



# VISUAL ARTS at

**ASHKENAZ**  
**אַשכּנַז**

A FESTIVAL OF NEW YIDDISH CULTURE

August 30–September 6, 1999

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קונסט  
קאטאלאג



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YIVO Institute for Jewish Research  
Rosemary Donegan  
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#### Guest Writers

#### Catalogue Design

Cover image: Henry Orenstein, *Chicken Woman*, litho, 1949 — courtesy the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia



A FESTIVAL OF NEW YIDDISH CULTURE



ASHKENAZ: A Festival of New Yiddish Culture is produced by the Ashkenaz Foundation in partnership with Harbourfront Centre and presented with the support of the following and Department of Canadian Heritage, Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council, Ontario Trillium Foundation, Ontario Tourism, Laidlaw Foundation, City of Toronto Economic Development Office, Toronto Arts Council.

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ASHKENAZ would like to thank all the artists for their participation and acknowledge the generous assistance to the Visual Arts Program by: Aboveground Art Supplies, the British Columbia Arts Council, Monique Nadeau-Saumier, Dianne O'Neil, Judy Dietz and The Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Peter Campbell, Amy Gottlieb, Pat Macaulay, Marlee Choo, Harbourfront Centre, and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

## REDISCOVERING THE YARMULKE UNCOMMON OBJECTS

Covering one's head in prayer has been a part of Judaism as well as many other world religions since ancient times. This custom's prevalence varies between geographically dispersed groups of Jews; stylistic approaches have evolved along cross-cultural paths of migration and settlement.

The yarmulke, or kippah, as it is also called, may have its origins in Roman times when Jews sought to differentiate themselves from the rest of the population and to identify themselves to other Jews. Through the medieval period in Europe, there was considerable variation in the use of head coverings for prayer. Amongst Spanish Jews, for example, head coverings were commonplace while in France and Germany, they were rare. It was not until the 15th century that the custom was codified by rabbinical law. It's current popularity can be seen as part of a renewed interest in Jewish identity.

Everywhere that Jews have lived, from the Middle East through Central Asia to Europe, North and South America, special head-coverings have long been made and used for specific festivals. The style of these head-coverings is often influenced by the surrounding culture. Jews living in India developed a turban head-covering while those in North Africa and Central Asia wore constructed caps. Yemenite Jews in the Middle East wore a distinctive ceremonial hat. These are all markedly different from the small, fitted skull-cap worn by many Jews living in Eastern Europe and North America.

Wherever Jews lived, family and community events such as weddings, bar

mitzvahs or a dedication were occasions to be marked by the wearing of specially hand-made yarmulkes. Women's textile skills were put to use to create these richly ornamented head coverings. Using sumptuous materials such as silks, velvets and gold or silver threads, traditional yarmulkes were often embellished with images such as barley, honey, pomegranates, figs, olives, wheat and the vine, representing the seven species which bless the land of Israel. Intricately worked Hebrew letters either represent a blessing or a prayer. Geometric patterns were also used, often influenced by local woven and embroidered textile practices.

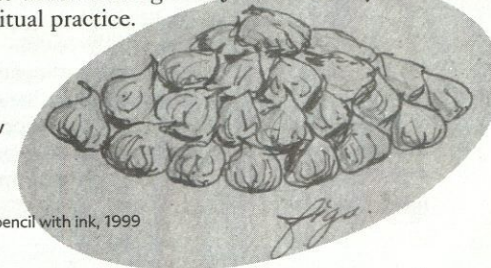
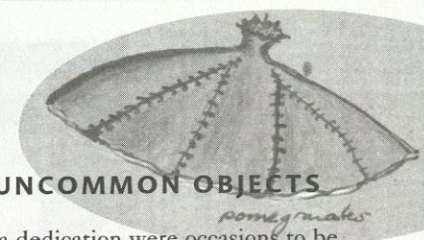
Recently, in an effort to create a more egalitarian milieu, many women have claimed this traditionally male article of dress and integrated it into their spiritual practice. In some congregations, girls start wearing a yarmulke as part of their Bat Mitzvah ceremony. Today, boys may be seen wearing yarmulkes adorned with 'teenage mutant ninja turtles', or other icons of pop culture.

The artists whose work is represented in Rediscovering the Yarmulke have been asked to examine this religious and cultural object and interpret it within a contemporary context. Their approaches range from decorative to celebratory to humorous and deeply personal. Some make reference to traditional Jewish arts and symbolism while others are completely contemporary in concept and technique. Through their thoughtful examination and reinterpretation of the yarmulke, these artists renew this traditional article of dress which is integral to Jewish identity and spiritual practice.

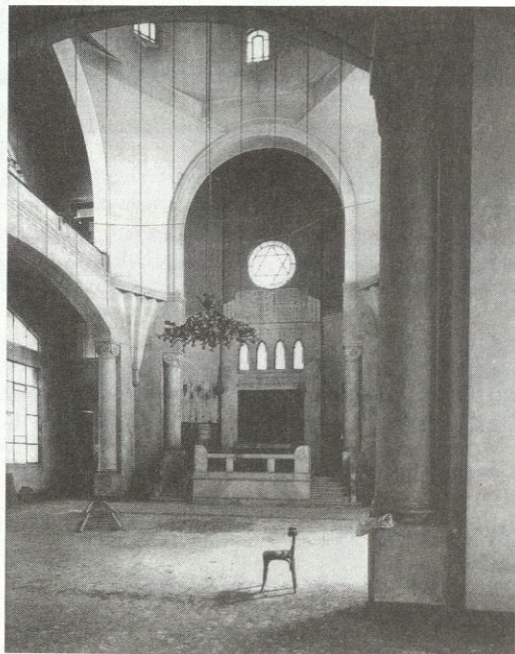
Laura Donefer, Lynne Heller, Barbara Klunder, Janet Morton, Russell Zeid, Heather MacCrimmon, Haya Nativ

Curated by Sharon Epstein and Rachel MacHenry

Images: Janet Morton, detail from *The Seven Blessings Yarmulke*, colour pencil with ink, 1999







D.R. Cowles,  
*La Grande Synagogue*  
*Caraita, Moussa Dar'i*  
*Abbasief, Cairo 1994*

## JEWISH SITES OF NORTH AFRICA

In North African countries, there are numerous remnants of a rich Jewish past, existing largely in a state of abandonment and decay. As the communities have migrated to more modern and conducive settings, or been forced out for political reasons, the synagogues, cemeteries and shrines of that past life have been left unmaintained.

The forces of modernization and social upheaval have already erased the majority of these ancient sites. In the face of current human need and political instability, preserving even the finest of physical monuments is, at best, a tenuous pursuit.

One of the defining attributes of the Jewish people is that the true structure of community life is not a construction of stone, but rather one of the soul. Today Jews are a living vital people, fifty years after the Holocaust and mass expulsions. The true 'monuments' of Jewish communities reside in their way of life carried across

the vacillations of history, rather than fixed to the soil with mortar and brick.

Yet physical monuments remain and I have sought to document these sites unembellished by artistic effect. To present them in their contemporary context, I have, as well, photographed the street world that has arisen in their immediate vicinity.

My aim is to document these sites in such a way as to give the feel of a place; not to enhance or manipulate it, but rather to convey its spirit. In places that have been abandoned, left derelict or converted to other uses, my intention is not to dramatize loss, but to record their passing beauty in the course of an historical process of change.

—D.R. Cowles

*D.R. Cowles is represented by: Galerie Mistral, Montréal; Marcia Rafelman Fine Arts, Toronto*

Curated by Linda Rutenberg  
Presented in collaboration with Photo Eclipse

## STREETLIFE

The life of the street is one of the essential elements of urban, Western culture. With its roots in the agora (public space) of the Greek city, the street is at once a space of commerce, social interaction and political discussion; it is about the exchange of money, ideas and looks. Streets, like cities, are an uneasy truce between the different communities which both mingle but try to keep a distance.

Streets in late 19th century Canadian cities were underdeveloped. Lives were lived in private while public life was supervised by business, law and religion. This was encapsulated in the world of 'Toronto the Good', full of church steeples and no street cars on Sunday. Although Montréal was larger, its religious and social activities were dominated by the Catholic Church. The Canadian city was to change dramatically when large numbers of immigrants began to arrive: Jews from Russia, Lithuania, Romania, Poland, as well as Poles, Ukrainians, Finns and Italians. They thronged into Montréal, Toronto and Winnipeg, crowding in with relatives and friends until they found work. In the United States, Jewish immigrants joined an established thriving and boisterous community in New York, centred around Hester St. in the Lower East Side.

For new Jewish immigrants, the garment or *shmata* industry was an easy place to find work. As Yiddish formed a common language, there were few language barriers and skills could be learned on the job. To save money, time, and for religious reasons, the immigrants settled in the downtown core, generally working in the same neighbourhood where they lived, shopped, socialized and could walk to synagogue. Because conditions were crowded and difficult—apartments were often two rooms—friends were encountered after school, people socialized around meetings, at social clubs and in restaurants.

## YORK QUAY GALLERY I

In Toronto, the Jewish community lived within a much larger ethnic enclave of Ukrainians, Poles, Finns and Italians, along with the well established Black community. By the 1910s, the centre of the Jewish community was Spadina Avenue and increasingly Kensington Market. Here could be



Eric Drooker, *Going to the Factory*, 46 x 61 cm, 1996,  
excerpt from *Flood! A Novel in Pictures*

found the garment industry on lower Spadina, the restaurants and theatres from Dundas to College, shops and kosher butchers in the Market and various synagogues and meeting halls. There were lectures by Emma Goldman at the Labour Lyceum, Yiddish plays at the Standard, delicatessens and coffee shops like Shopsy's or Ludovsky's where people met.

Similarly in Montréal, The Main, or St. Lawrence/St. Laurent as it was formally known, was the focus of the garment and fur industry, delicatessens and shops, with the Plateau as the major Jewish residential area. The Main was seen as the symbolic dividing



line in the city between the English on the west and the French on the east. In Winnipeg it was the North End, with its rail yards, where substantial numbers of 'foreigners', including Jews, Ukrainians, Poles and Germans, lived.

What made these neighbourhoods and streets conspicuous within the larger cities of Toronto, Montréal and Winnipeg was their public streetlife. Kensington Market, Spadina, The Main, Selkirk Avenue, was where you worked and shopped, where you went to see people. But the street was also a public space in a political sense, a place of demonstrations, speeches and organizing, where new ideas circulated freely. The recent Jewish immigrants had brought not only their religious culture, but their political culture as well to both Canada and the United States. Many brought the experience



Howard Podeswa, detail from *Youth Link Series*, 1998, ink on paper, 9 x 13 cm

and ideas of the Bund, the General Union (Bund) of Jewish Workers in Lithuania, Poland and Russia. The Bund was a Yiddish speaking workers' movement which believed in a Jewish socialist future and took pride in Yiddish secular culture. But most importantly, the Bund identified itself with the broader labour movement, which it saw as the agency for political education and mobilizing a Jewish proletariat. As a culture of social activism, the Bundists as they were informally known, contributed to a homogeneous community. There were major divisions, debates around Zionism and anti-Zionism, the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and the political splits within the Arbeiter Ring (Workmen's Circle).

Artistically, since the 1930s, the street has been a consistent theme in the work of a number of Jewish visual artists, offering vibrant portrayals of streetlife and activism. It is artwork that looks outside the studio window, into the street, the back alleys and the work sites of urban life. Fascinated and intrigued by urbanity, the artists have delved beyond the surface and are engaged as active participants. This humanism of Louis Muhlstock, Harry Gottlieb, Aba Bayefsky, Ghitta Caiserman-Roth, Henry Orenstein, Eric Drooker and Howard Podeswa is rooted in a social realism of daily life, rather than the monumental heroicness of state socialist realism.

The strongest stylistic influences in the work come from the United States, both from the early Ash Can school of New York and the American Scene painters of the 1930s. New York artist Ben Shahn was an important influence in the 1950s as an activist artist and graphic designer. Gottlieb, Orenstein, and Caiserman-Roth studied at the Art Students League in New York and worked in a figurative style, influenced by Shahn and the modernism of Picasso and Klee. In the 1980s and 1990s, the artistic influences seen in Drooker's and Podeswa's work are rooted in German expressionism,

cartoons and contemporary zines of the underground street scene.

One of the strongest themes is the street as public space where people walk, talk, sleep and play.

Montréal's Muhlstock, through his Depression drawings of the streetlife on Ste. Famille, captures the unemployed sleeping in the park and the derelict buildings in the neighbourhood. Something comparable can be found in Bayefsky's and Orenstein's drawings of Kensington Market, storekeepers and their customers, chickens and the general anarchy of the 'Jewish Market'. The interest in people, streets and parks, continues in Drooker's 1980s street posters fighting to retain community control over Tompkins Square Park in New York's Lower East Side,



Harry Gottlieb, *Going to Work*, 1941, serigraph, 39 x 51.5 cm

coal pickers of the 1930s by Gottlieb, the garment workers on Spadina Avenue by Orenstein or the prostitutes of Montréal by Caiserman-Roth. These artists were activists within the art scene and were often involved in broader left-wing movements. Younger artists like Drooker and Podeswa are more informally engaged as activists in local communities like Spadina Avenue or the Lower East Side around issues of street people, housing and police actions.

The interest and respect for humanity and the lives of ordinary people is what unites all of the artists in this exhibition. The artists see themselves and their role as representing both their own lives and the community as well as being active participants in the public life of the street.

—Rosemary Donegan

*Rosemary Donegan is an independent curator, writer and art historian. She presently teaches at the Ontario College of Art and Design.*

Aba Bayefsky, Eric Drooker, Ghitta Caiserman-Roth, Harry Gottlieb, Louis Muhlstock, Henry Orenstein, Howard Podeswa

Curated by Sybil Goldstein



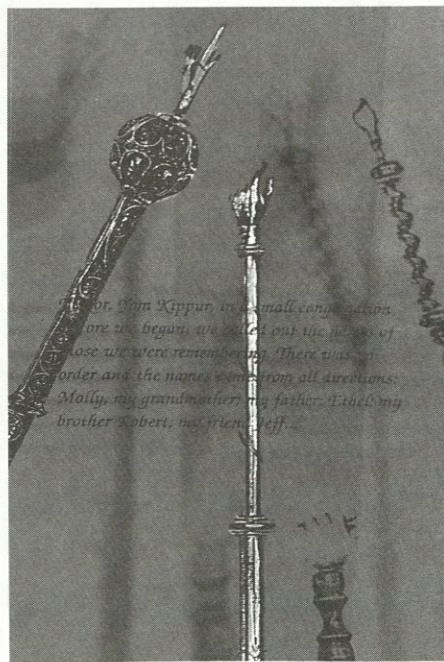
Louis Muhlstock, *Supper for Two*, 1935, linocut, 38 x 28 cm



## THE WORD

To live as a Jew seems much like the process of reading Judaic texts, an open-ended project replete with gaps, contradictions and the emergence of commentary in the form of many different voices. The artists in *The Word* represent these multiple voices investigating the tradition of the word in Jewish culture. From the writing of particular histories to the structure and format of the page, each installation brings text into tactile spaces for us to visually and viscerally enter.

Cynthia Madansky explores the typographic relation between Hebrew and Yiddish in *Havdalah*. Contrasting the vernacular and holy use of the same letter-forms, Madansky reveals the way in which the meaning of words becomes site-specific as she recontextualizes words from psalms into new sentences and colloquial phrases.



Mira Coviensky, *Meditations on Silence and a Word*, detail, mixed media, 1999

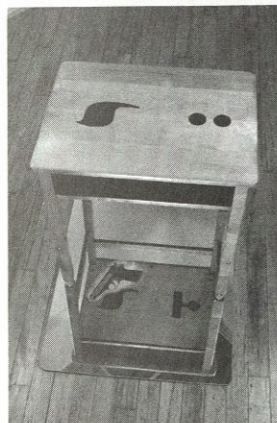
## CASE STUDIES

Mira Coviensky gestures to the relation between the orality of Jewish services and the meditative silence of prayer. In her book work, the image of the Torah pointer reminds one of the act of marking, with reverent rhythm, each word that is read whether aloud or in silent repetition.

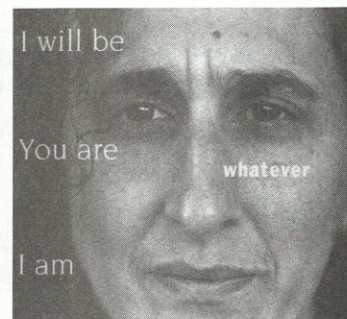
Sylvia Ptak investigates the process of ambiguity in the comprehension of the written word. A 'page' of gauze has been snagged and inked creating word-like shapes that reference Hebrew writing in the format of Talmudic commentaries. Faced with a text of omissions, comprehension is derived from the creative act of reading rather than emanating from some perceived authority of the word. While we are denied the immediacy of understanding, the tactile quality of Ptak's text invites us to read as though we are caressing the surface of the page with our eyes.

Simon Glass inscribes both the surface and the underside of a small wooden school desk with the Hebrew letter *yud*. The juxtaposition of the two letters, which form the word *Adonai*, is readable only with the aid of a mirror. As viewers acknowledge their own reflection, they mend the fragments of the name of G-d. This image of disassembling and re-unifying the Divine Name emphasizes that the existence of tradition depends on a practice of learning and passing on meaning from one generation to the next.

b.h. Yael creates a contemporary portrait of the desire to be heard, to be regarded with a response that doesn't fix our sense of



Simon Glass, *Tower II*, mixed media, 1998



b.h. Yael, *I will be (whatever)*, mixed media, 1999

self. Working with text from Exodus 3:14: "Eheyh Asher Ehyeh," the reply to Moses asking after G-d's name, Yael adopts the translation 'I will be whatever I will be.' This response leaves us with an image of a creator who remains frustratingly Other to our desires, a demanding presence that must be heard, asking us to respond without being able to say 'I know you.'

Howard Ross, drawing upon a Dead Sea Scroll fragment, searches for connections to his personal history through the capacity of language to activate the past. Embedded in layers of paint is the Hebrew text "The sun rises and the sun sets. Generations come and go. There is remembrance of men of old." In juxtaposition, Ross uses Yiddish text and found objects to recall the specific lives of his grandfathers. Staging an act of remembrance, in reading this work, history is brought into our presence.



Howard Ross, *Scroll Fragments I*, oil on wood, 1998

Nina Levitt and Wendy Oberlander emphasize the limits of those histories that may be brought into presence, when certain names and events are excluded from the chronicles of Jewish heritage. *The Case of Esther* traces the all-but-forgotten story of Esther Brandeau. Levitt and Oberlander create a complex intertext that investigates Brandeau's transgressive life narrative. Building with archival information they weave together stories of gender identity, nationhood and religious commitments, posing the questions 'who writes, who remembers, who believes'?

Ruth Liberman provocatively counterposes the Christian myth of the Wandering Jew with the Partisan song *Zog nit keyn mol az du geyst dem letstn veg* (never say you are going your last way). These spirited words of encouragement by poet Hirsh Glik remain a defiant and affirmative response to the damning narrative of the Wandering Jew. Reminding us of the importance of using words to contest words, Liberman reverses the image of the eternally walking Jew. Instead of an outcast, it is one who walks with resistance, endurance and pride.

The word in Judaic tradition has challenged readers to participate and engage creatively in the renewal of a text's meaning and significance. This exhibition confronts viewers with a similar task and thus has the potential to take us beyond the ritualized structures of our timeless communities. The art of *The Word* incites us to movement, enriching our definitions of community and the sense of our own possibilities.

—Kim Simon

*Kim Simon is a freelance writer from Toronto. She is currently studying at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, New York.*

Mira Coviensky, Simon Glass, Ruth Liberman, Nina Levitt, Wendy Oberlander, Cynthia Madansky, Sylvia Ptak, Howard Ross, b.h. Yael

Curated by Sybil Goldstein





# concealed

This day, 15 September 1738, before the undersigned, Commissaire de la marine, chargé à Québec de la police des gens de mer, appeared Esther Brandeau, aged about twenty years, who embarked at La Rochelle as passenger, dressed in boy's clothes, under the names of Jacques La Fargue, on the vessel "St. Michel", Sieur de Salaberry commander, and declared her name to be Esther Brandeau, daughter of David Brandeau, a Jew, trader, of St. Esprit, diocese of Daxe, near Bayonne, and that she is of the Jewish religion; that five years ago her father and mother

Geoffroy, in order to send her to Amsterdam, to Dutch vessel, Captain of her aunts; that the vessel having been lost on the bar of Bayonne, in the moon of April or May 1733, she was happily brought safe to shore with one of the crew; that she was received by Catherine Churiau, a widow living at Biariz; that two weeks thereafter she started, dressed as a man, for Bordeaux, where she shipped as a boy, under the name of Pierre Alainsiette, on a vessel commanded by Captain Bernard, destined for Nantes, that she returned on the same vessel to

Bordeaux, and there shipped again in the same capacity on a Spanish vessel, Captain Antonio, for Nantes; that on reaching Nantes, she deserted and went

to Rennes, where she took service as a boy at the house of one Augustin, for which she was paid six months; that from Rennes she went to Clisson where she took service with

Recollats as a servant and to run messages; that she remained three months in the convent and left without warning for St. Malo, where she found shelter at the house of a baker named Seruane; that she next went to Vitré to get place there and entered the service of Sr. de la Chapelle, an ex-captain of infantry; that she left the situation because her health rendered her unable to watch the said Sr. de la Chapelle, who was always sick; that when returning to Nantes, and when one league from Noisel, she was taken for a thief and confined in the prison of Noisel aforesaid; that she was set free, after twenty-four hours, because it was found that a mistake

had been made; that she then went to La Rochelle, where assuming the name Jacques La Fargue, she took ship as a passenger on the said vessel, "St. Michel".

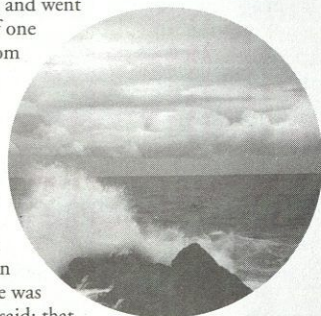
Upon which declaration we called upon the said Esther Brandeau to state for what reason she had so concealed her sex during five years. Whereupon she said: 'That when she escaped from the shipwreck and reached Bayonne, she entered the house of Catherine Churiau, as above stated; that the latter made her eat pork and other meats, the use whereof is forbidden among Jews, and that she thereupon resolved not to return to her father and mother in order that she might enjoy the same liberty as Christians.'

On 27 September, 1739, the Intendant informs the French Minister:

'Monsieur Pelissier, to whom I had written about the Jewish woman Esther Brandeau, informs me that she must be an illegitimate daughter of David Brandeau, a Jew of Bayonne. The girl is so flighty, that she could not adapt herself to any place, neither in the hospital nor in any of the private houses in which we had placed her. Her conduct was not altogether reprehensible, but she is of such an uneven temperament, that at times she was quite dutiful and obedient to the instruction given her by the priests, while at other times she was very obstinate. I cannot do anything but send her back. Sieur Lafargue, Captain of the ship "Le Comte de Matignon", from La Rochelle, will undertake to deliver her to Monsieur de Bélamy.'

Whereof we have indited these presents as our procès-verbal. And the said Esther Brandeau hath signed with us, on the day and in the year aforesaid.

הסתיר



## THE STORY OF THE JEWISH LABOR BUND 1897-1997 COMMUNITY GALLERY

Late one evening in October 1897, thirteen people gathered at a safe house in a secret location in Vilna. They arrived one by one, under cover of darkness, trying to make their movements as inconspicuous as possible — for this was an illegal meeting, called to establish a new organization whose fundamental purpose was nothing less than the overthrow of the Tsar and the political liberation of Jews throughout the Russian empire.

By the time the delegates had finished their deliberations three nights later, the new organization had been given a name: *Der algemeyner yidisher arbeter-bund in poyln un rusland* (The General Jewish Workers Bund of Poland and Russia — Lithuania was added to the title in 1900). Eventually it became known as 'the Bund'. It's mission: an all-out campaign for socialist revolution that would link the particular struggles of Russian Jews with the general struggles of workers throughout Russia.

In a real sense, the story of the Bund is the story of modern Jewry. It is a story of tradition and modernization, of political revolution and counter-revolution, of the fight for workers' rights and the growth of labor unions, of the glory days and dark days of Yiddish culture; most of all, it is a story of the struggle to maintain a secular Jewish identity in the face of implacable hostility from both left and right.

The documents for this exhibition have been drawn from the Bund Archives, which were transferred to YIVO in 1992. This exhibition tells the story of the Bund through its own clandestine brochures, underground leaflets, photographs and posters. It reveals the full history of this organization and celebrates the generations of Bundists who gave themselves to this century-long struggle for justice, dignity, and national identity.

Presented by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York



Exiled Bundists in Siberia

Adam Whiteman, *Geyt zikh a bahelfert* (The Bahelfrel Walks), papercut, 1997



## PAPIRSHNIT

## PREMIERE DANCE THEATRE

New York artist Adam Whiteman presents illustrations for the recent children's CD *Di Grine Katshke* (The Green Duck), and Bella Gottesman's book, *Mume Blume di makhsheyfe* (Aunt Blume the Witch). Following in the Yiddish folk culture tradition of papercutting, these charming original narratives appeal to all ages.



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D.R. Cowles

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## THE STORY OF THE JEWISH LABOR BUND 1897-1997

COMMUNITY GALLERY / Aug. 30-Sept. 6

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Presented by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

## PAPIRSHNIT

PREMIERE DANCE THEATRE / Aug. 30-Sept. 6

10

Adam Whiteman

This year ASHKENAZ has commissioned a number of artists to create unique stage surrounds and arched portals, designed to draw festival goers into the heart of what is ASHKENAZ.

### Site Transformation Coordinators:

Anne Barber + Brad Harley of Shadowland Theatre,  
Sybil Goldstein, Rachel MacHenry

### Site Transformation Artists:

Alan Glicksman, Sybil Goldstein, Lisa Kaffenbaum,  
Elisa Kukla, Otilie Mason, David Pellettier, Joy Walker

### Parade & Site Transformation Production Team:

Shadowland Theatre, Nicki Bercovitz, Dave Fringut, Matt Harley,  
Peter Kiddle, Barry Lipton, Willow Merrill, Luisa Milan, Suzy Tanzer



Elisa Kukla, Studies for Pond Installation,  
ink on paper, 1999