

How, When, and Why Did Yiddish Become a Modern Culture?

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Abstract

*The paper seeks to expand the area of modern Yiddish culture beyond literary fiction. It explores the rise of modern Yiddish theatre, press, poetry, and political literature in Imperial Russia in the 1880s. The essay argues that these forms of Yiddish cultural expression first became significant and widespread phenomena in the 1880s. It also highlights the emergence of a diverse Yiddish readership and audience, with different levels of Jewish and European cultural background, in order to counter the common dichotomy that Yiddish was for the masses, whereas Hebrew and Russian were used by the Jewish elites. Finally, the article places the rise of Modern Yiddish culture within the context of major social and economic transformations in East European Jewry: urbanization, population growth, and downward economic mobility. Overall, the article refines and revises certain conclusions offered in the author's book *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture* (2005).*

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In this paper, I would like to examine the infancy of modern Yiddish culture in Eastern Europe, in the second half of the nineteenth century, and revisit from a new perspective some topics that I dealt with more than a decade ago in my book *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture*.¹

Most scholars study the advances made by Yiddish literature and culture in the 20th century – great works of prose and poetry, drama and theatre, journalism and scholarship.² We tend to forget that the appearance of modern Yiddish culture was totally unanticipated and even inconceivable to Jewish intellectuals in the middle of the nineteenth century. The very venture of creating modern culture in Yiddish was then considered counterintuitive. For most Jews in the Russian Empire, modern education and culture were something one acquired in Russian, or in German. And modern Jewish writing was something done in Hebrew. To modernizing Jews of the mid-nineteenth century, Yiddish symbolized the old world they were rebelling against – Jewish social isolation, religious superstition, and cultural backwardness. Yiddish was the shtetl, the *kheyder*, the Hasidic *shtibl*. It was the opposite of modernity.

While Hebrew was likewise the language of despised religious texts – such as Midrash, Talmudic commentaries, and Kabbalistic literature – it was for the adherents of the Haskalah first and foremost the language of the Bible, and secondarily of Maimonides and Jewish rationalistic philosophy, texts they adored. It was easy for the Maskilim to conceive of the secularization and modernization of Hebrew as a literary language. Not so Yiddish. The words of Judah Leib Gordon (1830–1892), a central Haskalah poet and activist, in a letter to the young Sholem Aleichem, were quite typical for intellectuals of Gordon's generation:

¹ David E. Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

² Dan Miron's pioneering study *A Traveler Disguised. The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century*, (New York: Schocken, 1973), did not generate a school of scholarship on nineteenth century Yiddish literature and culture. Instead the field (including Miron himself) has focused on the 20th century. See the annual surveys of Yiddish studies in English published by the blog *In geveb*, e.g.: <https://ingeveb.org/blog/the-latest-in-yiddish-studies-in-english-2018>.

You ask for my opinion about Jargon. [...] I always considered the existence of this dialect in the mouth of our people to be the saddest phenomenon in all its historical existence. [...] I considered it the duty of every educated Jew to strive that it [Jargon, DEF] gradually be obliterated and disappear from our midst. One can tolerate it as a necessary evil [...], but one must not strive for its consolidation and flourishing. [...] Honestly, I'm surprised by you. You write well in Russian, and you have wonderful command of our literary (Hebrew) language. How can you devote yourself to *culture* in Jargon? [...] It would be sinful if you raised your children in this language. It would be like forcing them to promenade down Nevsky Prospect wearing a *talis koton* and worn out shoes.³

And yet, modern Yiddish culture did indeed emerge. The questions therefore are how, when and why.

Defining a Modern Culture

I'd like to begin by tentatively defining my terms. By a modern culture, I mean, first of all, a body of writing, and of artistic and other expression, that is basically secular in its assumptions and orientation. Literature that is homiletical, basing its ideas on Biblical verses or Talmudic passages, is not modern literature. There must be other values – aesthetic, social, political, philosophic – beyond the religious tradition. In a modern culture, secularity is part of the deep structure, an underlying assumption. In the sphere of mentality: modern Yiddish journalists did not explain events as acts of God, of providence. Traditionalists before the Haskalah routinely did so. Natural causation was taken for granted. And in the sphere of action: Yiddish theatre was performed in Odessa, Warsaw, or New York on Friday night and on a Saturday matinee, that is on Shabbat, when the purchase

³ Letter dated June 4, 1888, in Alexander Frenkel, "Perepiska sholom aleikhema s ieguda leibom gordonom," *Judaic-Slavic Journal* 1 (2018), 164; paraphrased by Michael Stanislawski, *For Whom Do I Toil? Judah Leib Gordon and the Crisis of Russian Jewry*, (New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 225. A *talis koton* [talit katan] is a fringed garment worn by Orthodox Jewish men in fulfillment of the commandment in Numbers 15: 38–41.

of tickets and playing of musical instruments were forbidden by rabbinic law. Such theatre performances in the big cities were not demonstrative anti-religious acts, just a natural part of life.

There were, of course, various attempts to combine secularity with tradition or faith, and the impact of the religious tradition on secular Yiddish culture was quite pronounced. But the appropriation of religious themes was self-conscious, voluntary, and selective.

Second, in order to call a body of creativity a modern culture, there must be more than just belletristic literature. European cultures consist not only of stories and novels, but of newspapers, magazines, music, theatre, political and social thought, a modern educational system, scholarship, and public organizations for the advancement of culture. A language whose cultural output consists exclusively of belletristic fiction, is not a culture in the full sense of the word. The overwhelming predominance of a single mode of expression (fiction) is itself a sign of weakness. It indicates that people are satisfying their other modern cultural needs or interests in other languages. That was indeed the state of Yiddish, until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. There was fiction, but nothing else.

It may well be that artistic literature is the aspect of culture that endows it with its greatest prestige and fame. The great French or Russian writers put their cultures “on the map.” But belle lettres is only the tip of the iceberg. It cannot thrive without a support system of other outlets – schools, periodicals, public gatherings.

Finally, modern cultures consist not only of authors, but also of readers and audiences. A vibrant modern culture has a numerically significant audience that is diverse, with different levels of education and refinement, and with different areas of interest. An undifferentiated “mass” of readers, all of whom who have negligible educational baggage beyond their functional literacy, cannot be the social basis for a modern culture.⁴

⁴ A recent study that stresses these three points, secularity, diverse modes of expression, and diversified audience is Jeffrey Veidlinger, *Jewish Public Culture in Late Imperial Russia*,

When we apply these three criteria to Yiddish culture – secularity, diverse modes of expression, and a sizeable, diversified audience – all signs point to the emergence of such a culture in the last quarter of the 19th century, around the time of Judah Leib Gordon’s letter to Sholem Aleichem.

The Development of Modern Jewish Culture in Russia

In Russia, the emergence of modern Yiddish culture needs to be viewed in the context of the development of modern *Jewish* culture in three languages – Hebrew, Russian and Yiddish, in that chronological order.

Between the 1830s and 1850s, works of modern Jewish culture were produced overwhelmingly in Hebrew. Maskilim published modern poetry, novels, autobiographies, philological and historical scholarship, popular science – predominantly in Hebrew. By the 1860s, there were four weekly Hebrew newspapers serving the Russian Jewish communities – *Ha-Melitz* in Odessa, *Ha-Tzefirah* in Warsaw, *Ha-Karmel* in Vilna, and *Ha-Magid*, published in East Prussia, for a readership in the Russian Empire – all with Maskilic perspectives.

The social base of this early modern Hebrew culture, its readership and audience, consisted of three groups: former Talmudists and former Hasidim who rebelled against “darkness,” well-to-do merchants in the Pale of Settlement, and semi-modernized members of the rabbinic class.⁵

From the 1860s through the 1880s, Jewish culture in the Russian language became a significant force, supplementing the Hebrew-language culture. There arose Russian-Jewish novelists (Lev Levanda, Grigory Bogrov), and there were a large number of modern Jewish schools using Russian as their language of instruction

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). It focuses on the years between 1900 and World War I.

⁵ For a study that pays careful attention to the diverse forms of Haskalah creativity including scholarship, See Shmuel Feiner, *Haskalah and History. The Emergence of Modern Jewish Historical Consciousness*, (Oxford: Littman Library, 2002); on the Hebrew press in the nineteenth century, see Menucha Gilboa, *Leksikon ha-’itonut ha-ivrit ba-me’ot ha-shemona esre ve-tesha esre*, (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1992).

(both state-sponsored and under private Jewish auspices). A series of Russian-Jewish weekly newspapers appeared in Odessa and St. Petersburg, culminating with the high-brow monthly journal *Voskhod*, which began publication in 1880. One of its authors was the young Shimon Dubnov.

The social base (readership, audience) of Russian Jewish culture consisted mainly of three groups: Jews who graduated from Russian gymnasia and universities, including professionals (doctors and lawyers); auto-didacts and “externs;” and the Jewish bourgeoisie in cities outside the Pale of Settlement – St. Petersburg, Kiev, Moscow – as well as in new frontier cities such as Odessa.⁶

Yiddish culture was the newest branch. And it really began to take off in terms of the three criteria mentioned above – natural secularity, diversity of media and genres, size and range of audience – in the final quarter of the 19th century.

To demonstrate this point, I’d like to survey Yiddish cultural activity in Russia in the 1880s. From a strictly literary perspective, the 1880s are not a very important period – Abramovitsh (Mendele Moykher-Sforim), the grandfather of Yiddish and Hebrew literature, was inactive in Yiddish during that decade. Sholem Aleichem was just a beginner (he debuted in 1883), and his major masterpieces were still ahead of him. I. L. Peretz, the father of Yiddish literature, debuted in Yiddish in 1889, at the end of the decade. By 1890, he had not yet published a single short story, feuilleton, essay, or drama – the genres for which he later became famous. But from the perspective of cultural history, we can see a lot happening in the 1880s. I would like to focus on four subjects: Yiddish theatre, press, political

⁶ The chronological progression from Hebrew to Russian and Yiddish is documented (albeit unconsciously) in Israel Zinberg, *History of Jewish Literature*, translated and ed. Bernard Martin, (Cincinnati – Ohio – New York: Ktav Publishing House, 12 vols, 1972–1978). Volume 11, “The Haskalah in Russia” deals almost exclusively with Hebrew writing, while volume 12 “The Haskalah at Its Zenith” deals with Hebrew, Russian, and Yiddish writing. On Russian-Jewish culture in the nineteenth century, see *An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature. Two Centuries of Dual Identity in Prose and Poetry*, ed. Maxim D. Shrayer, vol. 1, 1801–1953, (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2007); Brian Horowitz, *Empire Jews. Jewish Nationalism and Acculturation in 19th and Early 20th Century Russia*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Slavica Press, 2009).

pamphlets, and the social recognition of Yiddish literature. Finally, I'd like to offer a broad historical explanation for the burst of Yiddish cultural activity at that time.

A Surge of Theatre

The early 1880s are marked by the explosion of Yiddish performance culture in Russia. In the summer of 1879, Avrom Goldfaden, the father of modern Yiddish theatre, moved his theatre company from the backwater of Romania to the metropolis of Odessa, the city with the largest Jewish population in the Pale of Settlement. (in 1897, there were 124, 511 Jews in Odessa, 30% of the city's total population.) Goldfaden's theatre took Odessa by storm. Within a few weeks, his company's performances moved from the hall of the craftsmen's club to the Marien Theatre, which held 1,500 seats. In the early 1880s, the Marien theatre presented Russian shows four nights per week, and Yiddish shows three nights per week. Soon there were two or three competing Yiddish companies in Odessa, and ushers sold program booklets with the biographies of the various actors for five kopecks. There was, in other words, a bona fide theatre culture.⁷

Yiddish theatre was secularity incarnate. It was entertainment for entertainment's sake, a leisure activity to pass time pleurably. The mingling of men and women in the audience and on the stage was taken for granted, its plots included love stories, and its main modes of expression were humor and satire.

Of course, there had been some Yiddish performance culture before the advent of theatre – mainly musical programs performed in wine cellars. But the scale and social significance of what happened in Odessa beginning in 1879 was unprecedented. The main antecedent that paved the way to Goldfaden's smash success was the fact that Jews had frequented Russian theatre in Odessa and other

⁷ The literature on Goldfaden is vast. For a broad overview, see Zalmen Zylbertsvayg, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, vol. 1 (New York, Hebrew Actors' Union of America, 1931), 275–376. For an in-depth new treatment, see Alyssa Quint, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Theatre*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2019). Recent studies of Goldfaden's comedies and operetta are contained in *Yiddish Theatre. New Approaches*, ed. Joel Berkowitz, (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2003).

cities for years beforehand. One memoirist, Berish Vaynshteyn, was struck by the diversity of Goldfaden's audience. "In those years, people sang Goldfaden's songs in all Jewish homes, including among the 'intelligentsia'. Even gymnasium-students, who spoke only Russian and who had previously attended only Russian theatre, suddenly became lovers of Yiddish theatre."⁸

Between 1880 and 1882, Goldfaden's company toured various cities inside and beyond the Pale of Settlement. In 1880 it was in the south: in Kharkov, Kherson, Poltava, Rostov. Beginning in 1881, when pogroms broke out in Ukraine, the company spent its time in the north, mainly in Minsk and St. Petersburg. What is noteworthy about this tour is that Goldfaden performed only in major cities, not in towns (shtetlekh), i.e. locales with less than 10,000 inhabitants. I do not think this was mainly because of financial or organizational reasons. Rather, it had to do with the cultural gap between the city and shtetl in the 1880s. City dwellers were more secularized in their life-style, while the shtetlekh were bastions of traditionalism. City dwellers were accustomed to theater, and eager for theatre. Shtetl dwellers were not, or not yet, in the 1880s.

The greatest surprise of Goldfaden's tour was his success in the capital city, in St. Petersburg. Petersburg was outside the Pale of Settlement, and Jews constituted a very small minority of its massive population (less than 2% of its 1 million inhabitants in 1890). The St. Petersburg community was socio-economically and culturally atypical: Its Jews were literate in Russian, and partook of Russian culture. But Goldfaden succeeded among them as well. His performances attracted university graduates, professionals, and members of the bourgeoisie. In order to do so, Goldfaden altered his repertoire and shifted from slapstick satire and comedy to historical operettas (from "The Two Kuni-Lemels" to "Bar Kokhba").⁹ St. Petersburg Jews had higher cultural expectations.

⁸ Berish Vaynshteyn "Di ershte yorn fun yidishn teater in odes un in nyu york," *Arkhib far der geshikhte fun yidishn teater un drame*, vol. 1, ed. Jacob Shatzky, (Vilna–New York: YIVO, 1930), 243–254, quote from page 248.

⁹ Uri Finkel and Nokhem Oyslender, *A Goldfaden. Materyaln far a biografye*, (Minsk, 1926), 65–69.

While the Russian-Jewish press, both in Odessa and St. Petersburg, was quite negative in its evaluation of Goldfaden's plays, the reviews in the general, non-Jewish, Russian newspapers (*Odesskii Vestnik*, and *Novosti*) were favorable, if slightly condescending. The St. Petersburg paper *Novosti* wrote in 1881:

We can only welcome the appearance of such performances. ... From an artistic perspective, the plays have no significance for us. But that criteria is entirely inaccurate. The Jews cannot stage good theatre all at once. Theatre is something new for them, and Goldfaden needed to begin ab novo.... Everything will be accomplished with time and work...¹⁰

This theatrical explosion was short lived. In April 1883, the Tsarist Ministry of Interior issued a ban on Yiddish theatre, for reasons still debated by scholars. (Some say that Jewish plutocrats denounced the theatre to the authorities as a harmful impediment to Russification, others say that the authorities were alarmed that plays such as *Bar Kokhba* could serve as revolutionary propaganda.)¹¹ For a few years after the ban, Goldfaden was able to perform to packed audiences in Warsaw, in the nominally autonomous Kingdom of Poland, where the ban was not yet enforced.¹² But in general, after 1883, Yiddish theatre led a difficult existence, operating in a legal grey zone as “German” theatre, hounded by police and censors. Nonetheless, the flourish of those four years (six years, if one includes Warsaw) indicated to all that Yiddish theatre was a cultural institution of tremendous power and social reach.

¹⁰ Finkel-Oyslender, *A Goldfaden*, 67.

¹¹ Y. Riminik, “Redifes kegn yidishn teater in rusland in di 80-er un 90-er yorn”, in *Teater-bukh. zamlung tsum fuftsik yorikn yubiley fun yidishn teater*, (Kiev: Kultur-lige, 1927); Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture*, 25–29. The most recent treatment is John Klier, “Exit, Pursued by a Bear. The Ban on Yiddish Theatre in Imperial Russia,” in *Yiddish Theatre. New Approaches*, ed. Berkowitz, 159–174.

¹² Jacob Shatzky, “Goldfaden in Varshe” *YIVO bleter* 15/4 (May-June, 1940), 265–280.

The Ascent of the Press

At about the same time, there was an important development in the area of the Yiddish periodical press. In October 1881, the authorities issued a permit for the publication of a Yiddish weekly newspaper in St. Petersburg, after nearly a decade during which there was no Yiddish periodical in the Russian Empire. The new weekly, *Yidishes folksblat*, was edited and owned by Alexander Zederbaum, the long-standing editor of the Hebrew weekly *Ha-Melitz*. In the scholarly literature, *Yidishes folksblat* has been overshadowed by its predecessor *Kol mevaser* (1862–1872), which is widely credited as the first modern Yiddish newspaper, and by the similarly named literary almanac, *Yidishe folks-bibliotek*, edited by Sholem Aleichem, which appeared in 1888–1889. As a result, the newspaper is virtually unstudied.¹³

Compared to its predecessor, *Yidishes folksblat* was a giant leap forward in terms of journalistic and literary sophistication. The newspaper's format was based on a European model – a mix of news and opinion, politics, Jewish affairs, business news, popular science, literature and criticism. The paper was divided into sections and featured regular columnists. (By contrast, *Kol mevaser*, relied heavily on non-paid reports sent in by readers in cities and towns of the Pale.) On pages of *Yidishes folksblat*, we encounter, probably for the first time ever in the Yiddish language, such terms as “layt-artikl,” “korespondentsye,” “biografie,” “zhurnalnii un bibliografishe khronik,” “literaturnii kritik,” “felieton.” The Russified forms of some of these words indicate that Zederbaum's cultural model was Russian. But the staff members who put together the international news section also read German newspapers.¹⁴

Politically, the newspaper occupied an ambiguous position: Zederbaum's editorials praised the Tsarist government for its overall wisdom and kindness to Jews. But the paper's news section reported on pogroms, and it published poems

¹³ On *Kol mevaser*, see: Alexander Orbach, *New Voices of Russian Jewry*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980), 95–123, 155–181; on the *Yidishe folks-bibliotek*, see Miron, *A Traveler Disguised*, 27–30.

¹⁴ Zitron, *Di geshikhte fun der yidisher prese fun yor 1863 biz 1889*, (Vilna: Fareyn fun Yidishe literatn un zshurnalistn in Vilne, 1923), 121–123.

lamenting Jewish suffering and the rise of anti-Semitism. Numerous articles paid close, enthusiastic attention to the new Jewish colonies in Palestine and the *hibat tziyon* movement. But Zederbaum himself opposed emigration anywhere (to America or Palestine) as a solution to Jewish problems. It was a delicate balancing act.¹⁵

Even more than its predecessor, *Yidishes folksblat* devoted many pages to literature – short stories, novels in serialization, and poetry. In fact, the paper changed its sub-title in 1884 to “a politish-literarishe tsaytung,” and added a special literary supplement, which printed longer pieces of fiction. Among the authors who debuted on the newspaper’s pages, and published there frequently, were Sholem Aleichem and Mordkhe Spektor. Zederbaum added the supplement because literature, more than news and opinion, was the drawing card for the newspaper’s growing number of subscribers. He was a businessman, not a lover of the arts.

It is on the pages of *Yidishes folksblat* that one witnesses the remarkable linguistic transformation among the Russian-Jewish intellectual elite: established Hebrew and Russian-language authors began to write regularly in Yiddish, and some of them even switched mainly to Yiddish. In the opinion section, the newspaper’s prize catch was Moshe Leib Lilienblum, a central Hebrew Haskalah author who became a leading proto-Zionist during the pogroms of 1881–1882. In the 1880s, Lilienblum was a fully bi-lingual (Hebrew-Yiddish) writer, and published numerous articles calling for a Jewish national revival in the land of Israel on the pages of *Yidishes folksblat*.¹⁶

The surprise convert from Russian to Yiddish on the pages of *Yidishes folksblat* was Shimen Frug, then considered the Jewish national poet in the Russian language, and the unofficial poet laureate of *hibat tziyon*. Frug’s Yiddish debut in Zederbaum’s newspaper in 1887 with mournful national poems, and lyrical nature poetry, added a new dimension, and a sense of gravitas to Yiddish verse. These

¹⁵ Zitron, *Di geshikhte fun der yidisher prese*, 125–127. On Lilienblum, see Michael Stanislawski, *Autobiographical Jews*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 54–102.

¹⁶ Zitron, *Di geshikhte fun der yidisher prese*, 133–136. On Frug see Horowitz, *Empire Jews*, 51–64.

were poems for personal reading, not for singing or public performance, as were the verses by Goldfaden, Zunser, or Mikhl Gordon. The American Yiddish critic N. B. Minkov remarked half a century later:

Frug introduced long accepted features of Russian poetry into Yiddish – sonorousness, flexibility, and rhythm. While these things were obvious and taken for granted in Russian, they were new and refreshing in Yiddish poetry. In Russian he was a rather unoriginal poet, in Yiddish he was the father of modern Yiddish poetry.¹⁷

Frug's poetry is perhaps the best evidence that *Yidishes folksblat* was geared toward a multi-tiered readership, including readers with more refined or developed tastes. It seems that many of the newspaper's readers were likewise readers of Hebrew or Russian. When the paper began publishing Russian novels in translation, Mordkhe Spektor took the editors to task: "Such items cannot have much value for readers of the *Yiddishes folksblat*. Because most of them read novels in the Russian language. *Folksblat* readers are not from the simple folk, but are rather half-educated people."¹⁸

Zederbaum estimated that his Yiddish weekly had 7,000 subscribers, scattered across the Pale of Settlement. While this was enormous leap from the 500–750 subscribers to *Kol mevaser* in the 1860s, it was a far cry from the circulation of 175,000 by the two largest Warsaw Yiddish dailies *Haynt* and *Moment* in 1912, on the eve of World War I. But the relatively modest number of subscribers was deceptive, and for its own time quite impressive: In the 1880s, many subscriptions to *Yidishes folksblat* were shared (that is paid for) by two or three people, and copies of the newspaper passed through many more hands than its co-subscribers. Zederbaum claimed that there were ten readers for every subscription. The Yiddish newspaper was beginning to emerge as a mass phenomenon. And the

¹⁷ N. B. Minkov, *Yidishe klasiker poetrn. Eseyen*, (New York: Farlag Bodn, 1937), 14–15.

¹⁸ Spektor in *Hoyzfraynd* 2 (1889), 174.

number of subscribers to *Yidishes folksblat* surpassed the combined circulation of the Hebrew newspapers in the Empire, an important linguistic tipping point.¹⁹

Political Pamphlets in the Mother Tongue

The 1880s also saw the emergence of Yiddish political pamphlet literature, most of it published by or on behalf of the proto-Zionist movement, Hibat Tziyon. In 1884, Abramovitsh (Mendele Moykher-Sforim) published an adapted Yiddish translation of Leon Pinsker's *Auto-Emancipation*, under the title *A segule tsu di yidische tsores* ["A Remedy to Jewish Woes"], with a print run of 10,000 copies. In all, six Yiddish Palestinophilic booklets were published in the 1880s, all of them in Odessa, the movement's headquarters. Most were purely informative such as "Di Menoyre fun Eretz Yisroel: Statistische Tsifern" ["The Palestine Menorah: Statistical Figures"], which provided details on seven colonies (hence "Menorah"). The most ambitious was Moshe Leib Lilienblum's almanac, *Der yidisher veker*, published in 1887. It consisted of ideological essays, mainly polemics with assimilationists, reportage, poetry and fiction on Eretz Israel.²⁰ The compendium brought together prominent writers and intellectuals, including Sholem Aleichem, Goldfaden, Yehoshua Khona Ravnitsky, Eliakum Zunser, and Avrom Ber Gottlober, all of whom identified with the ideas of Hibat Tziyon.

Yiddish socialist literature was miniscule in the 1880s. According to the Elias Tscherikower's study, "The Beginning of Illegal Literature in Yiddish", the only brochure that was widely distributed was *Fun vos eyner lebt* ["From What One Lives"] a translation from Polish of Jan Mlot's *Kto z czego Zyje*. First published in Yiddish in 1887, it gave a readable primer on Marxism – the exploitation of labor, class conflict, workers' solidarity, and the ideal of socialism, which it defined as the workers owning the means of production. *Fun vos eyner lebt* subsequently

¹⁹ Zitron, *Di geshikhte fun der yidisher prese*, 132; "T sederboym," in Zalmen Rejzin, *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese un filologye*, vol. 3, (Vilna: Kletzkin, 1929), 337–338; <http://web.nli.org.il/sites/JPress/Hebrew/Pages/hmlets.aspx>, Zalmen Rejzen, *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur un prese*, (Warsaw: Tsentral, 1914), 679, 711.

²⁰ Miriam Katchansky, *Hibat Tziyon and Yiddish*, PhD Thesis, (Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2001), 73–113.

became of staple of Yiddish socialist literature, and went through five editions, under various party auspices, between 1900 and 1906.²¹

Needless to say, socialist pamphlets faced special challenges. They needed to be printed illegally, or smuggled into the country from abroad. “Fun vos eyner lebt” is a great early example of the transnational, pan-European character of Yiddish socialist literature – something that became a standard feature in the 1890s and 1900s. The translator, one Shimon Rabinowicz, was a native of Oszmiana (today in Belarus), who spent his school years in Warsaw, where he became involved in socialist and revolutionary politics. He emigrated to Paris in order to avoid arrest, and studied in Geneva. Publication of the pamphlet was funded by Polish and Jewish socialists in Paris, but it was printed in London, where there was a Yiddish socialist newspaper edited by Morris Winchewsky. Rabinowicz, the translator, personally smuggled hundreds of copies of *Fun vos eyner lebt* into Russia, sewing onto them false covers of siddurim, to deceive the border police. He then travelled across the Pale of Settlement and Russian Poland, distributing copies in Kovna, Vilna, Warsaw, Pinsk, Minsk, Bialystok, Mohilev, Odessa and elsewhere. After his grand book-distribution tour, he returned to Paris, and was arrested during his next attempt to enter the Russian Empire with illegal literature.²²

But generally speaking, Russian Jewish socialists showed no interest in using Yiddish for political propaganda in the 1880s. They believed that literacy in Russian was a pre-condition for becoming class-conscious, and taught Jewish workers Russian, and the basics of socialism, in Russian, to small “workers’ circles”. The shift to Yiddish took place in the 1890s, in the pre-Bund years and early Bund. So the socialists were relative latecomers to the rise of Yiddish. In that respect, they took a leaf out of “bourgeois culture,” and were not pioneers.²³

²¹ Elias Tscherikower, “Di onheybn fun der umlegaler literatur literatur af yidish,” *Historishe shriftn fun yivo*, 3. *Di yidische sotsialistishe bavegung biz di grindung fun bund*, (Vilna/Paris: YIVO, 1939): 577–603.

²² Sh. Rabinowicz, “Mit fuftsik yor tsurik,” *Historishe shriftn* 3 (1939): 314–347.

²³ On the circles and Russian, see Ezra Mendelsohn, *Class Struggle in the Pale*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

The proto-Zionist and socialist pamphlets of the 1880s were the first sprouts of a genre of Yiddish writing that would flourish in later decades. Their appearance indicated that there was a Yiddish readership capable of, and interested in, devoting their sustained attention to matters of politics. After all, a fifty-page pamphlet, or a 150-page almanac, demanded much more effort from the reader than a two-column newspaper article.

The Rising Status of Yiddish Literature

When it comes to Yiddish literature in the 1880s, the great event was not literary per se (the creation of a great masterpiece), but cultural-historical: the recognition of Yiddish literature by members of the Russian-Jewish and Hebrew intelligentsias as a legitimate and even valuable entity. The main Russian-Jewish author to offer such a positive view was the young Shimon Dubnov, who was then the literary critic of the Russian-Jewish journal *Voskhod*.

Until 1887, the Russian Jewish press basically ignored Yiddish literature as if it did not exist, or was not worthy of attention. There were virtually no reviews of the Yiddish works of Mendele, Isaac Mayer Dik, Y. Y. Linetski and others. Then Dubnov, who wrote under the pseudonym “Kritikus”, burst forth with a series of articles. In the first article, he reviewed three new Hebrew works of fiction, and Sholem Aleichem’s story “dos Meserl” [“The Little Knife”], and reached the surprising conclusion that only the latter, the story in “Jargon”, had any literary value. “This little work is a modest exception from the general rule of the extreme poverty of contemporary Jewish fiction.”²⁴

Then a year later, he expanded upon this observation in a review essay called “On Jargonic Literature in general.”²⁵

We observe a very noteworthy phenomenon, which should not be considered transitory or ephemeral... We have before us a new trend...

²⁴ Kritikus [Shimon Dubnov], “Novie svidetel’sтва o bednosti evreiskoi beletristiki,” *Voskhod*, July-August 1887.

²⁵ Kritikus, “O zhargonnoi literature,” *Vokhsod*, October 1888.

which will stimulate new talents in our literary scene. I refer to the progressive development of Jargonic literature. ...Before our eyes we observe the gratifying transition of Jargon from light popular works [...] to serious works which stimulate thought. [...] Today, even a simple Jewish woman cannot be satisfied by reading *Tsene-rene* and *tkhines*.²⁶

Dubnov viewed the new trend in a broad European context:

How is the Jewish Jargon worse than, for instance, the Bulgarian language, or than the small Slavic, Germanic and Romance dialects, which no one denies the right to have a literature in their language? Are there less Jews who speak Jargon than Czechs and Bulgarians, who have their own literatures? Jargon does not have scientific or philosophic terminology, but it can acquire it, just as Hebrew acquired it.²⁷

“We can only rejoice at the increase of literary forces, and the creation of a new school of Jargonists.”²⁸ It should be noted that Dubnov’s article was published before the appearance of Sholem Aleichem’s land-mark almanac *Yidishe folksbibliotek*.²⁹

By the time of Dubnov’s third article, in 1889, he both celebrated Yiddish literature and at the same time complained that it had advanced too far too soon, lamenting that Peretz’s poem “Monish” and Mendele’s novel “Dos vintshfingerl” [“The Wishing Ring”], were inaccessible to simple readers.³⁰

In the Hebrew *Ha-Melitz*, the old Maskilic anti-Yiddish attitude prevailed, but the attacks on Yiddish literature now had a new tone. Not merely contempt and disdain – but a sense of worry that Hebrew writers were abandoning ship for

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ “Novosti zhargonnoi literatury (sbornik sholom aleikhema),” *Voskhod*, July 1889. On Dubnov’s positive evaluation of Yiddish literature in the late 1880s, see Sh. Nizer, “Sh. Dubnov vi a literatur-kritiker,” *YIVO bleter* 23 (1944): 163–177.

Yiddish, and expressions of concern about a rising competitor which could threaten Hebrew literature. Elhanan Levinsky began his article attacking Sholem Aleichem's almanac *Yidishe folks-bibliotek* by quoting the verse in the Book of Proverbs: "The earth trembles... at a hand-maid who is heir to her mistress." Yiddish should know its place, as hand-maid, and not aspire to higher literary functions.

But there were pro-Yiddish voices in *Ha-Melitz*, most notably the Hebrew journalist and hibat tziyon activist Yehoshua Khona Ravnitsky. The latter argued that the rise of Yiddish literature would not harm Hebrew, but on the contrary would help it. If the simple folk were drawn to good works of literature in Yiddish, their love and study of Hebrew would grow. As for hand-maids and mistresses, Ravnitsky retorted, "the hand-maid has no aspiration to be heir. The hand-maid seeks to serve the masses, whom the mistress does not invite to her table. May the Yiddish writers continue to build and plant among the masses. The Jewish people will bless them."³¹

The Rise of Yiddish in Historical Perspective

Finally, I'd like to offer some reflections on the historical causes for the outburst of modern Yiddish cultural activity beginning in the 1880s. Usually, scholars have pointed to the change in the attitude of the Jewish intelligentsia toward Yiddish as the key factor, and have tied it to the changed atmosphere of the 1880s, in the aftermath of the pogroms, when the quest for integration lost its plausibility, and various proto-nationalist views grew.³² I'd like to question this top-down interpretation, and in fact invert it. In my opinion, audience for modern Yiddish culture grew and changed first, and the intellectuals followed suite in response to

³¹ Getsel Kressel, "A historishe polemic vegn der yidisher literatur," *Goldene keyt* 20 (1954), 338–356.

³² Emanuel Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture. The Story of the Yiddish Language Movement*, (New York: Shapolsky Publishers and the Workmen's Circle Education Department, 1987, 45–70; Miron, *Traveler Disguised*, 1–66.

that. To understand these changes, one needs to connect Yiddish cultural history to the broader social history of Russian and Polish Jewry.

The greatest social transformation in Ashkenazic Jewry in the Russian Empire in the second half of the nineteenth century was urbanization, migration from shtetlekh to cities. Between 1855 and 1897, the Jewish population of Odessa increased from 17,000 to 139,000, and of Warsaw from 40,000 to 220,000.³³ Similar processes took place in many other cities. The primary social base of modern Yiddish culture – literature, theatre, press, pamphlets – consisted of shtetl Jews who moved to the cities.

The city was a joltingly new world for these migrants, no less than America was a new world for Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Here, in the city, there was no social control by the kahal and rabbis – there was freedom to grow lax in religious observance. Here, Jews were a minority rather than a majority population; and Jews were exposed to modern Russian and Polish culture, some of them superficially, some more deeply. The migrants to the cities felt a need for modern types of information and modern forms of entertainment. For most of them, their primary language was Yiddish – though a minority of the migrants did become fully literate in Russian, with no or little Russian schooling (just as Mendele and Sholem Aleichem had done).

In the 1880s, the audience for modern Yiddish culture was in the cities, and not (or not yet) in the shtetlekh, which were bastions of tradition. Urbanization and the rise of Yiddish culture went hand in hand. *Kol Mevasser's* circulation in the 1860s was 500–750 copies, while *Yidishes folksblat's* was 7,000; the Yiddish musical shows of the 1860s were set in modest wine cellars, while Goldfaden's theatre company in the 1880s performed in halls with 1,500 seats.

An Important facilitating factor for the rise of modern Yiddish culture was the growth of the Russian railway system. (In 1855, the Russian Empire had 570 miles

³³ See Jacob Leshchinsky, *Dos yidishe folk in tsifern*, (Berlin: Klal-farlag, 1922), 69–82; Shmuel Ettinger, *Bein polin le-rusiyah*, (Jerusalem: Merkaz Shazar and Mosad Bialik, 1994), 257–279.

of rail track. In 1890, it had more than 19,000 miles of track.) *Yidishes folksblat* actually had few readers in St. Petersburg, where it was published. But it could be distributed with ease, speed, and at modest expense by rail to all major cities in the Pale of Settlement. Goldfaden's theatre company could tour from city to city travelling by train, moving its stage set and costumes along with its actors. The Yiddish book business was likewise transformed, as book-stores and mail orders displaced wandering peddlers. Most shtetlekh were not yet connected to the railway system, and were therefore not in contact with modern Yiddish culture, in the 1880s.

The second major social trend in Russian Jewry in this period was impoverishment, or downward economic mobility (not by all, but by most Russian Jews). The emancipation of the serfs in 1861 and the rise of the Russian railway system beginning in the 1860s, sent economic shock-waves through the Jewish Pale of Settlement. They led to a decline of traditional Jewish occupations in the shtetlekh (in trade, transport, and estate administration). Jews migrated to the cities more out of necessity than out of opportunity, in search of work. Downward mobility meant that the sons of successful merchants became wage-earners and workers. These sons came from formerly elite families, went to good cheders and sometimes to yeshivas. Their fathers had been readers of *Ha-Melitz* and of Hebrew Haskalah literature.³⁴

These sons (we know little about the daughters) became the more sophisticated readers of Yiddish literature, the press, political pamphlets, and attendees of the theatre. Many of them had to interrupt their Hebrew studies as youngsters, in order to find employment, but they could read and think complex thoughts in Yiddish. Some of these young migrants had the skills and inclinations to acquire Russian and became bi-cultural. And many of their declassée fathers and mothers moved to the city as well, in their middle age years, and began to partake of Yiddish theatre and literature there.

³⁴ For a recent analysis of these socio-economic processes, see Eli Lederhendler, "Classless: On the Social Status of Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe in the Late Nineteenth Century", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50/2 (2008): 509–534.

My point is that modern Yiddish literature had a ready-made elite contingent to its readership – declassée merchants and especially their children, who migrated to the cities. The notion that Jewish society was divided into two groups – a modernized intelligentsia and the “simple masses” – is a myth, a trope used by Russian Jewish intellectuals such as Dubnov, who lifted it rather mechanically from Russian social thought. Instead, there was intricately stratified community in the throes of dramatic social change, which produced a diverse Yiddish readership and audience.

When the founders of modern Yiddish literature and theatre produced works in the 1880s that were not for the simple masses, works that Dubnov and Levinsky complained about as inappropriately high-brow, their authors knew what they were doing. They were not ahead of their audiences; they were responding to the interests and needs of a growing and changing readership.

In conclusion, my broader point is that modern Yiddish literature and culture in Russia are a product of the latter part of the nineteenth century. Only then did the conditions arise for a culture that was naturally secular, multi-faceted, and geared toward a large and diverse audience. The rest, as we say, is history.

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