Introduction

The Days of Proletpen in American Yiddish Poetry

DOVID KATZ

History, they say, is written by the victors. That is the case not only for the military history of nation states. It can apply even within the heritage of stateless minority cultures and in the university study of their literatures, where there should be no losers on the basis of those external, political categories of winners and losers.

A half century ago, in the 1950s, Yiddish literature was beginning to win respect as a serious endeavor in an American Jewish society that had (and in many ways still has) a less than profound interest in the cultural and linguistic heritage of its recent East European ancestry. The grudging, piecemeal, and frequently superficial emergence of a recognition of Yiddish as the language of a serious modern literature came about in wider circles—in other words, beyond the limited and dwindling circles of the East European–born Yiddish cultural activists themselves—thanks to English translations that became fashionable in the fifties. Advances of the period include Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg's *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (1954) and the first major successes in translation enjoyed by Isaac Bashevis Singer. These include his novels *The Family Moskat* (1950) and *Satan in Goray* (1955; the original Yiddish appeared in the thirties). If some single literary event were needed as a symbolic turning point, it would be Saul Bellow's translation of Singer's "Gimpel the Fool," a short story, which appeared in 1952 in *Partisan Review*. Attention to Yiddish poetry was soon to follow, in expectedly smaller circles of readers.

And so it came to pass that Yiddish came out of the closet in America just as the McCarthy era was peaking and daily cultural ramifications of

the Cold War were becoming omnipresent. In those years, Yiddish was also making its maiden appearance in American academia. By producing a sophisticated anthology, Howe and Greenberg did for the study of Yiddish literature what Uriel Weinreich's *College Yiddish*, which first appeared in 1949, had done to pioneer the study of the language at American universities some five years earlier.

Howe (1920–1993) and Greenberg (1896–1977), like all serious translator-anthologists, chose works they thought would work best in the target language (i.e., English). Nevertheless, there was, in those "revelation years" of serious Yiddish literature in America, a McCarthyesque political litmus test as well. This was an issue bound to arise under such circumstances, because many of the best Yiddish writers came from that part of the American Left that was the prime target of McCarthyism. It is no novelty in intellectual history that competing groups which are "close relatives" tend toward more mutual bitterness than those at vast conceptual distance (the classic instance is Judaism and Christianity vis-à-vis paganism in the early Christian centuries). Howe and Greenberg (who were to reveal themselves as fine anthologists of Yiddish poetry too) were both from the "socialist but anti-Soviet camp." Howe, who had cofounded the journal *Dissent* in 1953, was an old democratic socialist with Trotzkyist leanings (ergo, anti-Stalin from the start). Greenberg was in his earlier years a member of the Yiddish literary communist movement and had published in the movement's daily, the *Frayhayt* (*Freiheit*), and its monthly, *Hamer*, and like many others, later "switched sides."

And that takes us to the content of that political litmus test, which has, remarkably, remained a taboo topic in Yiddish literary studies to this day, a taboo this book aims to start taking down. The test, strange as it may strike readers today, was based not even on whether writers were *still* "among the communists" (none of *those* could be included, no matter how talented), but rather on *when* a writer "left the Left" to "join the Right." And here it is necessary to review some historical and cultural background and the vocabulary of the history of Yiddish culture in America before the thread of this narrative can be picked up.

Modern Yiddish literature in all its branches is overwhelmingly a product of writers who were brought up in the traditional, religious, God-fearing, and strictly observant society of East European Ashkenazic Jewry. They

became part of the minority segment of that society that underwent radical transformation from unquestioning religiosity to a western type openness to ideas, beliefs, doubt, and—action. These individuals had become part of a number of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century movements that developed the use of Yiddish for modern genres, including the poem, story, novel, and play, as well as an extensive didactic and political literature and a vibrant press, all in the spirit of a rising Jewish modernism and a new attraction to the form and content of secular culture. The parent of all of these developments is the nineteenth-century East European *haskóle* (Haskalah), or "Enlightenment." Unlike its late-eighteenth-century German-Jewish "grandparent" (the Berlin Haskalah of Moses Mendelssohn), it did not, by and large, abandon the traditional languages of European Jewry. Instead, the Easterners recast and remolded both Hebrew and Yiddish into powerful media of expression for the modern literary and societal aims of East European Jewry.

By the late nineteenth century, when the anti-czarist movements in the Russian Empire were picking up momentum (especially after the assassination of Alexander II in 1881 and the pogroms that followed), the new Yiddish literary movement was emboldened by the various revolutionary tendencies. The most famous is the Jewish Labor Bund, founded in Vilna (now Vilnius) in 1897. But there were many more. By the early twentieth century, there were Yiddish journals published by anarchists, communists, social democrats, socialists (of various types and stripes), territorialists, Zionists, Zionist-socialists and more.

Emigré writers transplanted Yiddish literature to London's Whitechapel (the city's "East End") and to New York's Lower East Side (known simply as "the East Side" in Jewish cultural history and Yiddish literature). In both cities, the first major Yiddish poetry was closely linked with the labor movement. The immigrant sweatshop and its surrounding poverty and social injustice became a key theme. The pioneers of Yiddish poetry in the west were the "sweatshop poets," most famously Joseph Bovshover (1873–1915), Dovid Eydlshtat (1866–1892), Morris Rosenfeld (1862–1923), and Morris Winchevsky (1856–1932). Most spent some years in Whitechapel before continuing on to New York, where they established the first period of American Yiddish poetry. And, as is so often the case in the history of ideas and of literature, the pioneers set in motion a train of reactions and rebellions.

From around 1907, a group called Di yunge ("The Youngsters"—a name taken from their detractors) set out to write poetry that would not serve as the "rhyme department of the Jewish labor movement" (poems protesting exploitation of the workers and so forth), but would pursue art for the sake of art. They attracted writers who would come to be reckoned among the twentieth century giants of Yiddish verse, including Avrom-Moyshe Dillon (1883–1934), Mani Leyb (1883–1953), Moyshe-Leyb Halpern (1886–1932), Y. Y. Shvarts (1885–1971), and after his arrival in New York in 1913, H. Leivick (1886–1962). Nearly all were immersed in European literature.

A follow-on movement in New York Yiddish poetry came around 1919 with the launch of Inzikh ("In oneself" or introspectivism). The poets most associated with the movement, and its journal that began to appear in 1920, are Aaron Glantz-Leyeles (1889–1966), Yankev Glatshteyn (Jacob Gladstone, 1896–1971), N. B. Minkoff (1893–1958), and Yankev Stodolsky (1890–1962).

The period from around 1907 to the early 1920s, including both the Yúnge and the Inzikhístn (introspectivists), may be viewed as the second period of Yiddish poetry in America. The reaction against poetry for the sake of the labor movement, and the quest for genuine art, deep personal expression, and perfection of aesthetic form, went on to become part of most subsequent Yiddish poetry.

The third period, from the early 1920s to the years of the Second World War (and in many ways, beyond), was characterized by a new wave of immigration to New York that brought a lot of fresh young writers who would make their débuts in the early or mid-1920s, and by a new and different kind of politization. This was not a politization in the vein of the earlier sweatshop era ("the labor movement in general"), but a function of the acute new split *within* that movement. The starting point, around the time of the First World War and in its immediate aftermath, was that nearly all Yiddish writers in America published in newspapers and magazines affiliated with various socialist movements. This includes, by and large, even the maturing masters who were veterans of the Yúnge and the Inzikhístn. These "veterans" too were usually socialists, only socialists who believed in the freedom of literature from politics, including their own political affiliations.

These socialist movements underwent a bitter split in the years immediately following World War I and the rise of the Soviet Union. It was the

split between those who supported or at least had high hopes for the daring new Soviet experiment and those who opposed it early on as a deceptive evil. By the mid-1920s, the two camps had coalesced around two daily Yiddish newspapers in New York City.

Opponents of the Soviet Union were led by Abe Cahan (1860–1951), founding editor of the *Forverts* (the *Jewish Daily Forward*). The pro-Soviets grouped around Moyshe Olgin (1878–1939), founding editor of the *Frayhayt*. The *Forverts* had been around since the spring of 1897. The *Frayhayt* arose a quarter century later, in the spring of 1922, as a specific enterprise of the pro-Soviet Yiddish movement, and had positive attitudes toward (and affiliations with) the American Communist Party (though most writers and the vast majority of readers were not members).

Both Cahan and Olgin sought to attract to their newspapers (and to their "satellite" literary journals) serious literary talent in addition to popular writers. Although somewhat of an oversimplification, Cahan was the clear winner in prose, having on his staff such giants of Yiddish fiction as Sholem Ash (1880–1957), Israel Joshua Singer (1893–1944), and Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904–1991). Olgin was the victor in attracting great poets, including Menachem Boraisho (1888–1949), Moyshe-Leyb Halpern (1886–1932), H. Leivick (1886–1962), and Avrom Reisin (1876–1953), as well as the classic prose humorist Moyshe Nadir (1885–1943) and the "poetic novelist" Isaac Raboy (1882–1944).

The literary quality of the Yiddish used and the sophistication of literary criticism were palpably higher in the *Frayhayt*. Unlike the *Forverts* and all the other Yiddish newspapers of New York, which stuck to the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Germanized spelling, the *Frayhayt* adopted the mainstream modern spelling used by nearly all leading American Yiddish writers of the twentieth century. The *Frayhayt* did not adopt the radical Soviet spelling, or its offshoot, the YIVO variant proposed in the late 1930s (and in their books of poetry, the affiliated poets adopted a uniquely American modernistic spelling of Yiddish). As in so many other things, the *Frayhayt* was manifestly American. And on the issue of Yiddish spelling, it is an almost eerie "coincidence" that a typical page of a 1930s issue of the *Frayhayt* is spelled almost identically to a number of orthodox publications today in the early twenty-first century. Rather than try to sell papers at the lowest common denominator through sensationalism, the *Frayhayt* taught tens of thousands of immigrant workers to appreciate

the creativity of the most serious modern Yiddish culture. At the same time, its pages were full of lively advertisements for everything from kosher hotels to the latest movies to the best banks for working families. Despite the supposed "similar persuasion" of the *Frayhayt*, not one single page could ever be mistaken for one from a Soviet Yiddish newspaper.

The *Forverts* camp became known in Yiddish as Di Rékhte ("those of the Right"); the *Frayhayt* camp as Di Línke ("those of the Left"). That may sound strange today, given that both were so very proudly socialist and far to the left of the American center. Let it suffice to mention that the twin mottos on the front page of every day's *Forverts*, to either side of the name of the paper, were "Workers of the world unite!" and "Liberation of the workers depends on the workers themselves!" And that was the "right wing" paper!

As if to symbolize the "New Yorkness" of the scene, Lower Manhattan geographic concepts came to be signifiers of the camps: "East Broadway" was the symbol of the Rékhte, "Union Square" of the Línke. True, East Broadway was the home of a number of Yiddish newspapers, including religious and Zionist oriented papers, all of which were in some sense Rékhte, and true, Union Square was home to many American leftist and union institutions. Be it however cause or effect, it was the addresses of the two giants of the Yiddish daily press that came to be the "Temples of Jerusalem" for each camp: 175 East Broadway was the famed *Forverts* building and 35 East Twelfth Street (off Union Square), the premises of the *Frayhayt*.

This third period of American Yiddish poetry may be referred to as the "Left-Right Rift." The strife between the camps was its constant feature, and not infrequently its genuine inspiration. A sense of after-the-fact regret frequently accrues to that sharp divisiveness within Yiddish literature in America and all the "might have beens" about the differences unity could have made in the longer term. Who knows? A counter-argument is just as potent: The contentious spirit of the times, and the intense literary competitiveness engendered between the two camps, were a stimulation that spurred these circles in New York City to make the city a magnificent center (in both quality and quantity) of Yiddish literary output in the interbellum period.

But much of that output remains unknown today, even to the most serious students of Yiddish literature.

And the reason for that is to be found in politics and American Yiddish political correctness. Here we must turn to the history of the two camps against the backdrop of European and Middle Eastern history, both of which exerted powerful pressures on those happy-but-poor and war-free streets of New York.

In the early interbellum period, the successes of Yiddish in the Soviet Union were astounding. Here was a language, without a country or serious ambitions for becoming the national language of a nation-state, being given official status as one of a number of national languages in areas where it was widely spoken; where the government financed a system of education in Yiddish, from kindergarten through university-level institutes; where post offices and courts "spoke in Yiddish" in regions with dense Yiddish speaking populations; where Yiddish prose and poetry flourished and Yiddish writers were *paid* for their work (true paradise for the poets of, say, Delancey Street who worked in the garment industry, and other manual labor jobs, to keep themselves alive). This perception was not limited to the Línke of Union Square and the streets to its south. It took hold around the world. Two examples can make the point. The great Yiddish poet (and mystic prose writer) Moyshe Kulbak (1896–1940) migrated in 1928 from Vilna (then Wilno, in free Poland, a major international center of modern Yiddish culture) across the then Polish-Soviet border, eastward to Minsk. After various sojourns in Rumania, the Soviet Union, the United States, and Sweden, the famous novelist Dovid Bergelson (1884–1952), having "seen the choices," settled in the U.S.S.R. in 1934.

And then, history (or Stalin) mixed in and the Soviet paradise became hell on earth. To stick to our examples, Kulbak was arrested in 1937 and murdered soon thereafter, a fate that was to come upon Bergelson and many others in the later postwar purges. By the 1930s, there was extensive party meddling in the content and form of literature, and in the later years of the decade the Yiddish school systems were dismantled. The late 1920s Birobidjan experiment—establishment of a Jewish "homeland" in the Soviet Far East—was also ringing hollow by the later 1930s. During all this time, Jewish settlement in Palestine, by contrast, was succeeding ever more in building a viable state with the revived Hebrew-based language as its medium.

So it would be easy to argue that history happened to go Abe Cahan's way, not Moyshe Olgin's, especially as Cahan was prepared to shift on the

Zionism issue, while Olgin and the Communist Party were not. But things are never that simple. Within New York Yiddish culture, the *Frayhayt* took the lead in exposing Hitlerism for what it was from the first moment. Anti-Jewish laws and actions in Germany, even when directed against "capitalist Jewish institutions" were exposed in front page headlines. The unrelenting exposure of the Fascist threat was no mean feat in the early and mid-1930s. Still, the balance of a rapidly evolving history was tipping in the direction of the Rékhte, a tilt encouraged, at least in part, by a number of concrete events, each of which led to the defections of major writers from the Línke to the Rékhte.

First were the Arab riots in Hebron in 1929 which left sixty murdered and sixty-seven injured Jewish men, women, and children, many associated with the non-Zionist yeshiva community there (much of which had come from Lithuania to establish traditional Torah study in this ancient Jewish town). For the Rékhte, the need to support the Jewish cause in these circumstances was metamorphosing the whole attitude toward Zionism from negative to sympathetic. For Olgin and the Línke, whose cues on such matters came from the Party line, it was necessary to see the Arab perspective and not reach conclusions based on one's own race or religious background. After a first reaction, blaming Muslim fanatics, the *Frayhayt* reversed itself (catastrophically for its own interests) and adopted the Party line. This led to the first major spate of defections to the Rékhte, including the masters Boraisho, Leivick, Raboy, and Reisin. The leading periodical for serious literature, *Literarishe bleter* in Warsaw, published the declarations of all four in its September 27, 1929, issue. The fracas over Yiddishist reactions to the events in Hebron was not limited to New York and the writers around the *Frayhayt*. The editor of that prestigious Warsaw journal, Nakhmen Mayzl (1887–1966), devoted an editorial called "Nókhveyen" ("After-woes," October 11, 1929), begging Yiddish writers of all political stripes to disembark from the new internecine war of mutual destruction, boycotts, public disownings, and constant personal attacks in the press. A leftist himself, he noted with dismay how the Soviet press had suddenly turned the New York *Frayhayt* resigners into "enemies of the people" after years in which they had been "heroes of the people." Some of them, including Avrom Reisin, visited the new U.S.S.R. and their hometowns to a hero's welcome.

A decade later, in August of 1939, the Hitler-Stalin (Ribbentrop-Molotov)

pact engendered analogous results in "Yiddish New York." Moyshe Nadir was among the literary luminaries who walked away from the Línke. But now the situation was more complex. Many saw the pact as a clever way to stop Hitler's eastward advance that would open an opportunity for escape for as many Jews as possible. After the dismemberment of Poland in September 1939, the humiliation and ghettoization of the Jews on the German-held side of the newly established border contrasted starkly with the Soviet-allotted territories to its east. Notwithstanding the dismantling of cultural and educational institutions in the religious, Hebrew, and mainstream Yiddish spheres, the Soviet side provided physical safety, the development of Soviet Yiddish culture, and for the first time in these regions, anti-racist laws which even imposed a fine for the use of racial slurs. For all the faults of the Soviet system, the situation was one of day-and-night contrast. With Hitlerist ghettoization, deportation, and imminent genocide looming to the west of the new line, life on the Soviet, eastern side of the line looked pretty good. And, after the Germans overran the Soviet areas in late June of 1941, in Operation Barbarossa, the Soviet communists became close allies of the Americans and British, and the *Frayhayt*'s stance was strengthened for some years.

There was another arena in which the *Frayhayt*'s hand was strong: domestic policy in the United States. Following the stock market crash of 1929 and throughout the Great Depression and beyond, the vast majority of the Yiddish reading Jewish immigrant masses in America suffered poverty. Today we justifiably remember the evils of the American Communist Party and its various "cultural affiliates," but that is somewhat anachronistic and therefore inevitably one-sided. For many simple, not particularly political people, these were the folks who came to put your furniture back in your tenement after you were evicted for being late with the rent one month. These were the people fighting for the rights of the poor, the unemployed, the disenfranchised, the victims of all sorts of prejudice, not least racial and religious. If these people also thought that something good was being built "way over there" in faraway Russia, so be it. In the twenties and thirties it wasn't particularly sensational. In those years, that was not the kind of issue of "loyalty to America" that it would become decades later during the Cold War.

The Holocaust was a devastating blow to all Yiddish writers, and it is hardly a surprise that many (by no means all) wrote much of their most

original work before its full scope became widely known in the west. The calamitous realization that the civilization in which their language was native was totally destroyed in a mostly successful war of racial annihilation was, for the majority, demoralizing beyond description. But one moral issue hit the Línke harder than the Rékhte in the late 1940s and in the decades that followed. The age-old Jewish religious life in Eastern Europe, and all those rabbis, yeshivas, and God-fearing people which the Línke had rebelled against, had been savagely annihilated by the Nazis and their local collaborators. There could be little appetite for pursuing the old "anti-clericalist" line any longer.

Then came the Cold War and McCarthyism. The *Frayhayt* and its affiliate institutions, including the leftist Yiddish school system, faced constant harassment. And, the last major campaign of destruction against Yiddish culture by Stalin's government culminated in the murder of the leading Yiddish writers and Jewish intellectuals on August 12, 1952. When this became known in the United States, a significant group of younger generation writers (defined here, by and large, as those born in the early twentieth century) went over to the Rékhte. This third and most devastating wave of defections was the first to deprive the Línke of many of the very writers who had been the 1920s founders of the literary branch of the movement. Some of the best joined together in 1958 to move en masse to the *Forverts*-allied Workmen's Circle (Arbeter ring), where they established a (more or less) special branch for Línke-to-Rékhte-defectors. It was called the Dovid Bergelson Branch (no. 44) of the Workmen's Circle, named for one of the major writers murdered on August 12, 1952. This pivotal crossing over was trumpeted in a *Forverts* article of June 11, 1958, which has remained a sort of declaration of victory by the Rékhte. It reported: "Some two hundred people came to the inaugural meeting of the branch. It would appear that such a branch, an organization for the former Yiddish communists, who had been deceived by a false ideal, humiliated, bitterly disappointed, is very much a necessity." And so, victory was declared by the right in the *Yiddish* Cold War in New York, over thirty years before the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, the Línke and their institutions continued to work tirelessly for modern Yiddish culture. The *Frayhayt* was published until 1988, and the Zhitlovsky Foundation continued to publish fine Yiddish books throughout the 1990s and to this day. The magazine *Yidishe kultur* (Yiddish

Culture), edited by the universally beloved, redoubtable Itche Goldberg, continues to be arguably the best Yiddish literary journal in the world. Goldberg, who celebrated his one hundredth birthday in 2004, denounced Stalin's crimes only slightly later than the Rékhte, but like many others, elected to continue leading and working for a distinct branch of secular Yiddish culture in America. And, he survived all the rest.

For their part, the Rékhte, or their heirs to be more precise, continue to publish the *Forverts*, now a weekly, with lavish subsidies from the Forward Association, as well as the magazine *Tsukunft* (The Future).

Considering all that happened, it is not particularly surprising that those 1950s anthologists were petrified at the thought of including Línke writers who would be considered "disloyal" or "un-American." As they saw it, to do so would undermine the entire enterprise of winning acceptability for Yiddish in America. Moreover, they themselves were bitter enemies of those Línke, so they didn't really need much contemplation to decide to exclude their rivals.

But one problem was insurmountable. Like Eliezer Greenberg, one of the major anthologists, many of the fine anti-communist writers were themselves "former fellow travelers." The phenomenon is so important in the history of Yiddish culture in America that Yiddish developed a special ironic term for this category of person that inflects for gender and number: *gevézener* (literally "a former one"), feminine and plural *gevézene*. But irony aside, the word acquired the bitter aftertaste of a Cain-like stamp on the forehead.

In the mid-1950s, the Rékhte, in their own literary publications, particularly New York's *Tsukunft*, were applying unwritten rules that can be summarized with a simplicity that is so stark it is almost embarrassing, when applied to writers, many of whose writings had nothing to do with politics. In short: Whoever left the Línke for the Rékhte after the Hebron riots of 1929 was completely kosher. Whoever left after the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact of 1939 was sufficiently kosher. But those who waited until confirmation of the Moscow murders of the writers in 1952 were banished from the canon. And whoever hung around the Línke after that was not, heaven forefend, ever to be mentioned.

And so it came to pass that the canon of American Yiddish literature in English translation that thrives to this day was a creation, in part, of

1950s American political conformity. It is quite remarkable, when you think about it, that the book you are holding is the first serious attempt in English to *begin* the work of "constructively deconstructing" that sacred canon by outlining its political origins and, much more importantly, introducing a few of the poets who were at the core of one of the most exciting and creative milieus in Yiddish literary history: the Línke component of New York Yiddish literature in the interwar years.

But this is only the icebreaker. It cannot itself remedy the current situation in Yiddish literary studies, in which the same handful of authors get translated, anthologized, taught at universities, and endlessly analyzed in dissertations and conferences, while many *hundreds* of writers, many of them women, remain untouched and undiscovered, not in desert papyruses or manuscripts lost in war, but in printed journals and books that are easily found in major Yiddish collections.

Who were these Línke writers? They were much the same as all the others. Yes, American Yiddish leftist writers walked, loved, worked, and did all the other things that other writers did. Since Yiddish writers were virtually all "leftists" in the sense of being politically far to the left of the American center, the positing of some "species differentiation" is a silly, spurious picture resulting from antiquated political correctness at worst, or anachronism at best. Before the factional splits traced to 1919 (when American communism officially got underway) or 1922 (when the *Frayhayt* was established), one would be hard pressed to find *any* difference. One is reminded of Shylock's speech: "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands?"

Dynamic young men and women, many still teenagers, came off the boats from the old country and underwent a sweeping metamorphosis that was in some cases initiated before migration, in many others on New York City streets. For them, the fervor of a received and ancient system of strict beliefs was replaced by (or "transmigrated" into) a secularist modernism that put high value on originality of the individual and on social and political movements to bring about a better world here and now. This gave way to a rapid throwing overboard of belief in the world to come, Godliness, and strict adherence to a multitude of laws that continued—and continues—to characterize the vibrant traditional Jewish religious culture. All of Jewish history, in fact, can be viewed as a permanent traditionalist religious trunk with sporadic, asymmetrical, creative secular outbranches

that have brought magnificent cultural results without undoing the trunk, which continues apace with its own, sometimes imperceptibly slow, process of multi-millennial development. These outbranches include philosophy in medieval Spain, individuals like Spinoza in seventeenth-century Holland, and modern Yiddish literature.

Focusing in from these broader historic strokes to the streets of the Lower East Side in the years around World War I, it is clear that all of the modern Yiddish writers who settled in America and went on to build a literature centered in New York are part of the "same secular outburst" in Jewish history. It was a tiny matter of historic chance whether a young immigrant turned into a Yiddish writer after meeting people from "this" or from "that" circle. Once they were in one of the circles they enjoyed an environment of friends, lovers, and competitors, a vibrant café life, magazines and newspapers looking for new young talent, and an array of cultural institutions and clubs. This usually became the circle the writer stuck with. The overwhelming majority of these multitudes of young writers had little interest in party politics, but it was usually a politically oriented organization or movement that provided the infrastructure (and financial support) for Yiddish publications and events. After the Rékhte-Línke split of 1922 (if we date it to the founding of the *Frayhayt*), these young writers, of prose, poetry, drama, criticism, journalism, or educational materials "found themselves" in "one of two camps" as so often happens in the history of cultural movements and societies. It didn't matter whether their writing happened to concentrate on the old country or the new, on oneself, nature, love, life, death, or society, or on labor and class issues. There were myriad personal and literary inclinations.

One camp was aligned with a political movement (anti-Soviet socialism) that ended up—after a few decades—being a lot stronger than the other (pro-Soviet socialism) after the betrayals and crimes perpetrated by the Soviet Union became known (opinions differ on when to date the onset of those betrayals, and in the American scene, when evidence of them should have first been "believed"). Alas, both camps failed to viably transmit the language and its literature and culture to their children and grandchildren (the odd exceptions are so startling as to prove the rule). But that is another story.

The spotlight of this book is on the interwar period (with secondary attention granted the relevant postwar literary continuations). In the

twenties and thirties, many of the most talented and original writers in New York were among the Línke. The group is perhaps best known by the name of its own writers' union, Proletpen, a Russian style Yiddish concoction abbreviated from *proletárishe pen* ("proletarian pen"). Nevertheless, the "formal" period of the actual union called Proletpen covers only the period from 1929, when it was formally set up (to help boost the Linke's literary output after the Hebron Riot defections that year), to 1938, when it was phased out upon creation of the YKuF, or Yidisher kultur farband, which became one of the leading forces for Yiddish culture in America during and after the war years. YKuF grew into a much more widely based and international secular Yiddish movement with branches in London, Paris, and other centers where secular Yiddish culture remained vibrant in the years after the Holocaust.

The Yiddish literature of Proletpen did not come into being by party-related diktat in 1929, even if the name and the official status came into being in just that fashion on September 13 of that year. In real life, it became the new union into which a number of previous groups of Línke writers naturally streamed. Those earlier groups were often defined informally as those who "hung around the *Frayhayt* crowd." They included the Yunger arbeter shrayber fareyn (Young Workers Writers Union, called the Jewish Proletarian Writers Circle in English), set up in 1924, and the Frayhayt shrayber fareyn (The Frayhayt Writers Union, 1929). One of the most important organizations did not even have a literary name. That was the Daun-tauner Yidisher arbeter klub (Downtown Yiddish Workers Club), which provided premises for these young writers to meet and became a pioneering publishing house for Yiddish literature in 1920s New York.

The colorful proliferation of journals continued apace after that 1929 founding of Proletpen per se, and well after its demise. Among the best-known Línke publications that followed were *Yunyon-skver* (Union Square, 1930), *Signal* (1933–1936), the late 1940s *Yidish Amerike*, *Zamlungen* in the fifties and sixties, and of course, *Yidishe kultur* which continues to appear in New York today.

Throughout the interwar period, there were two streams among the Línke poets. There were those who believed in "art for the sake of art" including Zelik Dorfman (1905–1993), Yosl Grinshpan (1902–1934), Menke

Katz (1906–1991), Meir Shtiker (1905–1983), Abba Shtoltzenberg (1905–1941), and Leybele Sobrin (1907–1946). A second group believed in proletarian poetry "as such." Among them were Martin Birnbaum (1904–1986), Yosl Kohn (1897–1977), Aaron Kurtz (1891–1964), and in the 1930s, after her arrival in New York, Dora Teitelboim (1914–1992). Like all such classifications, this one too is flawed. Over the years, the poets within each of these literary tendencies experimented with verse from the "other" tendency, but usually the occasional crossovers within the two visions of poetry simply confirm where each poet's main strength and output were to be found on that particular axis.

Organizationally, the two major founders who helped put it all together in the 1920s were the union leader and prose writer Max Perlow (1902–1993) and the short story writer, educational author, and teacher Shloyme Davidman (1900–1975). In a memoir, Perlow recalled how it all started: "We used to meet at Shloyme Davidman's place over on Wise Avenue in the Bronx. He did everything calmly, slowly and modestly, and was incapable of antagonizing anybody." Perlow also reminisced about the motivation of most of the young writers in joining these organizations: "Their ambition was to write and to get published." Perlow and Davidman themselves produced a notable book of short stories, *Geknípte rítlakh* (Knotted Twigs), with alternating stories by each. The Downtown Yiddish Workers Club published it in 1928.

In many ways, Perlow and Davidman, middle ranking writers and first rate organizers, between them encapsulated much of the quintessence of the flavor of the Línke. Perlow brought from his native Dombrowitz, in the Ukraine, a background in Hebrew and Aramaic (he had studied at Lithuanian yeshivas before coming to America and switching to secularism). He became a major union organizer. Davidman was a laundry worker and baker of knishes in Brighton Beach. He worked for decades to qualify as a Yiddish teacher. After his *A Song to Yiddish* appeared in his later years, Deidre Carmody wrote him up in the *New York Times*. "Courage," her piece began, "can be a quiet quality when it breeds in the obscure and joyless corners of the city. For the most part it goes unheralded. But it can be found, if anyone tries hard enough. Shloime Davidman, 75, lives in Brighton Beach on $182 a month. He pays $143 a month for rent" (February 25, 1974).

From the literary point of view, the founder of the Línke Yiddish poets'

groups in New York was Alexander (or Yeshia / Ishiye) Pomerantz (1901–1965), a talented young poet, inspirer, and editor. He came from a well-to-do big city family in Grodna (interwar Grodno, Poland; now in Belarus). He was the son of a faucet-maker who won a gold medal from the czar for inventing a sprouting tap for soldiers to drink from, obviating the need for producing cups. As a very young boy, Alexander excelled in Talmud and was sent to the famous yeshiva at Mir. As a teenager, he fell in love with Yiddish poetry and became the third and youngest member of the "Grodna threesome" of great Yiddish poets during the teens of the twentieth century, along with Leib Naidus (1890–1918) and Avrom Zak (1891–1980). The group disintegrated after Naidus's early death. Pomerantz immigrated to New York in 1920 where he rapidly became not only a stirring young poet, but also a magnet for talent. When he succeeded as editor too (even if his journals tended to be short-lived), it made for the rise of the group of writers, particularly the younger poets who were to become the core of Proletpen.

In the summer of 1924, Pomerantz founded the Yiddish literary magazine *Yung kuznye* (*kuznye* is Yiddish for smithy or a blacksmith's shop; *Young Forge* was the official English language title). Nearly all the participants "fed into" Proletpen some five years later, and it is therefore, intellectually as well as in terms of most of the personalities, the precursor of Proletpen. Pomerantz's own poem "New York" (see page <000> in this volume) ends with lines that are recognizably from the heyday of Línke Yiddish poetry of the period.

un shpéter—
(ven s'hiln di shotns fun nakht ayn fabríkn)
ze ikh tsegornte reyen bes-álmins,
ze ikh umendlakhe shures fun féntster,
shmol un lang—fentster-matséyves,
éydes—
af lebns fritsaytik farlórene:
(neshomes deózlin artilóyin)
bludne farvóglte neshómes — — —

and later—
(when shadows of night envelop factories)

I see rows of graveyards laid out vertically,
I see endless rows of windows,
thin and long—windows that graves are,
witnesses—
to lives lost before their time:
(souls that walk about nakedly)
stray, roaming souls — — —

What is, to use the cliché, "lost in the translation" is the virtuosity of the language-layers and imagery which come from the integrated parts of Yiddish that nevertheless evoke more than subtle consciousness of their origins that span thousands of years of Jewish history and language. Things start out with a contemporary proletarian bit of realia (a factory after dark), using the accepted formulas of contemporary Yiddish poetry. Sadness is introduced dramatically by the poet's radical reorganization of the "photographic scene" (tall buildings in New York City) to a vertical cemetery. The verticality is suggested by the newly minted Poetic Yiddish *tsegornt*, which is, for all its novelty, immediately comprehensible: divided up into the stories of a building, hence vertical and building-like. Of the various choices of word for "cemetery" Pomerantz passes up *besóylem*, the Yiddish term derived from the Hebrew, for the Aramaically formed *besálmin*. This serves as a signal for the much deeper Aramaic to come: the kabbalistic phrase, used in the poem as its entire penultimate line, *neshomes deózlin artilóyin* ("souls that walk about nakedly"). For much of the Yiddish readership of sophisticated poetry of the day (including, needless to say, the Yiddishist Línke of the time), the Aramaic line would evoke the kabbalistic image of its source, in the Zohar, the classic work of Jewish mysticism, where it occurs twice: once referring to souls that ramble from one world to another, and one time referring to souls that have been rambling since the six days of creation. But Pomerantz made one linguistic adjustment to the phrase: he replaced the Aramaic plural for "souls" from the Zohar, *nishmósin*, with the much more familiar Hebrew plural, *neshomoys*, which is graphically identical to the everyday plural in spoken Yiddish, *neshómes*, and which would be pronounced the Yiddish way by traditional East European scholars even when it occurs in a kabbalistic text. In other words, the poet has fused the most esoteric Aramaic with daily Yiddish, to evoke an ancient mystical image and apply it seamlessly to the streets of Manhattan.

The final line of the poem uses Slavic derived *blúdne* for "stray." It is a vivid shtetl term that would not infrequently be used of a stray dog or cat back in the old country. Having transported the reader of wherever and whenever to the new world metropolis seen through the ancient Kabbalah as it was distilled within the Jewish multilingual culture of Eastern Europe, the poet returns the reader safely to the warmth of that earthy shtetl term.

So there we have it, "the poetic world of a New York Communist Yiddish poet" in the poem that launched the literary movement, at the start of the first issue of its first major journal, *Yung kuznye*, in 1924. Nothing could be more different from the way Yiddish literature would develop in the Soviet Union, where the pressures of the Party and its law drove everything from the spelling and graphics of the Yiddish used to the topics permitted, and ultimately the poetic imagery itself, into the ever tightening Soviet stranglehold. Things were different over in New York City, where anyone who wanted could walk away and join another group. But most didn't want to "join another group" in the twenties and thirties, despite the fact that things were changing for the worst in the Soviet Union, because they were having a darned fine time among the Línke, whether or not their writing was politically oriented.

In 1925, this environment got a big moral boost from the visit to America of V. V. Mayakovsky (1893–1930), the leading poet of the Russian Revolution and the early Soviet period (the visit that led, incidentally, to his satiric *My Discovery of America*). He and Pomerantz teamed up to edit *Spartak*, a trilingual journal of revolutionary literature. Although only one issue appeared, in 1925, it remains a classic in Yiddish literary creativity.

The departure of some of the older generation of greats in 1929 had the curious side effect of leaving the poetic side of Proletpen to its youngest poets (who did not follow the masters out). It was as if, overnight, the young Línke poets had become the new Yúnge or "young ones" of the New York literary scene. When the renowned Vilna literary scholar Zalmen Reyzen (1887–1940?), compiler of the classic four-volume encyclopedia of Yiddish writers (known as "Reyzen's *Leksikón*," Vilna 1926–29), visited America in 1930, he, like other Europeans who were not in the thick of the New York polarizations of the previous year, took care to visit the different writers' circles. In an interview he gave to the Warsaw-based *Literárishe*

bléter upon his return to Vilna, Reyzen remarked: "Recently the appearance of the monthly *Hamer* has been renewed, the journal around which the so-called 'Proletpenists' [Yiddish *proletpenístn*] group themselves, almost entirely young writers and people just starting out" (December 26, 1930). As ever, Reyzen's keen eye summed up a wide literary scene to the point to which it had evolved at the time of his observations.

It is fortuitous for future research into the interwar Línke Yiddish writers that the group's founder, Alexander Pomerantz, spent the years 1933 to 1935 in Kiev, capital of the Ukrainian S.S.R., where he worked with major Soviet Yiddish scholars, including Max Erik (Zalmen Merkin, 1898–1937). During that time he exchanged his writer's cap for that of the literary historian and wrote his thesis on Proletpen. He could hardly be objective about the chapter of American Yiddish literature that he co-founded. Moreover, the work suffers from all the trappings of Marxist prejudices generally, as well as the specific party line of those years. It is as if the earlier original Alexander Pomerantz (and luckily, the later one too!) became a Soviet hack for those years. Nevertheless, the thesis is invaluable as source material on Proletpen. It was published in Kiev in 1935 as *Proletpén. Etyudn un materyaln tsu der geshikhte fun dem kamf far proletarisher literatur in Amerike* (Proletpen: Studies and Materials on the History of the Struggle for Proletarian Literature in America). This 250-page volume includes chapters on the *Frayhayt*, the various writers' unions that fed into Proletpen, and the disputes of the journals of the Proletpen era itself with special attention to the role played by each of the journals of the time. There is a lively (if not impartial) encyclopedic section of biographies and bibliographies of the writers of Proletpen, statistics, and an array of facts that will prove invaluable when taken in context with other materials from the period. As if with an eye to the past, the future, and the west, Pomerantz's propaganda component, an inevitable feature of a thesis published in Kiev in 1935, is so constructed as to be straightforwardly separable from the vital data whose analysis and "English revelation" remain a necessity for Yiddish studies in the twenty-first century.

The life of Alexander Pomerantz is a microcosm of the whole of Línke Yiddish literature in America. The dynamic poet of World War I Grodna who founded those leftist Yiddish literary journals and circles in New York in the 1920s went on to write the history of the movement during a sojourn in Kiev in the 1930s. He returned to New York and to poetry but became

increasingly disillusioned with the Soviet Union. When news of the Stalinist murders of the Yiddish writers and cultural leaders in the Soviet Union was confirmed, it was Pomerantz who teamed up with various of his old 1920s buddies, including William Abrams (1894–1969), Max Perlow, Menke Katz, and Chaim Plotkin (1910–1996), to break away from the Línke and form the special Dovid Bergelson Branch of the Workmen's Circle in 1958. Pomerantz's final major work is a masterly history and exposé of the tragic liquidation of Soviet Yiddish writers. As in that 1924 poem he used to launch the period of Línke Yiddish poetry in New York, he invoked a term from the ancient sources to symbolically close that period of Yiddish literature in New York. Pomerantz's five-hundred-page work, *Di sovetishe harugey malkhus,* derived its title from *harugey malkhus* ("people murdered by the government"), which originated in connection with the Roman murders of leading Jewish sages in the second century A.D. His book, which appeared in Buenos Aires in 1962, used the ancient untranslatable term to invoke the historic image from nearly two thousand years ago. And so, the same Alexander Pomerantz who founded, in the 1920s, the writers' group that was to become Proletpen, and wrote its history in the 1930s, also wrote the epitaph of its inspirational forces in the 1960s. It isn't many flourishing movements in world literature that get to be founded, chronicled, and lamented by one person. He was a fine poet himself all the way through.

It must be underscored that the impassioned literary debates within Proletpen are themselves an important chapter in the history of this era in Yiddish literature. The primary fault line lay in the very notion of "proletarian literature." Was it there to express the goals of the movements to bring about a better world, or could literature, and particularly poetry, be oblivious to the social goals inherent in the movements that created the infrastructure for Yiddish literature? In the case of Proletpen, it is characteristic that the inherent tolerance and pluralism of the American environment allowed fierce debates to play out on the pages of the movement's press, particularly the *Frayhayt* under Olgin. That level of debate, and perhaps of literary inspiration, came to an end with Olgin's death on November 22, 1939. His death was the emblematic end of the interwar era of the Yiddish poetry of the left, which is the primary focus of this anthology.

The debate about poetry within Proletpen circles went beyond the

narrower question of whether poetry should serve the social and political aims of the leftists. It reached the universal question of whether poetry should serve *any* good purposes other than art for its own sake. I cannot claim objectivity here, as I grew up in New York hearing a lot about the debate from one of its key and most controversial protagonists, my father, poet Menke Katz.

The debate reached its climax over a controversy that erupted over Menke Katz's two-volume epic poem, *Brénendik shtetl* (*Burning Village*, New York 1938). Menke, as he was universally known in Yiddish poetry, had emigrated from Lithuania in 1920 at the age of thirteen and a half, and went on to become the most controversial poet in Proletpen. In 1932, he was expelled from the organization for publishing *Three Sisters* against the wishes of its leaders. It was a work steeped in mysticism and eroticism (poems from the book appear on pages 354 and 360). He was soon readmitted, however, and the debates over nonconformist poetry intensified.

In 1938, stalwarts of Proletpen launched a barrage of attacks against *Burning Village* for being steeped in the past, in the Jewish shtetl and ancient Jewish traditions, for not bringing happiness to working people and for ignoring the entire list of requirements for "constructive" poetry.

Menke replied on the pages of the *Frayhayt* on August 14, 1938, with his "Der braver pakhdn" ("The Brave Coward"), a defense of the independence of poetry. It comprised four poems, each of which answered one of the leftist complaints about poetry that does not serve good causes. The first, "Vegn freyd un umet" ("On Happiness and Sadness"), is a response to the notion that happiness can be "demanded" of poets. The second, "Vegn nekhtn, haynt un morgn" ("On Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow"), defends the poet's right to be passionately consumed with the past (which coincides, it so happens, with traditonalist Jewish culture). The third, "Un du bist umetik vi toyznt Kuni-Aylend zunen" ("And You Are as Sad as a Thousand Coney Island Suns"), is a broadside against faked happiness delivered up by poets as some kind of commodity. The final poem, "Di tfíle fun barabán" ("The Prayer of the Drum"), is an ode to the magnificence of true sadness in genuine poetry.

The most famous line in "The Brave Coward" is "I will not lead my poem into battle."

"The Brave Coward" led to a major debate on poetry on the literary pages of the *Frayhayt* in the late summer and fall of 1938. Nearly all the

major poets participated. The majority were committed to poetry in the cause of the movement and roundly condemned "The Brave Coward." The polemics were colorful. Moyshe Katz's piece was called "Something Is Rotten in Denmark" (the *Frayhayt*, August 28, 1938). Aaron Kurtz called his "A Shot that Hits Its Shooter" (September 4, 1938). Martin Birnbaum's "A Libel-Sheet against Proletarian Literature" hit at Menke Katz for writing about everything in his *Burning Village* "from the purest poetic sadness to the weirdest spider, from Grandmother Toltse's shrouds to the wailing of hungry cats" (August 21, 1938).

This attack on the poet's beloved grandmother Mona (Yiddish Moyne), calling her "grandmother Toltse" (a disparaging Yiddish term for an elderly woman, a bit like "Aunt Tilly"), led Menke Katz to turn proletarian poetry on its head by coming back not with a polemic reply, but with an entire new book of poetry written "by" the poet's disparaged grandmother Mona, who had died before he was born. She appeared to him in his dreams in his Lower East Side tenement and dictated the book, which is an impassioned defense of shtetl life and values against the political bigwigs of downtown New York.

Menke Katz's *Grandmother Mona Takes the Floor* (New York 1939) made for a poignant end of the Proletpen era in Yiddish poetry. The book also contains a revised version of "The Brave Coward," which starts with the lines:

> Ever will the coward
> fear my proud Grandmother Mona—
> fear, should the magic staff of Moses
> wake her from her mossy sleep,
> fear, should she return in purity from her ancient grave:
> to deflect the tin grumble of his voice,
> with her breath to blow away his overblown pride,
> to blot with her blood that washed out red
> and leave but the rattle of a rattler.

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