

THE RISE OF MODERN YIDDISH CULTURE

AN OVERVIEW



The use of Yiddish has been a feature of Ashkenazic Jewish life for approximately a millennium. The first known Yiddish sentence, written in Hebrew letters and containing both Germanic and Hebraic words, is found in a manuscript holiday prayer book from 1272; the first known literary document in Yiddish, a codex consisting of seven narrative poems, was composed in 1382; and the first known printed Yiddish book, a Hebrew-Yiddish dictionary of biblical terms, was issued in 1534. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, numerous belletristic, homiletical, moralistic, and ritual works were published in Yiddish, and this period was the heyday of what is now referred to as Old Yiddish literature. The most popular book of all was Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi's *Tse'edah u-re'edah*, a collection of rabbinic homilies and exegesis on the Pentateuch, first issued in the 1590s, which went through 175 editions by 1900.

Despite this millennial history, one can speak of a new, modern Yiddish culture that began to arise in the 1860s and continued its upward trajectory for the next half century, until the outbreak of the First World War, and, in many respects (but not all), during the interwar period as well. The new culture bore the imprint of European modes of expression and of secular thinking. The processes involved in its ascendancy were numerous and intertwined.¹

TRADITIONAL AND HASKALAH LEGACIES

Before the appearance of the Haskalah (the Jewish enlightenment), in the late eighteenth century, Yiddish occupied a legitimate, but clearly subordinate, position vis-à-vis Hebrew in the culture of Ashkenazic Jews. While Yiddish was the language of everyday speech, the most culturally valued activities in the eyes of nearly all Jews were conducted in Hebrew—communal prayer in the synagogue, the reading of the Torah scroll, and the performance of the religious rituals. The revered texts of the Jewish tradition, whose study was considered a religious commandment—the Torah, the Talmud, and the medieval commentaries of Rashi and the Tosafists—were in Hebrew and Aramaic, and mastery of those texts in the original bestowed upon their student a high social status. Yiddish translations and explications of the prayer book, Bible, and the narrative parts of the Talmud abounded, but they were by definition intended for those Jews who could not achieve the desired cultural ideal of studying the originals.

After the introduction of Hebrew printing in central and eastern Europe in the early sixteenth century, printed Yiddish literature grew consistently, both in the number of imprints and in the range of genres, paralleling the rise of vernacular literatures throughout Europe. By the mid-eighteenth century, the Yiddish literature available throughout the Ashkenazic Diaspora, from Holland in the west to Lithuania and Ukraine in the east, included original storybooks (*mayse bikhlekh*), narrative poems, historical chronicles, moralistic treatises, homiletical works on the Torah, ritual manuals, and collections of nonobligatory prayers for women (*tshines*). The readership of Yiddish books certainly included, by then, not only women and unlettered men but also men who were fully literate in Hebrew, who satisfied some of their reading interests in Yiddish. Nonetheless, the most socially valued and respected types of Jewish literature were still produced exclusively in Hebrew and never in Yiddish: rabbinic literature (legal responsa, commentaries on the Talmud and on subsequent codes), as well as theological and kabbalistic literature.

This situation changed only slightly with the rise of the Hasidic movement in the second half of the eighteenth century. Storytelling

occupied an important position in Hasidic culture, and collections of Hasidic tales, which were told in praise of the movement's masters, or told by the masters themselves, and which appeared in Yiddish (or in both Hebrew and Yiddish), were considered holy books by the movement's adherents. But these books were never viewed as equal in sanctity to the homiletical and theological works by the Hasidic masters (called *rebbe*s) that were written in Hebrew. Similarly, a few Hasidic *rebbe*s composed original religious songs and prayers in Yiddish, but the focal point of the Hasidic communities' religious life remained their enraptured prayer in Hebrew. In short, Yiddish existed for many centuries in Hebrew's shadow: always present but always in a secondary role—as seen from the perspective of the community's own value system.²

This Hebrew-Yiddish symbiosis was shattered by the *Haskalah*, inaugurated by the German Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), which was the dominant ideological trend among modernized Jews in eastern Europe for most of the nineteenth century. For the *Haskalah*, the adoption of modernity (reason/science, moderate secularization, European culture, education, and habits) went hand in hand with the rejection and dismissal of Yiddish, which was derided as a corrupt German Jewish jargon (*zhargon*). In place of the traditional Hebrew-Yiddish bilingualism, the *Maskilim* (adherents of the *Haskalah*) championed a new Hebrew-German, or Hebrew-Russian, bilingualism. Thus, the *Maskilim* in imperial Russia spoke among themselves in German during the first half of the nineteenth century and, from the 1850s on, in Russian. They wrote the vast majority of their works in Hebrew—poetry, prose, biblical studies, historical scholarship, philosophy, popular science, and so on—and, from the 1860s on, they and other modernized Jews wrote increasingly in Russian. The Jewish schools established by the *Maskilim*, which featured a broad secular curriculum, used German, and from the 1850s on, Russian, as the language of instruction, with Hebrew language and the Bible in the original as subjects in the curriculum. In their modernized synagogues, the prayers were in Hebrew, but the sermons were delivered in German, and later on in Russian.

Many *Maskilim* dabbled in Yiddish writing, but it was not their pri-

mary medium. As a rule, they did not publish these pieces, which either languished in the authors' desk drawers or circulated in limited copies in manuscript—a sign that they did not ascribe importance to their Yiddish writings and may have been embarrassed by them. The only Maskilic author to devote himself mainly to Yiddish writing in the 1840s and 1850s, Isaac Meir Dik, was held in very low regard by his fellow Maskilim, as a scribbler and dilettante. In all, the Haskalah created a modern Jewish subculture of literature, schools, synagogues, and salons in which Yiddish was cast aside to the margins. The Haskalah's negative attitude toward Yiddish as a *zhargon* became the norm among Jews who considered themselves modern and enlightened.⁵

The Russian Maskilim did not succeed in effecting the radical linguistic transformation of east European Jewry at large that they themselves pursued. As late as 1897, 97 percent of the 5.5 million Jews in the Russian Empire claimed Yiddish as their mother tongue, and only 26 percent of them claimed to be literate in Russian. In no other country in Europe was Jewish linguistic acculturation so modest. The persistence of Yiddish was a consequence of Russian Jewry's basic social features: its size (in 1897, more than five times the size of any other European Jewry); its compact concentration in the cities and towns of the western provinces designated as the Jewish Pale of Settlement, where Jews constituted 36.9 percent of the total urban population; the Jews' separate legal status and the tight restrictions on their obtaining a Russian higher education and government employment; and the climate of growing national consciousness, national tensions, and anti-Semitism in Russia and Russian Poland, which reinforced Jewish social cohesion. Full linguistic Russification (with the dropping of Yiddish) was the exception rather than the rule among Russian Jews and could be found mainly in communities outside the Pale of Settlement, such as St. Petersburg, or among exceptional groups, such as Jewish university students.⁴

THE BEGINNINGS OF YIDDISH PRESS AND THEATER

The first modern Yiddish cultural institution in Russia was the periodical press, which came into being, alongside the Hebrew and Rus-

sian Jewish press, during the 1860s, the era of the great reforms of Tsar Alexander II. The first modern Yiddish newspaper, the weekly *Kol Mevasser* (Hebrew for “The Heralding Voice”), was established in 1862 by the Maskil Alexander Zederbaum. Since the modern newspaper was itself an institution that migrated from European and Russian culture to Jewish culture, it comes as no surprise that the founder and editor of *Kol Mevasser* was a Maskil, someone who advocated the Jews’ modernization.

Many of the characteristics of *Kol Mevasser*, which was published in Odessa between 1862 and 1873, would become mainstays of the Yiddish press. Each issue opened with a news section consisting of a mix of world news, items about Jewish communities across the globe, Russian news, and governmental decrees from St. Petersburg. The section exposed Yiddish readers in the Pale of Settlement to the goings-on in the wide world beyond their immediate horizons. But news actually occupied a minority of the weekly’s space. Most of its pages were taken up with biographies of famous Russian, European, and Jewish historical figures; articles on science, technology, medicine, and health; and Maskilic feuilletons with social criticism of Russian Jewry for its ignorance, superstition, and backwardness.

Two types of nonnews material stood out in *Kol Mevasser*: First, it published Yiddish stories and the first Yiddish novels in serialization. S. J. Abramovitch, better known by his pen name, Mendele Moykher Seforim, and by the title of grandfather of Yiddish literature, published his first Yiddish novel, *Dos kleyne mentshele* (The little man), in *Kol Mevasser*. Abraham Goldfaden, the father of Yiddish theater, published poems in *Kol Mevasser*. The close association between the press and literature would become a basic feature of modern Yiddish culture. The press gave an impetus to the spread of Yiddish literature and provided a measure of financial security for writers. But it also created limitations on the kinds of works that could be published, given that Yiddish newspapers were directed at a broad general readership.

The second type of nonnews material published in *Kol Mevasser* was reports on Jewish life in the cities and towns of the Pale of Settlement, sent in not by professional journalists or regular correspondents but by local inhabitants, unsolicited and free of charge. These reports often

took the form of exposés or simple gossip about Jewish communal conflicts and the shortcomings of local institutions and leaders. The material transformed *Kol Mevasser* (and subsequent newspapers) into a folk institution, where the boundary between reader and writer was porous—and sometimes nonexistent. Popular participation in the Yiddish press (far beyond the confines of a letters to the editor column) created an informal and familial atmosphere in its pages.

In *Kol Mevasser*, as in many later Yiddish newspapers, the voice of the editor was ubiquitous and his role domineering. Zederbaum did not merely compose much of the newspaper himself. He frequently penned responses to the feuilletons and reports he published by others; he freely edited his contributors' language and content, including the belle lettres submitted by writers such as Mendele Moykher Se-forim; and he used the newspaper as a forum to settle personal accounts.

While Zederbaum's attitude toward Yiddish was ambivalent at best—he urged the readers of *Kol Mevasser* to give their children a Russian education—the newspaper he founded thrust Yiddish writing into the modern world. It provided the opportunity for a significant Maskil, Abramovitsh, to launch his career as a Yiddish novelist. The paper also helped create a modern Yiddish style, as it vacillated between the meandering loquaciousness of a traditional storyteller and the highfalutin German of a Maskil, to present the problems of the modern world in Yiddish.

Zederbaum maintained the basic features of *Kol Mevasser* in his subsequent weekly newspaper, *Yidishes Folksblat* (Jewish People's Paper; St. Petersburg, 1881–1890), where the most famous Yiddish writer of all, Sholem Rabinovitch, better known by his pen name, Sholem Aleichem, debuted in 1887. The only shift was in the newspaper's editorial orientation. Whereas *Kol Mevasser* was enthusiastically patriotic and supportive of the regime of Alexander II, *Yidishes Folksblat*, published after the pogroms of 1881–1882, was reserved in its treatment of Russian affairs, while devoting considerable attention to the new Jewish colonies in Palestine.⁵

The second institution of modern Yiddish culture to arise, Yiddish theater, was, like the press, established by westernized Jews who were

proponents of Haskalah ideas. Its forerunners, Wolf Ehrenkrantz (popularly known as Velvl Zbarzher) and Berl Broder, performed Yiddish songs and rhymes in taverns and wine cellars across Besarabia, Galicia, and Romania during the 1850s and 1860s. They drew upon Yiddish folk songs and poems by traditional Jewish wedding bards, to which they added their own material. Many of Zbarzher's songs were humorous spoofs on Hasidic beliefs and practices. Broder went several artistic steps further by dressing up in costume and performing monologue character songs and later by enlisting a group of singers ("the Broder singers") to perform musical dialogues and skits along with him. The Broder singers reached the peak of their success in the 1870s, when they performed in the Jewish metropolis of Odessa (Jewish population in 1897: 138,915) to audiences sipping wine and eating knishes. A secular Yiddish leisure culture was in the making.

The bona fide father of the Yiddish theater was Abraham Goldfaden (1840–1907). Goldfaden spent his formative young adulthood in Zhitomir as a student in the Haskalah-orientated Rabbinical Seminary, and there he was exposed to the city's thriving Polish theater culture. Goldfaden launched his one-man performing career in the wine cellars of Odessa in the early 1870s, but then moved to Romania, where he produced and directed the first modern Yiddish theater production, in Jassy in 1876. He proceeded to compose the classical repertoire of Yiddish theater during the next nine years.

Goldfaden's repertoire consisted at first of musical melodramas and later of historical operettas. Songs were the core of his plays and were often inserted with little connection to the plot. The music was highly eclectic: opera, classical and cantorial music, and all sorts of folk music (Yiddish, Ukrainian, Rumanian). Regardless of a play's genre, it always included a comic character and many sentimental moments that elicited tears.

In the 1870s, Goldfaden's plays had Maskilic messages. Thus, *Di tsvey kuni-leml* (The two Kuni-Lemls) is a story of love overcoming social conventions. A loving couple, thwarted by the institution of arranged marriage, devise a plan to subvert the girl's forthcoming arranged marriage to a stuttering, limping yeshiva student named Kuni-Leml. Her true love disguises himself as Kuni-Leml and presents

himself to the parents as her groom. In the comic climax, the two grooms confront each other on the wedding day, leading to a happy ending.

In the 1880s, Goldfaden's plays had a national-romantic bent. In *Bar Kokhba*, Goldfaden staged the Jews' final revolt against the Roman Empire, using declamatory rhetoric. The play ends with Bar Kokhba's death in battle, preceded by a soliloquy in which he swears victory for the Jewish people in the future. The play mirrored the proto-Zionist sentiments in Russian Jewry during the 1880s.

In 1878, Goldfaden moved his company to Russia. In Odessa, it performed frequently in the Marinsky theater, with 1,500 seats, and generated "theater mania" in the city. It toured locales as diverse as Berdichev, Minsk, Warsaw, and St. Petersburg. The new phenomenon of Yiddish theater elicited opposition: rabbis and Hasidim were offended by the "frivolity" of theater and by the mingling of men and women; the Russified and Polonized Jewish intelligentsia was scandalized by its "coarseness" and by the use of *zhargon* in a public arena. But Yiddish theater was a stunning popular success, and a whole generation of Yiddish actors began their careers under Goldfaden's tutelage.⁶

The development of the Yiddish press and theater was severely hampered by tsarist bans—on the press in the 1870s and 1890s and on the theater from 1883 to 1905.⁷ Nonetheless, the press and the theater became the strongest, most popular, and most financially viable institutions of modern Yiddish culture.

LITERARY ALMANACS AND POLITICAL LITERATURE

A landmark event in the development of Yiddish literature (and of Yiddish culture at large) was the publication in Kiev in 1888 and 1889 of the literary almanac *Di Yidishe Folksbibliotek* (The Jewish people's library), published and edited by Sholem Aleichem. The handsome volumes were modeled after the Russian "thick journals" of the time in the diversity and scope of their material. Besides prose by Mendele and Sholem Aleichem, they featured lyric poetry—a genre that had been virtually nonexistent in modern Yiddish writing—and works by Hebrew and Russian Jewish authors who had not published in Yiddish

before, such as I. L. Peretz and Shimon Frug. Also included were literary criticism, bibliography, historical documents, and essays on current affairs. *Di Yidishe Folksbibliotek* emitted a message: Yiddish could be the language of a literature of artistic value, while remaining at the same time accessible to “the people.” Similar almanacs were issued by I. L. Peretz and other writers in its aftermath, during the 1890s.

Di Yidishe Folksbibliotek and its offshoots reflected—and stimulated—a more positive view of Yiddish, its role in Jewish life, and its cultural possibilities. The young Simon Dubnov, then the literary critic of the main Russian Jewish journal *Voskhod* (The Dawn) and later the preeminent Russian Jewish historian, applauded the emergence of literature in the folk tongue, which would elevate the cultural level of the Jewish masses. The Hebrew writer Y. H. Ravnitsky commented that Yiddish embodied the “spirit of the people,” its humor and moral strength, and should be treasured rather than denigrated. During the 1890s, writers began to refer to the language as Yiddish (in Russian, Novo-evreiskii; in Hebrew, Yehudit or Yudit), rather than by the Maskilic term of contempt, *zhargon*. The new positive attitude toward the language was a by-product of the rising Jewish national sentiments in Russia in the aftermath of the wave of anti-Jewish pogroms in 1881–1882. Rather than denigrate their own victimized community for its shortcomings, former Maskilim now looked more favorably upon its cultural and moral resources, including Yiddish. After the pogroms and state measures against the Jews during the 1880s, Jewish cultural and linguistic Russification seemed both impossible and inappropriate.⁸

In the 1890s, mass political movements arose in Russian Jewry: Zionism and Jewish Socialism. Since Jewish politics were no longer conducted by small elite groups behind closed doors, both Zionism and Jewish Socialism considered the mobilization of popular support to be essential to their success and produced literature in Yiddish to spread their ideas. Jewish socialist propaganda was produced almost exclusively in Yiddish, since the Jewish working class knew no other language. More than thirty underground socialist pamphlets and six underground newspapers, the most prominent of which was *Di Ar-beter Shtime* (The Workers’ Voice; 1897–1902), were printed in tsarist

Russia during the 1890s. The Zionist movement published more material in Russian and Hebrew than in Yiddish, first because much of its constituency belonged to the Jewish middle class, which read Hebrew and Russian, and second because cultural Zionists were ideologically committed to the revival of Hebrew. But the Zionists also established a weekly organ in Yiddish, called *Der Yid* (The Jew; Cracow/Warsaw, 1899–1905), which was succeeded by the first Yiddish daily in the Russian Empire, *Der Fraynd* (The Friend; St. Petersburg/Warsaw, 1905–1915). The writings of Theodore Herzl and Max Nordau were also published in Yiddish translation, and Sholem Aleichem himself penned Zionist pamphlets in Yiddish.⁹

The attitude of both the Jewish socialist Bund and the Russian Zionist organization toward Yiddish was basically pragmatic and utilitarian until 1905. In fact, the Zionist *Der Yid* and *Der Fraynd* served as the most important forums for the publication of Yiddish fiction in Russia from 1899 to 1905.

EXPANSION, GROWTH, DIFFERENTIATION

To speak of an explosion of modern Yiddish culture in the early twentieth century, and especially after the revolution of 1905, is more than a rhetorical flourish. It is an apt characterization of a series of developments in the position of Yiddish in Jewish life in Russia.

Publication of Yiddish books and periodicals increased dramatically. When Sholem Aleichem compiled a list of Yiddish books printed in the Russian Empire in 1888, he recorded 78 titles. Twenty-four years later, in 1912, an analogous list prepared by Moshe Shalit consisted of 407 titles. In 1888, there was only one Yiddish periodical in all of Russia; in 1912 there were forty periodicals, including seven daily newspapers. Yiddish theater troupes jumped from one or two in 1888 to more than a dozen in 1912.¹⁰

While the growth in the number of books, publications, and theaters can be attributed in part to the loosening of state censorship after the revolution of 1905, the exponential growth of the Yiddish readership cannot. In the 1880s, the only Yiddish newspaper in the empire, the weekly *Yidishes Folksblat*, attained a peak circulation of 7,000 copies (according to its editor, Alexander Zederbaum). In early 1905,

the only Yiddish daily in the empire at the time, *Der Fraynd*, was distributed in close to 50,000 copies (according to one of its editors). By 1912, the combined circulation of the two most popular Yiddish dailies in Warsaw, *Haynt* (Today) and *Moment*, was 175,000.¹¹

The explosion in readership (and, analogously, in the theater audience) should be seen against the backdrop of the rapid modernization of east European Jewry. During the period between 1888 and 1912, Russian Jewry experienced massive urbanization, industrialization, increased literacy, secularization, and political mobilization. Consequently, the community had new cultural needs—for secular books, newspapers, and magazines and for modern literature, theater, and music. At the same time, the Jews' overall acculturation to Russian and Polish proceeded at a much slower pace than the other modernization trends, for reasons mentioned above. The disparity between the pace of Jewish modernization and Jewish acculturation caused modern Yiddish literature and culture to flourish.

In the absence of modern Yiddish-language schools (which were banned by the tsarist authorities and were a negligible phenomenon until World War I), the most influential Yiddish cultural institution was the daily newspaper. The mass-circulation Yiddish dailies that came into being after 1905, *Haynt* and *Moment*, were run by businessmen, not by intellectuals or political movements. They attracted readers by printing sensational headlines and “thrilling romances,” whose first chapters were distributed free of charge on the streets of Warsaw. Ideologically, the newspapers gravitated toward a Jewish center: Jewish nationalist (but not stridently Zionist), liberal (but not openly socialist), sympathetic toward the Jewish religion (but not so pious as to stop printing the romances). During this decade of tumultuous political events (1905–1915), Yiddish columnists such as Yitzhak Grünbaum (in *Der Fraynd* and elsewhere) and Noyekh Prilutski (in *Moment*) were among the most influential figures in Russian-Polish Jewry and used their journalistic fame to advance their political careers, as leaders of the Zionist and Folkspartei movements.¹²

With the expansion of Yiddish cultural output, there arose simultaneously a modern Yiddish-speaking and Yiddish-writing intelligentsia: a social class of writers, artists, political activists, small businessmen,

workers, and professionals, with either a higher education or exposure to Western culture, who spoke, wrote, and read in Yiddish. This intelligentsia began to use Yiddish not only to communicate with the uneducated “masses” but also for communication among itself, to satisfy its own intellectual and artistic needs. In other words, a process of differentiation took place within the Yiddish readership and audience, leading to the rise of a Yiddish high culture. The *Literarishe Monatschrift* (Literary Monthlies; Vilna, 1908), the first Yiddish journal dedicated exclusively to belle lettres, proclaimed in its opening editorial, “Literature which is intentionally directed at readers with a low level of development cannot be artistic literature. . . . It is our goal to become a focal point for that which will enrich Jewish spiritual life, augment our cultural treasures, refine the taste of veteran readers, and enlist new ones.”

In a sign of the consolidation of Yiddish high culture, one of the best Russian-language Jewish periodicals, *Evreiskii Mir* (The Jewish World), closed down and was reincarnated as the Yiddish-language *Di Yidische Velt* (1912–1915), with essentially the same editors and contributing writers. Such high-brow Yiddish journals challenged, or at least counterbalanced, the dominance of the daily press in Yiddish culture and created space for more sophisticated discourse.¹³

An analogous process of differentiation between popular culture and high culture took place in the theater. A new repertoire of serious Yiddish drama appeared, pioneered by an emigrant playwright in America, Jacob Gordin. His *Mirele Efros*, a realistic drama without music, on the clash between the generations in a well-to-do Jewish family in Grodno, became an instant classic of serious Yiddish theater and was dubbed the Yiddish Queen Lear. The role of Mirele Efros, the materfamilias, catapulted and sustained the career of Esther-Rokhl Kaminska, “the mother of Yiddish theatre.” The Kaminski theater in Warsaw, founded by her husband in 1905, with Kaminska in the lead roles, became the first standing Yiddish theater in the empire and a model of better Yiddish theater. Other highbrow troupes, usually referred to as art theaters or literary theaters, followed in its wake, performing dramas by Yiddish writers such as Sholem Aleichem, I. L. Peretz, Sholem Asch, and others.¹⁴

A refined Yiddish musical culture also arose, independent from the theater. Concerts of Yiddish folk songs were now performed by opera singers, using arrangements by composers such as Joel Engel and M. Milner, who in 1908 formed the Society for Jewish Folk-Music in St. Petersburg.¹⁵

THE LANGUAGE QUESTION, YIDDISHISM

The dramatic transformation of *zhargon* into Yiddish, and the expansion and diversification of its cultural output, put the language question squarely on the agenda of Russian Jewry. What was to be the language of the Jewish future: Hebrew, Russian, or Yiddish? When the oldest Hebrew daily newspaper in Russia, *Ha-melitz* (The Advocate), closed down in 1904, it seemed to confirm that Yiddish was surpassing Hebrew as the primary language of Jewish discourse. A combination of Jewish-nationalist and “democratic” sentiments led many in the Jewish intelligentsia to embrace Yiddish as a value during the revolution of 1905.¹⁶

Yiddishists, the most prominent of whom was Dr. Chaim Zhitlovsky, considered Yiddish language and culture to be important Jewish national values and advocated the cultivation of Yiddish into the primary linguistic medium of Jewish life in the Diaspora. Yiddishists demanded recognition of Yiddish by the state, within the framework of its granting Jews national autonomy. They also pressed for Yiddish, rather than Russian (or Polish), to be the language of instruction in modern Jewish schools and of public discourse in communal bodies and organizations. The major event marking the upswing of Yiddishism was the conference for the Yiddish language held in Czernovitz, Bukovina, in 1908, led by Nathan Birnbaum, Zhitlovsky, and Peretz, which proclaimed Yiddish to be a national language of the Jewish people.¹⁷

On the other hand, antipathy toward Yiddish persisted, and even grew, among the Hebrew writing intelligentsia and cultural Zionists, who warned of the *zhargon* peril (*ha-sakanah ha-zhargonit*) and complained of “the maid-servant seeking to inherit her mistress” (Proverbs 30:23). The leading Hebrew essayist, Ahad Ha’am (the pseudonym of Asher Ginsberg), referred to the embrace of Yiddish by the Jewish intelligentsia as “a cultural Uganda,” an allusion to Herzl’s

much-disparaged 1903 attempt to create a Jewish republic in East Africa, rather than in the land of Israel.

The newly ascendant Socialist Zionist movement was divided on the language issue. The Palestino-centric wing, whose sole goal was to build a Jewish socialist society in the land of Israel, led by Nahman Syrkin, was Hebraist, and considered Yiddish to be a passing linguistic instrument, doomed for extinction—like Diaspora Jewry itself. The revolutionary wing of Socialist Zionism, led by Ber Borochov, struggled not only for socialism and Jewish sovereignty in Palestine but also for socialism and Jewish national autonomy in Russia. It consequently favored Hebrew as the primary language in Palestine (with a secondary role for Yiddish) and Yiddish as the primary language in the Diaspora (with a secondary role for Hebrew). Borochov was himself a pioneering scholar of Yiddish philology whose original tombstone in Kiev bore an inscription from one of his studies: “The first task of an awakening people is to become the master over its own language.”¹⁸

Meanwhile, Diaspora Nationalists, who strove for a liberal democracy in Russia and the granting of Jewish national autonomy, led by Simon Dubnov, advocated Russian-Hebrew-Yiddish trilingualism, with an equal status to be granted within the Jewish community to all three languages. But the various Jewish socialist parties—ranging from the Marxist Bund to the non-Marxist Jewish Socialist Workers’ Party (SERP, popularly known as the Sejmists) and the Socialist Territorialists, all of which combined socialism with Diaspora Nationalism—were Yiddishist. Language thus became emblematic of the various movements’ positions on the broader issues facing Russian Jewry at the time.¹⁹

Most of the readers of the Yiddish press, or viewers of the Yiddish theater, were not Yiddishists in any sense of the term, but simply Jews who satisfied their modern cultural needs and intellectual interests in the language they knew best. The Yiddishists formed the self-conscious and activist core of the culture, and they created a cultural movement. Especially after the collapse of the 1905 revolution, and the onset of political reaction, Yiddish cultural associations became extremely numerous, as the political intelligentsia shifted its focus to cultural activity. The strongest of these associations was the Jewish Liter-

ary Society, founded in St. Petersburg in 1908. By mid-1910, the society had fifty-five branches in Russia and sponsored literary programs, lectures, and concerts. While some of its founders, including Dubnov and S. An-sky, had initially intended for the society to support Jewish literature in all three languages, it quickly became an association for the spread of Yiddish literature.²⁰

The half century prior to World War I was a period of great dynamism in the position and roles of Yiddish in Jewish life. While it makes little sense to speak of a distinct Yiddish culture before 1860, by 1914 a full-fledged Yiddish culture not only existed but seemed to be the wave of the future in east European Jewish life.