

Warsaw. The Jewish Metropolis

*Essays in Honor of the 75th Birthday
of Professor Antony Polonsky*

Edited by

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The Kultur-Lige in Warsaw: A Stopover in the Yiddishists' Journey between Kiev and Paris

Gennady Estraiikh

The Kiev League

Hebraism and Yiddishism were cultural constituents of political movements with competing Jewish nation-building models. Hebraism became the linguistic platform for advocates of the ingathering (or “return”) of all dispersed Jewish groups to their historical homeland, the Land of Israel, an ideology famously known as Zionism. Yiddishism, in contrast, tended to find followers among those activists who believed in a national awakening through the modernization of Jews within east and east central Europe without such an ingathering. While national territory was the key element in some varieties of Yiddishist constructs, the majority believed that Jews would ultimately thrive in the Diaspora among other tolerant, egalitarian peoples. According to these ideologues of Diasporic Yiddishism, the nascent modern Jewish nation of workers, peasants, intellectuals and (in non-socialist visions) entrepreneurs and their centuries-long Ashkenazic tradition should be made to blossom on the stump of an allegedly decaying religious and economically “non-productive” Jewry. Modern, “productive” Jews would grow together into a modern nation by means of two key agents: a highly developed Yiddish culture and language; and a network of local, regional, national, and pan-Diasporic organizations.

Yiddishism was born predominantly in the political and ideological ferment of Russian—more specifically, Lithuanian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian—Jewry, known collectively in Poland as *Litvaks*.¹ Yiddishist circles, most notably in such cities as Vilna and Kiev, challenged the *nusekh varshe* (“Warsaw brand”), which they associated with pandering to the little-educated masses, and sought to advance their *nusekh vilne* (“Vilna brand”) of a sophisticated, future-oriented

1 According to the Lithuanian scholar Aušra Paulauskienė, “the new imperial term—‘Russian’ Jew—marks mostly a territorial affiliation, while the ‘Lithuanian Jew’ or ‘Litvak’ is firstly a cultural term,” cf. her *Lost and Found: The Discovery of Lithuania in American Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 19. This should not be confused with the term’s contemporary usage for describing non-Hasidic, ultra-orthodox Jews.

culture.² Leaving aside the tendency of advocates of the “Vilna brand” to, ironically enough, venerate the Warsaw-based guru of modern Yiddish literature, I.L. Peretz, the two competing brands can be seen as reflecting a larger, still relatively unexplored Polish-Litvak cultural clash.³ Warsaw emerged as a main site of this clash, thanks to the well-known Litvak “invasion” of the city. Yet as this chapter will show, a creative product of the Litvak migration was the Warsaw Kultur-Lige (Culture League), a new organization aimed at nourishing a nation-defining Yiddish culture.

Vilna is often seen as the “capital” of Yiddishism, or “the most Yiddishist city in the world” (see Kalman Weiser’s chapter in this volume).⁴ The city really did assume this role, at least part-time, at the end of the 19th century and, even more so, in the first three decades of the 20th century. In imperial Russia, however, highly consequential developments often took place in Warsaw, Kiev, Odessa,⁵ or in the actual capital, St. Petersburg—the latter being the main gravitational center for Russian Jewish politics, where all-Russian Jewish civil-society organizations had been emerging since the 1860s. In 1910, Jacob Lestschinsky, then considered the most serious social economist in the Zionist Socialist Workers’ Party (which encouraged emigration with the ultimate goal of building a modern Yiddish-speaking socialist state), was happy to detect components of a “Jewish government” there, whose “departments” had

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- 2 Various aspects of Yiddishism are analyzed, in particular, in Joshua A. Fishman, *Ideology, Society and Language: The Odyssey of Nathan Birnbaum* (Ann Arbor, MI: Karoma Publishers, 1987); Emanuel Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture: The Story of the Yiddish Language Movement* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997); Itzik N. Gottesman, *Defining the Yiddish Nation: The Jewish Folklorists in Poland* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2003); David E. Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005). For the Vilna-Kiev Yiddishist “axis,” see Gennady Estraiikh, *In Harness: Yiddish Writers’ Romance with Communism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 17–26.
- 3 The Israeli historian Eli Lederhendler wrote about “two separate Jewries” who lived on the territory of the Polish Commonwealth for a century before the advent of Russian rule—see his “Did Russian Jewry Exist prior to 1917?” in Yaacov Ro’i (ed.), *Jews and Jewish Life in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1995), 15–27, here 17. For an overview of some sources describing the Polish-versus-Litvak relations, see Gennady Estraiikh, “Di litvakes un andere yidn,” *Forverts* (25 July 2008): 12–13; idem, “Varshe—a yidisher shmeltstöp,” *Forverts* (15 September 2009): 12–13.
- 4 See also Dina Abramowicz, “My Father’s Life and Work,” in Hirsz Abramowicz, *Profiles of a Lost World: Memoirs of East European Jewish Life before World War II* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1999), 31.
- 5 Andrew Noble Moss, “World War I and the Remaking of Jewish Vilna, 1914–1918,” (unpublished PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 2010), 125.

been formed by various philanthropic organizations.⁶ Lestschinsky and those like him especially appreciated the quasi-state role of the Petersburg-centered Jewish apparatus because it dovetailed with Simon Dubnow's scheme of Diaspora Jewish autonomy.⁷

Constituents of Jewish civil society, such as various charities and savings-and-loan associations, contributed significantly to the status of Yiddish, which increasingly functioned as an institutional language. In addition, Yiddishism had taken root among various denominations of Jewish Socialists, notably in the Zionist Socialist Party and the Bund.⁸ But the structural building of a modern Yiddish cultural medium might have remained ineffective were it not for the convincing success of its literature, whose three main writers, Mendele Moykher Sforim, Sholem Aleichem and I.L. Peretz, were pronounced "Classic" only a few years after their deaths in 1915–1917.⁹

Yet for all that, a coordinated, strong Yiddishist movement never fully materialized. An attempt to consolidate the ranks of Yiddish enthusiasts by convening an international conference in the Austro-Hungarian town of Czernowitz (today Chernivtsi in Ukraine) in August 1908 did not yield tangible results. The Bureau formed to realize the conference's resolutions "was closed even before it could be opened."¹⁰ Establishing an organized movement seemed particularly urgent after the break-up of the imperial Russian Pale of Jewish Settlement. Ironically, the same Jewish intellectuals who had once condemned the Pale now grieved over its post-1917 disintegration, realizing that the segmentation of the centuries-old Jewish habitat made any Diasporic nation-building project more problematic. In March 1917, the transformation of imperial Russia into a republic triggered discussions about the structure of the incipient multinational state. The provisional government proposed cultural-personal autonomy as a way of solving the national question in Russia, while various national

6 Jacob Lestschinsky, "Profesyon-froyen-shule af dem Vilner tsuzamenfor," *Der shtetl* (21 January 1910): 2.

7 See David E. Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture*, 67–71.

8 Brian Horowitz, "Victory from Defeat: 1905 and the Society for the Promotion of Enlightenment among the Jews of Russia," in Stefani Hoffman and Ezra Mendelsohn (eds.), *The Revolution of 1905 and Russia's Jews* (Philadelphia: University Of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 85–95; Gennady Estraikh, "Yiddish in Imperial Russia's Civil Society," in Eugene Avrutin and Harriet Murav (eds.), *Jews in the East European Borderlands: Daily Life, Violence, and Memory* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2012), 50–66.

9 Benjamin Harshav, *The Polyphony of Jewish Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 12–13.

10 Joshua Fishman, "Was the Original Czernowitz Conference of 1908 a Success?" *Jews and Slavs* 22 (2010): 18.

movements demanded either a federative reconstruction of the former empire or its breakup into a number of independent states. Jewish ideologues usually favoured the latter, federative option, with some forms of autonomy for the Jewish population.

Various configurations of Jewish autonomy in the new, post-imperial Russia were discussed by leading journalists of the New York Yiddish daily *Forverts* (Forward), the preeminent American Jewish working class newspaper. The Bundist Moyshe Olgin (Novomiski), for example, an acclaimed expert on Russian politics and culture, contended that an independent body rather than a governmental organization had to assume responsibility for running Jewish educational and cultural institutions.¹¹ In 1918, Jacob Lestschinsky published a pamphlet in Warsaw entitled *Our National Demands*, picturing a post-imperial Russian federation whose society entitled citizens to become members of ethnic communal bodies with representatives who would participate in all decision-making and executive institutions of the state. Reflecting the assumption that religious sentiments would atrophy in a modern egalitarian world, Lestschinsky envisioned an essentially secular Russian Jewish community governed by a democratically elected assembly that controlled the cultural domain of national life—educational networks, publishing, libraries, theatres and museums.¹² In Kiev that same year, the Jewish socialist Ben-Adir (Abraham Rosin) described—in his programmatic treatise *Our Language Problem*—a world brotherhood of nations that included Jews as a well-organized national collective with a highly developed Yiddish culture.¹³

In other words, after the collapse of Imperial Russia the idea of Jewish extra-territorial autonomy was in the air. Shmuel Niger (Charney), then the towering figure among Vilna Yiddishists, declared at the beginning of 1919, when Vilna's state affiliation remained opaque, that Yiddish culture would suffer in either extreme in Lithuania's relations with Russia: full amalgamation or full independence.¹⁴ He wrote this following the establishment in Vilna of the Kultur-Lige, modelled on the league founded the previous year, in April 1918, in Kiev. Earlier, the Central Rada, the governing institution of the Ukrainian People's Republic, had officially declared extra-territorial (effectively, cultural)

11 M. Olgin, "Tsu vos darfn di yidn fun rusland natsionale rekht?" *Forverts* (29 March 1917): 4. See also Tsivion (Ben-Zion Hoffman), "Di natsionale frage in dem frayen rusland," *Forverts* (15 April 1917): 2.

12 Jacob Lestschinsky, *Undzere natsionale foderungen* (Warsaw: Tsukunft, 1918).

13 Ben-Adir, *Undzer shprakh-problem* (Kiev: Kultur-Lige, 1918).

14 Shmuel Niger, "Lite un Rusland," *Di vokh: a vokhnschrift far literatur un kunst* (17 January 1919): 57–59; (8 February 1919): 112–15.

autonomy for Ukraine's Jews, thus creating a brief, incandescent moment in Jewish history. The initiative to create the Kiev-based Kultur-Lige belonged to a friend of Niger, Zelig Melamed, who became the "nerve and engineer" of the new organization.¹⁵ In all probability, his own initiative followed the example of the League of Russian Culture, founded in June 1917 by a group of liberal intellectuals.¹⁶ This chapter follows the Kultur-Lige's next transplant, however awkward, into Warsaw as a result of its suppression by the new Soviet regime.

The Kiev Kultur-Lige had emerged as an outgrowth of the Ministry for Jewish Affairs in the Ukrainian government and later depended on the support of the Ukrainian and sometimes Soviet government. Private fundraising in the war-ridden country could not have secured the league's existence, especially as its ideas of secular, Diasporic Yiddish-speaking nationhood appealed only to a minority of the Jewish population. During the 1917 elections to the All-Russian Constituent Assembly and 1918 elections to the provisional Jewish National Assembly, Zionist and religious parties outpolled both Yiddishist socialists and liberals.¹⁷ Yet it was not in the spirit of the time and place to abide by the popular will, particularly the will of non-proletarian masses. The socialists insisted that they understood the law of history better and therefore had the right to facilitate its implementation, while circles that did not belong to the so-called "revolutionary democracy," no matter how numerous, would have to satisfy themselves with the status of a helpless minority.¹⁸ This type of cultural force-feeding was considered legitimate because the masses were "national [i.e. non-Zionist and non-assimilationist], whether they want[ed] it or not, whether they recognize[d] it or not."¹⁹

The Soviet authorities began to sponsor the Kultur-Lige as early as 1919, though the Bolsheviks made it clear that they were only ready to support Yiddish cultural institutions, not structures of cultural autonomy. In January,

15 Shmuel Niger, "Kultur-lige," *Di vokh: a vokhnshrift far literatur un kunst* (8 January 1919): 23–25; Zelig Melamed, "Bergelson der gezelschaftler," *Literarische bleter* (13 September 1929): 728; Khaim Kazdan, *Fun heyder un "shkoles" biz tsisho: dos ruslendishe yidntum in gerangl far shul, shprakh, kultur* (Mexico: Shlomo Mendelzon Fond, 1956), 436.

16 See, e.g., Richard Pipes, *Struve: Liberal on the Right, 1905–1944* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 235–36.

17 Solomon I. Goldelman, *Jewish National Autonomy in Ukraine, 1917–1920* (Chicago: Ukrainian Research and Information Institute, 1968), 79; L.M. Spirin, *Rossia 1917 god: iz istorii bor'by politicheskikh partii* (Moscow: Mysl, 1987), 273–328; Oliver H. Radkey, *Russia Goes to the Polls: The Elections to the All-Russian Constituent Assembly, 1917* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 19, 152–53.

18 Goldelman, *Jewish National Autonomy in Ukraine*, 57.

19 *Kultur-lige: ershtes zamlheft* (Warsaw, April 1921), 2.

1920, Anatoly Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar (Minister) of Education in Lenin's government, allocated a subsidy for the Kultur-Lige, but cautioned that it was a temporary measure pending a decision that would define the role of the organization. Some activists tried to secure the league's survival as part of the Soviet state-run educational and cultural system for all ethnic groups. But on 16 September, 1920, the fate of the league was sealed when a meeting of Jewish culture activists welcomed the decision to Bolshevice it, stressing that, under the specific conditions of Ukraine, the organization needed protection from all kinds of erstwhile non-Bolshevik socialists and nationalist bourgeois intellectuals. In December, 1921, an attempt was made to re-register the Kultur-Lige as a pan-Soviet organization with headquarters in Moscow and "chief committees" in Kiev and Minsk. But it was a stillborn project, since Lenin considered cultural-national autonomy "absolutely impermissible" and demanded that education and the majority of other domains of cultural activity be put under the direct control of the overall state apparatus.²⁰ The harnessing of the Kultur-Lige was part of the general Soviet destruction of civil-society institutions and the elimination of political and legal conditions for an autonomous civil society.²¹ As a result, while many constituents of the Kultur-Lige survived in the Soviet environment, the league itself was soon dissolved.²²

The league's transformation into a communist-controlled organization undermined its principal aspiration: to be supra-political. The pre-Soviet "political harmony" (the reality was, of course, more complex) could only be achieved in a favourable ideological climate: the three Jewish political groupings

20 *Kultur-lige: byuleten num. 2* (Kiev: Tsentral-komitet fun Kultur-Lige, June-July 1920), 1–6, 31; Abraham Abchuk, *Etyudn un materyaln tsu der geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur-bavegung in fssr, 1917–1927* (Kharkiv: Literatur un kunst, 1934), 18; David Bergelson, "A geshikhte vegn Lenin, vos iz nokh nit dertseylt gevorn," *Frayhayt* (19 January 1929): 7; Vladimir Lenin, "Cultural-National' Autonomy," in idem, *Collected Works*, vol. 19 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 503–7; Estraiikh, *In Harness*, 53; Kenneth B. Moss, *Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 229.

21 Ruben Apressyan, "Civil Society and Civil Participation," in William Gay and T.A. Alekseeva (eds.), *Democracy and the Quest for Justice: Russian and American Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 110.

22 See, in particular, S.M. Shevchenko, "Orhanizatsiia navchal'no-vykhovnoi roboty v kyivs'komu doslidnomu evreiskomu ditbudynku," *Pedahohichna osvita: teoriia i praktyka 2* (2009): 59–65; Gennady Estraiikh, "The Yidish Kultur-Lige," in Irena R. Makaryk and Virlana Tkacz (eds.), *Modernism in Kyiv: Jubilant Experimentation* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2010), 197–217. In February 1922, the Kultur-Lige's Central Organizational Bureau still existed in Moscow and even signed an appeal to international Jewry which appeared in the Soviet press: "Spravedlivoe trebovanie," *Izvestiia* (26 February 1922): 1.

that played prominent roles in post-revolutionary Ukraine—the Fareynikte (United Jewish Socialist Workers Party, which incorporated the Zionist Socialist Party), the liberal, Dubnowian Folkspartey (People's Party) and the Poale Tzion (Labor Zionist Party)—shared the overarching goal of building a modern Jewish nation, even if they differed on many details of both the nation-building process and its ultimate purpose. Some Bundists, too, participated in cultural projects; for instance, A. Litvak (Khaim-Yankev Helfand), a member of the Bund's central committee, was a leading figure in the organization. The bloody turmoil of the civil war left a very limited space for interparty ideological confrontations. In the Soviet environment, however, the league's struggle to remain above the political fray rapidly came to nothing.²³

Meanwhile, as a punishment for its “nationalism” during the independence period, Kiev lost its status as the Ukrainian capital. Yiddish literati flocked either to the Soviet capital, Moscow, or to Kharkov, which obtained the status of Soviet Ukraine's capital, while many activists of the Kultur-Lige chose to leave the country and replant their organization elsewhere. The league had never, in any case, shaped itself as an exclusively Ukrainian organization. Its constitution, ratified on 15 January, 1918, defined the “whole territory of the Russian Republic” as the domain of the league's activities. The authors of the 1918 pamphlet *The Main Aims of the Kultur-Lige* mentioned Ukraine as merely *the place* where they, a group of enthusiasts, had less than nine months earlier happened to decide to establish the new Jewish cultural network's headquarters.²⁴

The Warsaw Transplant

On 15 July, 1921, the *Forverts* published an article by Tsivion, who at that time was travelling in Europe. In his dispatch sent from Warsaw, Tsivion wrote:

Every person who is more or less interested in Jewish life in Ukraine, Belorussia, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, certainly has heard about the Jewish Kultur-Lige. [...] The Kultur-Lige was established in April 1918 and, in a rather short period of time, spread its activity over the whole territory of Ukraine. The Kultur-Lige had concentrated around itself a

23 See, in particular, Moss, *Jewish Renaissance*, 259–60.

24 *Di grunt-oyfgabn fun der “kultur-lige”* (Kiev: n.p., 1918); Mikhailo Rybakov (ed.), *Pravda istorii: diial'nist' evreis'koï kul'turno-prosvitnyts'koï orhanizatsii “Kul'turna liha” u Kyievi (1918–1925)* (Kiev: Kyi, 2001), 15.

whole range of strong groups of Jewish radical intelligentsia, who sought to organize the Jewish masses and develop Yiddish culture. [...]

Unfortunately, I did not have a chance to see the work of the Kultur-Lige in Ukraine first hand. I learned about the organization only from a number of written and published reports, as well as thanks to personal communications with central figures of the Kultur-Lige whom I met in Warsaw.²⁵

Indeed, Warsaw was now the only place to host an organized group of the Kultur-Lige's high-ranking activists, i.e., those who regarded themselves as the core of the organization. They arrived virtually penniless, though rumours circulated that the group was loaded with "barrels of gold."²⁶ (This tale could be an echo of the earlier, German army's, evacuation from Kiev, at the beginning of 1919, when a small group of Jewish entrepreneurs relocated to Germany with portions of their wealth.)²⁷ The memoirs of a member of the group, the editor, publisher and literary critic Nakhman Mayzel (also spelled as Nachman Maisel, 1887–1966), provide us with a list of the newly-arrived Kultur-Lige activists:

Our group, the Executive Bureau of the Kultur-Lige, included Dr. Moyshe Zilberfarb, the former minister [of Jewish affairs] in Ukraine; A. Litvak, the well-known Bundist writer, theoretician and speaker; Joseph Lestschinsky [Jacob Lestschinsky's brother], or J. Khmurner, as he later called himself in the Polish Bundist movement; Zelig Melamed, the energetic, stubborn champion of Yiddish; Kh[aim] Zh. Kazdan, the well-known educator, and I.²⁸

Like other intellectual cohorts in the waves of the "Litvak invasion" these activists were sometimes perceived as people who culturally colonized Warsaw, the most populous European Jewish urban center and a place that offered both a less totalized political environment and highly developed infrastructure for publishing, considered "almost the world capital of Yiddish culture."²⁹ Warsaw

25 Tsvion, "Der yidisher kultur-lig in Eyrope," *Forverts* (15 July 1921): 3.

26 *Ibid.*, 25.

27 Cf. A. Vol'skii, "Russkie evrei v Germanii," *Evreiskaia tribuna* (9 September 1921): 3.

28 Nakhman Mayzel, *Geven amol a lebn* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-farband fun poylishe yidn, 1951), 19.

29 Adam Pomorski, "Pochemu ne priamo?," *Novaia Pol'sha* 12 (2010): 20–28, esp. 20.

was not only the main Jewish publishing hub in Eastern Europe; it also outsourced printing operations to American authors.³⁰

The “Litvak colonization” of Warsaw had become especially noticeable during the 1880s, and the influx only increased in the 1890s following the expulsion of Jews from Moscow.³¹ Warsaw Jews dubbed as Litvaks any Jews who spoke a different, non-Warsovian kind of Yiddish, though Jews from Lithuania and Belorussia bore the brunt of ridicule and even hatred. The Warsaw-born Yiddish journalist A. Almi (Elias Chaim Sheps) compared the Warsaw Jews’ stigmatization of Litvaks to the Poles’ denigration of the Jews.³² A Warsaw Jewish dweller would quip that “a litvak iz a halber goy” (“a Litvak is a half-gentile”) or “ot geyen tsvey yidn un a litvak” (“two Jews and a Litvak are walking along here”).³³ Israel Joshua Singer, a Yiddish novelist and Warsaw correspondent of the *Forverts*, reported that a Polish Hasidic rebbe had suggested that a Jew baptize his daughter rather than to allow her to marry a Litvak. Singer similarly reported that some Polish Jews did not even hide their Schadenfreude when they spoke about the pogrom in the Litvak-populated town of Białystok in the summer of 1906.³⁴ According to the journalist and historian Azriel Natan Frenk, the term “Litwak” was invoked in the Polish press around 1907 as a euphemism for the “bad Jewish migrant.”³⁵

Activists of the Kultur-Lige no doubt knew that the local Jewish population would not welcome them with outstretched arms. Yet they also recognized prime indicators of a successful migration to Warsaw. At the end of the day, virtually the entire infrastructure of the Warsaw-based Yiddish press and publishing industry had been developed thanks to several generations of

30 Hagit Cohen, “The USA-Eastern Europe Yiddish Book Trade and the Formation of an American Yiddish Cultural Center, 1890s–1930s,” *Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe* 57 (2006): 53.

31 See, e.g., Stephen D. Corrsin, “Language Use in Culture and Political Change in Pre-1914 Warsaw: Poles, Jews, and Russification,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 68.1 (1990): 84; David Assaf, “Life as It Was’—Yekhezkel Kotik and His Memoirs,” in Yekhezkel Kotik, *Journey to a Nineteenth-Century Shtetl* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 30.

32 A. Almi, *Momentn fun a lebn: zikhroynes, bilder un epizodn* (Buenos-Aires: Tsentral-farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1948), 182–83.

33 A gevezener rusisher professor [A former Russian professor], “Di litvishe yidn,” *Di miz-rekh-yidn* (Berlin and Warsaw: Misrach, 1916), 112–13; Max Weinreich, “Galitsianer lakhn fun litvakes, litvakes fun galitsianer,” *Forverts* (11 January 1930): 6.

34 G. Kiper [I.J. Singer], “Poylishe yidn, galitsianer un litvakes mishn zikh itst oys in di poylishe shtet,” *Forverts* (10 October 1929): 3.

35 Azriel Natan Frenk, “Litvakes,” *Dos yidishe folk* (7 February 1918): 7–8.

people born somewhere east of Warsaw.³⁶ To a large extent, Jewish nationalism in its various forms had also been imported to Warsaw by non-Polish Jews, who tended to acculturate into Russian society without assimilating, whereas acculturation into Polish society seemed to make Jews more prone to assimilation. Contemporary observers explained this phenomenon by differentiating the two cultural environments: “Russian Jews” lived, in fact, on outskirts of the empire and were mainly surrounded by local ethnic groups (such as Ukrainians and Lithuanians); therefore Russian culture had obtained a predominately abstract, universal, “bookish” quality that remained detached from Russia and Russians proper. In Poland, on the other hand, Jews were predominantly surrounded by native Poles, many of whom were well-educated, which made the impact of Polish culture more direct, demanding, and “seductive.”³⁷ According to Shmuel Niger, “If a Jew has been brought up in the environment of Polish culture, often only in the Polish language, he becomes a Pole.”³⁸

For all that, Warsaw was considered the only suitable venue for the headquarters of such an ambitious project as the Kultur-Lige. Apart from the sheer size of its Jewish population and its highly developed cultural infrastructure, the city had the attraction of being the capital of a newly independent country, a country which had also incorporated territories previously considered Ukrainian or Lithuanian, and where chapters of the Kultur-Lige had developed within the Kiev orbit. In addition, on 28 June 1919, Polish leaders signed the so-called Little Treaty of Versailles and thus committed the Second Polish Republic to the protection of national minorities. Also known as the “Minorities Treaty,” the agreement promised that its

nationals who belong to racial, religious, or linguistic minorities shall enjoy in law and in fact the same treatment and security as the Polish nationals. In particular, they shall have an equal right to establish, manage, and control at their own expense charitable, religious, and social institutions, schools, and other educational establishments, with the right to use their own language and to exercise their religion freely therein.³⁹

36 Chone Shmeruk, *Prokim fun der yidisher literatur-geshikhte* (Tel Aviv: Y.L. Peretz Farlag, 1988), 306–7.

37 A. Litvin, “Polyakn, litvakes un poylishe yidn,” *Forverts* (21 February 1910): 2; Frenk, “Litvakes,” 8.

38 Shmuel Niger, “Vu iz itst der yidisher tsender?,” *Forverts* (6 December 1919): 12.

39 Miriam Eisenstein, *Jewish Schools in Poland, 1919–39: Their Philosophy and Development* (New York: King’s Crown Press, 1950), 1–2.

Nevertheless, the Kiev activists found themselves in a very hostile political environment controlled by several competing parties with no appetite for cooperation. Mayzel recalled:

We had the aim, the intent to unite around the Kultur-Lige in Poland socialist, democratic and general public circles. However, it was next to impossible to achieve such a thing at that time. It was hard to bring together, under the same roof and around the same table, [even] labor representatives of the Folkspartey. It was also not easy to bring together representatives of labor parties, especially as the Bund always insisted that its hegemony in leadership was a prerequisite of participation, whereas the right Poale Tzion kept its distance from us. In the meantime, the Fareynikte and the recently established left Poale Tzion did welcome us and were ready to work in the organizational committee. So, we found ourselves between more than two fires [...].⁴⁰

Although Warsaw seemed the best available locale for the league's transplant, it was to remain an imperfect option.

In April 1921, the first Warsaw conference of the Kultur-Lige (in fact, a gathering of representatives of about thirty already existing local branches) stated in its resolutions its object of "facilitating construction of socialist Yiddish culture for the working masses." At the same time, such people as Mayzel resisted attempts to turn their organization into an agitprop of a particular socialist party. Mayzel's type of intelligentsia sought to develop cultural activities also among the non-proletarian, middle class elements of the Jewish masses, elevating them culturally to its own level. A similar conceptual divide was characteristic of the Soviet Yiddish cultural milieu, in which some former activists of the Kultur-Lige intended to target all strata of the Jewish population but remained—paradoxically—an elitist group, since in that bigger pool they sought an audience that was receptive to highbrow cultural products.⁴¹ Mayzel and his friends regarded themselves as custodians of I.L. Peretz's traditions, which—they contended—had declined in Peretz's own Warsaw. Moreover, Mayzel would argue that in Warsaw Peretz remained a lonely figure, with no close friendships with local intellectuals. In Peretz's vein, the activists of the Kultur-Lige sought to preserve the "golden chain" of Jewish culture, shaking off

⁴⁰ Mayzel, *Geven amol a lebn*, 20.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 23; Estraikh, *In Harness*, 114.

the ancient dust while, at the same time, absorbing nutrients of Jewish tradition and history.⁴²

To overcome its image as a task force that had landed in Warsaw on a mission of ideological-cultural colonization, the Kiev activists sought an organizational umbrella that could legitimize the league's transplant into Poland. The first congress of Jewish educators, convened in June 1921, would have made the perfect forum for establishing a pan-Polish Kultur-Lige. However, the Bund, whose delegates did not have a majority, boycotted any league-related resolutions. The official argument, spelled out by the Bund leaders Beinish Michalewicz and Henryk Ehrlich, was based on their reluctance to turn the congress of educators into a congress of cultural activists. In reality, however, the Bundists simply realized that the governing body of the new organization would have a composition that reflected the delegates' diverse party affiliations, while the Bund sought hegemony over this important cultural network. As Khaim Kazdan, the secretary of the Kiev Kultur-Lige who soon jumped onto the Polish Bundist bandwagon, wrote in his memoirs, "history would show that such an organization as the Kultur-Lige could not be established by force, against the will of the strongest Jewish workers party."⁴³

The Kultur-Lige activists then faced the choice either to form an elitist group of Yiddish culture-builders or to join one of the organized political currents. Those who did not want to join any political group focused on developing a Yiddish publishing house. As a result, two publishing houses, completely independent of one another, operated under the same name—one of them, in Kiev, became the main producer of Yiddish books in the Soviet Union; the other, a Warsaw-based eponymous publishing house, sought to continue the traditions of the pre-Soviet Kultur-Lige. However, in Poland, where local Yiddish cultural and educational institutions were so thoroughly controlled by politicians with entrenched interests, it was exceedingly hard to preserve the "apolitical spirit" of pre-Soviet Kiev.⁴⁴ Even more importantly, in Poland the Kultur-Lige could not obtain state funding and thus depended on party sponsorship, which of course entailed loyalty to a political current.

42 Nakhman Mayzel, *Y. L. Perets: zayn lebn un shafn* (New York: IKUF, 1945), 156; idem, *Geven amol a lebn*, 27–28, 42–43; Ellen Kellman, "Dos yidishe bukh alarmirt! Towards the History of Yiddish Reading in Inter-War Poland," *Polin* 16 (2003): 213–41, esp. 222.

43 Khaim Kazdan, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn shulvezn in umophengikn Poyln* (Mexico: Kultur un hilf, 1947), 101.

44 Abraham Golomb, *A halber yorhundert yidishe dertsung* (Rio de Janeiro: Monte Skopus, 1957), 122–27.

Organizations attempting to model themselves on the Kiev Kultur-Lige in other locales, such as Kaunas, Paris, Amsterdam, Detroit, and Berlin, faced similar problems. As a result, none of the Yiddish leagues would achieve the Kiev prototype's scope of activities and supra-political status. For instance, from 1919 Kaunas had a Kultur-Lige that from the very beginning functioned as a proletarian, communist-leaning organization, and as such it was closed down by the authorities.⁴⁵ Although Berlin was a stronghold of Russian Jewish emigration, the city did not boast strong Bundist or other Jewish political groupings interested in the developing of cultural activities in Yiddish. As a result, the Berlin-based league, too, failed to become viable.⁴⁶ The Parisian league, established in 1922, initially united representatives of various political currents who would assemble in a café in the Latin Quarter. Unlike its Berlin counterpart, it did succeed in developing itself into an active organization with affiliations in towns throughout France. Ultimately, however, the French Kultur-Lige became an arena for political intrigues and manoeuvrings until the "red faction" attained, in 1925, full Communist dominance, turning it into an affiliate of the *Main-d'œuvre immigrée*, a trade unionist organization composed of immigrant workers.⁴⁷ As Marc Chagall (who had been associated with the Kultur-Lige during his Moscow stint) complained in 1925, writing from Paris to his friend, the American Yiddish novelist Joseph Opatoshu, "various *Kultur-lige* people want us to be close to the people, the workers, and wherever else!"⁴⁸

In November 1922, the Warsaw journal *Kultur* (Culture), published by the "elitist group," featured Moyshe Zilberfarb's article entitled "On Individual or Party Foundations?" Zilberfarb honed in on the Polish Jewish cultural landscape:

In recent years, the Jewish labor institutions in Poland have been developed exclusively along party lines. Everything belonged to the parties—trade unions, workers' cooperatives, evening classes, schools, workers' clubs, and workers' soup kitchen. It is not merely some links with this or that party. Rather, it means full dominance of one of the parties— from the personnel to the ideological direction. The moment a new party

45 Unpublished Yiddish memoirs of the former Kaunas activist David Tomback, preserved in the YIVO Archive (New York), RG 454, box 1, 10.

46 "Berliner 'kultur-lige,'" *Undzer bavegung* 5 (1923): 12.

47 M. Liro, "Di geshikhte fun der kultur-lige," in *10 yor kultur lige* (Paris: Kultur-Lige, 1932), 3–11; Lynda Khayat, "Les étudiants juifs étrangers à Strasbourg au tournant des années trente," *Archives Juives* 38.2 (2005): 12.

48 Benjamin Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times: A Documentary Narrative* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 337.

appears as a separate cohort in the labor movement, it has to build a parallel network of labor institutions, such as kitchens and schools, cooperatives and libraries, which turn essentially into outposts of the party.⁴⁹

Six decades later, the Israeli historian Ezra Mendelsohn described Jewish parties in Poland as substitutes for both “the decaying home” and a state that was not “serving this particular group the way it should.” Hence “one gets the kind of party that is also an entire world, with its schools, its cultural institutions, its recreational institutions, and so forth and so on.”⁵⁰ As a result, very little apolitical space was left in Poland for cultural activities sponsored by an organization that aspired to be trans-partisan and even trans-national.

Still, the publishing house Kultur-Lige started out as a struggling independent body and managed to find a niche in Warsaw’s already overcrowded Jewish publishing market. The city boasted several well-established publishers, including the syndicate Tsentral (Central), created by four publishers in 1911; the “Brothers Levin-Epshtein” that moved its office from Ukraine to Warsaw in 1885; and the Yehudiya publishing house founded in 1912. In the early 1920s, Warsaw publishers produced several hundred religious and secular Jewish books annually. In addition, books appeared in other towns in Poland. Boris Kletzkin, based in Vilna, had been publishing middle-brow and high-brow literature since 1910. The Kultur-Lige elbowed its way into this highly populated terrain, positioning itself as a pan-Diasporic publisher of high-quality literature. It printed two poetic volumes by the poet Peretz Markish, who had moved from Ukraine to Warsaw; the first book by Israel Joshua Singer, a recent returnee from Russia; and books by two New York-based writers—the poet H. Leivik and the novelist Joseph Opatoshu. *In Poylishe velder* (In Polish Woods), Opatoshu’s 1921 novel, became a bestseller—the Kultur-Lige released it in 1922 with a print-run of 3,500, and produced 10 more editions within two years. In November 1922, the American writer Peretz Hirschbein, who like Opatoshu contributed to the New York daily *Der tog* (Day), signed an agreement with the Kultur-Lige to publish his oeuvre. Hirschbein invested his own money in the venture, paying the publisher by means of commissions from the sales in Poland and the United States.⁵¹

49 Moyshe Zilberfarb, “Af personale oder parteyishe yesoydes?,” *Kultur* (November 1922).

50 Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 212.

51 Nakhman Mayzel, *Yoysef Opatoshu* (Warsaw: Literarishe bleter, 1937), 64; Mayzel, *Geven amol a lebn*, 37–39, 48–51; Estraiikh, *In Harness*, 19–20; Cohen, “The USA-Eastern Europe Yiddish Book Trade and the Formation of an American Yiddish Cultural Center,” 69.



FIGURE 13.11 Erd-vey (*Earth-woe*), by Israel Joshua Singer (Warsaw: Kultur-lige, 1922). From the Archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York. COURTESY OF YIVO.

According to the September 1922 memorandum written by the Kultur-Lige for the American Joint Jewish Distribution Committee, the league—whose activities began “with no funds on hand except a loan of 1,000,000 Marks [hyperinflated *marka polska*] obtained from friends”—managed to get 50,000,000 Marks from the sale of its books. About 70 percent of this income had been earned in Poland, while the United States (10 percent), Romania (10 percent) and Ukraine (4 percent) were the most significant foreign markets. Books were sold also in Germany, Latvia, Argentina, Brazil, Lithuania, France, England, Estonia, Belgium, South Africa, and “the Far East” (meaning, most probably, Harbin).⁵²

Ultimately, however, all efforts to have a stable, non-party affiliated organization fell through in an environment beset by ideological factionalism. In 1924, it became clear that the Kultur-Lige was at the end of its rope. Its journal, *Bikher-velt* (World of Books), which appeared in Kiev from January to August 1919 and was re-launched in Warsaw in January, 1922, had to be phased out after April, 1924. (From April 1928 to August 1929, it re-emerged as a Bundist-controlled monthly.) Its replacement, the highbrow weekly *Literarische bleter* (Literary Pages), was produced in Boris Kletzkin's publishing house rather than as an organ of the Kultur-Lige. In the eighth issue of the *Literarische bleter*, dated 27 June 1924, an article by the leading left Poale Tzionist Zerubavel (Yakov Vitkin) was quite revealingly entitled “Concerning the Question of Liquidation of the Organization Kultur-Lige.” Zerubavel laid the entire blame on the Bund and its unwillingness to tolerate parity with other Jewish political currents. By 1924, Mayzel and Melamed remained the only non-Bundist members of the executive. They left the organization when the Kultur-Lige ceased to function as an independent organization.

While remaining officially unaffiliated with any party, the league had effectively become an outpost of the Bund.⁵³ As a Bund-controlled publishing house, it continued to print hundreds of titles, with the bestselling Yiddish novelist and playwright Sholem Asch as its leading author. In 1928, it published 67 books and journals. Under the directorship of Chaim Wasser, a member of the Bund's central committee, the Kultur-Lige became one of the largest publication projects in Poland. Thousands of dollars worth of books, including

52 “Publishing House Kultur League, Warsaw,” 27 September 1922. The Archive of the American Joint Jewish Distribution Committee, item 333115, 1–5, here 2 and 3.

53 Ellen Kellman, “The (Brief) Afterlife of the (*umparteyishe*) Kultur-Lige in Interwar Poland,” *Jews and Slavs* 22 (2003): 114.

teaching material for Yiddish secular schools, would be sold to American distributors.⁵⁴

In 1931, Abraham Cahan, editor of the New York *Forverts*, accused the Kultur-Lige of producing “translations of Bolshevik writers.” This was an exaggeration. Although several books by Soviet authors, including Ilya Ehrenburg, did appear under the Kultur-Lige imprint, Cahan’s remark simply reflected his and his circle’s negative stance towards the Polish Bund, which—according to Cahan—“was closer to Communism than to Socialism.”⁵⁵ Indeed, on some political scales, including the right-wing socialist scale of Menshevik and Menshevik-leaning socialists, both the Polish Bund and its cultural organizations were ideologically quite close to Moscow, though the Bund and the Jewish Communists always remained rivals.

In addition to its publishing house, libraries formed one of the most significant constituents of the Kultur-Lige in Poland. In the 1930s, Herman (Hersh) Kruk, who in 1920 changed his ideological affiliation from Communism to Bundism, played a central role in the league. In 1930, he was appointed director of the Warsaw library, named after the prominent Bundist Bronisław Grosser. That same year, this largest of all Jewish libraries in the city and most important of all workers’ libraries in the country was now run by the Kultur-Lige. Kruk and his colleagues employed modern librarianship and coordinated some 400 (i.e., about a half of all) Jewish libraries in towns around the country. Although in 1931, during the census of the Polish population, 79 per cent of Jews named Yiddish as their mother tongue, the Warsaw library revealed a dwindling interest in Yiddish books among its readers. Initially, until 1931, its collection did not include books in Polish; but by the 1930s it was compelled to establish a Polish collection because the younger generation increasingly shunned Yiddish books and authors. Polish and Yiddish translations of books by Jules Verne, rather than works by Yiddish authors, were popular among the library’s readers.⁵⁶

54 Cohen, *The USA-Eastern Europe Yiddish Book Trade*, 72.

55 S. Kan, “Ab. Kahan vegn ‘Kultur-Lige’ un ‘Vokhnshrift,’” *Vokhnshrift far Literatur, Kunst un Kultur*, 6 November 1931, 5; *Ab. Kahan un der “Bund” in Poyln* (New York: Bundisher Klub, 1932), 11. See also Jack Jacobs, *On Socialists and “The Jewish Question” after Marx* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 28–29.

56 Aleksandra Bilewicz and Stefania Walasek (eds.), *Rola mniejszości narodowych w kulturze i oświacie polskiej w latach 1700–1939* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1998), 258–59; David H. Stam (ed.), *International Dictionary of Library Histories*, vol. 1 (Chicago and London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), 181; Nathan Cohen, “The Jews of Independent Poland—Linguistic and Cultural Changes,” in Ernst Krausz and Gitta Tulea (eds.), *Starting the Twenty-First Century: Sociological Reflections and Challenges*

Political and cultural education of the masses played an important role in the activities of each party. Thus, when the Kultur-Lige had been monopolized by the Bund, the left Poale Tzion launched its educational arm, Ovnkursn far arbeter (Evening Courses for Workers).⁵⁷ In November 1925, the Bund used the framework of the Kultur-Lige to establish its *Folks-universitet* (People's University), which evolved into a vibrant cultural institution. Its lectures and literary galas, conveniently held in evenings and on weekends, were attended by hundreds of people. Separate classes targeted illiterate adults or those who sought to improve their general education. (Among those who joined the Bund were hard-up people with little or no education—porters, butchers, street vendors and simply poorly-qualified workers.)⁵⁸ Summer camping and tourism, including trips to France, Italy and Germany, also became domains of the Kultur-Lige's activities. The Kultur-Lige would encourage people to go to theatres and cinemas by getting quantity discounts and distributing cheaper tickets. In 1929, the avant-garde Yiddish Theatre Studio, led by Michael Weichert, was established at the Kultur-Lige. Despite the severe economic problems of the period, the league remained active through the 1930s, even playing a role in local and national elections.⁵⁹

The Fate of the Kultur-Lige: The World Yiddish Cultural Congress

In 1932, Mayzel summed up the experience of establishing the Kultur-Lige in Poland:

Once, ten or eleven years ago, the slogan was tossed around about creating a united worldwide Yiddish cultural organization (at that time it was associated with the popular and catchy name of the Kultur-Lige). Leagues appeared in a number of places, but they did not have any central governing body, nor had they any well-defined program or clear-cut

(New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 166; Markus Kirchoff, *Häuser des Buches: Bilder jüdischer Bibliotheken* (Leipzig: Reclam, 2002), 41–43. Yiddish translations or adaptations of Jules Verne's books began to appear from the end of the 19th century. Many of them were produced by the Warsaw publisher A. Gitlin.

57 Bina Garntzarska-Kadari, *Di linke poyle-tzion in poynl biz der tsveyter velt-milkhome* (Tel Aviv: Y.L. Peretz Farlag, 1995), 299.

58 Bernard Goldstein, *20 yor in varshever bund, 1919–1939* (New York: Unser Tsait, 1960), 187.

59 P. Kozhets, "Iz istorii bor'by za narodnyi front v Pol'she," *Voprosy istorii* 7 (1962): 83; Gertrud Pickhan, "Gegen den Strom": *Der allgemeine jüdische Arbeiterbund "Bund" in Polen 1918–1939* (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2001), 230–35.

purpose. Therefore they either declined or took a peculiar character and form. At that time, Jewish life was still unstable, everything remained very turbulent, people did not know which balance of power would prevail between various Jewish parties, groupings and movements. All the energy was wasted in political bargaining and bickering and in attempts to secure as much influence as possible in governing bodies [of various organizations]—as it happened in Warsaw and Vilna, where the Kultur-Lige tried to establish its centers.⁶⁰

Indeed, Yiddishism, in its “pure,” non-partisan forms, could survive and even prosper in relatively narrow intellectual circles and their organizations, such as the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO) and the Yiddish chapter of the International PEN Club. However, it failed to develop into a properly organized mass movement even in such a populous Jewish center as Warsaw. Seeds of the Yiddish language’s decline could be detected even during its heyday in the 1910s: while many intellectuals embraced the language of the masses, the masses proper regarded Yiddish as a language of little worth.⁶¹

In the 1920s and 1930s, many “pure” Yiddishists moved over to the Communist camp. Thus, a pro-Soviet newspaper, *Fraynd* (Friend), was launched in Warsaw in April 1934 under the management of Boris Kletzkin, one of the best-known and most respected members of the Yiddish publishing world.⁶² Soviet Communism’s international character and initial, unprecedented support of Yiddish culture convinced many people that the Soviet Union and pro-Soviet circles in other countries offered the best ideological environment for realizing Jewish national and cultural aspirations. Peretz Hirschbein, who spent about a year in the Soviet Union in 1928–29, believed that the new Communist country could attract hundreds of thousands of Jewish emigrants from Poland.

Jacob Lestschinsky, who like Hirschbein did not belong to the Communist movement, offered three reasons for why Poland could not match Moscow’s political stance towards Jews and, as a result, had a less attractive image. First, Poland did not have territories for colonization and could not even contemplate projects like Birobidzhan, the area in the Far East of Russia allocated for a Soviet Jewish territorial unit (from May 1934—the Jewish Autonomous Region). Second, while tens of thousands of Soviet Jews had replaced the

60 Nakhman Mayzel, *Af undzer kultur-front: problemen fun literatur un kultur-shafn* (Varshe: Literarishe bleter, 1936), 223–24.

61 A. Litvin, “Yidish, yidish, yidish: der kurs fun mame-loshn heybt zikh in rusland,” *Forverts* (2 July 1910): 5.

62 Estraikh, *In Harness*, 66.

pre-revolutionary white-collar cadre, independent Poland did not have such a dearth of educated people and thus lacked similar opportunities. Third, rapid industrialization in the Soviet Union created jobs for Jews there, whereas the Polish economy was beset by chronic unemployment. Moreover, the Soviet government sought to transform its Jewish population for the better, whereas the Polish government merely hoped that its Jewish population would emigrate.⁶³

The Kultur-Lige ideology found a new incarnation in the World Yiddish Cultural Congress (YKUF), whose formation in September 1937 in Paris was inspired by the grandiose international Congress in Defense of Culture, convened in Paris in June 1935. It reflected the *modus operandi* adopted by various anti-fascist ideological currents, Communist and non-Communist, which had collaborated during the Popular Front period. In this climate of cooperation, an international group of intellectuals who came to Vilna in August, 1935, to participate in the congress of YIVO announced the founding of a movement called the Yiddish Culture Front, which sought to protect Yiddish culture. In fact, YIVO did not support the initiative and supporters of the campaign had to find a time and venue outside the conference—they assembled late in the evening in a Vilna café. Mayzel and Chagall, the writers Yehushe Perle and Alter Kacyzne, and the historians Emanuel Ringelblum and Raphael Mahler were among the few dozen intellectuals who put their signatures on the new movement's manifesto. The founders sought to protect their culture not only from Fascism, but also from other factors contributing to the erosion of the Yiddish environment. They were worried, for instance, that in addition to the “big cultures,” Lithuanian and Latvian culture had begun to distract the younger Jewish generation from Yiddish. An increasing number of young literati created works in those languages, which previously were not in competition with Yiddish.⁶⁴

A congress of the new movement could not be convened in Poland, where it was seen as a Communist ploy (the Communist Party operated underground), and its members had to disguise their activities as a campaign to celebrate the centenary of the “grandfather” of modern Yiddish literature Mendele Moykher Sforim (1836–1917). The Yiddish Culture Front met resistance from the Bund, which as in the early days of the Warsaw Kultur-Lige, kept a wary eye on any initiative that could undermine its role as main custodian of secular Yiddish culture. In addition, the notion of a world-wide, supra-class Jewish nation

63 Gennady Estraiikh, “From ‘Green Fields’ to ‘Red Fields’: Peretz Hirschbein’s Soviet Sojourn, 1928–1929,” *Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe* 56 (2006): 60–81, esp. 76; idem, “Jacob Lestschinsky: A Yiddish Dreamer and Social Scientist,” *Science in Context* 20.2 (2007): 215–37, esp. 229.

64 Mayzel, *Af undzer kultur-front*, 168–69; idem, *Geven amol a lebn*, 372–80.

jarred the Bund ideologists' Marxist sensitivities to what they saw as "nationalist" constructs.⁶⁵ As a result, Paris seemed much better suited for a Yiddish cultural congress, especially as the Jewish organizations that had established their European or central headquarters in Berlin after World War I had moved to Paris in 1933. Significantly, Jewish Communists, who supported the Yiddish Culture Front as part of the Popular Front's paradigm, had a stronger organization (including the press) in Paris than did the Bund.⁶⁶

In May, 1937, Mayzel went to Paris as a delegate to the 15th congress of the International PEN Club. While in Paris, he also took part in a meeting at the studio of the famous sculptor Naum (Nahum) Aronson. Among the guests were Isaac Nakhman Steinberg, a Yiddish delegate from London (in 1917–18, Steinberg, a member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, was the People's Commissar of Justice in Lenin's government), and Moyshe Shalit, a representative of the Vilna-based Yiddish Writers and Journalists Association, which enthusiastically supported the idea of convening a world conference for discussing the situation in Yiddish culture. Shalit had a high opinion of Paris, the "community of about one hundred thousand Jewish dwellers, with a constant influx of Jewish intellectual and proletarian youth, in the world city of Paris, in the heart of Europe, at the time of cataclysms in surrounding countries."⁶⁷ The gathering at the art master's studio proclaimed themselves the initiators of a Yiddish Culture Front in France, which aimed first of all to organize a world congress of Yiddish intellectuals. The front itself emerged in September 1937, under the chairmanship of Aronson. The main organizer of the congress was

65 Mayzel, *Geven amol a lebn*, 378; Haim Zhitlovski, *Undzer nayer kultur-viln: vos vil der ykuf?* (New York: YKUF, 1941), 26; Matthew Hoffman, "From Czernowitz to Paris: The International Yiddish Culture Congress of 1937," in Kalman Weiser and Joshua A. Fogel (eds.), *Czernowitz at 100: The First Yiddish Language Conference in Historical Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 153.

66 See Renée Poznanski, *Jews in France during World War II* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2001), 10; Aline Benain and Audrey Kichelewski, "Parizer Haynt et Naïe Presse, les itinéraires paradoxaux de deux quotidiens parisiens en langue yiddish," *Archives Juives* 36.1 (2003): 52–69.

67 Moyshe Shalit, "Di naye yidishe gaystike kolonye in Paris," *Literarische bleter* (15 June 1934): 375. See also Moyshe Shalit, "Ideologischer moment," in Moyshe Shalit (ed.), *Almanakh fun yidishn literatn- un zhurnalistn-fareyn in vilna* (Vilna: n.p., 1938), 12; Mikhail Krutikov, "Isaac Nahman Steinberg: From Anti-Communist Revolutionary to Anti-Zionist Territorialist," *Jews in Eastern Europe* 1–2 (1999): 5–24; Hirsz Abramowicz, *Profiles of a Lost World: Memoirs of East European Jewish Life before World War II* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1999), 321–26.

the Yiddish playwright and journalist Chaim (Henri) Sloves, a Białystok-born enthusiast of the Bolshevik revolution, who settled in France in 1926.⁶⁸

The congress took place in Paris on 17–21 September, 1937, with 104 delegates representing 677 organizations and institutions from Austria, Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Britain, Canada, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, Holland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Mexico, Palestine, Poland, Romania, Switzerland, South Africa, United States, and Uruguay. The American delegation represented 452 organizations and institutions, which had participated in the American Culture Congress, 27–28 August; the Polish delegation: 72 organizations and institutions; the French delegation: 35. In the Soviet climate of purges, however, the Soviet party leadership did not allow a would-be delegation of five Yiddish luminaries—David Bergelson, Itsik Fefer, Izi Kharik, Moyshe Litvakov and Solomon Mikhoels—to take part in the World Yiddish Cultural Congress.⁶⁹

“Yiddishland” became the catchword of the congress. Joseph Opatoshu stated that “[a]s a result of the historic development, ‘Ashkenaz’ has become an ideological rather than a geographic notion, it’s become ‘Yiddishland.’” Daniel Charney, the younger brother of Shmuel Niger and a well-known Yiddish litterateur in his own right, argued that the time had come to establish a “central address for so-called Yiddishland.”⁷⁰ It was a “land” populated by *progressive* people who regarded themselves part of a worldwide Yiddish-speaking *nation* (rather than religious group), united by one culture and language.⁷¹ The delegates and, generally, many activists, saw Paris as the only logical center for this virtual Yiddishland and its World Yiddish Cultural Association.

However, during the remaining years leading up to World War II, Paris did not evolve into the new Yiddish intellectual capital, although the YKUF’s headquarters were located in the city. Similar to Weimar Berlin,⁷² the French capital could function at best as a crossroads between the real centers of “Yiddishland,” where several oases of the Kultur-Lige ideology endured on the eve and in the aftermath of World War II. The strongest of them was the New York-based

68 Mayzel, *Geven amol a lebn*, 380–81. See also Annette Aronowicz, “Haim Sloves, the Jewish People, and a Jewish Communist’s Allegiances,” *Jewish Social Studies* 9.1 (2002): 95–142.

69 Materials of the congress came out in *Ershter abveltekhher yidisher kultur-kongres* (New York: IKUF, 1937). See also Gennady Estraiikh, *In Harness*, 99–100.

70 *Ershter abveltekhher yidisher kultur-kongres*, 26, 33. See also Hoffman, *From Czernowitz to Paris*, 157.

71 Zhitlowski, *Undzer nayer kultur-viln*, 12.

72 Cf. Gennady Estraiikh and Mikhail Krutikov (eds.), *Yiddish in Weimar Berlin: At the Crossroads of Diaspora Politics and Culture* (Oxford: Legenda, 2010).

YKUF, with Nakhman Mayzel as one of its central figures. According to Isaac Bashevis Singer, Mayzel “had for years flitted between socialism and communism before becoming a full-fledged communist.”⁷³ In reality, Mayzel was a fellow traveller whose mild pro-Sovietism began to evaporate in the 1950s.⁷⁴

A new international network of organizations, infused with the spirit of the Kultur-Lige traditions, emerged after the Holocaust. The American YKUF and similar bodies in such countries as Canada, Argentina, and France gravitated to Poland, to her promising *nusekh poyln* in the shape of Jewish cultural autonomy. The Warsaw-based Yiddish publishing house Yidish Bukh issued co-editions with the YKUF and the Paris-based imprint Oysnay (Anew). Chaim Sloves's plays were performed in Warsaw by the State Polish Yiddish Theatre.⁷⁵ Still, the YKUF and its sister organizations remained on the margins of Jewish life because Yiddish and its secular culture “were not transmitted beyond one or two generations. Uprooted from its native soils, Yiddish culture did not transplant well with the immigrants who bore it.”⁷⁶ All of these organizations were scorned by the Jewish mainstream as stooges of Moscow; and they became almost irrelevant following the anti-Jewish campaign in Poland in 1968, which brought to an end the period of *nusekh poyln* and the hopes of the left-wing Yiddishists. By that time, in any case, their constituency had already shrunk under the impact of the de-sanctification of Stalin, when revelations about his repression and terror moved many erstwhile Soviet sympathizers to change their ideological orientation.⁷⁷

In 1964, that is, even before the terminal decline of Warsaw's post-Holocaust Yiddish center, Mayzel settled in Israel, hardly the proper place for a committed Yiddishist. In fact, a number of Yiddishist activists, including the social scientist Jacob Lestschinsky and the linguist Yudel Mark, moved from the United

73 Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Love and Exile: An Autobiographical Trilogy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 50.

74 Gennady Estraiikh, *Yiddish in the Cold War* (Oxford: Legenda, 2008), 18.

75 Annette Aronowicz, “Homens Mapole: Hope in the Intermediate Postwar Period,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 98.3 (2008): 355–88; Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikow, “The Last Yiddish Books Printed in Poland: Outline of the Activities of Yidish Bukh Publishing House,” in Elvira Grözinger and Magdalena Ruta (eds.), *Under the Red Banner: Yiddish Culture in the Communist Countries in the Postwar Era* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2008), 118.

76 Zvi Gitelman, “The Decline of the Diaspora Jewish Nation: Boundaries, Content, and Jewish Identity,” *Jewish Social Studies* 4.2 (1998): 112–32, here 122.

77 Gennady Estraiikh, “Metamorphoses of *Morgn-frayhayt*,” in Gennady Estraiikh and Mikhail Krutikov (eds.), *Yiddish and the Left* (Oxford: Legenda, 2001), 144–66; see also Leszek W. Gluchowski and Antony Polonsky (eds.), *1968: Forty Years After; Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry* 21 (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2009).

States to Israel in the 1950s through the 1970s. By that time, the Diasporic national landscape, where the Peretzian (and Kultur-Ligean) “golden chain” continued to be preserved, had become almost invisible, its organization populated predominantly by elderly people with old loyalties.⁷⁸ They, like other secular ideologues, had to a certain extent failed; they were not destined to realize the dream of a Diasporic Jewish nation with a contents-rich form of Yiddish culture.

78 See, e.g, Estraiikh, “Jacob Lestschinsky,” 233.