

**A Quest for Yiddishland:  
The 1937 World Yiddish Cultural Congress**

by *Gennady Estraikh*

**Abstract**

*In August 1935, a group of intellectuals who gathered in Vilna at a jubilee conference of the Jewish Scientific Institute, YIVO, announced the founding of a movement called the Yiddish Culture Front (YCF), whose aim would be to ensure the preservation of Yiddish culture. The article focuses on the congress convened by the YCF in Paris. The congress, a landmark in the history of Yiddishism, opened on September 17, 1937, before a crowd of some 4,000 attendees. 104 delegates represented organizations and institutions from 23 countries. Radically anti-Soviet groups boycotted the convention, considering it a communist ploy. Ironically, the Kremlin cancelled the participation of a Soviet delegation at the last moment. From the vantage point of the delegates, Paris was the only logical center for its World Yiddish Cultural Association (IKUF or YIKUF) created after the congress. However, the French capital was not destined to become the world capital of Yiddish intellectual life. Influential circles of Yiddish literati, still torn by ideological strife rather than united in any common cultural “Yiddishland,” remained concentrated in America, Poland, and the Soviet Union.*

**From Berlin to Paris**

**Preludes to the Congress**

**The Boycott**

**A Phantasm of Yiddishland**

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“Where are you coming from?”  
“From Yiddishland.”  
“Where are you headed?”  
“To Yiddishland.”  
“What kind of journey is this?”  
“A journey like any other journey.”

### From Berlin to Paris

In the years following World War I and the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, Berlin emerged as the European capital of Eastern European Jewish, including Yiddish-speaking and -writing, intellectual émigré life. The city boasted a dynamic milieu of writers and journalists, linked with periodicals and publishers in the three Yiddish cultural centers: Warsaw, New York, and Moscow. Several Jewish scholarly projects developed in Berlin during this period. It is no coincidence that the concept of a Yiddish academic center crystalized in Berlin in 1925, though ultimately the project was realized as a Vilna-based institute, YIVO.<sup>2</sup> Berlin was home to the European (or main) headquarters of several Jewish relief organizations. One of these, ORT, initially founded in 1880 in St. Petersburg as the Society for the Promotion of Artisanal and Agricultural Work in the Russian Empire, transformed into the World ORT Union in 1921. David Lvovitch and Aron Singalowsky, key figures in the reminted organization, had their ideological roots in the Territorialist movement, which sought a homeland for a Yiddish-speaking state. Yiddish cultural activism was also well represented in other Jewish organizations in Berlin.

All this came to an end following Hitler’s coming to power. Paris became the main destination for Jewish writers, journalists, scholars, and civic leaders fleeing

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<sup>1</sup> H. Leivick, “Mit a vize fun Yidishland,” *Folksblat*, October 30, 1935, 3.

<sup>2</sup> For a history of YIVO, see Cecile E. Kuznitz, *YIVO and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture. Scholarship for the Yiddish Nation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Germany in the 1930s. In the French capital, they found a setting for Yiddish cultural activities that differed significantly from the German. Tellingly, Berlin never had a Yiddish daily; its Yiddish weeklies also tended to decline soon after beginning publication.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, the French capital, with its vibrant environment of some 150,000 Jewish immigrants, primarily from Poland and other countries of Eastern and Central Europe, ensured a stable readership for two Yiddish dailies: the *Parizer haynt*, launched in 1926 as a sister publication of the Warsaw daily *Haynt* (Today), and *Naye prese* (New Press), a communist publication, which began to appear in 1934. Several other Yiddish periodicals saw the light of day in Paris, but did not endure long enough to leave a tangible mark.<sup>4</sup>

In 1936, a monthly journal, *Parizer zhurnal: far literatur, kunst un kultur* (Parisian journal: for literature, art, and cultural issues), emerged under the patronage of the Association des Ecrivains et Artistes Revolutionnaires (AEAR, Association of Revolutionary Writers and Artists), founded by communists and communist sympathizers. Nonetheless, the French capital did not play a significant role in the landscape of Yiddish literature, though several Yiddish writers, including the literary heavyweights Sholem Asch, David Eynhorn and Zalman Shneur, settled for a time in the city. There were also much less known local young writers, patronizingly described as “provincial” by the poet and essayist Daniel Charney, one of the last Yiddish literati to flee Berlin.<sup>5</sup> This local provinciality did not prevent him from including some of them, notably Wolf Wiewiorka and Benjamin Shlevin, in the association of Yiddish journalists, which he launched and chaired in January 1937.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For more on Yiddish in Berlin, see, e.g., Gennady Estraiikh, “Yiddish on the Spree,” in *Yiddish in Weimar Berlin. At the Crossroads of Diaspora Politics and Culture*, ed. Gennady Estraiikh and Mikhail Krutikov, (Oxford: Legenda, 2010), 1–27.

<sup>4</sup> “200,000 Jews of France Served by Vigorous Weekly and Daily Periodicals Published in Yiddish, French, German and Russian,” *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, July 5, 1931, 3; Daniel Charney, “Der yidisher kultur-yarid in Pariz,” *Literarische bleter*, April 2, 1937, 4; Albert Dérozier, *Mélanges offerts à Albert Dérozier*, (Besançon: Université de Besançon, 1994), 315–16.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Charney, “Di yidishe bikher produktsye in Pariz,” *Literarische bleter*, April 9, 1937, 5.

<sup>6</sup> “Fun vokh tsu vokh,” *Literarische bleter*, January 22, 1937, 14.

The Kultur-Lige, or Yiddish Culture League, modeling on the original Kiev prototype of 1918–20, was established in Paris in 1922 and later had branches in several French cities. In Kiev, the league operated, at least in part, as a supra-party organization promoting development of secular Yiddish culture, which was proclaimed as the spiritual core of the modern Jewish nation-in-the-making.<sup>7</sup> Initially, the Parisian league also united representatives of various political currents, but very soon became an arena for political intrigues and maneuvers, until the ‘red faction’ attained, in 1925, full Communist dominance in the organization.<sup>8</sup> A Yiddish drama circle, formed at the Kultur-Lige in Paris in 1928, became the basis for the Yiddish Workers Theater (Parizer yidisher arbeter-teater), or PYAT. According to Nick Underwood, the PYAT “played a fundamental role in the development of political culture within leftist circles in interwar France.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1928, a group of Eastern European immigrants aligned with the local Bundist group founded the Bibliothèque Medem (or Medem-Bibliotek in Yiddish). In 1932, the Bundists launched the Arbeter-Ring (Workmen’s Circle) as a mutual-aid society as well as the agency responsible for Yiddish-language education. The founders took as their model the socialist-leaning Arbeter-Ring, which had been active in the USA since 1900 and, independently, in London since 1909. Paris was also home to libraries belonging to various Jewish political groups.<sup>10</sup> In 1937, some 600 children attended ten Yiddish supplementary schools in the city,<sup>11</sup> and during 1936–38, *Naye prese* published a column for young readers.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For more, see Gennady Estraiikh, “The Yiddish Kultur-Lige,” in *Modernism in Kyiv. Jubilant Experimentation*, eds. Irena Makaryk and Virlana Tkacz, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 197–217.

<sup>8</sup> M. Liro, “Di geshikhte fun der kultur-lige,” *10 yor kultur lige*, (Paris: Kultur-Lige, 1932), 3–11.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Lee Underwood, “Staging a New Community. Immigrant Yiddish Culture and Diaspora Nationalism in Interwar Paris, 1919–1940,” Ph. D Thesis, (University of Colorado at Boulder, 2016), 36.

<sup>10</sup> Giles Rozier and Alan Astro, “The Medem-Bibliotek. The Yiddish Library of Paris,” *Shofar* 14/3 (1996): 138–139; Giles Rozier, “The Bibliothèque Medem. Eighty Years Serving Yiddish Culture,” *Judaica Librarianship* 15 (2009): 25–34.

<sup>11</sup> “Fun vokh tsu vokh,” *Literarische bleter*, April 30, 1937, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Nick Underwood, “Our Most Beautiful Children. Communist Contests and Poetry for Immigrant Jewish Youth in Popular Front France,” *Jewish Social Studies* 23/1 (2017): 64–100.

Yiddishization was a characteristic feature of ORT's Parisian period after the organization decamped to Paris in 1933. An ORT veteran described the years 1933–1940 as the most Yiddishist period in ORT's history. Apart from reflecting the cultural climate of Jewish Paris, this linguistic shift emphasized ORT's transition from an essentially Russian Jewish organization to an international one, whose operations increasingly transcended the borders of the disintegrated Russian Empire, but remained largely focused on the Yiddish-speaking masses. The turn to Yiddish was characteristic even of those ORT activists who had previously preferred Russian.<sup>13</sup>

Yiddish-speaking communists were particularly prominent in French Jewish political and cultural life. This was, to a considerable degree, a reflection of the influence of political immigrants from Poland, where the authorities sought to suppress all forms of pro-Soviet activity and forced many politically active people to leave the country. Numerous political immigrants had come to Paris earlier, after the revolutionary events of 1905–1906 in Russia.<sup>14</sup> The first communist Jewish organizations appeared in Paris in 1922; the following year saw them morph into a Jewish – moreover, a Yiddish-speaking – section (*sous-section juive*) of the French Communist Party. Dissolved in 1937, the section subsequently regrouped around *Naye prese*.<sup>15</sup> The communist newspaper remained the only full-fledged Parisian (rather than a local version of a Warsaw-based) Yiddish daily with a well-organized base of several thousand friends and fundraisers. Its readers included representatives of other leftwing political currents, notably Bundists and members of the leftist Poalei Zion (Marxist Zionist 'Workers of Zion'), who did not have

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<sup>13</sup> Gennady Estraiikh, "From Berlin to Paris and Beyond. The 1930s and 1940s," in *Educating for Life. New Chapters in the History of ORT*, eds. Rachel Bracha, Adi Drori-Avraham and Geoffrey Yantian, (London: World ORT, 2010), 110–111.

<sup>14</sup> Yekhezkel Kornhendler, *Yidn in Pariz. materyaln far yidisher geshikhte*, (Paris: n.p., 1981), vol. 2, 186.

<sup>15</sup> Zosa Szajkowski, "Dos yidishe gezelschaftlekhe lebn in Pariz dem yor 1939," in *Yidn in Frankraykh. Shtudyes un materyaln*, ed. Ilia (Elias) Cherikover, (New York: YIVO, 1942), 212–213; Gerben Zaagsma, "The Local and the International. Jewish Communists in Paris between the Wars," *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 8 (2009): 345–363.

their own stable Yiddish press in France.<sup>16</sup> The trans-partisan nature of the readership reflected the cooperation of these political groupings in the leftist Popular Front, formed to fight – including in the cultural domain – against the threat of fascism.

With Berlin a no-go for anything Jewish, in Europe it was becoming increasingly hard to find a better setting than Paris for the World Yiddish Cultural Congress (17–21 September 1937), marked by pro-Soviet sympathies and opportunism. The International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life, also referred to as the 1937 World's Fair, provided a symbolic backdrop. Significantly, the exposition included a Modern Jewish Culture pavilion, whose committee was chaired by a former prominent resident of 'Jewish Berlin,' Raphael Abramovitch, a person of stature in the socialist movement and in Yiddish cultural circles.<sup>17</sup>

### Preludes to the Congress

In June 1935, Paris hosted the grandiose First International Writers' Congress in Defense of Culture. The Soviet government allocated major expenditures for its involvement in this vastly propagandist event, entrusting the organization of its part in the congress largely to the Soviet literati Ilya Ehrenburg and Mikhail Koltsov (Fridliand). Isaac Babel and Boris Pasternak attended as members of the Soviet delegation. The atmosphere of the time, when many western intellectuals perceived the Soviet Union as the most reliable anti-Nazi force, made a gathering of this nature possible.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For a comparative study of the two newspapers, see Aline Benain and Audrey Kichelewski, "Parizer Haynt et Naïe Presse, les itineraries paradoxaux de deux quotidiens parisiens en langue yiddish," *Archives juives* 1/36 (2003): 52–69.

<sup>17</sup> Nick Underwood, "Exposing Yiddish Paris. The Modern Jewish Culture Pavilion at the 1937 World's Fair," *East European Jewish Affairs* 46/2 (2016): 160–175; on Abramovitch, see Gennady Estraiikh, "Die jiddischsprachige New Yorker Tageszeitung *Forverts* und ihr Korrespondent Raphael Abramovitch," in *Judentum und Arbeiterbewegung. Das Ringen um Emanzipation in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, eds. Markus Börner, Anja Jungfer and Jakob Stürmann, (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2018), 115–141.

<sup>18</sup> Tat'iana G. Petrova, "Kongress pisatelei v zashchitu kul'tury," in *Russkoe zarubezh'e. Istorii i sovremennost'*, (Moscow: INION, 2011), 213–220.

Taking the Writers' Congress as a model, a group of intellectuals in Vilna in August 1935 as part of the YIVO tenth jubilee conference announced the founding of a movement called the Yiddish Culture Front, whose aim would be to ensure the preservation of Yiddish culture. The writers Yeshue Perle and Alter Kacyzne, the editor Nachman Meisel (or Mayzel), the historians Emanuel Ringelblum and Raphael Mahler, and the artist Marc Chagall all signed the new movement's manifesto.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, importantly, while the 1935 Writers' Congress had been launched by the Soviet propaganda apparatus, the idea of conducting a Yiddish congress was originally floated among non-communist (though leftist) intellectuals. The initiators of the new movement aimed to protect Yiddish culture not only from fascism, but also from other forces, most notably assimilation, which was largely accountable for the erosion of Yiddish. They were concerned that even the comparatively young modern cultures, such as the Lithuanian and Latvian, were distracting the younger Jewish generation from Yiddish. Moreover, an increasing number of young literati were writing in languages, which had previously not been in competition with Yiddish.<sup>20</sup>

In fact, many Yiddish activists envisioned YIVO as the trend-setting cultural institution in secular Jewish life. The 1935 conference brought to Vilna scores of delegates and hundreds of guests, many, if not the majority of whom wanted to see YIVO as more than a merely academic center. Vilna had already begun to be considered as a capital of virtual Yiddishland. However, YIVO's administration was reluctant to overstep the academic borders of the institute's activity. Presumably, they were wary of the questionable political tint that might attach to YIVO, thereby endangering the existence of the institute. As a result, the initiators of the Yiddish Culture Front had difficulty so much as obtaining the conference

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<sup>19</sup> Nachman Meisel, *Geven amol a lebn*, (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-farband fun poylishe yidn, 1951), 372–380.

<sup>20</sup> Nachman Meisel, *Oyf un[d]zer kultur-front. Problemen fun literatur un kultur-shafn* (Warsaw: Literarische bleter, 1936), 168–169.

organizers' permission to announce the movement's manifesto during one of the sessions.<sup>21</sup>

Convening a congress of the new movement in Poland, where it would be seen as a communist ploy, was out of the question. The Polish Yiddish Culture Front had to disguise its activities as a campaign to celebrate the centenary of Mendele Moykher Sforim, the 'grandfather' of modern Jewish literature. Paris, where pro-Soviet sympathies were not punished, was clearly more suitable as the location for an event of this kind. Numerous publications and speeches drew parallels between the 1908 First Yiddish Language Conference, which had taken place in Czernowitz, then in Austria-Hungary,<sup>22</sup> and the Parisian convention. Among the similarities was the setting: in both cases, the organizers' choice had fallen on a city with a relatively small Yiddish-speaking population, but with minimal legal hurdles. As the St. Petersburg Yiddish daily *Der fraynd* (Friend) wrote sarcastically in 1908, the participants had to "*geyn in goles un shlepn zeyer toyre mit zikh*" – "go into exile and carry their Torah with them."<sup>23</sup>

September 1936 saw an organizational meeting of another group that called the Yiddish Culture Front. This had formed in Paris, chaired by the well-known Russian Jewish sculptor Naum (Naoum or Nohem) Aronson, an intellectual fascinated with the post-1917 developments in his birth country. In September 1935, Aronson returned from a three-month-long trip to the Soviet Union, nurturing plans of working on Soviet themes. Among his projects was a sculpture of Stalin as "the leader of the world."<sup>24</sup> One of the two vice-chairmen of the new Front, Michel (Mikhail) Kiveliovitch, had a reputation as a talented mathematician and a pupil of Henri Poincaré working in celestial mechanics. He

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<sup>21</sup> Jacob Botoshansky, "A demonstratsye in der hoyptshtot fun 'Yidishland'," *Literarische bleter*, August 23, 1935, 7; Meisel, *Geven amol a lebn*, 377; Christopher Hutton, "What Was Going on at the 1935 YIVO Conference," in *The Politics of Yiddish. Studies in Language, Literature and Society*, ed. Dov-Ber Kerler, (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1998), 29–40.

<sup>22</sup> See, in particular, *Czernowitz at 100. The First Yiddish Language Conference in Historical Perspective*, eds. Kalman Weiser and Joshua A. Fogel, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Shaul Lev, "Di Tshernovitser konferents fun 1908 un der Parizer kongres fun 1938," *Literarische bleter*, September 17, 1937, 602.

<sup>24</sup> "Skul'ptor Aronson vyekhal v Parizh," *Izvestiia*, September 23, 1935, 4.



was also known as a ‘great friend of Lenin and Trotsky,’ an ORT activist, and the founder of the *Artistes juifs* (Jewish Artists) book series published under the aegis of Le Triangle in Paris.<sup>25</sup>

The new organization’s other vice-chairman, Ben-Adir (Abraham Rozin), a former leader of the Jewish Territorialists in Russia, was also associated with ORT – as a former editor of its Yiddish periodical *Virtshaft un lebn* (Business and Life, 1928–31).<sup>26</sup> In 1934, he was one of the founders of a Territorialist group in Paris that became involved in the establishment of the Frayland (Freeland) League, a source of crucial new vigor for the movement. David Lvovitch and Aron Singalowsky were also among the founders.<sup>27</sup> In contrast to Aronson and Kiveliiovitch, Ben-Adir was a thoroughly seasoned anti-Bolshevik. However, the Soviet Birobidzhan project of setting up a territorial autonomy in the Far East of the country apparently appealed to him.

After 1933, many activists in the West came to the conclusion that the urgent need of finding a safe haven for Jewish refugees from Germany did not leave many choices, especially as even relatively Jewish-friendly countries were ready to admit a bare trickle of immigrants. Tens of thousands of socially and economically deprived Jews from Poland, Romania, Lithuania, and Latvia viewed emigration as the only viable solution to their plight. As a result, increasing numbers of people of various ideological persuasions turned their eyes to the Soviet Far East. In Britain, Lord Dudley Marley, Deputy Speaker of the House of Lords and Chairman of the Committee for the Relief of Victims of German Fascism, described Birobidzhan as ‘about the safest spot in the world.’ In America, former

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<sup>25</sup> Louis Atlas, “Jewish Cultural Phases in the French Capital. An Entertaining Letter from Paris,” *The Jewish Exponent*, November 27, 1931, 8; Leon Shapiro, *The History of ORT. A Jewish Movement for Social Change*, (London: World ORT, 2010), 93; Alessandro Gallicchio, “Parigi 1928–1932. La collana ‘Artistes Juifs’ de Le Triangle tra promozione artistica e appartenenza ebraica,” in *Gli intellettuali/scrittori ebrei e il dovere della testimonianza. In ricordo di Giorgio Bassani*, ed. Anna Dolfi, (Florence: Florence University Press, 2017), 43–52.

<sup>26</sup> Shapiro, *The History of ORT*, 145.

<sup>27</sup> “Der Territorialismus im Anmarch,” *Jüdische Wochenblatt* (Bielsko), October 26, 1934, 1–2; Michael C. Astour, *Geshikhte fun der Frayland-lige*, (Buenos Aires and New York: Frayland-lige, 1967), vol. 1, 29–34, 56–79.

Democratic Congressman William W. Cohen chaired a committee of influential figures who had become enthused by the Birobidzhan endeavor.<sup>28</sup>

Soviet representatives promised to allow foreign Jews to settle in the Far Eastern territory designated for Jewish colonization, which in May 1934 began to be referred to as the Jewish Autonomous Region. The administrative capital was in Birobidzhan, a newly built town. The area's rank of 'region' was seen as a temporary status prior to the proclamation an autonomous republic. In 1936, the Soviet propaganda industry produced a talkie, *Seekers of Happiness*, a work of unabashed propaganda, whose central Jewish (but Russian-speaking) characters came from an unspecified foreign country to settle in the Soviet Far East.<sup>29</sup> (In America, the film encountered censorship, but was shown in some places under the title of *A Greater Promise*.)<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, the campaign proved perfectly futile. Despite the Soviet government's promises to allow one thousand foreign Jewish families to settle in the region, fewer than 1,400 individuals from abroad were granted state permission to immigrate into the area.<sup>31</sup>

Beginning in fall 1936, and ever more violently in 1937 and 1938, brutal mass repressions in Birobidzhan, echoed by repressions throughout the country, made the Soviet Union impossible as a destination for any resettlement campaign. In the climate of purges, Soviet party leadership cancelled plans for a Yiddish culture conference in Birobidzhan. This had initially been scheduled to take place in

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<sup>28</sup> Henry Srebrnik, "Diaspora, Ethnicity and Dreams of Nationhood. American Jewish Communists and the Birobidzhan Project," in *Yiddish and the Left*, eds. Gennady Estraiikh and Mikhail Krutikov, (Oxford: Legenda, 2001), 94–95; Alexander Ivanov, "Facing East. The World ORT Union and the Jewish Refugee Problem in Europe, 1933–38," *East European Jewish Affairs* 39/3 (2009): 369–388.

<sup>29</sup> See J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light. Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 170–174; Miron Chernenko, *Krasnaia zvezda, zheltaia Zvezda*, (Vinnitsa: Globus-Press, 2001), 111–116; Iakov Lur'e, "Cherez ternii Kryma k zvezdam Birobidzhan. Dve pereselencheskie utopii v sovetskom agitkino," in *Kino i kapital. Al'manakh Tsentra issledovaniia ekonomicheskoi kul'tury*, eds. Aleksandr A. Pogrebniak and Nina M. Savchenkova, (St. Petersburg: Smolny, 2018), 130–141.

<sup>30</sup> "Biro-Bidjan Film Ends Tomorrow," *Jewish Advocate*, January 15, 1937, 10; Alfred Segel, "Pinya Kopman," *The American Israelite*, May 13, 1937, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Gennadii Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika Stalina. Vlast' i antisemitizm*, (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 2001), 119–121.

February, and then in May 1937. The authorities also refused to authorize a delegation of five cultural luminaries – Moyshe Litvakov, editor of the Moscow Yiddish daily *Der emes* (Truth), Solomon Mikhoels, director of the Moscow State Yiddish Theater, and the writers David Bergelson, Itsik Fefer, and Izi Kharik – to take part in the World Yiddish Cultural Congress.<sup>32</sup> Litvakov and Kharik would be executed in late 1937; the remaining three members of the group would be murdered in the final years of Stalin’s rule.

Communists had to come up with an explanation for Soviet non-participation. Moyshe Katz, an American communist journalist, emphasized the fact that the congress had not been initiated by the Soviets, which was, he argued, understandable: defending Yiddish culture had no resonance in the Soviet Union, where the state supported Yiddish institutions anyway. At the same time, Katz’s comments included a carefully worded reproach against the Soviets’ decision to keep away from the Paris congress and from Yiddish cultural life outside their country overall.<sup>33</sup> Katz appears to have been prescient: his article came out in June 1937, whereas the Organizational Bureau of the Soviet Communist Party’s Central Committee made the decision not to allow the Soviet delegation to attend the congress in Paris was on September 7, 1937.<sup>34</sup>

Nonetheless, communists became key figures in setting up the congress. The main hands-on organizer of the congress was Chaim Sloves, a Bialystok-born Yiddish communist litterateur. In 1920, he left Poland together with the retreating Red Army, but later came back and endured four years of imprisonment for his participation in the communist movement as the secretary of the Jewish section of the Polish Komsomol (Young Communist League). In 1926, he emigrated to France and in 1935 defended his doctoral dissertation at the Sorbonne. By that time, he had been a member of the French Communist Party for six years, active in its Yiddish sub-section.<sup>35</sup> Sloves belonged to the multitudinous group of Jewish

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<sup>32</sup> Gennady Estraiikh, “Yiddish Language Conference Aborted,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 25/2 (1995): 91–96; Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika Stalina*, 134–135.

<sup>33</sup> Moyshe Katz, “Far dem alveltlekhn yidishn kultur-kongres,” *Der hamer*, 10/6 (1937): 41.

<sup>34</sup> Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika Stalina*, 134–135.

<sup>35</sup> Annette Aronowicz, “Joy to the Goy and Happiness to the Jew. Communist and Jewish Aspirations in a Postwar *Purimshpil*,” in *Inventing the Modern Yiddish Stage. Essays in Drama*,

intellectuals who mourned the remapping of Eastern and Central Europe in the late 1910s and early 1920s and the disintegration, which it entailed, of the Old Country, *di alte heyim*, the historical habitat of Yiddish and Yiddish culture. With its international character and its unprecedented support of Yiddish culture, communism, centered in the Old Country, appealed to Sloves and others who held similar views, giving them a hope of realizing their Jewish national and cultural aspirations.

Enthusiastic support for the congress came from ardent Yiddishists, who thought of Yiddish and Yiddish culture as the principal elements in preserving and fostering the modern Jewish nation. In their view, the Jewish nation could survive and thrive only as a continuation of the centuries-long Ashkenazic tradition – the same tradition, which Zionist ideologists tended to discard as the product of a deviant period in Jewish history. By contrast, Yiddishists typically dreamt of a diasporic Yiddishland, with linguistically and culturally interlinked communities spread over the world.

Literature was seen as the main constituent of the nation-defining culture. In the 1920s, a group of literati, some of them from the Kultur-Lige, mounted a sustained and ultimately successful effort to achieve recognition for the Yiddish PEN Club. This became possible when they overcame the limitation spelled out by the International PEN Club's constitution, which originally permitted the admission of only one group from any one country. The international organization eventually admitted the Vilna-headquartered Yiddish club with chapters in Poland and America. (The Soviet Union and communist writers elsewhere refused to join the association of 'bourgeois writers'). Many in the Yiddish literary community saw their connection to the PEN Club as a way to ensure the worldwide unity of Yiddish letters. Meisel, a veteran of Kiev's Kultur-Lige and then editor of the highbrow Warsaw weekly *Literarische bleter* (Literary Pages), in his memoirs convincingly claimed to have played a key role in the Yiddish PEN Club's establishment and in convening the Paris congress later.<sup>36</sup>

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*Performance, and Show Business*, eds. Joel Berkowitz and Barbara Henry, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 276.

<sup>36</sup> Meisel, *Geven amol a lebn*, 278–290.

In his account of the International PEN Club's 1936 congress, the Argentinian Yiddish writer Jacob Botoshansky noted that the Hebrew poet Shaul Tchernichovsky represented Palestine, whereas the American author of Yiddish verse H. Leivick came as a poet of 'Yiddishland,'<sup>37</sup> thus emphasizing the parochial character of Hebrew literature in comparison with the Yiddish. Leivick, Botoshansky, Meisel, and many others saw the congress in Paris as a chance to find an organizational framework for the further consolidation of cultural bodies and individuals into a virtual Yiddishland. This was a new form of the idea, germinated in the 1910s, that Yiddish literature and culture should be able to shape a surrogate territory for itself. In the words of Boruch Rivkin, an American Yiddish literary critic:

For a nation that has no land, an artificially created territory supplants an actual one. Literature has to forge an alliance among people, classes, and events, as if the nation lived within clearly defined borders a life absolutely sovereign in all its societal aspects.<sup>38</sup>

### **The Boycott**

The congress had a different purpose for communist ideologues. To them, Yiddish cultural territory was to serve as a conduit for post-1935 Popular Front policy, backed by the Moscow-headquartered Communist International.<sup>39</sup> Even so, they sought to downplay their own role. For Sloves and most other communist organizers of the congress it was of the utmost importance to gain the support of Chaim Zhitlovsky, a widely recognized non-communist authority among Yiddishists.<sup>40</sup> Significantly, his sympathies turned increasingly towards Moscow.

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<sup>37</sup> Jacob Botoshansky, "Der 14-ter PEN-kongres in Buenos-Ayres," *Literarische bleter*, October 18, 1936, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Boruch Rivkin, *Grunt-tendentsn fun der yidisher literatur in Amerike*, (New York: IKUF, 1948), 29.

<sup>39</sup> Matthew Hoffman, "The Red Divide. The Conflict between Communists and their Opponents in the American Yiddish Press," *American Jewish History* 96/1 (2010): 26.

<sup>40</sup> Matthew Hoffman, "From Czernowitz to Paris. The International Yiddish Culture Congress of 1937," in *Czernowitz at 100*, eds. Weiser and Fogel, 153.

On March 12, 1930, over two thousand people assembled in Beethoven Hall, Manhattan, to see and listen to two formidable debaters: Raphael Abramovitch, a bitter critic of Bolshevism, and Chaim Zhitlovsky, who found some elements of the Soviet system appealing. Zhitlovsky justified the revolutionary violence (capitalism is a cancer which could be treated only by surgical procedure) and valorized the Soviet approach, whereas Abramovitch rejected this stand as misinformed and utopian.<sup>41</sup> Abramovitch was a political journalist for the New York rightwing socialist daily *Forverts* (Forward), whose editorial described Zhitlovsky's involvement in the Parisian congress as "sour cream to 'whiten' the communist borscht" of the congress. It emphasized that communists would always remain communist, with or without the Popular Front. However, "scratch a communist and you will find a terrorist beneath the surface."<sup>42</sup>

The communist taint of the congress led to a boycott by such important bodies as the *Forverts*, the highest-circulating Yiddish newspaper, and its sister organization Arbeter-Ring, YIVO, and the Central Yiddish School Organization of Poland. The reasons for keeping a distance from the Paris forum were not the same for all. For organizations based in Poland, participation in the communist-tinted congress could lead to considerable legal difficulties. The *Forverts*, by contrast, boycotted the event primarily because it saw it as a channel for Soviet and other communist influence. On August 13, 1937, the newspaper published a statement signed by 26 writers and journalists, many of them contributors to the *Forverts*. Thus, the poet and essayist Jacob Glatstein, who wrote for the conservative daily *Morgn-Zhurnal* (Morning Journal), affixed his signature next to the *Forverts* writers'. All criticized the plan to convene the congress and listed various communist wrongdoings, including the glorification of Arab violence in Palestine.<sup>43</sup>

At the same time, the *Forverts* boycott reflected the paper's general opposition to Yiddishism. The editor, Abraham Cahan, a towering – admired by some and

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<sup>41</sup> Harry Lang, "Di debate vegn Rusland tsvishn R. Abramovitsh un dr. Zhitlovski," *Forverts*, March 18, 1930, 3; Raphael Abramovitch, "Der umgliklekher yor in der geshikhte fun di hayntike doyres," *Forverts*, March 27, 1949, section 2, 3.

<sup>42</sup> "Vegn dem kultur-kongres," *Forverts*, August 20, 1937, 4.

<sup>43</sup> "Derklerung vegn dem kultur-kongres," *Forverts*, August 13, 1937, 2, 5.

hated by others – figure in American Jewish life, never tried to conceal his distaste for Yiddishists. The newspaper’s satirist Yakov Adler, writing under the pseudonyms B. Kovner and Khoyzkl Eynikl, would make fun of Yiddishism and Yiddishists both.<sup>44</sup> In 1920, Cahan characterized the movement promoting Yiddish schools in the United States as a form of raw nationalism, or chauvinism.<sup>45</sup> In late 1922, an editorial comment informed readers that the newspaper opposed Yiddishists on almost every count, including their endeavors to purify the lexicon and make it more sophisticated.<sup>46</sup> A decade later, Cahan characterized Yiddish schooling as ideological “madness” purveyed by a clique of well-organized activists and teachers.<sup>47</sup>

The Paris congress was also boycotted by people who had little or nothing to do with the *Forverts*. For instance, the literary critic Shmuel Niger, a perennial detractor of Cahan’s cultural policy, initially supported the idea of an international gathering, but then changed his attitude and decided to bypass the congress, deeming it pointless.<sup>48</sup> Aron Glants-Leyeles, a Yiddish poet and essayist, also withdrew his initial support of the congress, explaining that he did not want to participate in an event that would provide grist for the mill of Stalinism. In particular, he did not want to be part of an American delegation that included communists, most notably Moyshe Olgin, editor of the New York Yiddish daily *Morgn-Frayhayt* (Morning Freedom), which tirelessly eulogized Stalin, despite accounts of the historically unprecedented scale of repressions unleashed in the Soviet Union.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See, e.g., Khoyzkl Eynikl, “Der ‘yidishist’,” *Forverts*, June 6, 1920, 5; B. Kovner, “Mame-loshn,” *Forverts*, July 13, 1920, 3; Id., “Ikh un der ‘yidishist’,” *Forverts*, April 9, 1922, 5.

<sup>45</sup> Abraham Cahan, “Natsionalizm un shovinizm,” *Forverts*, July 10, 1920, 8.

<sup>46</sup> “Notitsn fun der ‘Forverts’ redaktsye: naye kreftn,” *Forverts*, December 6, 1922, 4.

<sup>47</sup> Abraham Cahan, “Der fundament un di gebayde,” *Forverts*, April 18, 1931, 4–5; Gennady Estraiikh, *Transatlantic Russian Jewishness. Ideological Voyages of the Yiddish Daily Forverts in the First Half of the Twentieth Century*, (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020), 93–118.

<sup>48</sup> Shmuel Niger, “A yidishe kultur-kongres – far vemen?,” *Yidish. Peryodishe shrift fun mitl-mayrev rayon* 6, (November, 1936): 6.

<sup>49</sup> Aron [Glants-]Leyeles, “Favos ikh vel nisht geyn tsu der amerikaner konferents far a yidishn kultur-kongres,” *In zikh*, June 1937, 175–180.

Glants-Leyeles's withdrawal was likely a significant factor in the attempt which the poet H. Leivick and the prose writer Joseph Opatoshu made to postpone the congress. The Glantses, Leivicks, and Opatoshus were very close friends, "more so than family."<sup>50</sup> On August 4, 1937, Leivick and Opatoshu sent an alarming letter to Sloves. Staunch supporters of the congress, they did not, however, belong to the communist movement. Leivick, a fellow traveler rather than a card-carrying party member, left the movement in 1929, but did not become a sharp critic of the Soviet regime, whereas Opatoshu remained a sympathetic observer of Soviet cultural life.<sup>51</sup> Seriously concerned about the spread of the boycott plan, both American men of letters suggested that organizers delay the congress for six months; it might otherwise become a meeting of a single ideological *vinkl*(corner), or clique. The writers did not consider it necessary to have the congress coincide with the World's Fair, which, they argued, had nothing to do with the congress focus or objectives.<sup>52</sup>

Sloves found the letter thoroughly disturbing. Leivick and Opatoshu were literary heavyweights and their participation in the congress was paramount to the organizers. Leivick's play *The Golem* was part of the repertoire of the Tel Aviv Habima theater, invited to perform at the Paris World's Fair.<sup>53</sup> In 1926, Opatoshu's novella "The Romance of a Horse Thief," translated by Zev (Lupus) Blumenfeld, appeared, serialized, in *L'Humanité*, a French communist daily.<sup>54</sup> His 16-volume *Gezamlte verk* (Collected Works) were printed by the prestigious

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<sup>50</sup> Dan Opatoshu, "In New York *Velder*. Yosef/Joseph Opatoshu – Constructing a Multinational, 20<sup>th</sup> Century, (very) Modern Yiddish Identity," in *Joseph Opatoshu. A Yiddish Writer between Europe and America*, eds. Sabine Koller, Gennady Estraiikh and Mikhail Krutiko, (Oxford: Legenda, 2013), 24.

<sup>51</sup> For more, see Gennady Estraiikh, "Soviet Dreams of a Cultural Exile," in *Joseph Opatoshu*, eds. Koller, Estraiikh and Krutikov, 43–44.

<sup>52</sup> Leivick and Opatoshu Letter on Culture Congress, 1937-08-04. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Martin P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University. International Workers Order (IWO) Records, 1915–2002 (KCLo5276), box 53, folder 5 (<https://digital.library.cornell.edu/catalog/ss:19043860>).

<sup>53</sup> "Habimah to Play at Paris Exposition," *The Sentinel*, July 15, 1937, 13.

<sup>54</sup> "Paris Paper 'L'Humanite' Publishes Yiddish Novel," *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, October 20, 1926, 1.



publishing house of B. Kletskin in Vilna. In addition, Leivick's and Opatoshu's journalism and lectures made the two writers' opinions widely known.

In his reply, dated August 18, Sloves called both writers "spiritual guides" and agreed that many would shun the congress. However, he contended, no one could vouch that a six-month delay would improve the situation. Sloves stressed that the congress itself, not the timing, was at stake. In addition, it was simply too late to call a sudden halt to the process which had been set in motion to enable the congress to take place. As for holding the congress in conjunction with the World's Fair, Sloves explained that this was instrumental for delegates coming from 'semi-fascist' countries. They would be more easily able to obtain passports if their travel could be ostensibly connected to the exposition. Sloves squarely disagreed that the congress would appeal to only one 'corner' of the intellectual community. Rather, he argued, only one corner (he clearly meant anti-Soviet socialists) would not be represented, whereas in Poland the leftist Poalei Zion, the Folkspartey (Jewish People's Party), and the Territorialists had made known their support. Significantly, the congress was meant to reach out for unity on cultural programs rather than to find solutions to political issues.<sup>55</sup>

It would appear that Leivick and Opatoshu found Sloves's arguments persuasive. In addition, other American congress enthusiasts disagreed with the suggestion to postpone the event.<sup>56</sup> Within a few weeks, both writers embarked a ship for Paris, sailing 'from Yiddishland to Yiddishland.' The American delegation was the second-largest in attendance, surpassed only by the French.

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<sup>55</sup> Response to Leivick and Opatoshu Letter on Culture Congress, 1937-08-18. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Martin P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University. International Workers Order (IWO) Records, 1915-2002 (KCLo5276), box 53, folder 5 (<https://digital.library.cornell.edu/catalog/ss:19043861>). For the participation of the Left Poalei Zion, see Samuel D. Kassow, "The Left Poalei Zion in Inter-War Poland," in *Yiddish and the Left*, eds. Estraikh and Krutikov, 117-118.

<sup>56</sup> Sima Beeri, "Language in Its Place. Yiddish as Seen through the Historical Prism of *Literarische Bleter* 1924-1939," PhD Thesis, (London: University College, 2013), 239-240.

## A Phantasm of Yiddishland

The congress opened on Friday, September 17, at Wagram Hall before a crowd of some 4,000 attendees. 104 delegates, representing 677 organizations and institutions, came from 23 countries: Austria (2 delegates), Argentina (jointly with Uruguay – 1), Belgium (6), Brazil (1), Britain (3), Canada (2), Cuba (1), Czechoslovakia (2), Denmark (1), Estonia (6), France (29, including 8 members of the organizational committee), Holland (1), Italy (1), Latvia (4), Lithuania (8), Mexico (1), Palestine (1), Poland (5), Switzerland (1), Romania (8), South Africa (1), United States (11), and Uruguay. Workers and artisans were the most numerous (34) among the delegates, followed by writers (17), political and social activists (11), journalists and publicists (10), teachers (8), artists (8), lawyers (3), and office workers (2). A small number represented other occupations: a publisher, an engineer, a physician, a dentist, a theater director, a chorus conductor, and a student.<sup>57</sup>

Chaim Zhitlowsky could not make the transatlantic journey because of the state of his health, but he was widely seen as the congress's spiritual leader, a living link with the legendary 1908 Czernowitz conference. His paper, read by the American poet Zishe Weinper, was meant to set the tone of the forum. However, the real tone-setter was Leivick. Joseph Chernikhov, the leader of Vilna's Territorialists, wrote a fortnight after the congress's opening: "Since [I. L.] Peretz's departure from this life ... Yiddish literature had been left without an ethically central figure, without a pathfinder. In Wagram Hall, where we all had assembled, ... Leivick put on this crown,"<sup>58</sup> the crown of "conscience of Yiddish literature."<sup>59</sup>

In his speech, the 49-year-old poet – a revolutionary hero hardened in Siberia's tsarist jails and rapturously welcomed in the Soviet Union in 1925 – pointed to a symbolically empty chair: "It'll remain empty, reserved for a Soviet

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<sup>57</sup> Nachman Meisel, "Oyfn alveltlekhn yidishn kultur-kongres in Paris," *Literarische bleter*, October 1, 1937, 7.

<sup>58</sup> Joseph Chernikhov, "Kultur un kiem," *Haynt*, October 1, 1937, 9–10.

<sup>59</sup> L. M., "Parizer shtimungen," *Folks-blatt*, October 15, 1937, 5.

representative.”<sup>60</sup> Like many in the audience and among the delegates, Leivick felt offended by the “emptiness.” David Ignatoff, an American novelist, referred to the absence of Soviet representatives as a “dramatic moment of the congress.”<sup>61</sup> The Parisian writer and journalist Wolf Wiewiorka interpreted it as a sign of Soviet distrust.<sup>62</sup> The aching issue of *leydike benklekh* (empty chairs) would be dredged up in Yiddish activist circles as late as the 1960s and beyond.<sup>63</sup>

In his keynote address, delivered on Saturday, Leivick declared his “love for the Soviet Union,” but stressed that this positive attitude would not stop him from criticizing Moscow’s misdeeds,<sup>64</sup> explaining that some of the turns in Soviet cultural politics simply stunned him. For instance, he found it both illogical and indicative that Sholem Aleichem rather than Peretz had been canonized in the Soviet Union as the most important Yiddish writer. Leivick considered Peretz’s writings more revolutionary than Sholem Aleichem’s, but Soviet literary pundits had apparently decided that Peretz was too complex and “too Jewish.”<sup>65</sup>

For all that, ‘unity’ was a keyword throughout the gathering, even though, hugely disappointingly, Léon Blum’s socialist government, supported by communists, had fallen shortly before the congress opened, in June 1937.<sup>66</sup> Even so, Sloves underlined that “We have assembled here ... under the sign of unity,” unity in the struggle of Yiddish culture against all enemies.<sup>67</sup> Many of the delegates were apparently ready to recognize the leading role of the communists. In Ignatoff’s words:

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<sup>60</sup> *Ershter alveltekher yidisher kultur-kongres*, (Paris and New York: IKUF, 1937), 49. For Leivick’s Soviet trip, see Gennady Estraikh, *Evreiskaia literaturnaia zhizn’ Moskvyy, 1917–1991*, (St. Petersburg: European University Publishing Press, 2015), 103–105.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>63</sup> Aron Vergelis, *Rayzes*, (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1976), 48.

<sup>64</sup> *Ershter alveltekher yidisher kultur-kongres*, 90.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 99–100; cf. Gennady Estraikh, “Soviet Sholem Aleichem,” in *Translating Sholem Aleichem. History, Politics and Art*, eds. by Gennady Estraikh et al., (Oxford, Legenda: 2013), 62–82.

<sup>66</sup> Jonathan Boyarin, *Polish Jews in Paris. The Ethnography of Memory*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 48.

<sup>67</sup> *Ershter alveltekher yidisher kultur-kongres*, 15.

... nowadays, Yiddish and Yiddish culture remain an active political factor only thanks to communist groupings. This has to do with more than the newspapers, journals and books published by them. Other groupings and parties also have such publications. What is important is that they recognize the political potential and significance of Yiddish and Yiddish culture.<sup>68</sup>

Yiddishland was another keyword. Zhitlowsky wrote:

The Czernowitz conference [in August 1908] aimed to create such a worldwide ‘spiritual-national home,’ which would provide an environment for the cultural life of all classes and strata of the Jewish people scattered all over the world; a spiritual-national territory – now called ‘Yiddishland’ – whose atmosphere would be the wholesome air of the people’s language and where each breath and each pronounced word would sustain the [Yiddish-speaking] people as a nation.<sup>69</sup>

Daniel Charney felt that the time had come to establish a “central address for the so-called Yiddishland.”<sup>70</sup> Opatoshu theorized that Ashkenaz, the areas of Europe for many centuries populated by Yiddish-speaking Jews, had now become an ideological rather than a geographic notion, resurfacing as Yiddishland in contemporary cultural life.<sup>71</sup> Opatoshu supported Leivick’s ideas of cooperation with Hebrew writers and of avoiding excessive ideologization insofar as nationalism could lead to chauvinism, while socialist leanings could give authentic writing a false edge.<sup>72</sup>

The idea of Yiddishland was not acceptable from the point of view of communist ideologists. The absence of a Soviet delegation in Paris makes this clear. Top party

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>72</sup> M. Krimski, “Der ziveg hebreish-yidish,” *Der moment*, October 3, 1937, 6.

functionaries had agreed with some experts' conclusion that Soviet representatives did not belong at a gathering whose key ideologist, Chaim Zhitlovsky, advanced the idea of Yiddishland, a symbolic spiritual homeland, which would unite all Yiddish-speaking Jews, independent of class and state borders, and help them to protect themselves both from assimilation and from Zionism.<sup>73</sup> While western communist delegates tactically did not criticize Zhitlovsky or openly reject the idea of Yiddishland, Olgin stressed that one could draw a parallel between culture and fatherland only if both notions were free of "metaphysical content." In reality, he argued, both culture and fatherland would be cherished and be worthy of sacrificing for only if they truly belonged to the people.<sup>74</sup>

From the vantage point of the delegates, Paris was the only logical center for Yiddishland and its World Yiddish Cultural Association (IKUF or YIKUF) created after the congress. However, the French capital was not destined to become the capital of Yiddish intellectual life. Like Berlin before it, it would prove a temporary – until the outbreak of World War II – tryst site for representatives of the real centers of Yiddishland. Influential Yiddish writers' and theoreticians' groups, still torn by ideological strife rather than united in any Yiddishland, remained concentrated in America, Poland, and the Soviet Union.

Leivick and Opatoshu were to be proven right: the Paris congress left a significant mark on only one *vinkl*, or corner, of Jewish cultural life, namely, on the loosely linked branches of IKUF, which became vibrantly active in the USA, Argentina, and Uruguay, but remained insulated due to their transparent or suspected pro-Sovietism. Ironically, this was love unrequited. The fate of the IKUF organization formed in 1944 in Romania and dissolved in the Soviet satellite state in 1953 is a representative instance of the overall pattern.<sup>75</sup> The New York-based IKUF, the most vigorous of the Paris congress's offspring, continued to be ostracized in other 'corners' of Yiddish intellectual-cum-political community. As late as August 1976, at the Jerusalem conference on Yiddish attended by some 200 delegates from 14

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<sup>73</sup> Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika Stalina*, 134–135.

<sup>74</sup> Moyshe Olgin, "Far a fareyniktn yidishn kultur-front," *Der hamer* 12 (1937): 29–30.

<sup>75</sup> Corina Petrescu, "A Jewish State Theater in the People's Republic of Romania? Notes on a Transitional Becoming (1944–1953)," *New Europe College Yearbook* 6 (2005): 283–319.

countries, IKUF and its affiliated organizations, by then ‘constructively critical’ of Soviet policies, were excluded. In a dramatic development, Itche Goldberg, who had replaced Nachman Meisel as editor of the journal *Yidishe kultur* (Yiddish Culture), a leading American Yiddish literary periodical of the time, spent the duration of the conference at a Tel Aviv hotel awaiting an invitation which never came. Old political sins had not been forgiven.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Jacob Sonntag, “Jerusalem Conference on Yiddish,” *Jewish Quarterly* 24/3 (1976): 18.