

Jews celebrate completion of the writing of a Torah scroll, synagogue in Dubrovna, Belorussia, early Twentieth century, in the Pale of Jewish Settlement. Dubrovna, a textile center, produced most of the prayer shawls for the Russian Empire.



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I.L. Peretz, Father of the Yiddish Renaissance



Isaac Leibush Peretz

by Paul Kreingold

*'It is not enough to speak Yiddish—
you must have something to say.'*

Introduction

The year 2002 marked the 150th birthday of I.L. Peretz, the Father of the Yiddish Renaissance. Playwright, poet, composer, essayist, and political organizer, Peretz, by the time of his death in 1915, was the most published Yiddish writer in history, and the most beloved.¹

Under his intellectual leadership, Yiddish was transformed, in less than a century, from a “kitchen jargon,” to one of the great languages of the world, spoken by over 11,000,000 people; a language which was capable of transmitting the ideas of the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment, to the Jews of Poland,

Russia, and the United States. The *Haskalah* was initiated a hundred years earlier by the great German-Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, who demonstrated that a Jew could free himself from the parochialism of ghetto life, become recognized as the most profound thinker in the “outside” world, and still remain true to the faith of his fathers. In a 1999 speech, Helga Zepp LaRouche describes Mendelssohn as follows:

Moses Mendelssohn is a good example of a world-historical individual. By breaking out of the containment of the Jewish ghetto, taking the best of humanist culture from Plato to Leibniz to Bach to everybody else, he is a model of what every oppressed minority can do today. Take everything mankind has produced so far, add your own creative contribution, and be part of the creation of a new Renaissance.²

I.L. Peretz and his collaborators did exactly that in the late Nineteenth century, and, as a result, a Yiddish Renaissance flowered.

But, why is this worth looking at today? With the destruction of, especially, Polish Jewry, the assimilation of American Jews, and the creation of modern Hebrew, Yiddish is now, if not dead, then certainly dying. Why then spend time studying its origins? This is not difficult to answer. Firstly, the Jews of Eastern Europe were the last national group in Europe to undergo a Renaissance; a Renaissance with Warsaw at its center and literature as its primary creation. Yiddish literature: the stories, poems, and plays of Mendele Moykher-Sforim (Mendele Mocher Seforim), I.L. Peretz, Sholem Aleichem, and others, is uniquely the literature of the Jewish Pale, but like all world-class literature, it speaks universally to all of humanity.

And there is more. When I was growing up in New York City, there was an old picture hanging on the wall of my bedroom. Taken outdoors in 1906, carefully posed, its background is a thick pine forest and its subject is a Siberian farm family, a father with five children. In the foreground are two young men, half-lying, half-sitting. One of them is my grandfather, Adolph Rambam, and both of them are political prisoners, in exile in Siberia for



Political prisoners, in exile for crimes against the Russian Empire, pose with a Siberian farm family (seated), 1906. The author's grandfather is reclining on the right.

Courtesy of Paul Kreingold

crimes against the Russian Empire. My grandfather's life story: fighting Cossacks on the streets of Riga during the 1905 Russian Revolution; publishing an illegal newspaper; his arrest and sentence to eight years in Siberian exile, his harrowing escape and eventual emigration to America; these, not Cinderella, were the “fairy tales” on which we were raised.

This, too, is the Yiddish Renaissance. The creators of this “new” language, speaking, for the first time, for an oppressed and despised people, living under brutal political and economic conditions, were of course concerned with the well-being of their brothers, Jewish and Gentile. Yiddish became not only a literate language, but a political language of labor, unionism, and protest, and Yiddish-language organizations such as the Jewish Bund played an important role in the history of late-Nineteenth-century Russia and Poland.

From a literary standpoint, the writers of the Yiddish Renaissance should be judged against the greats of European literature. Their stories are not “cute” and should never be read aloud with pseudo-Yiddish accents; that is, to do them justice, the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* is an insufficient model. These writers saw themselves in a brotherhood with Cervantes, Heine, Poe, and Pushkin.³ Many of them would have become great *Polish* writers, if growing anti-Semitism had not frozen them out of civil society.

The general theme of their writing is the need for uni-

versal progress. The oppressed minority, of which they were the eloquent spokesmen, could never be free, unless mankind as a whole were free. In this idea, they reflected the cataclysmic social changes brought on by the freeing of the Russian serfs in 1861, the American slaves in 1863, the Polish Rebellion the same year, and the freeing of the Polish serfs the following year.

I.L. Peretz was born, lived, and died in this period, from 1852 through 1915, and can be understood only within its context. When Peretz died, on April 3, 1915, he had been the dominant figure in the Yiddish literary life in Warsaw for 25 years, and over 100,000 people attended his funeral. But, Polish newspapers reported nothing of this event, as Poland was in the throes of a boycott of Jewish businesses. It was not always so in Poland. In fact, only 52 years earlier, during the 1863 Polish Uprising against the Russian Empire, Jews and Poles fought side by side against a common enemy. In fact, the history of Jewish immigration to Poland was, until the end of the Eighteenth century, basically a success story.

A Surprising Early History of Poland

The first Jews, in significant numbers, began to arrive in Poland in the Twelfth century, and by the Thirteenth century, Poland was criticized by the Papal Legate for allowing Jews to dress like everyone else.⁴ When the Black Death devastated Europe in the Fourteenth century, Poland, because of its lack of population density, was spared. Of the thousands who escaped Western Europe, many were skilled artisans, and others were Jews who brought with them banking and business skills. The result of this immigration was a period of great growth for Poland, as thousands of acres were brought under cultivation to provide food for Europe. While in the rest of Europe Jews were blamed for the plague, and some of the most horrific atrocities were committed against Jewish communities, in the Kingdom of Poland, Jews were allowed “their own fiscal, legal, and even political organization,” in an environment of tolerance established during the reign of Casimir III (the Great) (1309-1370).⁵

The Jewish communities in Poland continued to grow, especially as other countries expelled their Jewish populations, such as Spain in 1492, and Portugal in 1496. By 1772, four-fifths of the world’s Jews were living in Poland. But, it was not only Jews who had immigrated; in fact, only 54 percent of Poland’s population was Catholic in 1794.⁶ Read, and enjoy, one author’s description of Eighteenth century Poland-Lithuania:

[T]here flourished a profusion of peoples, a riot of religions, a luxuriance of languages. Polish noblemen and Slavonic peasants mingled with German burghers and with Jewish

or Armenian merchants. . . . The Roman Catholic majority was surrounded by a colorful array of sects and faiths—by Calvinists, Lutherans, Arians, Unitarians; Orthodox, Uniates and Old Believers; by orthodox Jews, Karaim, Chassidim and Frankists; by Armenian monophysites and by Tartar Muslims. The official languages of Polish and Latin in the kingdom were matched by Ruski and Polish in the Grand Duchy. Vernacular speech was conducted in anything from the four main regional dialects of Polish, plus Kashub and *goralski* (the highland brogue), to Ruthenian in its northern (Byelorussian) or southern (Ukrainian) forms; Lithuanian, Latvian and (to 1600) Prussian; *plattdeutsch* in the northern cities, Yiddish, Tartar, or Armenian. . . . The liturgical languages in use included Church Latin, Old Church Slavonic, High (Lutheran) German, Hebrew, and Arabic. Documents were written in a variety of alphabets including the Roman, Cyrillic, Hebrew, and Arabic. Even the calendar showed marked variations. In a city like Wilno, for example, when the Poles celebrated the Constitution of 3 May A.D. 1792, the Orthodox were still on 22 April, the Jews were in the month of Iyyar after Passover in the year 5552 AM, and the Tartars were in the eighth month of the year Hegira 1205.⁷

Now, one should not get overly sentimental about old Poland. No American who cherishes our Constitution and history, would actually want to live in pre-partition Poland. After all, this was a feudal nation, with the majority of the population tied to the land and very poor, ruled over, quite ruthlessly, by a noble class called *szlachta*. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that Poland offered to Jews and others a safe haven, where they could live in relative security, and that haven was offered for over 500 years.

The Partition of Poland

Between 1772 and 1795, Poland was absorbed into the Russian Empire as a result of the First, Second, and Third Partitions of 1773, 1793, and 1795. This, of course, was the period of the American Revolution, and, as one would expect, the fight for a North American republic was watched closely in Warsaw, Krakow, and Lubin. On May 3, 1791 the Polish parliament, or Sejm, approved Europe’s first written constitution. Other policies were initiated to improve the lot of labor, peasants, and the Jews, and create a national bank and paper currency. Russia quickly sponsored a counter-revolution, and a Russian army of 97,000, led by a few Polish Quislings, quickly defeated the small Polish army of 37,000, but not before Tadeusz Kosciuszko, who had designed the West Point defenses for General George Washington, led the Polish army to one of its few victories.

Soon, Russia and Prussia grabbed more Polish territo-

What Was the Yiddish Renaissance?

Beginning in the Eighteenth century, followers of the great German-Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn undertook to spread his ideas to the majority of Europe's Jews, who lived in Eastern Europe and Russia, and who spoke the Germanic language Yiddish. Known as the *Haskalah* movement, its adherents, the *maskilim*, set out to elevate the Jewish population from the self-imposed backwardness of Hasidic religious fundamentalism. In order to carry out this mission, the impoverishment of the Yiddish language as a conveyor of profound ideas had to be overcome, and a number of Jewish authors undertook the task of creating true literature in Yiddish, as a means of popular education. This was known as the Yiddish Renaissance. The three greatest of these authors were Mendele Moykher-Sforim (1836-1917), I.L. Peretz (1852-1915), and Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916). Their success in this mission, led to a proliferation of Yiddish-language publications, schools, and political movements throughout Russia and Poland.

The deteriorating situation for Jews in the Russian Empire and Eastern Europe at the end of the Nineteenth century, especially the anti-Semitic pogroms in which thousands of Jews were slaughtered, caused mass emigration to America. It is from this safe haven that the Yiddish Renaissance continued to wield influence—despite the Nazi Holocaust which decimated European Jewry—through the contribution of its descendants to American society, most notably in the struggles for unionization and Civil Rights. —PK

ry, turning the remaining area into such an economic disaster that by 1793 the six largest banks in Poland had declared bankruptcy. In 1794, the Poles launched an insurrection. A Polish cobbler drove the Russians out of Warsaw in 24 hours, killing 4,000 Russian soldiers. A Jewish Regiment of the Polish National Guard was formed, marking, according to one author, the “first Jewish military formation since Biblical times.”⁸ Kosciuszko, leading a force of 4,000 regulars and 2,000 peasants armed with scythes, defeated a Russian army.

Eager to stamp out the contagion of Republicanism, and always greedy for more loot, Prussia and Austria joined Russia to crush the insurrection. When its political

leader, Kosciuszko, was wounded and captured on October 10, 1794, the Russians went for the *coup de grâce*. As a harbinger of future policy, the Russians attacked Praga, a Jewish suburb of Warsaw, and massacred the population. Well-warned by this atrocity of the consequences of further resistance, Warsaw capitulated, and the insurrection was over.

Now the dark years began. The cream of Polish leadership, those not dead or captured, went into exile, and ten thousand Polish officers were sent into hard labor. In 1797, a protocol was signed by the victorious powers, “binding themselves to excise the name of Poland from all future documents, to remove any reference to it from diplomatic business, and to strive by every means for its oblivion.”⁹

Russian Policy

For the next hundred years, the period we are considering in this article, the fate of Poland's Jews, and indeed the fate of all Poland's people, rested on the internal battle in the Russian Empire between two factions. On one hand, the “modernizers” attempted various reforms, both economic and social, modelled on American System methods. Arrayed against the “modernizers” was the “Third Rome” grouping. As one author writes, “Every period of actual progress in the Russian Empire was accomplished in opposition to the ‘Third Rome’ cultural outlook of the Russian autocracy and church.” This outlook “promulgated a mass of racist doctrines glorifying the ignorance and submissiveness of the Russian peasantry which, according to this cult ideology, was joined in mystical union with the ‘sacred soil’ of Holy Mother Russia through the intervention of God's agent on Earth, their Caesar (or Czar in Russian).”¹⁰

The result was a see-saw policy of progress and reaction. For example, under Czar Alexander I (1801-1825), the double taxation of Jews was ended and they were permitted to own farmland and establish factories. By the end of his reign, the double taxation was reinstated and the factories and farmland were taken away; in fact, Jews were forced to live in one area of the Empire alone, stretching from Baltic Poland to the Black Sea, dubbed the Pale of Settlement [SEE Map, page 43].

Under Czar Nicholas I (1826-1855), a punitive 25-year military draft was established for Jews. Jews were expelled from all major Russian cities and forced into the Pale, while Jews living in the Pale were forced out of the villages and into the towns. Later, with the ascent of the new Czar, Alexander II, the draft was abolished, and major cities were re-opened to Jewish settlement.

It should be kept in mind that the attacks on the Jews

during this period were not merely attacks on property or civil rights. Their generally miserable economic conditions were worsened 100-fold by pogroms, government- and church-supported attacks by thugs on Jewish communities. One of the results of this misery was the mass emigration of Jews from the Russian Empire and Eastern Europe to the United States late in the Nineteenth century [SEE Map, page 49].

It should not be overlooked that the other powers which had swallowed Poland, Prussia and Austria, were also guilty of the worst kind of economic oppression of the Jews under their control. For example, in Austrian-controlled Galicia:

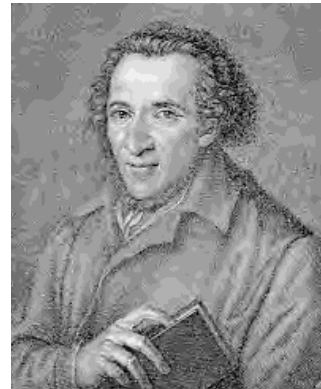
Still more invidious was the introduction in 1797 of the candle tax, which was trebled in the course of two decades. Every married Jewish women was required to pay the candle tax of ten kreutzers on two candles to the tax lessee before the Sabbath began, whether or not she had any money to buy candles! The homes of those who could not pay promptly were raided by the tax collector on Friday night, and he was empowered to confiscate the household goods, including even the bedding. According to . . .

reliable testimony . . . , one would often meet impoverished people on the street on Fridays begging for a few kreutzers in order to pay the candle tax.¹¹

The *Haskalah* and the *Maskilim*: Enlightenment and the Enlighteners

Another important part of this story, which you must know to understand the Yiddish Renaissance, is the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment. Spreading out of Eighteenth-century Germany, from the mind of Moses Mendelssohn, Jews in Eastern Europe began to reject the

Not only did the philosophical and political works of Moses Mendelssohn—known as the “Berlin Socrates”—lay the basis, with his collaborator Gotthold Lessing, for the Weimar Classic of Schiller, Goethe, and the Humboldts, but they inspired the “Haskalah” (Enlightenment) movement that brought the fruits of European culture to the Jews of Eastern Europe, out of which the Yiddish Renaissance was born.



The Granger Collection



Yiddish Renaissance authors. Top row, left to right: Mendele Mocher Sforim, I.L. Peretz, Sholem Aleichem: the “grandfather,” “father,” and “son” of the Yiddish Renaissance. Bottom row, left: Mendele Mocher Sforim surrounded by Y.H. Ravnitzky, S. Anskij, C.N. Bialik, and S.S. Frug. Right: Sholem Asch.

mysticism and fundamentalism of the Hasidic rabbis then dominant, especially in the rural Jewish communities of the Pale. As one author writes:

Science was regarded by the Hasidim to be such a great threat to faith that even medicine was rejected by some of the rebbes. When the terrible cholera epidemic of 1831 broke out, Hersh of Zydaczow deemed it necessary to write a letter enjoining his Hasidim . . . against being treated by a physician. His remedy for cholera was to “recite all Psalms every week, pledge to charity after completing each of the five books of the Psalms, recite the Ketoret (the biblical portions concerning burning of incense in the Tabernacle)

before 'May it be Thy will,' and examine the mezuzahs to insure that they are ritually fit."¹²

The opposite tradition, where reason, science, and religion do not conflict, stretches way back in Judaism, to Maimonides in the Fourteenth century, to Philo of Alexandria in the First century, and to Rabbi Hillel in the First century B.C.

The organizers of the *Haskalah* were the *maskilim*, the Enlighteners. As with Moses Mendelssohn, the *maskil* did not *reject* Judaism, but *embraced* it for its tradition of social order based on law and justice. As opposed to the Hasidic rabbis, the *maskilim* were willing to live in a world inhabited by many religions, by many peoples, who believed differently, and were willing to help build that world.

The conflict between parochial tradition and a wider view is one of the major themes of Nineteenth-century Jewish literature. For example, in Mendele Moykher-Sforim's *Don Quixote*-like novel *The Nag*, the Jewish mother pleads with her *maskil* son, Israel:

"Well, my son, you seem to be drawn to your fairy tales, to burning the midnight oil over your books. . . . Oh those books of yours! All they yield is new cares and woes. Israel, I am only a plain woman and fail to understand why you should be concerned so much over that world of which you speak so often and to which you are so strongly drawn. Stay near your mother where, thank God, you are well taken care of. And for whom, if not for you, my son, have I struggled and worked my fingers to the bone all of my life?"¹³

Great literature also came out of the *Haskalah* written in Hebrew, the holy tongue, but even to the *maskilim*, Yiddish, the language of the people, was merely "jargon." Thus, the Jewish Enlightenment freed Jewish intellectuals in Eastern Europe from their urban ghettos and rural *shtetls* (villages), but the majority of the Jewish population still waited for the *Haskalah* to be transmitted in a language they could understand.

Peretz's Childhood and Youth

Isaac (Yitzhok) Leibush Peretz was born in Eastern Poland, in the city of Zamość, which was founded in 1580 by Jan Zamoyski, a Polish general, educator and art lover. The Polish connection to Italy was strong in the Sixteenth century, and it stretched beyond the shared religion. Zamoyski wanted to build a Renaissance city, so he imported an Italian architect from Padua, Bernardo Mirando. (Zamoyski himself, after attending the Sorbonne and the College de France, had been formerly the rector of the University of Padua). The 20-year city-building project was both an architectural and a com-

mercial success. This new city, whose great buildings included a Catholic church, Franciscan church, Armenian church, Orthodox church, synagogue, university, library, arsenal, public bath, town hall, a palace and three market squares, became a great trading city, whose lively beginnings were fertilized by many cultures and peoples, Poles, Germans, Italians, Greeks, and others.¹⁴

Although the official town history praises the town as a center of "peaceful coexistence" between the various groups, over the years local Jews suffered those indignities, blood libels,¹⁵ starvation, forced conversions, and public hangings, which were quite "normal" in Europe over the last millennium. In addition, because of its location, Zamość was constantly changing hands, as marching armies through siege and slaughter captured the city, despite its moat and high walls.¹⁶ During Peretz's lifetime, the city was ruled at various times by Poland, Austria, and Russia. By 1856, some 60 percent of its population of 4,000 was Jewish.¹⁷

Nevertheless, Zamość was a special place, and Peretz in his biography makes that point very strongly: "The Jewish Enlightenment came to Poland, and outside of Warsaw, Zamość was the most natural place for it to take root." But, says Peretz, the Jews of Zamość were not assimilationists, for with whom could they assimilate?

The Polish middle class, as he describes it, was backward and ignorant. The peasants "were quiet submissive folk, just released from serfdom. . . . The younger ones, still unsure what to do with their freedom, submitted to their elders, who slapped them when they failed to fall on their knees before the landowner, cap in hand and face to the ground." Then there were the officers of the occupying Russian Army. Although they were educated and approachable, Peretz says, "We were flaming Polish patriots," who could never form any alliance with them, especially, "Not, God forbid, in any alliance against the Poles! How long had it been since we prayed for the success of the second Polish uprising?"¹⁸ (This is a reference to the 1863 Polish rebellion against Russia.)

Amongst the Jews, there were many accomplished figures. Moses Mendelssohn's rabbi and first teacher, Israel Samoszcz, was from Zamość. There was Dr. Shloyme Ettinger, a playwright, who wrote a Yiddish adaptation of Schiller's narrative poem "The Song of the Bell"; Jacob Eichenbaum, who wrote Hebrew poetry and translated mathematical works into Hebrew; Alexander Zederbaum, who founded the first Hebrew weekly in Russia in 1860, and its Yiddish supplement two years later.¹⁹

One of the richest men in Zamość, highly assimilated and an "Enlightener," was Abraham Luxemburg. Behind his large house was a walled garden in which, according to Peretz, Abraham's "hunchbacked" daugh-

ter, respected for her education, but “afraid to show herself on the street,” hid from the world and read her books. This young lady, of course, was the revolutionary socialist Rosa Luxemburg.²⁰

Peretz came from a long line of scholars and men of the world. His great-grandfather wrote Talmudic tracts, and it is reported that his great-grandmother studied the Talmud “like a man.”²¹ His grandfathers were merchants in Danzig and Leipzig, and his father a businessman, the owner of a whisky distillery.

The character of Peretz’s parents is lovingly revealed in his memoirs. Of his father, Peretz writes:

[T]he word went out that the government would be drafting men into the army. He was a liberal, and something of an anarchist, and when people got frightened, his advice was not to be frightened and not to comply. People should just refuse to go.

They said, “We’ll be whipped.”

He said, “They can’t whip the whole world.”

“They will take us away in chains.”

“There aren’t chains enough!”

“They’ll put us in prison.”

“Only if they make the whole world a prison.”²²

And, of his mother:

The guest took hold of our large double-eared copper rinsing cup in one hand, emptied it over the other hand, and then, switching hands, filled the cup again to the brim and repeated the process. This he did three times, each time with a full cup.²⁴ Our water carrier was Ayzikl, a tiny, frail man who supported his wife and eight children. He was paid by the week, not by the pail-full, refilling the barrel whenever it ran low. My mother, who was standing beside me, spoke softly to herself, but I could hear her words distinctly: “Pious at Ayzikl’s expense.”²⁴

I.L. Peretz was born in Zamość, a city in eastern Poland near the border of present-day Ukraine.



In 1580, an Italian architect was brought in to construct Zamość as a Renaissance city by its founder, Jan Zamoyski, the former rector of the University of Padua. Above: City Hall. Right: Merchants’ apartments.



Peretz writes: “My father’s, ‘They can’t put the whole world in jail,’ and my mother’s, ‘Pious at Ayzikl’s expense,’ were the two precepts that, once implanted in my youthful soul, took deep root there and later bore fruit in everything I wrote.”²⁵

Early on, the Jews of Zamość made sure that Hasidic rabbis were kept out of the city. “If Zamość got word that a rebbe was on his way, the police were asked to set a guard at every gate, and the community provided a Jew to stand by him on watch. When the wagon appeared, it was challenged: ‘Kudie?’ Where to? ‘Nazad!’ Go back to where you came from!” It was not uncommon for secret converts to Hasidism, once discovered, to be beaten and then driven out of town!

Peretz jokes, “So you see, Her Royal Highness, the Jewish Enlightenment, didn’t have a stitch of work to do Zamość. It was mostly a romantic sentiment. . . . And in compliance with Haskalah directives, people began to shorten their coats to modern style.”²⁶

Peretz grew up in this environment, but nevertheless received the standard Jewish education, studying, and memorizing, huge sections of the Talmud and commentaries. He was quickly recognized as a prodigy, studying

the Hebrew Bible at age three and the Talmud at age six. By the age of 13 he was allowed to read, unsupervised, in the study house, where he discovered Maimonides' rational approach to Jewish law. In fact, *The Guide to the Perplexed* is reported to be the first book he read from cover to cover.²⁷ His reputation for brilliance led a local musician, who had tried, and failed, to open a bookstore, to give him the key to his library.

This library was a dark place, seldom used, with books scattered on tables, floors and shelves. Peretz decided to read every book, seriatim, starting at the door and working his way to the other end of the room. Reportedly, he read French novels, British moral philosophy, German poetry, Polish reformers, and the Napoleonic Code of Law, teaching himself German and Russian along the way. Very quickly he began to doubt all of the parochial beliefs which were instilled in him as an Orthodox Jewish youth. He says: "To whom could I talk to about all this? To whom could I pour out my lament for the ruins in my mind and the corpses in my heart? To the people around me? I lacked the very language to speak to them. I couldn't express these things in Yiddish, because I had no words for these ideas in Yiddish. I couldn't even talk about them to myself when I tried."²⁸

Perhaps as a result of his frustration with Yiddish, but certainly as a reflection of his Polish nationalism, his first published poems were written in Polish at the age of 22, in 1874. Even later on, when he became editor of a Yiddish magazine, he always included reviews of Polish literature.

Young Manhood

The failure of Peretz's first marriage demonstrates the conflicts Jewish society experienced because of changes brought on by the *Haskalah*. Ironically, given who was involved, it was an arranged marriage, which Peretz uneasily accepted because the bride was said to be beautiful and educated. She was all that, and more; the daughter of a famous Warsaw *maskil*, well-known for his writing in Hebrew and Polish on mathematics, geometry, and science. Furthermore, she spoke perfect Polish, and was in touch with some of the leading Polish writers of the day. In sum, the new bride considered her groom a country bumpkin! In addition, as the daughter of a Jewish writer who had grown up under the "honorable poverty" this occupation guaranteed, she was not so happy that her new husband was considering the same path. But, with all her sophistication, this young lady, in the Orthodox fashion, kept her shaven head covered with a wig. It is reported that

Peretz, in a fit of anger, once tore off the wig and threw it into the fire.²⁹

Despite the bad marriage, Peretz attempted to write. His composed Yiddish songs which became popular with teen-agers all over Zamość; wrote poems in Hebrew and, secretly, in Polish (secretly, because he thought they were not very good). In 1873, he travelled to Warsaw to visit his father-in-law and discovered, for the first time, the poverty of his wife's family. "Before he leaves Warsaw, he spends a few unforgettable days in Krashinsky's Garden, the 'Garden of Eden' of the *Haskalah* . . . , at the 'Haskalah bench.' In those days, luminaries of the enlightenment's older *maskilim*, writers, would gather at this bench in this Garden in the Jewish quarter and talk, argue, discuss."³⁰ (One wonders whether this site can still be found in Warsaw, and whether a historic plaque has been installed.)

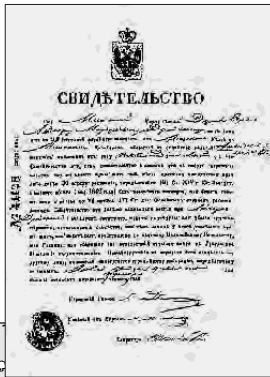
When he returned home, he decided to become a Polish writer and, for the next year, spoke and wrote only in Polish. Then he committed himself to writing Hebrew poetry, some of which was published. After five years of marriage, he divorced his wife and, in 1878, at the age of twenty-six, set up what would be a very successful law practice in Zamość. Soon after, he remarried.

During the approximately ten years that Peretz practiced law, he continued to write: Hebrew poems for Russian periodicals, Yiddish translations of portions of the Bible, songs protesting both anti-Semitism as well as Orthodox traditions. "One of the more popular ones, in typical *maskilish* fashion, ridicules the Zamość Jewish communal institutions, such as the study house and the poorhouse, and complains about the continually rising tax on kosher meat."³¹ He set up a night school for workers, teaching reading, arithmetic, and Jewish history. Soon, the local Hasidim complained to the authorities that the school was "socialistic," and it was shut down. The same thing happened to a school he set up for the poor children of Zamość.

Then, in 1887, the Czarist government, without any explanation, and without the right of appeal, deprived him of the right to practice law. Peretz travelled to Warsaw, and then to St. Petersburg for a personal audience with the Justice Minister of the Russian Empire. After emotionally pleading his case, the minister off-handedly replied, "So, there will be one less talented Jewish lawyer in Russia."³²

Without any means of support, Peretz fell back on his writing. Soon, news arrived in Zamość that a young writer from Kiev, Sholem Aleichem, was publishing a collection of Yiddish writings called *Di Yidishe Folks-Biblyote*. Having just inherited a fortune from his father-in-law, this wealthy young man (who would soon lose

Jews in the Russian Empire were restricted to the Pale of Settlement, which stretched from Poland to the Black Sea; a written pass was required for exit (right). Most inhabitants lived in poverty-stricken "shtetl" (villages) (far right).



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The Pale of Jewish Settlement



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Cobblers and apprentices in their workshop, c. 1900.

everything in stock market speculation) was paying top dollar for each contribution. In the initial communication between these two men, who would later be called the “father” and “grandson” of the Yiddish Renaissance, we can see how distant the “father,” Peretz, was from Yiddish-language circles. He wrote two letters to Sholem Aleichem before admitting that he thought he was writing to Mendele Moykher-Sforim, who would later be known as the “grandfather” of the Yiddish Renaissance!³³

For his collection, Sholem Aleichem selected Peretz’s poem *Monish*, about a young Jew’s seduction by the Christian world, which leads to his destruction. In this poem, Peretz clearly states the problematic nature of the Yiddish language; its inability to discuss anything which

transcends every day life. Ironically, as should be clear from the extract translated below, this lament of Yiddish banality is in itself a major step towards developing the power of the language:

Differently my song would ring
If for gentiles I would sing,
Not in Yiddish, in “Jargon”
That has no proper sound or tone.

It has no words for sex appeal,
And such things as lovers feel.
Yiddish has but quips and flashes,
Words that fall on us like lashes,

Words that stab like poisoned spears,
And laughter that is full of fears,

What Is Yiddish?

Yiddish, the language spoken by Eastern European Jews (it literally means Jewish), is a Germanic language, with significant French vocabulary and syntax. It originated in the 13th century, with the expulsion of the Jews from France and their emigration to the German-speaking Rhineland. The language also contains Hebrew loan words for both liturgical and “family” usage, as well as Russian and Polish, the result of emigration to the east in subsequent centuries. There is an extensive medieval Yiddish literature, including chivalric romances, dating back to the early period; in 1534, a Hebrew-Yiddish dictionary of the Bible was published in Poland.

Although Yiddish uses the Hebrew alphabet and, like Hebrew, is written from right to left, it is a completely distinct language from Hebrew. (Hebrew, like its close relative Arabic, is a member of the Semitic language group.)

Yiddish was spoken by 11 million people worldwide, largely in Europe, at the time of the Holocaust. Jewish immigrants to the United States in the late-19th and early-20th centuries created a vibrant, Yiddish-based culture, which has all but disappeared as a result of assimilation. The contributions from the Yiddish idiom to American English represent a treasure-trove of hundreds of Yiddish words and expressions, in everyday usage.

Here are a few examples:

nosh—to eat a little something, a snack. “Do you want dinner?” “No, I’ll just *nosh*.”

shlep—to carry or drag. “I *shlep* that chair with me whenever I move.”

meshugenah—a crazy person. “My brother-in-law is such a *meshugenah*!”

shtik—a routine, or obsession. “That comedian has a funny *shtik*.”

kibitz—to meddle or make unwelcome comments. “Did you come to *kibitz*, or to play bridge?”

shnorrer—a beggar. A *shnorrer* knocks at the door and says, “Lady, I haven’t eaten in three days!” “So,” says the housewife, “you should force yourself!”

schlemiel—a fool or unlucky person. “A *schlemiel* falls on his back, and breaks his nose!” Less well known is the *schlemazel*, the perennial recipient of others’ bad luck. For example, there might have been a *schlemazel* standing in just the right place, so that when the *schlemiel* fell, it was the *schlemazel’s* nose that was broken. —PK

And there is a touch of gall,
Of bitterness about it all.

It is drenched with tears and blood,
That comes pouring like a flood
From the wounds that never cease,
Of our Jewish agonies.

In Yiddish I have never heard
A single warm and glowing word.³⁴

A passionate man throughout his life, Peretz often spoke of the difficulty of wooing in Yiddish. That he solved this problem is demonstrated not only by his later work, but by the reports of his many amorous liaisons. It is interesting to note that Yiddish speakers hearing *literary* Yiddish spoken for first time, are reported to have exclaimed about their own language, “Why, it is as beautiful as French!”

With the publication of *Monish*, Peretz, now famous, moved back to Warsaw, where he lived a bohemian intellectual’s life, with many creative friends, all of whom continued to converse and write in Polish.

In 1890, he was employed by a wealthy, converted Jew, Jan Bloch, who was sponsoring a survey of Jewish life in Poland. Bloch was a financier who, among other things, had contracts to build railroads in Russia. Although a convert, Bloch was disturbed by the growing number of anti-Semites in Poland who claimed, among other slanders, that Jews were parasites. Bloch hoped to prove that Jews were productively employed and were an asset to Polish life. Peretz’s job was to visit Jewish towns near Zamość, helping the locals fill out questionnaires about their everyday existence. The survey was conducted in Yiddish, of course, and Peretz became immersed in not only the language, but the folkways of rural Jewish life. He soon published a book of his adventures called, *Pictures of a Provincial Journey through the Tomaszow Region in 1890*.

He was once again unemployed, and in 1891 his friends got him a job with Community Council of Warsaw, where he worked for the rest of his life. Although the pay was low, his working hours were 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., which allowed time for writing. With his wife and son, he rented a three-room apartment at No.1 Ceglana Street in Warsaw. For the next 25 years, this tiny apartment became the center of the Yiddish Renaissance, as visiting writers from all over the Pale were offered hospitality and encouragement or criticism of their work.

The Yiddish writer Sholem Asch, in his “My First Meeting with Peretz,” describes the dynamic which Peretz created among young Jewish intellectuals in Poland:

It is a curious fact that Mendelssohn's translation of the Bible into German, printed in Hebrew characters, opened the way to German classics for many a yeshivah bochur [boy who studies the Talmud-PK] whose mental horizon had been bounded by talmudic and rabbinic lore—opened the way to Schiller, Körner, and Goethe, as well as Shakespeare in German translation. But these were, in the final analysis only extraneous books. The lacunae left by loss of religious faith and belief in the Messiah still remained. There was no substance to cling to, there was no purpose to aim at. Hebrew, Polish grammar, the elements of arithmetic, German—these subjects were only means to an end. But what practical end was to be envisaged? Our hearts remained empty and gnawed by a vague longing. Yet we were young and craved for something to live by.³⁵

Asch continues that, just at this time, a young man arrived in his town with some of Peretz's stories printed in Yiddish, "jargon," "the kind servant girls and journey-men borrowed from book hawkers at three kopeks a week":

We read them and were powerfully affected by them. They taught me three things ... [T]hat there was no need of waiting until I could write grammatical German or Hebrew, but that I could say things now in the simple idiom that I and all others around me spoke. Secondly, I learned that the story need not deal with barons or princes, as in Schiller ... Why not a present-day story about people I knew and saw daily? Thirdly, and most important, I found that there was always an idea behind the story that Peretz wrote. He demanded, for example, some great act of justice for his heroes ...

From then on I longed for No. 1 Ceglana, Peretz's address.³⁶

Let us take a look, then, at some of these stories, which created the Yiddish Renaissance.

Three Short Stories

1. 'Bontshe Shvayg'³⁷

There are many words in Yiddish for the unfortunates of world, the losers, those for whom success is always beyond reach; *shmo*, *shnuk*, *shlump*, *schlemiel*, and *schlemazel* are a sampling. Leo Rosten in his *Hooray for Yiddish!* masterfully explains the different shades of meaning in words such as these, for example, "A schlemiel is always spilling hot soup—down the neck of a schlemazel."³⁸ As you can see from Rosten's definition, these words, though derisive and often dismissive, also have a hint of humor or even affection, as in: "My brother-in-law, such a schmo!" But in his 1894 story "Bontshe Shvayg" ("Bontshe the Silent"), Peretz creates a character so pathetic that even Yiddish had no adequate description. Bontsche

was born in silence. He lived in silence. He died in silence. And he was buried in a silence greater yet ... when he died, the wind blew away the wooden sign marking his grave. The gravedigger's wife found it some distance away and used it to boil potatoes.

Bontshe lived as he died, nameless, suffering, hated, even beaten by his own children! But through all this suffering Bontshe remained silent. “Not once in his whole life . . . did he complain to God or to man. Not once did he feel a drop of anger or cast an accusing glance at heaven.” And it is for this silence, this acceptance of fate, that Bontshe is offered by the “heavenly tribunal” not only a place in Heaven, but anything he desires: “All heaven belongs to you. Ask for anything you wish; you can choose what you like.” And what does Bontshe choose? “Well then,” smiled Bontshe, “what I’d like most of all is a warm roll with fresh butter every morning.”

Those familiar with this story always remember Bontshe’s request for a “warm roll and fresh butter,” but not the reaction of Heaven to this request. Depending on the translation, Peretz reports that the Holy Tribunal and the angels were “ashamed,” “abashed,” and “stunned” that a man had been reduced to so little. And, in a final irony, the angelic prosecutor, who had refused to present evidence against Bontshe, twists the knife, with a bitter laugh.

Ruth Wisse, in her book *I.L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, writes “When the story of Bontshe was dramatized in the Broadway production ‘The World of Sholem Aleichem,’ a halo of light was cast on him as he made this request.”³⁹ This suggestion of sainthood would not have occurred to Peretz’s contemporaries, who understood that this story was a direct attack on the passivity of Jews in the face of oppression.

It is interesting to reflect on Lyndon LaRouche’s recent discussion of the *underling*, drawn from Cassius’s famous speech in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, / But in ourselves, that we are underlings.” LaRouche writes,

The fight for freedom, now as before, is essentially a fight within the individual. It is a fight to uplift him, or her, from the habit of thinking like an underling. If you give them freedom for a moment or two, but do not remove the habit of being an underling from them, they will shuck off newly gained freedom, as it were this January’s torn Christmas wrappings.⁴⁰

So, poor, pathetic Bontshe Shvayg, offered anything by the tribunal, is unable to even conceive a desire for his own humanity, the greatest treasure that *can* be granted.

This was exactly the understanding Peretz’s readers took from this story. Soon after it was published, “Bontshe Shvayg” became a major recruitment tool for the Bund, the Jewish socialist organization for which Peretz had great sympathy. It placed the responsibility for Jewish oppression on young Jews themselves, who acceded to that oppression. The story was read at clandestine Bund

meetings in the same way that *We Shall Overcome* was sung at Civil Rights meetings in the 1960’s. To the young Jews of Poland, the story almost shouted out, “Fight now for your humanity or you will be reduced to something so low it will shock the heavens!”

2. ‘The Three Gifts’⁴¹

This story is, along with Bontshe Shvayg, the best-loved of Peretz’s stories, and is so poignant that I hesitate to summarize it, knowing that I will do it an injustice. Once read, it will never leave your thoughts.

A Jew dies—“after all, you can’t live forever,” is buried, the prayers are said, and his soul arrives at “the celestial court” to be judged. To the amazement of the presiding angels, when the poor soul’s good and bad deeds are compared, they are found to be of equal weight! As his good deeds are not greater than the evil he has done on earth, he cannot be allowed into heaven; on the other hand, he cannot be sentenced to hell; he must remain a “vagabond,” wandering the universe, homeless.

An angel takes pity on our poor soul and tells him that, times being what they are, even the angels can be bribed. That if the soul finds three rare and beautiful gifts for the angels, the gates of heaven will be opened. And so our soul wanders the earth searching for gifts, rare and beautiful, but encountering only mediocrity and wretchedness.

Despairing of ever changing his fate, he spies a rich Jew being robbed by bandits, who threaten to kill him if he mutters a word while they take his gold and jewels. The old Jew remains silent, thinking to himself, “The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord! You’re not born with it, and you can’t take it with you.” He remains silent until the thieves reach into a secret hiding place and take out a small bag. He attempts to scream “Don’t touch that!” and is summarily murdered. The bandits greedily open the sack expecting to find the most valuable booty of all. “But they were bitterly mistaken. The blood was shed in vain. There was no silver, no gold, no jewelry in the bag. . . . Just a little soil. From the earth of Palestine, for his grave.”

This was the first gift our poor soul gave the angels.

The second gift is a mere pin, but such a pin. Our poor soul removed it from the battered body of a beautiful young Jewess who was horribly executed for walking past a church on Sunday. When given a last wish, she asks only for a pin, with which she pins her dress to her flesh, so that her modesty will be preserved as her body is torn to pieces.

The last gift is a skullcap, taken from the body of an old Jew who is forced to walk the gauntlet for crimes nobody remembers. Barely surviving the beating, he real-



A water carrier: "Pious at Ayzikl's expense."

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Shtetl Life. *This porter, waiting with his rope for work, could well be the protagonist of "Bontshe Shvayg."*



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A village "melamed" (teacher). The traditional one-class schoolroom instructed boys in the Bible and Talmud.

izes his skullcap has fallen off half way through. Without hesitation, he goes back through the gauntlet, retrieves it, and dies bloody and battered from the beating.

What is the intrinsic value of these three gifts? A bag of dirt, a bloody pin, and a torn skullcap are less than worthless, yet valuable enough to buy a ticket to heaven. From the narrowest standpoint, our poor soul is the Jewish people who, forced to roam the earth will find peace only if they maintain their relationship to their history, their individual dignity in the face of oppression, and to God.

But, isn't this a universal message? Is it only the Jewish people for whom this formula will succeed? Or is this not the key to humanity's successful future? The "Three Gifts," in particular, demonstrates what I emphasized in the Introduction: that the writers of the Yiddish Renaissance in general, and Peretz in particular, are powerful, world-class writers with a universal message. All three characters are faced with a horrific death, yet none grovel before their tormentors, and none of them are victims.

The rich Jew's bag of dirt is not some "blood and soil" relationship to Palestine, but an understanding that there is an historic basis for his life, that others have lived so he may live. The young Jewess preserves her modesty not for herself, as she will soon be ripped to pieces, but to demonstrate that she remains human whilst surrounded by once-human beasts. And the old man, who dies for his skullcap, is refusing to relinquish his relationship to the

Creator, a relationship which is, after all, the source of the past, present, and the future.

"The Three Gifts" is a brilliant work in the Jewish idiom which ennobles an audience from any background.

3. 'In the Mail Coach'⁴²

This is what I call a "train" story. Those who have read Sholem Aleichem are familiar with this genre. The author writes in the first person about individuals he meets on his journey. Through conversation, the author exposes, often humorously, the character flaws or ideologies of his acquaintances, usually to make a larger point, but often for the sheer fun of it.

By the way, this is also one of the important currents in Jewish humor. For example, the old joke:

A Jew and a Russian are sitting across from each other on a train. The Russian asks the Jew, "Why is it that you Jews are so smart?" The Jew replies, "Because we eat a magic food." The Russian asks, "Do you have any with you? Can I buy some of this magic food from you?" The Jew says, "Yes, for ten kopeks I will sell you some." The Russian gives the Jew ten kopeks and the Jew hands over a potato. The Russian takes a bite and says, "This is only a potato! I could buy one just like it in the market for one kopek!" The Jew replies, "See, you're getting smarter already!"

But Peretz's train story is deadly serious and quite

ambitious. In thirteen pages he exposes the oppression of women by traditional Jewish society, *and* the effects of the growth of Polish anti-Semitism on the men and women of the Polish nation, both Jew and Gentile.

As I mentioned earlier, before the Yiddish Renaissance, the Yiddish language was a “kitchen” language, sufficient to discuss the banalities of home life and little more. In traditional Jewish life, the family model was the man spending his day in the study house (*besmedresh* or *beysmedresh*), while the women worked to support the family. As in most traditional societies, women were discouraged from any intellectual achievements. In this story, a young husband, met on the mail coach, tells Peretz of his wife’s recent depression, and in the process a great deal about himself:

I was always in the beysmedresh, studying the Torah. I figured my wife was frightened to be alone all the time. But still that did not account for her crying. No, she’s not frightened, she says. She is bored. . . . Bored? I don’t even know what that means—I saw that she wandered about like a sleepwalker. Sometimes when I talked to her, she didn’t hear me, sometimes she looked at the wall, lost in thought, just staring and staring, sometimes she moved her lips but not a sound came out. What is to be bored? Something for women only no doubt. These women are an unknown tribe. A man is not bored, a man has no time to be bored. A man is either hungry or full, he is involved in business affairs, or he is in the study house, or he sleeps. If he has an extra minute, he smokes a pipe—but bored?

So I said to her, “Do something!” She wants to “read” she told me. “Reading” was also a strange concept to me, even though there are already Jews among us, especially those who had learned to write in the profane tongue who “read” books and newspapers instead of studying the sacred texts. . . . Read what? Polish, German, even the Yiddish translation of the Bible, so long as it is something to read.

But there are no books in the town so, the young husband gives in to his wife’s pleading. If I can’t read books, I want to study the holy books like you do.

I make it clear to her that Talmud is not a storybook, that it is not meant for women, that the Gemara⁴³ even teaches that women are not permitted to study the Talmud, which is holy. But nothing helped. If the people of Koneskivola had known, they would have stoned me. And they would have been right! I won’t go into all the details—I’ll be brief. She begged me, she cried, she swooned, she carried on for so long that I finally gave in.

The young husband finds that his wife falls asleep as soon as he begins translating the holy books. Luckily, he is able to purchase a crate of “storybooks,” and the situa-

tion is reversed. Now, his wife reads a story to him each evening, and he falls asleep.

Soon his young acquaintance arrives at his destination. Left alone, Peretz muses about what he has just heard:

Two separate worlds, a man’s world and a woman’s world. . . . When he reads, she falls asleep; when she reads, he falls asleep. It is not enough that we have different sects . . . —but we are also divided into males and females, so that in each and every narrow, damp, squalid Jewish home there are two distinct worlds.

When he reads, she falls asleep; when she reads, he falls asleep. At the least, I think, we ought to unite the two worlds. It is the debt of every Yiddish writer—but Yiddish writers have too many debts of their own. If only we had some supplement to our income!

As he ruminates, another passenger enters the coach; an old acquaintance and childhood friend:

It’s unbelievable, I think. It really is Janek Polniewski, the town administrator’s son; it really is my old friend who wanted to embrace the whole world and kiss each part, except for the disgusting warts that needed to be excised! But who can tell these days? Perhaps he has become an anti-Semite; perhaps we Jews are today’s warts that have to be excised from Europe’s beautiful nose. Perhaps he will survey me with a pair of cold eyes, even hug and kiss me, but say I am different from the other Jews.

But I was mistaken. Polniewski recognized me and fell on my neck, and before I even had time to raise the question, he asked me what I thought of the vile anti-Semitism.

As they catch up on their lost years, Polniewski tells the sad story of a young, beautiful, married, but lonely, Jewish neighbor he befriended. Peretz begins to imagine the end of this story. His friend a seducer who would “arouse an unhappy, repressed Jewish woman’s heart to the peals of sweet, romantic music, to a new, wild, unknown or long-forgotten emotion, to kiss, and then adieu! Close the door, and leave her to a life of gall and wormwood”

But Peretz stops himself, realizing that his suspicions are unfounded. “We are so glutted with poison, with bitterness and hatred, that when we are offered bread and salt we are sure that it is contaminated.” The poison of anti-Semitism works two ways. It not only poisons the minds of the Poles, but of the Jews as well. In an atmosphere such as this, “when the hand trembles with compassion, the eyes fill with tears of pity, and the lips speak words of comfort, we find it hard to believe! We too have been infected, the epidemic is upon us too.”

“In the Mail Coach” ends with an ironic and bitter-sweet twist which unites the two strands of this story. I

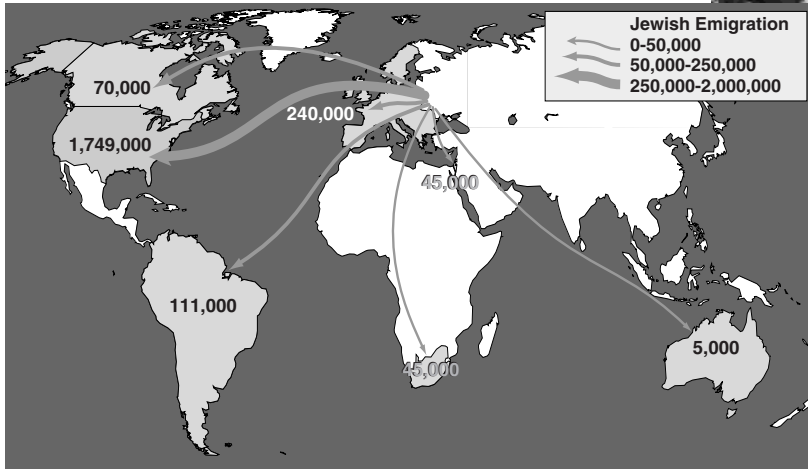


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Jewish Emigration from Russia, 1880-1928.



The rising wave of anti-Semitic pogroms in the Russian Empire, beginning in the 1880's, spurred mass emigration, and creation of organizations like the Jewish Socialist Bund. Above, left: Three Bund members killed in a pogrom, Odessa. Above: Mass demonstration of the Bund, Belorussia, 1905. During 1905-1906, more than 600 outbreaks of violence, and over 3,100 Jewish deaths, were recorded. Almost 80 percent of Jewish emigration was to the United States.

will not ruin the ending for you, in the hope that you will soon read this story yourself.

Essays and Social Writings

To the world around him, the educated Jew seemed a conundrum. Cultured, conversant in many European tongues, familiar with the literature and music of Europe, why then maintain an identification with the teeming ghetto or the impoverished shtetl? Even the great Moses Mendelssohn was challenged, in his time, why he did not convert to Christianity!

But to thinkers like Peretz, it was not difficult to imagine a Poland where every religious and language group flourished, yet a nation was built. Addressing the world-federalists of his day, Peretz wrote, "We too hope for a common humanity, but we shall never attain it your way. We shall never get to it by destroying languages, or by annihilating separate peoples, or by extir-

pating differing civilizations."⁴⁴

Peretz loved his people, the Jews. He loved them as a patriot loves his nation above all other nations, but not to the detriment of other nations. He thought his religion and cultural traditions beautiful, and worth preserving; a rare jewel of historic and intrinsic value, not just for the Jews but for the outside world as well. He was willing to enter into social and intellectual discourse with the thinkers of the world, but always he remembered his father's "They can't put the whole world in jail," and his mother's "Pious at Ayzikl's expense."

The fight therefore, was to progress as a people, to break out of the ghetto, to act in the world, but to preserve traditions and religion.

In his essay "Education," Peretz outlines his program:

Our program is education. We want to educate our people. We want to transform fools into sages, fanatics into enlightened human beings, idlers into useful, decent workers who live by labor and thereby benefit our entire community.

Our enemies speak of all Jews as parasites, criminals, rascals. Our detractors say that the Jewish brain is a rotten weed, the Jewish heart is made of flint, the Jewish skin is in a state of decay, and all our limbs are crooked and lame.

Our chauvinists, on the other hand, maintain that Israel is God's only beloved child, that his cradle is faith, his pillow is trust, his swaddling-clothes are parchments from Solomon's Temple.

We simply say: Jews are human beings just like all others. We have our good qualities and we also have our faults. We are not Gods and we are not devils, merely human beings. We hold that human beings need education, need to learn unceasingly, need to grow daily in wisdom, goodness and refinement.

Although we Jews are, by nature, like other peoples, nevertheless we do somehow behave differently, because our historic experience has made us different. We have had as our schoolmaster—the *Galuth* [the Diaspora; from the Hebrew *galut*, meaning exile, banishment—PK].⁴⁵

Jews, wrote Peretz, must know at least three languages. "As Jews we must know Hebrew; but as educated people, as living active human beings, we must also know the language of the land. Hebrew is the tongue of our religion and nationality, but we also need the tongue of the state we dwell in, the tongue of our general education and of our daily affairs."

As for Yiddish, "The question is answered by the reality about us. The third language exists. Three million people speak it. If we want to educate these three million Jews, we cannot wait until they acquire a thorough knowledge of other tongues."⁴⁶

Peretz did not regard Yiddish as sacrosanct, but rather as a tool which must be developed to serve a purpose. In the essay "What Is Missing in Our Literature?," Peretz excoriates the Yiddish writers who simply copied their contemporaries in Europe, creating a cold, sterile language. "The supreme form of will power for them [Yiddish writers—PK] must be their own distinctive character, original form. We must get out of the ghetto and see the world—but with Jewish eyes."⁴⁷

Politics

I.L. Peretz was a socialist. This meant in late-Nineteenth-century Poland that he was a member of the Jewish Socialist Bund. His interest in socialist politics began shortly after he arrived in Warsaw and continued during the 1890's. The Bund was an underground movement whose clandestine meetings were often broken up by Czarist police, its members sent to prison or exile.

It was illegal to publish a newspaper during this time without the approval of the censor. As the censor would not approve a Yiddish-language newspaper, Peretz and

friends proposed a flyer for the Jewish holidays which was approved. As there was a Jewish Holiday almost every month, Peretz was able to publish 17 issues between 1894 and 1896 of *Yontef Bletlekh* (Holiday Pages), but filled with political articles!

The newspaper became extremely popular and was distributed all over Poland. Soon police began to suspect Peretz as they found his newspaper, and his other works, in almost every worker's house they raided. As I mentioned earlier, his story "Bontshe Shvayg," was often read aloud at secret meetings, and was particularly effective in recruiting young workers. In 1895, his house was searched, but nothing "incriminating" was found.

Finally, in 1899, Peretz was arrested while attending a meeting which had been approved by the police because they were told it was an engagement party. The meeting was raided, and Peretz was sent to the Tenth Pavilion of the Warsaw Citadel, a prison for political prisoners.⁴⁸

After his imprisonment, Peretz continued a rocky relationship with the "movement." He announced in his 1906 essay "Hope and Fear,"

My heart is with you.

My eye cannot have its fill of your flaming flag. My ear never tires of listening to your sonorous song.

My heart is with you. Sated should every man be and his home flooded with light. Free should every man be, free to fashion his life, free to chose his work.

When you clench your fists at those who would stifle the free word in your throat and still the burning protest on your lips—I rejoice: I pray to God to sharpen your teeth. Yea, when you march upon Sodom ready to rend and tear, my soul is with you. Sureness of our victory fills me with warmth and makes me drunk as old wine.

And Yet. . . .

And yet I have my fear of you.

His fear is that his socialist comrades will submerge the cultures of Europe, and particularly Jewish culture, in one great, gray bureaucracy.

With real joy I see you tear down the walls of Sodom. But my heart trembles lest you build on its ruins a new, worse Sodom—more cold, more gloomy!

True, there will be no homes without windows, but the souls will be shrouded in mist.

True all bodies will be well fed, but spirits will go hungry.

True, no wail of woe will be audible but the eagle—the human spirit—will stand with clipped wings at the same trough beside the cow and ox.⁴⁹

No idle fear, as many of his comrades from this movement played major roles in the Russian Revolution, and were later liquidated by Stalin.



Jewish theologian Rabbi Abraham Heschel (left) joins Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., anti-Vietnam War demonstration, Arlington National Cemetery, 1960's.



Martyred Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, Palestinian Authority President Yassir Arafat, and President Clinton.

Despite his trepidation, Peretz continued his relationship with the Bund. To give you a flavor of the times, let me quote to you, in full, a description of Peretz's 50th birthday party and 25th jubilee as a writer:

The guests were in an elevated mood when there was a ring at the door and two young, unknown personages let themselves in. They were poorly dressed workingmen. They spoke quietly with Peretz and asked him to go with them into another room. Peretz excused himself from the committee and went into another room with the two young people. A few minutes later he emerged with his face alight with enthusiasm; in his hand was an old book. The workers quietly left and then Peretz called out, "Do you know who that was? A delegation from the Bund. They sent me an official greeting with this gift." The Polish-speaking guests grew pale with fright and looked towards the door. In the word "Bund" they smelled Siberia and the gallows. Dineson [Peretz's associate-PK] calmed them down with a quiet act. The official greeting of the Bund he cautiously removed from Peretz's hand and burned in the lighted candle on the table. He gathered the ashes carefully on a piece of paper and threw them into an ash tray. The book, a copy of Peretz's Yiddish Library, Peretz hid deep among his most precious documents that he held dear his whole life.

The book, greasy, smeared, torn-up from use, came from

the Tenth Pavilion, where it has been secretly circulated from one political prisoner to the next. Many single letters were underlined with pencil which encoded messages from one prisoner to the next. After this event Peretz would write with deep sincerity, "I belong to no party, but I feel closest to the Bund." And years later he would say, "I found my Socialism in the Prophets of the Bible."⁵⁰

Conclusion

Yes, it is true that the Yiddish Renaissance was the flowering of a language, once mere jargon, resulting in great literature, but it is more than that.

Look back at what Sholem Asch wrote in "My First Meeting with Peretz." Young Jewish men and women throughout the Pale of Settlement and in Russia had absorbed the lessons of the *maskilim*, the Jewish Enlightenment. Eagerly they studied German and Polish, read Schiller and Shakespeare, and loved what they read. But, and this is the nub of the matter, they asked, "What about us? What do we contribute? We Jews, with our history, religion, folkways, our sense of humor, what do we contribute?" It was I.L. Peretz, along with a few others, who answered the question for them.

Of course, all of this discussion is colored by the fact that the culture which spawned these questioning youth

was destroyed; their institutions blasted and burned, and the next generation of poets and writers exterminated.

Yet, if one takes seriously the beautiful notion that each of the world's people is an invaluable gem on a single necklace; then it is a powerful memorial to these writers that, despite the obscuring veil of translation, their efforts still sparkle and glisten.

In the two great centers of Jewish life today, the U.S.A. and Israel, the Yiddish language is almost gone, a victim of American assimilation and modern Hebrew. Yet, if we look back on the best of America in the Twentieth century—the trade union movement, the New Deal, the Civil Rights movement, musical performance, and scientific progress—it is to I.L. Peretz's credit (and that of his collaborators) that the children and grandchildren of his contemporaries played so important and critical a role in all these areas. And this holds true for Israel as well. I.L. Peretz and his friends would have recognized in martyred Yitzhak Rabin a soulmate, and in Ariel Sharon an inveterate enemy. As Peretz wrote,

[B]ecause we are eternally unhappy guests forced to eat at the tables of other peoples, we aspire all the more toward one world, humanity is our holiest ideal, and sheer egoism compels us to the purest love of mankind as a whole. For, we rightly feel that as long as universal love does not tri-

umph over envy, hatred, discord, and war, we shall not prosper. Hence, our constant prayer is for peace on earth; our hearts are like a sponge, receptive to all the newest humanitarian ideas; and our sympathy goes out to all the unfortunate, all the exiled, all the oppressed.⁵¹

It is sad, but true, that on the 150th birthday of I.L. Peretz, his original Yiddish writings can be read only by an aging population which diminishes with each passing year. Nevertheless, efforts should be made to keep the Yiddish Renaissance alive, if only through translation, not only to preserve a great literature, but because, as Lyndon LaRouche wrote in his essay, "Music, Judaism, and Hitler,"

[T]he Yiddish Renaissance of Germany and Eastern Europe bequeathed to posterity great gifts to which posterity must turn fond attention whenever the name of "Jew" is spoken. With that, every Christian bearing the legacy of Augustine must concur. To deny the Jews hated by Adolf Hitler their claim to that honor, is to subject those who suffered to a virtual second Holocaust, a holocaust of deadly silence, a virtual denial that those millions of victims ever existed except as a mass of nameless dead.⁵²

Happy Birthday, Yitzhok Leibush Peretz. Mazel Tov!

FOOTNOTES

See the *Bibliography for full publication information.*

1. In a 1965 bibliographical archive, there were 9,499 items on Peretz, 5,719 on Sholem Aleichem, and 3,401 on Mendele Mocher Sforim. *Three Great Classic Writers of Modern Yiddish Literature*, Vol. III, p. 9.
2. Helga Zepp LaRouche, "What it Takes To Be a World-Historical Leader Today," *Fidelio*, Summer 1999. This issue of *Fidelio* also includes "Philosophical Vignettes from the Political Life of Moses Mendelssohn," by David Shavin, and "Moses Mendelssohn and the Bach Tradition," by Steven P. Meyer.
3. For example, the following (non-Yiddish) writers had the greatest influence on Peretz: Heine, Goethe, Wyspianski, Gorky, Checkov, Mickiewicz, Bjornson, Maeterlinck and the Polish positivist current. *Three Great Classic Writers, op. cit.*, p. 9.
4. Adam Zamoyski, *The Polish Way*, p. 23.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
6. Norman Davies, *The Heart of Europe*, p. 342.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 316-317.
8. *The Polish Way*, p. 256.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
10. Kenneth Kronberg, "The Russian Orthodox Church and the Rise of Nazi Anti-Semitism."
11. Ralph Mahler, *Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment*, pp. 4-5.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.
13. Mendele Mocher Sefhorim, *The Nag*, p. 70.
14. *The Polish Way*, p. 115.
15. The "Blood Libel" was the accusation that Jews use the blood of Christian children to make the matzoh used in the Passover service.
16. Zamość web site: www.ovpm.org/ovpm/sites/azamos.html
17. *Three Great Classic Writers, op. cit.*, p. 17.
18. *Ibid.*, "My Memoirs."
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
22. *The I.L. Peretz Reader*, p. 270.
23. Ritual washing of hands is performed by Orthodox Jews before each meal.
24. *Peretz Reader, op. cit.*, p. 295.
25. "My Memoirs," *op. cit.*
26. *Ibid.* Wearing a short coat, rather than the long one associated with Orthodoxy, was a sign of an enlightened Jew. The short coat was also called the "German Style," in reference to the followers of Mendelssohn.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 367.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 113. [This passage was omitted from the 1908 final version of the poem, "perhaps [because] Peretz no longer felt these constraints as sharply in later years" (*Peretz Reader*, ed. by Ruth R. Wisse). Or, perhaps, because Peretz judged the Yiddish Renaissance authors to have succeeded in expanding the ability of the language to express profound ideas.—Ed.]
35. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 57. On p. 65, here's what an old *maskil* sounds like, trying

to convince his nephew to go to Warsaw to present his work to Peretz: "Uncle Yosel decided that as soon as he could leave some of his urgent business with the Lams, he would come to Warsaw and personally escort me to Peretz. He had to be in Warsaw anyway to purchase some books for his Hazomir library, and it would give him a chance to go to the opera. He longed desperately for good music. If I were not such a delicate mollycoddle, he said, I should spit on all the Hasidim and their traditions and go along to the opera. Only then would I realize that we live in a wonderful world with opportunities for a free and beautiful life. But no—he knew beforehand that I would not have the nerve, and who knows if I were not a lost soul altogether—unless some shikse [Gentile girl—PK] should come along and make a man of me. This is the essence of Uncle Yosel's letter, written in a maskilish, euphuistic Hebrew, cursing all bigots and reactionaries and telling me to prepare my best manuscripts to take to Peretz."

37. Excerpted from translation in *Peretz Reader*, *op. cit.*
38. Leo Rosten, *Hooray For Yiddish*, p. 287.
39. Ruth R. Wisse, *I.L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, pp. 47-51.
40. Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., "Freedom vs. 'Democracy': How 'Democracy' Became Diseased," *Fidelio*, Winter/Spring 2002 (Vol. XI, No. 1-2), p. 9.
41. Excerpted from translation in *Three Great Classic Writers*, *op. cit.*
42. Excerpt from translation in *Peretz Reader*, *op. cit.*
43. Gemara is commentary on the Mishna. Together, the Gemara and the Mishna make up the Talmud.

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44. "Education," in *Three Great Classic Writers, op. cit.* p. 348.
45. *Ibid*, pp. 345-346.
46. *Ibid*, p. 348.
47. "What Is Missing in Our Literature?," in *Three Great Classic Writers, op. cit.* p. 358.
48. When Peretz was arrested, the poet Hersh D. Nomberg composed a song called *S'loyfn, S'yogn Shvartse Volk'n*, to a well-known melody. The author had to remain anonymous for his own safety, but this song became a popular "folksong" in workshops and factories throughout Poland. In effect a "militant" lullaby, it is sung beautifully by Martha Schlamme on her recording *Raisins and Almonds*. Its translated text is as follows:

"Dark clouds race and rush, the wind whistles and blows. Your father sends greetings from Siberia to you, my child. It is the wind that brings a greeting from that cold land. There your father stands with a shovel in hand. And he digs deeper and deeper—shovelling out the earth. Don't worry—he's digging graves for all lies. He's neither the first nor the last to fall in the field. But don't worry, my child, a great hero bore you. And you'll grow up to be a hero. So sleep, sleep now. Gather your strength for the future, my only child." (*Pearls of Yiddish Song*, p. 78)

Martha Schlamme performs Peretz's favorite song, *Unzer Rebbenu*, on the same CD.
49. "Hope and Fear," in *Three Great Classic Writers, op. cit.* p. 352.
50. *Ibid*, p. 43.
51. "Education," *op. cit.*, p. 346.
52. Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., "Music, Judaism, and Hitler."

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