split personalities, and everything they said had to have the dual meaning of mockery (or stylization), even when their intentions were completely serious.

No, Yiddish literature could be neither proletarian, elevated, nor combative. Not only the Yiddish writer but his work, his *oeuvre*, was in a bind. A contradiction ran through this literature's entire existence. It was godly without a god, worldly without a world. In order to survive, it had to either win back the Lord of the Universe or feel firm ground beneath its feet. Such running between heaven and earth could not last long. With the peculiar sense of truth possessed by those who pass for dreamers and fantasists, the Yiddish writer felt more than others the inexorable approach of catastrophe. He understood that no program could save the Jewish Pompeii. He could not look for comfort anywhere save in Jewish history, in the eternity of Israel. Long before the Nazis entered Poland, the Yiddish writer perceived the scent of the Middle Ages, of slaughter and martyrdom. He intuited the great solitude of the Jew on earth and the eternal forces that were shaping his destiny. The better the writer, the more boldly these feelings were expressed in his work.

The distinct culture of 3 Polish Jewry

As bleak as we have shown the lot of the writer in Poland to have been, it did have one bright aspect: although economically and politically Jewish life was definitely on a downward path, within its limitations it existed. Up to the last minute, when all was annihilated, Poland comprised

a distinctive Jewish life replete with its own style and form—the old pious Jewish way of life. There was also a Yiddish language, which flourished in a fruitful if circumscribed soil. The Polish Yiddish writer, unlike his American Yiddish counterpart, did not have to rely on memory. He could, if he so desired, simply walk out onto the street and see Jewish life and hear how it spoke.

A literature cannot grow out of a lifestyle that has gone mad, out of a world turned inside out. There can be no literature where forms are not defined. Immanuel Kant says somewhere that order must exist in nature itself for thought to be possible. If there were no system in experience, there could be no system in thought either. Precisely the same can be said about literature. Form must surround literature in order for literature to have form. The spirit must be malleable for the artist to give it shape. Such was the case in Poland.

Every shtetl in Poland, every Jewish alleyway, had its own character. Jews from the Lublin area spoke in a different way and even, it seemed, looked different from Jews from Kalisz or Siedlce. The Jewish towns by the Vistula were very different from those in Volhynia. In Wawolnic, near Lublin, the Scroll of Esther was read on the day after Purim because of a tradition that the site had been surrounded by a wall even in the time of Joshua. In Tyszowce, the Messiah son of Joseph had lived and had been martyred. In Lublin stood the Maharshah's synagogue, while in Vilna you might have been asked to make a quorum in the chapel of the Gaon; in Cracow you would be shown the cemetery in which Rabbi Moses Isserles lay buried; and in Ludomir, the Green prayer house, where the Maid of Ludomir had prayed in a shawl like a man, still stood. You could tell from his clothes whether a Polish Jew was a Hasid or an opponent of Hasidism, a scholar or an ignoramus. To the very end there were householders who kept their prayer shawls in leather sacks and wore high caps, and housewives in silken wigs and Turkish scarves. A practiced eye could tell what kind of rebbe a Jew followed. The Gerer Hasidim were louts, while the Kozienicers figured in hasidic folklore as hard-luck cases, sluggards, whiners; the Radzyner Hasidim still argued about whether the fringes on the prayer shawl should be blue, while the Kotzkers would rush through the prayer service and crack jokes. Jews who prayed at daybreak and according to the German rite were completely different from those who prayed late and according to the Spanish rite. One could recognize from his pronunciation whether a man was from Wloclawek or Kovel, Warsaw or Lemberg, Cracow or Kolomyia. In Warsaw you could distinguish the Jews who lived in certain streets—Grzybowska, Twarda, Sliska, Panska, Gnojna—from those who lived in others—Nalewa, Franciszkanska, Mila, Kupiecka. The potential heroes of Yiddish literature were wandering the city, simply begging to be described.

The Jews in Poland were poor in everything except individuality. As for Yiddish literature, although its applicability was, as noted, limited, within its narrow sphere it was able to develop. In recent decades the Yiddish press coined neologisms that entered the language. Writers interested in reviving Old Yiddish did not have to burrow through tomes; in small towns, there still lived old wives who spoke the language of the medieval women's prayer book. There was an argot for musicians and one for thieves, both swarming with idioms that were never even appropriated for the literature. Yiddish writers in Poland drew from the source. One feels this in the way they handled dialogue, in their descriptions, in their authorial voice. Behind the literature was a way of life, a unique manner. These were the forms and boundaries without which no literature can exist.

The Yiddish Writers' Club

* The Writers' Union in Warsaw, which was the bourse of Yiddish literature in Poland, was always filled with young talents who came from every corner of the country. A fertile soil was provided there in which Yiddish writers grew, although without a future. From their shtetlekh the novices brought disheveled hair, a hatred of Warsaw, and the will to make a revolution in literature. They strolled through the Writers' Union in provincial fur coats and boots. In the little magazines they published, like *Shprotsungn* (Saplings) and others, they used a difficult archaic Yiddish, thickened with provincialisms. Among the "barbarians" who had invaded Tomacki 13 were such genuine talents as Yehiel Lerer, author of the epic of the Jewish shtetl *Mayn heym* (My Home), Leyb Rashkin, who wrote the novel *Di mentshn fun Godlbozhits* (The People of Godlborycz), S. Berlinsky, Moshe Shimmel, Chaim Grade, Reisel Zhikhlinski, A. Sutzkever, Israel Emiot, Leizer Wolf, Chaim Semyatitski, and a host of others.

All sorts of young fellows arrived: those who carried their collected works in their pockets and would read at the drop of a hat, and those who for years had been writing a masterpiece around which they had built an aura of mystery. There was a Jew with beard and sidelocks who had left his wife and children at home and had decided to become a literatus, and one who on the day of his arrival started a scandal, claiming that the youngest writers were ignored. (He himself was a youth of forty-six.) There were communists who threatened to have everyone shot after the revolution, and young women who, while boasting that they didn't know any "jargon" (i.e., Yiddish), plunged right into literary matters and argued with the critics. One young man sat an entire day by the stove, reading and writing. He read everything that came his way: books about medicine, astronomy, an old report to a company's shareholders, an

account of a strike by railroad clerks that had taken place fifteen years before. Another young man proclaimed that he had virtually begun a revolution in world literature. In the Writers' Union he was immediately surrounded by fervent disciples. His "revolution" lay in the fact that he composed his stories (or whatever they were) vertically; e.g., on the mountain stands a tower, on the tower stands a castle, on the castle stands a chimney, on the chimney a witch, the witch is holding a fir tree, and so on to the sky. . . . This method elicited no skeptical comments or queries. The vertical poet fought like a leopard for his literary revolution, and his disciples shouted that a new Homer had materialized out of the blue.

An integral member of the Writers' Union was the poet Hershele. At fifty he looked like a man of twenty-five, and his mental age remained that of a schoolboy, with a schoolboy's charms and childishness. This Hershele nevertheless wrote lovely folk songs. His last book was entitled *Shabes oyfn trakt* (Sabbath on the Highway). Hershele became engaged at the Writers' Union, was married at the Writers' Union, and, after quarreling with his mother-in-law, spent nights at the Writers' Union. He blamed the other writers for having duped him into marrying. This Hershele with his follies and bits of wisdom, his ignorance and poetic facility, was an authentic member of the "folk," and everything he said was thereby folklore. He always carried on his person the kind of notebook in which shopkeepers enter debts. It was in this notebook that, in his microscopically small handwriting, he set down his poems. Virtually thousands of poems were contained in that notebook.

New arrivals to the Writers' Union included a regimental colonel and government rabbi whose ritual fringes stuck out from under his uniform; a young man who had written an encyclopedia on his own and who had entire sacks filled with manuscripts in his attic; a poor woman who wrote refined pornographic poems; and a man who took out an ad in the papers on the eve of every festival, claiming that the coming of the Messiah had been revealed to him. There were Hebrew teachers who spent hours arguing over points of grammar; a Bundist who had once had to eliminate a stool pigeon and who never stopped conducting conspiracies; a Jew who bathed in winter, ate only vegetables, and believed in Jesus; and a librarian familiar with every cranny of world literature who nonetheless could not believe—did not want to believe—that there was such a thing as a literature in Yiddish.

A man who was a virtual millionaire in terms of individuality was the writer S. L. Kave, also known as M. Vanvild and Joseph Dikstein. One can't imagine the Writers' Union without Kave. He was an autodidact, but he was well informed, well read, and had a sharp mind. Everything about this man was hyperoriginal, topsy-turvy, and perverse. When Kave played chess, he would claim that the winner had bungled. When Kave

folk
poets

quoted
in
Album

eccentric

committed an error, it was the encyclopedia that was at fault. When Kave made up his mind about something, God Himself couldn't make him budge. On the basis of his theories he could prove that Warsaw was on the North Pole and that Dr. Herzl had founded the Bund. . . . In him there was a remnant of the old master quibblers who, by applying their methodology to the talmudic tractate Bava Mezia, could surmise that it was permitted to eat bread on Passover. When the journal *Globus* began appearing in Warsaw, the editors commissioned an article on literature from Kave. They knew that he had ideas, opinions, material for a good essay. The result was an essay on . . . horses. It happened like this: starting to write about literature, Kave happened to use the word "full-blooded." Soon something about this expression puzzled him. What was meant by "full-blooded"? He checked an encyclopedia and it emerged that "full-blooded" is an expression originally used in reference to horses of pure stock—thoroughbreds. Kave was so enthused by this discovery that the resultant article was almost entirely about horses. Later, he was very surprised when the editors refused to print it.

It is characteristic of a living literature that its writers often pose as institutions, or at least as types. The writer as ordinary human being was not typical of literary Warsaw. An institution unto himself was Hillel Zeitlin. He rarely entered the Writers' Union, but his home was itself a sort of writers' union. First of all, he had two sons who were writers, Aaron and Elhanan. Besides, his house was always filled with writers, some just starting out, as well as with other remarkable personages. Every young man who lifted a pen sooner or later called on Hillel Zeitlin. Zeitlin had patience for all: for kabbalists seeking clues about the Messiah and the End of Days as well as for scoffers who came to debate the existence of God. He gave letters of recommendation to young people in quest of teaching positions in the province or of communal stipends, and would allow young poets to read their lyrics to him. For some time a frequent visitor had been Y. Y. Posner, whose book *Malkhus hameshichk* (Kingdom of the Messiah) was recognized by several critics as a work of great importance. Posner was frightfully morose. He would come and sit for several hours without saying a word, and Hillel Zeitlin would display as much interest in Posner's silences as in the talk and arguments of others.

Much ink has been spilled over Weissenberg's quarrel with the Litvaks. For Weissenberg, the Litvak—the Lithuanian Jew—served as a symbol. To him, "Litvak" meant a man without innate talent but with the ability to master everything. Indeed, it so happened that most of the radical writers were either from Lithuania or Russia. (For Weissenberg, Lithuania began just outside of Warsaw.) With time his struggle against the Litvaks became so broad that he accused even Sholem Asch of being a

Litvak. His bitterness would occasionally reach such extremes that he would say the entire world consisted of Litvaks. Weissenberg had early on founded a literary school and, like every master, he later suffered great disappointments from his pupils: either they defected to the Litvaks . . . or became Litvaks themselves. One had to be familiar with Weissenberg and the context of his upbringing in order to understand him. Through his mouth spoke generations of uneducated Jews who loved the Torah but hated its teachers.

"Politically suspect"—for many years this phrase described Aaron Zeitlin's reputation in Warsaw. According to the theories of the Writers' Union, a writer, an authentic talent, had to come from a small town, keep eating days (as in yeshivahs), and write furiously, with errors and without punctuation. That an artist must not read any books was an axiom. Well, Aaron Zeitlin possessed none of the above attributes. He had studied in a gymnasium and attended university. He wrote in both Yiddish and Hebrew. He read Goethe and Shakespeare in the originals. For all these sins he was branded an intellectual by those of the Writers' Union. It took a long time before Tomacki 13 made peace with the idea that a person can read a book without pilfering it from top to bottom. It went against all the rules.

The secret saint of the Writers' Union was the poet Israel Shtern. It was said that he prayed every day in prayer shawl and phylacteries and danced among the Umaner (Bratslaver) Hasidim—the "dead Hasidim." He lived in the most bitter poverty and went about in wretched condition. Israel Shtern was a scholar and a mystic. Another mysterious soul, Shlomo Gilbert, was an occultist who would lie awake entire nights trying to achieve "astral" states. He spoke in symbols. Gilbert was a consumptive, and doctors had given up on him long ago. He led the life of one who knows that he has been condemned to the world of chaos.

Melech Ravitch was known for his organizational skills. As secretary of the Writers' Union, he also—or so malicious tongues claimed—was the bookkeeper of Yiddish literature. He registered geniuses, ordinary talents, and graphomaniacs. Each graphomaniac had a number that was kept by Ravitch. How true these stories are is known only to Ravitch, who—seriously speaking—is a unique man and writer.

The peacemaker of the Writers' Union was J. I. Trunk. His mission was to reconcile opposites. He was a capitalist and a Bundist. He believed that "the earth is the Proletariat's and the fullness thereof" even as he wrote about ancient Greeks and Romans. He preached collectivism and was an individualist. He loved Jewish street life but lived among Gentiles. J. I. Trunk believed that all contradictions are the result of misunderstandings that must be eradicated as quickly as possible. In the ragged Jewish

life of Nalewki Street he sought the harmony of which Plato and Seneca had spoken.

Although Itzik Manger was relatively new to the Writers' Union, he soon became so integrated within the environment that it was often hard to tell where Manger ended and the Union began. The drunk and his lamppost were no mere clichés to Manger. There has rarely been a poet who combined life and work with such harmony as did he. When in his cups he declaimed, with bitter humor, all the woes and complaints that lay in the unconscious of the entire profession known as Yiddish literature.

The most prolific writer in Warsaw was Z. Segalowitch. Every year he produced a book—sometimes two. He had much luck with readers, but little with his colleagues. He was, it seems, the only Yiddish writer in Poland who considered his readers. He could never make peace with the idea that Yiddish literature was a literature for writers, not readers. Segalowitch would arrive at the Writers' Union early in the day, when the club first opened, and often did not leave until three o'clock the next morning. It seems that the atmosphere of the Union was the only air he could breathe; meanwhile, he would keep complaining that the air surrounding Yiddish literature was contaminated. . . . One can hardly imagine Segalowitch as he is now, living in sunny and Hebrew-speaking Tel Aviv.

There were literary societies in other cities besides Warsaw. Pride of place belonged to Vilna, whose writers—Dan Kaplanowitch, Falk Halperin, Grodzinski, Zalmen Reisen, Z. Kalmanovitch, Dr. M. Weinreich, M. Shalit, Sarah Reisen, and others—regarded literary Warsaw as a kind of Sodom. In Vilna people sought results. Writers built schools, gathered material for YIVO, did things for Jewish culture. They could not understand the slovenliness, the fatalism, the irreverent humor of Warsaw. It was agony for someone from Vilna to have to enter the Warsaw Writers' Union.

The writers of Lodz included Itzhak Katzenelson, Israel Rabon, Moshe Broderzon, Chaim Krol, H. L. Fuchs, Y. M. Neiman, and several others. Literary Lodz felt the influence of Germany and of Europe in general. This "Europeanness" was the legacy of Frischmann, and the city's literati wanted to make the most of it. For them, Warsaw was nothing but a large provincial town.

There was a group of writers who remained in Galicia but from time to time would visit Warsaw. To this group belonged the poets Samuel Jacob Imber, Ber Horowitz, Dovid Kenigsberg. Galicia also produced the historical writers Prof. Meir Balaban and Dr. Izhak Schiper; the theater critic Dr. Michael Weichert, too, was a Galician. The Galician poets were educated but wrote in the vernacular, so that I. M. Weissenberg

could never decide if they were Litvaks—because they studied in the universities—or Poles, because they wrote a popular Yiddish.

It was not our intention here to give a history of Yiddish literature in Poland between the wars. That would require a major work in which each author would be analyzed separately. We have not even had the opportunity to mention such well-known Yiddish writers as Rokhl Feigenberg, Avrom Zak, Leib Olitzky, Dr. Y. B. Zipor, Moshe Zilborg, Yosef Kirman, S. Zaromb, Der Tunkeler (Yosef Tunkel), Alexander Farbo, Dovid Kassel, M. B. Stein, the essayists Dr. Mattias Mieses, S. Y. Stupnicki, Dr. A. Gliksman, Noah Prilucki, K. Gutenbaum, Nahman Meisel, Leo Finkelstein, and so on.

All we have done here is to illuminate a few aspects of Yiddish literature in Poland and the conditions under which it existed. For the Yiddish writer who comes from there, the very ground from which he derived literary sustenance has been destroyed along with Jewish Poland. His characters are dead. Their language has been silenced. All that he has to draw from are memories.

First published as "Arum der yidisher literatur in Poyln,"

Di tsukunft 48 [August 1943]: 468–75.

Translated by ROBERT WOLF