# Yiddish Literature in the United States

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It is widely believed that Yiddish literature first took root in the United States only in the early 1880's, following the begining of mass Jewish migration to "the land of the free and the home of the brave" from Eastern Europe. This migration was largely provoked by the Russian pogroms starting in 1881 and the cruel May Laws promulgated by the government in 1882, which crowded Jews still more thickly into the already packed towns of the Pale of Settlement and made Jewish life more intolerable than ever before in the czarist empire. The belief that Yiddish literature began in America only in the 1880's is, however, quite mistaken. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century a considerable number of Yiddish-speaking Jews drifted into the United States from Central and Eastern Europe. In 1852 New York already had a synagogue, the Beth Ha-Midrash, whose membership consisted largely of Russian and Polish Jews, and in 1872 there were almost thirty congregations in the city that followed East European Orthodox practice.[1]

**Yiddish Periodicals from Anarchism to Zionism**

By July 1870, when the Franco-Prussian War broke out, Tzevi Hirsh Bernstein (1846–1907), a recent immigrant, decided that there were now a sufficient number of readers of Yiddish hailing from the areas of the czarist empire bordering on Prussia to make the idea of a successful periodical in that language more than a chimera. In August of that year he began publishing the Yiddish *Di Post* ("The Post"), convinced that there were many Jews eager to read the latest news about the conflict in Europe. The paper lasted only six months, and not a single copy of it has survived to the present day. The following year Bernstein and J. Cohn undertook to publish a quadrilingual paper called *Hebrew News* in Yiddish, Hebrew, German, and English, but, being essentially a political propaganda effort, it did not survive the election season. More successful was Kasriel Hersch Sarasohn (1835–1905), who arrived in the United States in 1869 and in 1872 began publishing *Di New Yorker Yidishe Tsaytung* ("Yiddish Newspaper"). The sheet folded after only

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five months, but Sarasohn, undismayed and ever optimistic, undertook some years later to issue a new paper under the title *Di Yidishe Gazetn* ("The Yiddish Gazettes"), which survived for a long time.

While these and other early endeavors to establish a Yiddish press in America were precarious and always tottering on the brink of financial ruin, conditions became somewhat more favorable in the early 1880's as the Jews of Russia began their wholesale flight from the tyranny of the Romanovs. On June 18, 1881, the inaugural issue of the *Yidishes Tageblat* ("Jewish Daily News"), the first Yiddish daily newspaper in the world, appeared in New York City. To be sure, the large number of readers anticipated by its founders did not materialize and, after two months, it had to be transformed into a bi-weekly, not to be permanently established as a daily until 1885. But by that year Yiddish journalism was firmly rooted in the United States. The *Tageblat,* which, like most of its contemporaries, was written in a *daytshmerish,* or Germanized, Yiddish, and by the turn of the century had achieved a circulation of seventy thousand copies, preached two fundamental themes – the necessity of clinging to Orthodoxy in faith and practice and the obligation of the immigrant to appreciate the blessings of his adopted country.

However, not all the Yiddish newspapers of the 1880's by any means manifested a boundless enthusiasm for traditional Judaism or America's social and economic system. More than a few of the new immigrants had already exchanged the Torah of Moses for that of Marx and Lassalle or that of Proudhon and Bakunin before arriving at Castle Garden or Ellis Island, and their move to the United States was motivated more by a desire to escape from the czar's secret police, always on the hunt for political subversives, than by a longing for a bourgeois life of prosperity and respectability. These socialists and anarchists, most of them quite young, quickly established organs for propagating their revolutionary views. In 1886 the *Naye Tsayt* ("New Times"), the first radical Yiddish weekly in the United States, with Abraham Cahan (1860–1951) among its editors, appeared, but it ran out of funds after only four numbers and had to be suspended.[2] In the same year the *Yidishe Folkstsaytung* ("Yiddish People's Newspaper"), which was destined to enjoy much more longevity and which, in order to obtain a wider readership, propagandized a strange combination of socialism and Zionism – ideologies then generally in bitter opposition to each other – began publication. During the three years of its existence it attracted Morris Rosenfeld, whose Yiddish verses Professor Leo Wiener of Harvard declared the work of a great poet when he first discovered them in the late 1880's,[3] to its pages, and it also printed in serial installments a translation of Edward Bellamy's utopian *Looking Backward.*

In 1890 another socialist periodical, *Di Arbayter Tsaytung* ("The Worker's Newspaper"), began publication under the editorship of Philip Krantz. A year earlier an anarchist journal, *Der Emes* ("The Truth"), had been started. It stridently proclaimed that it would "fight until slavery is abolished . . . fight against popes, rabbis, swindlers, laws and chains."[4]

*Der Emes* lasted only five months; during that time it published poems, polemical tracts, and translations of radical essays by American, English, Russian, and other European writers. Soon after its demise its founders regrouped their forces and in 1890 established the *Fraye Arbayter Shtime* ("Free Worker's Voice"), a weekly which, after an initial period of faltering, maintained for a long time, under the editorship of S. Yanovsky, comparatively high literary standards.

By the turn of the century a substantial number of Yiddish newspapers and periodicals, advocating the whole gamut of ideologies espoused by their readers, from anarchism to Zionism, were flourishing in the United States, mainly on the East Side of New York but in several other large cities as well. Among the leading journals established in the late nineteenth century was *Di Tsukunft* ("The Future"), started in 1891 as a literary monthly under socialist auspices. After a fumbling beginning, it quickly gained distinction and began to appear regularly under the brilliant editorial direction of Abraham Cahan. When the Jewish socialist movement was riven by ideological dissension in 1897, *Di Tsukunft* temporarily suspended publication. However, it soon reappeared on a regular monthly basis, and it remains to the present day, despite its greatly diminished readership, the foremost Yiddish magazine published in the United States.

In 1897 a faction splitting off from Daniel De Leon's Socialist Labor Party began publishing the *Forverts* ("Jewish Daily Forward"), with the brilliant and energetic Abraham Cahan serving as editor continuously for almost half a century except for the years 1898 to 1902. At first the *Forverts,* as a socialist newspaper, was anti-Zionist, but after Cahan visited Palestine in the 1920's, it became progressively more favorably disposed to the idea of a Jewish national homeland. The list of writers whom Cahan managed to obtain as regular contributors to his paper reads like a "Who's Who" of modern Yiddish literature: in the early years—Morris Vinchevsky, Sholem Asch, Abraham Reisen, Leon Kobrin, and Z. Libin; later—Zalman Shneour, I. J. Singer, and Isaac Bashevis Singer. The department of the *Forverts* known as *Bintel Brif* ("Packet of Letters") printed both real queries submitted by readers and invented ones, as well as answers to them written by the staff.[5] These questions and answers mirror the problems and anxieties of the first generation of immigrants in their endeavor to adapt to the strange new world into which they had been cast by fate; many followed the advice proffered them with the reverence due the deliverances of Holy Writ. Though its circulation has now been declining for many years, the *Forverts* in its heyday during the First World War was the most widely read foreign-language newspaper in America, with a circulation of nearly 250,000 and eleven local and regional editions, and it continues to enjoy relatively sound health to this day.

Four years after its founding, the *Forverts* found itself faced by a competitor of a quite different orientation — *Der Morgn Zhurnal* ("Jewish Morning Journal"), established in 1901 by Jacob Sapirstein and edited

for some years by Peter Wiernik (1865–1936). Pro-Orthodox, pro-Zionist, and pro-Republican Party on the American political scene, the new paper quickly won numerous readers by its excellent coverage of the news as well as its cliff-hanging, frequently vulgar fictional serials. During Wiernik's editorship the paper was enriched by the regular contributions of such distinguished European critics as David Frishman and Baal-Makhshoves (Dr. Isador Elyashev). Later its staff included Bernard Gorin, A. Mukdoni, Jacob Glatstein, and Gedaliah Bublick. Ultimately, however, in 1953, the *Morgn Zhurnal* had to merge, as a result of reduced circulation, with *Der Tog* ("The Day"), established in 1914 by a group of prominent New Yorkers led by Rabbi Judah Leon Magnes and Morris Weinberg and edited originally by Herman Bernstein and later by William Edlin. With the acquisition of a large number of regular contributors of high stature, including David Pinski, Abraham Coralnik, Osip Dymov, A. Glanz-Leyeles, B. Z. Goldberg, Peretz Hirschbein, H. Leivick, Samuel Niger, Joseph Opatoshu, and Yehoash (Solomon Bloomgarden), *Der Tog* became a widely respected paper, distinguished by its literary excellence and living up to the slogan on its masthead, "the newspaper of the Yiddish intelligentsia."

The importance of these and other journals for American Yiddish literature throughout practically the entire span of its existence can hardly be overestimated.

> For a long time the periodical press in Yiddish remained the dominant form of publication. Yiddish literature was virtually synonymous with the Yiddish press, and it was the press that paved the way for purely literary creation and enjoyment. The press helped develop the language; it taught the writers to write and the readers to read. The periodicals were the intermediaries between the novelists, short story writers, poets and critics, and the reading public. Nearly all novels, short stories, poems and critical essays were first published in the press before appearing in book form – if they ever attained this distinction.[6]

For some years in the period immediately following World War I there were more than half a dozen Yiddish dailies in New York City alone. Other large cities with sizable Jewish communities – Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Cleveland – could also boast of their daily Yiddish papers at that time.

**Proletarian Poets and Writers**

The newspaper was the first and most enduring form of Yiddish literature in the New World. Books in Yiddish had been published in the United States as early as 1877, when Jacob Tzevi Sobel's collection of Yiddish and Hebrew poems *Israel the Old* and A. Silberstein's brochure *The Life and Death of Jesus the Nazarene* (an answer to the Christian missionaries who were then conducting an intensive proselytizing campaign among Jews) were issued. But hardly a single volume of distinction was published in the decades of the seventies and the eighties, with the exception of *Di Gloke* ("The Bell," 1888) by Morris Rosenfeld

(1862–1923).[7] In the 1890's Rosenfeld continued to publish his verse, and some works of the other significant "proletarian" poets – Morris Vinchevsky (1856–1932),[8] Joseph Bovshover (1873–1915),[9] and David Edelshtat (1866–1892)[10] – appeared. Mostly, what was printed in Yiddish in the United States in book or brochure form in the 1880s and 1890's were socialist and anarchist propaganda tracts, some of them in the style of crude parodies of traditional prayers, a textbook or two of Yiddish, and a small heap of vulgar, escapist fiction, produced by such hacks as Shomer,[11] M. Zayfert, who arrived in New York in 1886 and quickly became Shomer's competitor, the journalists Johann (John) Paley and D. H. Hermalin, and several other even less talented scribblers. This "literature" was aptly characterized by the playwright Jacob Gordin as a "Noah's ark of foolishness and junk."[12] Included in the list of sixty-five novels published in the United States until 1898 that was compiled by Alexander Harkavy are such titles as *A Daughter's Revenge, Between Love and Millions, The Black Hand, California Gold Miners, Heroes of the Night, Indian Prince, White Slavery,* and translations of Jules Verne's adventure tales.[13]

Perhaps the only Yiddish literature worthy of the name produced in America between 1880 and 1900 was that of the young "proletarian" or "sweatshop" poets mentioned above – Morris Rosenfeld, Joseph Bovshover, David Edelshtat, and Morris Vinchevsky – and Abraham Liessin (1872–1938), who served for a quarter of a century as editor of *Di Tsukunft.*[14] Their verses were avidly read not only by the exploited and exhausted inhabitants of the tenements of New York's Lower East Side but overseas by members of the Bund and other Jews in Russia whose social consciousness had been awakened and who could express radical views at that time only with great difficulty through the semi-legal "Jargon Committees" and the illegal socialist Yiddish press. But if their work was applauded in their native lands as well as in their adopted home, this was not because it was a continuation of the established tradition of East European Yiddish literature. Quite the contrary; it was almost totally the product of the specifically American milieu and, from a literary point of view, influenced more by American and English writers than by Mendele Mocher Seforim, Sholem Aleichem, I. L. Peretz, and other authors who then dominated Yiddish literature in Russia. Indeed, the proletarian poets seem to have had little, if any, familiarity with the work of these titans of Yiddish letters in Eastern Europe. Their contemporary, the playwright Leon Kobrin, bore testimony to this when he wrote: "Our Yiddish-American literature has its own history. It is not a continuation of the older Yiddish literature in Russia. (In fact, we who created American Yiddish literature had no knowledge whatever of Yiddish literature in Russia at that time)."[15]

Kobrin may have exaggerated a bit, but there is little doubt that Bovshover's literary heroes and models were Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Edwin Markham.[16] As for Vinchevsky, who migrated to the United States after spending some

time in London, where in 1884 he founded the weekly *Dos Poylishe Yidl* ("The Little Polish Jew"), which signalized the beginning of a socialist press in Yiddish, and a year later began publishing (first as a monthly and later as a weekly) *Der Arbeter Fraynd* ("The Worker Friend"), he brought with him to New York an ardent affection for Thomas Hood's "Bridge of Sighs" and "Song of the Shirt" and William Morris's unique brand of socialism and wrote under their inspiration.

Granted that neither the Yiddish poetry nor prose published in the United States in the period from 1880 to 1900 reached an enviable degree of excellence, the reason for this should perhaps be sought in the rather peculiar position of the authors and the singular conditions under which they had to work. Professor Joseph C. Landis has noted, I believe, correctly:

> If the poetry of these two decades was public, declamatory, hortatory—sometimes bombastic and sentimental—it was so because the poets were mainly workers whose private woes coincided with the sufferings of the multitudes. So overwhelming was the initial shock that private feelings were molten into those of the mass, and the qualities of the response were derived from its very immediacy. Crude, primitive, popular was also the fiction of most of the prose writers, many of whom were self-educated. Workers themselves, writing in the midst of struggle, their work was direct, immediate, as hortatory as a demonstration placard. Like their audience, many were ordinary, workaday, uneducated even in Jewish matters. When they strove for elegance, they turned, not in the manner of their European confreres, to Bible and Talmud for references and telling phrases, but to Germanized forms which have come to be known as "daytshmerish." But for the most part their writing was simple and direct, their construction unsophisticated, their themes obvious, and their strength in the realistic depiction of everyday reality and in their romantic exhortations to change it.[17]

**Rise of the Yiddish Theater**

Concomitantly with the rise of the Yiddish press and the appearance of the proletarian poets and prose writers, the Yiddish theater established itself in America. The scenarios and operettas of Abraham Goldfaden traveled overseas to New York quite soon after proving their attractiveness to the Jewish masses in Jassy, Bucharest, Warsaw, Odessa, and St. Petersburg.[18] Tailors, cutters, pressers, seamstresses, and cigarmakers, toiling six days a week from dawn till late at night in the sweatshops, viewed the prospect of an evening's entertainment with avid excitement. The first Yiddish play professionally performed in New York was staged on August 18, 1882.[19] Among the performers was a sixteen-year-old cigarmaker named Boris Tomashevsky (1866–1939), who had learned to sing from his father, a cantor. By the end of the century Tomashevsky was the idol of the Jewish masses of the Lower East Side, particularly the women, and the director of the enormously successful People's Theater, which opened with Goldfaden's *Di Kishefmakherin* ("The Witch"). The suppression of the Yiddish theater in Russia by the czarist regime in 1883 quickly brought to the United States such distinguished actors as Jacob Adler (1855–1926) and David Kessler (1860–1920). The trio of Tomashevsky, Adler, and Kessler became not only the foremost

actors but the leading producers of the American Yiddish stage in its first decades.

Though Goldfaden's works can scarcely be considered high literary and aesthetic achievements, the demand for Yiddish stage entertainment was so insatiable that it could be satisfied only by writers of even less – indeed, far less – talent. Joseph Lateiner, arriving in New York in 1884, achieved instantaneous success with his shoddy *Di Emigratiziye Keyn Amerika* ("Emigration to America," 1886), the first full-length play on an American subject. In his long career in the United States he wrote and produced close to one hundred "dramas," one more hackneyed than the other.[20] The masses devoured them with gusto. But Lateiner had effective rivals in shoddiness and triviality in Moshe Hurwitz[21] and Shomer, both of whom catered just as unabashedly to the crude and still undeveloped tastes of their audiences. Most of the working men and women who then came to the theater were so physically and mentally exhausted that they would probably have been incapable of responding to anything that made serious demands on their native intellectual powers.

Fortunately, the melodramatic bombast and sentimental trash produced by Lateiner, Hurwitz, and Shomer did not enjoy a long monopoly in the American Yiddish theater. In 1891 Jacob Gordin (1853–1909) arrived in New York and, faced with the necessity of supporting his sizable family, took up Jacob Adler's suggestion and wrote his first full-length play, *Siberia.* It was staged toward the end of the same year. With it the reform of the Yiddish theater in the United States was inaugurated and its so-called golden age began. At its height even the flamboyant Tomashevsky, always profit-minded, was moved to seek higher forms of dramatic expression and produced adaptations—in which he also acted—of Shakespeare, Goethe, and Israel Zangwill. In 1918, when Second Avenue was enjoying its heyday (although the period of decline was soon to begin), Maurice Schwartz opened his distinguished Yiddish Art Theater with an ambitious and laudable program that he managed largely to achieve in the next decade and a half.

Jacob Gordin, the chief figure in the reform of the Yiddish drama, arrived in New York already an established writer in Russian.[22] In his youth he had associated with the *narodniks,* the radical young Russian intellectuals who went out to live among the peasants in an attempt to raise their economic and spiritual level. Drawn also to the evangelical Stundists, a non-Orthodox Christian group that accepted only the ethical teachings of the Bible, Gordin founded in 1890 his own sect, the Dukhovno-Bibliskoye Bratstvo ("Spiritual Biblical Brotherhood"), as an instrument for liberating Jews from ecclesiastical dogmas and rabbinic ritualism and persuading them to conduct their lives solely in accordance with the ethical precepts of the prophets. He himself had lived for several years as a peasant and came to the United States with the professed purpose of founding an agricultural colony in which the social and ethical principles of the older Count Tolstoy, who also abandoned the aristocratic

existence of the nobility into which he was born, assumed peasant dress, and worked in the fields each day, would be applied. However, under pressure to provide food and clothing for his growing family,[23] he was forced to abandon his utopian ideas and devote himself to the more lucrative activity of journalism and playwriting. For almost two decades he exercised an enormous influence on the Yiddish theater in the United States not only by virtue of the high quality of his work but by its sheer volume.

Most of Gordin's plays were adaptations or translations of classic European dramas. Some of his plots were borrowed from such world-renowned figures as Euripides, Shakespeare, Calderón, Schiller, Gutzkow, Grillparzer, and Victor Hugo, and he also translated plays by Ibsen, Strindberg, Tolstoy, Gorky, and Hauptmann. In the more than seventy-five plays that Gordin adapted, translated, or himself wrote, his constantly repeated themes were the conflict of generations, the struggle between the rich and the poor, the perennial battle between virtue and vice.

Gordin's first major success was *Der Yidisher Kenig Lir* ("The Jewish King Lear," 1892), adapting to the contemporary Jewish situation Shakespeare's theme of the ingratitude of children and portraying the conflict between immigrant parents clinging to the traditions of the Old World and children frantically pursuing the goal of Americanization. Jacob Adler played the title-role. Even more popular was his original play *Mirele Efros* (first staged in 1898), a tragedy revolving around a high-principled and strong-willed Jewish widow of considerable wealth who manages her business and her household in an imperious but fair-minded fashion and who, in consequence of turning over her authority and her means in a moment of weakness to her morally flabby sons and to a scheming and avaricious daughter-in-law, is ultimately reduced to poverty and forced to abandon her own house. *Mirele Efros* was staged with great success before Yiddish-speaking audiences all over the world for more than fifty years. It was revived in Warsaw and New York in the 1960's, and even in Cleveland in the 1970's, with the great actress Ida Kaminska playing the title-role in Yiddish. Among other of Gordin's best and most popular plays were *Got, Mentsh un Tayvel* ("God, Man, and the Devil," 1903), powerfully influenced by the Book of Job and by Goethe's *Faust,* in which the author dealt with the corrupting potentialities of wealth and the capacity of the human spirit to resist total degeneration; *Sappho* (1907), modeled after Sudermann's *Magda,* in which a moving portrait of the liberated woman ready to follow the dictates of love in the face of public scorn and contumely is painted; and *Elisha ben Abuya* (1907), which is patterned after Gutzkow's *Uriel Acosta* and has as its hero the renowned Jewish heretic of the Tannaitic age, who was prepared to purchase intellectual freedom and liberty of conscience at the price of social rejection and the hatred of his erstwhile friends and colleagues.

While much of Gordin's work was imitative and derivative, he always

maintained a high moral seriousness and adamantly refused to cater to the demands of the masses for mindless burlesque and escapist entertainment. His achievement has been aptly summarized as follows:

> Gordin, even as Goldfaden before him, saw in the theater an educational medium, a stimulus to thinking, and not merely a pleasant means of relaxation. His dramas presented characters that were alive, situations that were real, social issues which were vigorously debated by his contemporaries, moral dilemmas which demanded solutions. He weaned his audiences from melodramas and musical farces, he accustomed his actors to more natural acting, he raised the stage to an arena on which human wills, human emotions exploded, and conflicting ideas were clarified.[24]

Other dramatists who contributed significantly to the reform of the Yiddish theater in America were Leon Kobrin (1873–1946), Israel Hurvitz, who wrote under the pen-name Z. Libin (1872–1955), David Pinski (1872–1959), and Peretz Hirschbein (1880–1948). All of them played an important role in the burgeoning of the Yiddish theater in New York, which continued long after the removal of the ban on Yiddish productions in Russia in 1904 made that country a serious rival to the United States for primacy in the world of the Yiddish theater.

Upon his arrival in New York in the early 1890's, Kobrin, who had received mainly a Russian education and had a thorough acquaintance with Russian and French literature, knew Yiddish only quite imperfectly and commanded no more than a superficial acquaintance with Yiddish literature.[25] As he himself attests, he had merely heard about "Jewish writers who wrote simple tales for girls and ignoramuses in the Yiddish jargon. . . . about Mendele and Peretz I knew only a few translated things which I had read in *Voskhod.*"[26] Discovering that physical labor was not only uncongenial but quite unprofitable, he improved his Yiddish and began to write for the newspapers. Kobrin's early play *Minna* (1899) was written in collaboration with Jacob Gordin. His drama of the following year, *Natur, Mentsh un Khaye* ("Nature, Man, and Beast," 1900) is resonant of the title of Gordin's *Got, Mentsh un Tayvel.* Kobrin, however, was less interested than Gordin either in social issues or in moral problems and succumbed less frequently to a tendency toward preaching. His strength was in portrayal of character. Perhaps his finest work, based on a story he had written ten years previously, is *Yankl Boyla* (1908), revolving around a simple-minded but kindly and strong young Jew in a Russian fishing village whose hopeless love for a Christian girl ends with his suicide. Kobrin's strong emphasis on the power of sexuality and his portrayal of erotic passion were virtually unprecedented phenomena in which he had been anticipated only by David Pinski in Russia. Aside from his original plays, Kobrin translated and adapted for the Yiddish stage Tolstoy's *The Living Corpse,* Goethe's *Faust,* Chirikov's *The Jews,* Israel Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto,* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet.*[27]

Z. Libin emigrated from Russia to London in 1891 at the age of twenty-one and soon afterwards came to New York, where he worked

in sweatshops for several years.[28] He published his first short story in 1892 and then continued to write for more than half a century. Many of his hundreds of realistic short stories about immigrant life and the misery of labor in the sweatshops were published originally in the daily *Forverts.* He was also the author of half a hundred plays staged in the United States and Europe. The most famous of his more somber plays (he wrote both comedies and tragedies) was *Gebrokhene Hertser* ("Broken Hearts"), produced in 1903 with Jacob and Sarah Adler in the leading roles. The play was subsequently performed throughout the Yiddish-speaking world and filmed in 1926 with Maurice Schwartz in the chief role.

When David Pinski came to New York in 1899 to become literary editor of the daily *Abend Blatt* ("Evening Newspaper"), the organ of the Socialist Labor Party, he had already achieved a considerable reputation in Russia as a short story writer and editor.[29] Pinski's stories were written under the sway of naturalism, then the prevalent tendency in European literature and perhaps best exemplified by Gerhart Hauptmann's powerful drama *Die Weber* ("The Weavers"). In Pinski's first play, *Ayzik Sheftl,* completed in 1899, the influence of Hauptmann's tragedy is very clearly discernible. The hero of the Yiddish play is a poor Jewish weaver with a talent for invention who conceives new machines that are exploited by his employer without the inventor receiving the slightest recognition or compensation. His rage grows to the point where he smashes the machines which he himself had created. Pinski's comedy *Der Oytser* ("The Treasure") won him international fame. It was staged by the eminent director Max Reinhardt in Berlin's Deutsches Theater in 1910 even before it was produced on the Yiddish stage. His messianic tragedy *Der Eybiker Yid* ("The Eternal Jew," 1906) was chosen by the Habimah troupe to open its first season in Moscow in 1918. When Habimah transferred its activities to Palestine, the play became part of its permanent repertoire Pinski shared with Sholem Asch and a handful of other Yiddish playwrights the distinction of having his work performed in foreign languages, especially English and German. The New York Theater Guild staged his *The Final Balance* in 1926. Among Pinski's most popular plays on the Yiddish stage were the already mentioned *Ayzik Sheftl; Di Familye Tsvi* ("The Family Tsvi"), dealing with the pogroms at Kishinev; *Yankl der Shmid* ("Yankel the Blacksmith"), which powerfully dramatizes the enormous force of the erotic instincts; and *Gabri un di Froyen* ("Gabri and the Women"), a play about a man of strong sexual passions who struggles for moral health and cleanness. Among the heroes of Pinski's biblically inspired plays are David and Solomon. From postbiblical Jewish literature he drew heroes and heroines such as Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Meir, and Rabbi Meir's celebrated wife, Beruriah. Pinski's concern with messianic redemption also led him to write dramas about the pseudo-messiahs Solomon Molcho, David Reuveni, and Shabbetai Tzvi.

It may be noted here that after World War I, when the Yiddish theater

in New York began gradually to decline in influence, Pinski returned to the narrative genre in which he had begun his literary career. He achieved extraordinary success with his two long novels *Arnold Levenberg*[30] and *The House of Noah Edon.*[31] The first of these novels, which was begun in 1919 and published in English translation in 1928, revolves around the German-Jewish aristocracy of New York City. Sol Liptzin has well summarized the character of the hero (or rather anti-hero) and the theme of the novel: "In Arnold Levenberg and his circle, Pinski depicted the wealthy, overrefined, stable, passive, slightly decadent German Jews who had gone far in assimilating to American life and whose Jewish traditions were no longer sufficiently virile to enable them to play more than merely a philanthropic role in the struggle for Jewish survival, let alone rebirth."[32] Pinski's stature as a novelist is even more evident in *The House of Noah Edon,* published in an English version in 1929, two years before it appeared in the original Yiddish. *The House of Noah Edon* is a genealogical novel, along the lines of Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* and John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga,* depicting the life of three generations of a Jewish family that originally came to the United States in the 1880's from a *shtetl* in Lithuania. It charts the progressive course of assimilation of the Edon family and the consequent feeling of anomie and misery engendered in the younger generation, which achieves material prosperity but loses the consolations of religious faith and rootedness in a meaningful cultural tradition. The novel, written before the beginning of the Great Depression and at a time when the children and grandchildren of those who had sought refuge from the pogroms of Russia by emigrating to the United States in the 1880's achieved the height of their prosperity, ends in suicide and despair. "Its conclusion," Liptzin correctly notes, "was as pessimistic as the conclusion of Peretz's story *Four Generations–Four Testaments,* on which it is based. Its author held up a mirror to the generation of the 1920s, presenting a horrible object lesson. He called for a stemming of the tide of assimilation to the non-Jewish environment."[33]

Like Pinski, Peretz Hirschbein was a novelist as well as a dramatist.[34] Born in 1880 in a *shtetl* in eastern Poland, he left home soon after his bar mitzvah to study in various *yeshivot.* At the age of eighteen he began writing stories in Yiddish and poems in Hebrew, and at twenty-four moved to Warsaw, then the chief center of Yiddish literary activity, where he became friendly with Hayyim Nahman Bialik, I. L. Peretz, and Sholem Asch, who encouraged him in his ambitions to become a playwright. Hirschbein's first play, *Miriam,* the story of a prostitute, was written in Hebrew and published in 1905. In the same year he also wrote his first Yiddish play, *Oyf Yener Zayt Taykh* ("On the Other Side of the River"), redolent of the symbolism of Maurice Maeterlinck. In 1907 he wrote *Di Erd* ("The Earth"), in which he expressed what was to be a central motif in his later works–a revulsion against urban life and a longing for the simple beauties of nature. A year later, with the help of Bialik, Hirschbein organized a troupe in Odessa for the

purpose of presenting Yiddish plays of distinction. Under his direction the troupe staged dramas by Sholem Asch, David Pinski, Jacob Gordin, and Sholem Aleichem, as well as the director's own plays, throughout Russia. Upon the dissolution of his troupe in the summer of 1910 because of financial difficulties, Hirschbein began a series of journeys that took him to Vienna, Paris, London, and New York and, in later years, on extended tours around the world. In 1912 he finished his dramas *Di Puste Kretshme* ("The Empty Inn") and *A Farvorfn Vinkl* ("A Cast-Away Corner") in which naturalism and mysticism were interwoven. Since he could not find a producer for these plays before the establishment of the Yiddish Art Theater by Maurice Schwartz in 1918, Hirschbein tried to earn a living as a farmhand in the Catskill Mountains. Disillusioned by his American experience, he returned to Russia in 1913 but was soon on the move again. Shortly before the outbreak of the First World War he went to Argentina but remained there only a few months before sailing again for New York.

Of the plays that Hirschbein composed during the war years, the best is undoubtedly his famous pastoral romance *Grine Felder* ("Green Fields," 1916).[35] After wandering during the 1920's with his wife, the poet Esther Shumiatcher, to many parts of the world, including Palestine, India, Japan, and China, and writing travelogues about his journeys that were serialized in the New York daily *Der Tog* and later published in book form under the title *Arum der Velt* ("Around the World," 1927), Hirschbein finally settled permanently in New York in 1930. There he wrote a historical tragedy, *Der Ershter Melekh in Yisroel* ("The First King of Israel," 1934), on the life of King Saul, as well as his best novel, *Royte Felder* ("Red Fields," 1935), revolving around the efforts of the Bolshevik regime to settle Jews in collective-farm colonies in the Crimea after the revolution. In his plays Hirschbein showed himself a master of the art of natural dialogue and the possessor of a genuine lyric gift. Some of his characters are stereotyped, but most of them are alive and fully credible. Along with the playwrights discussed above, and Sholem Asch (who is not treated in this essay because, although he lived in the United States for some years, he cannot properly be regarded as an American Yiddish writer), Hirschbein was one of the dominant figures in the great age of the Yiddish theater in America.

**Di Yunge**

Returning to poetry, we have noted that most of the Yiddish poets in America between 1880 and 1900 were spokesmen of the proletariat, expressing their rage and resentment over the exploitation suffered by themselves and their brethren in the New World about which they had entertained such golden dreams. Other poets wrote in a nostalgic vein about the Old World, which they had abandoned for a strange and generally disappointing environment. Eventually the moods of social protest and nostalgia were replaced by other moods. The emergence

of a new and quite different kind of poetry was signalized by the publication in 1908 in New York of *Yugend* ("Youth"), the first journal of a group of poets calling themselves *Di Yunge* ("The Young Ones"). Included among *Di Yunge* were such distinguished writers of verse as I. J. Schwartz, H. Rosenblatt, Joseph Rolnik, Moshe Nadir, Mani-Leib, Moshe Leyb Halpern, Reuben Eisland, A. M. Dillon, Zisha Landau, and later, the brilliant and profound H. Leivick. These poets had no clearly articulated program. What they shared was a rebellion against the social poetry of the nineteenth century. In S. Niger's succinct characterization, "they preferred individualistic moods and some of them were inclined to embrace the principle of art for art's sake. All of them sought to refine the Yiddish poetic word and to formulate expressions for everyday experiences as well as for the rarer nuances of emotion and thought. They also aimed to modernize and vitalize Yiddish verse, to liberate it from conventional rhetoric and to make it resemble, as nearly as possible, everyday speech."[36]

Arguing mainly from the attitude of Zisha Landau, perhaps the most extreme of the individualists, who disdained the proletarian poets of the 1880's and 1890's as mere propagandists, proclaimed that the poet's major responsibility was to express himself, and gloried in the charge of self-contradiction leveled against him, Joseph Landis asserts that "the revolt of the Yunge, in contrast to their predecessors, was essentially an affirmation of America, of a new life, a new home, a new freedom, a determination to be American."[37] Now, it is true that later, in the 1920's, I. J. Schwartz wrote a famous epic poem entitled *Kentucky,* dealing with a Jewish immigrant peddler who wanders about the towns and villages of the southern state, and that H. Rosenblatt, who settled in Los Angeles in 1921, composed lyrics about the awesome landscapes and seascapes of California and retold the legends of American Indian tribes, but most of the other adherents of the Yunge dealt relatively little with America and took their major themes from very different sources. Zisha Landau himself wrote mainly satires and fantasies about figures from the Bible and Jewish legendry, and the most famous lyric of this grandson of the Strikover Rebbe, who earned his living in America as a house-painter, is his joyously ecstatic song of the Baal Shem Tov. The bohemian Mani-Leib wrote not only about his romantic longing for the "blue flower" but about the "wise men" of Chelm and the Jews of Vilna for whom the prophet Elijah opened a path when they were snowed in and could not leave their houses to prepare for the Sabbath. In his longest poem, *Tarnov,* Ruben Eisland wrote nostalgically about a Galician town, and Joseph Rolnik incorporated in his verse his recollections of his life as a miller's son in a Russian village. As for Moshe Leyb Halpern, much of his poetry is a protest, reminiscent of the proletarian writers, against the economic exploitation of the immigrant and the general social injustice that he perceived as prevalent in America, and he himself for several years was a member of the Communist Party and wrote verses for the Communist Yiddish daily

*Frayhayt* ("Freedom"). The greatest of the poets claimed by the Yunge as one of their own, H. Leivick, who had spent several years of imprisonment in Siberia for his revolutionary activities as a member of the Bund, during which he witnessed the torture and hanging of fellow-prisoners, expressed in his early poems written in Russia, such as *Di Keyten fun Moshiakh* ("The Chains of the Messiah," 1908), a longing for the deliverer who would liberate mankind from tyranny and enslavement (a theme to which he was to return repeatedly in his later work); and his first published volume of lyrics after his arrival in New York in 1913, *Hintern Shloss* ("Behind the Lock," 1918), deals with his sufferings in Russia and his first years of economic exploitation in the New World. In the light of this, it seems quite dubious that the revolt of the Yunge was "essentially an affirmation of America."

**Novels and the Short Story: The Twenties and the Thirties**

In the field of the novel and short story, Yiddish literature in the United States, beginning in the second decade of the twentieth century, was enriched by a number of talented figures. One of the foremost among them was David Ignatoff (1885–1954).[38] Though he rarely wrote poetry, Ignatoff was one of the chief founders of the Yunge. In collaboration with I. J. Schwartz he edited and published the annual *Literatur* in 1910 and in 1912 began publishing a periodical entitled *Shriftn* ("Writings") in which he included translations from world literature, original works by aspiring novices, and reproductions of paintings by Jewish artists. In his own writing Ignatoff manifested both a tendency to romanticize and idealize the Jewish cultural and religious tradition and a realistic radicalism which brought him close to the proletarian writers. His romanticism is evident in his *Dos Farborgene Likht* ("The Hidden Light," 1918), a collection of tales based on the highly original stories of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, and in his *Vundermayses fun Alten Prag* ("Wonder Tales of Old Prague," 1916–1920), and his realism is very obvious in the novel entitled *In Keselgrub* ("In the Cauldron," 1918), whose theme is the struggle between corruption and spiritual renewal among the young Jewish immigrants. Later Ignatoff was to write the trilogy *Oyf Vayte Vegn* ("On Distant Roads," 1932), a fictional description of the origin and development of the Jewish labor movement in the United States. He was also to compose the biblical plays *Yiftokh* ("Jephthah," 1939) and *Gideon* (1953).

Perhaps the best loved of short story writers was Abraham Reisen (1876–1953).[39] When he arrived in the United States in 1914 to make his home in New York, Reisen had already achieved a considerable reputation as a poet, editor, short story writer, and translator in Warsaw and Cracow. During his years in America Reisen wrote a short story and one or two poems practically every week for the Yiddish newspapers. Many of his poems and stories were translated into English and other European languages and were included in a number of anthologies. The characters in Reisen's stories, some of which became favorite texts for

Peretz Hirschbein
(1880–1948)

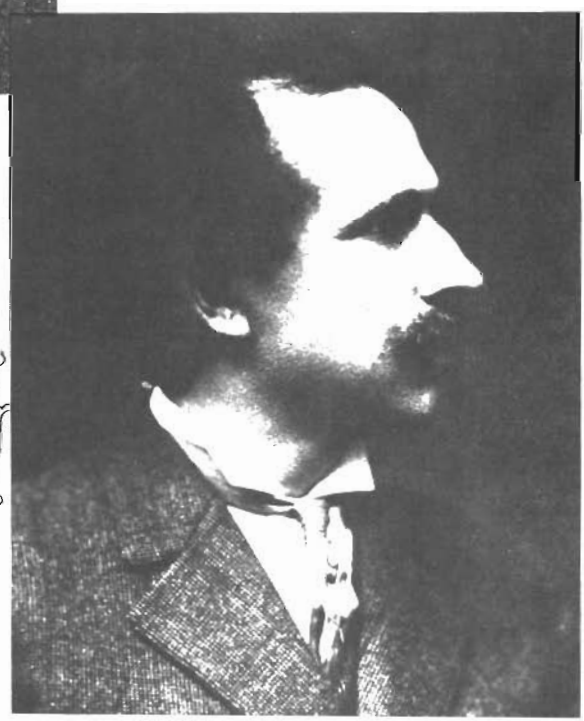




David Pinski
(1872–1959)



Kasriel Hersch Sarasohn
(1835–1905)



Morris Rosenfeld
(1862–1923)



Isaac Bashevis Singer
(born 1904)



Yehoash (Solomon Bloomgarden)
(1872-1927)



Chaim Grade
(born 1910)

*Courtesy of Professor Herbert Paper*

children in Yiddish schools, tend to be archtypes rather than unique individuals. His narratives reflect his sympathy for the poor and exploited among his people and often sound a gentle protest. Reisen's work, it has been rightly observed, "is notable for a fragile delicacy of tone. He does not use a heavy pencil, he evokes rather than portrays. Some of his little stories – muted, barely plotted, without verbal tinting – have become almost legendary materials, or hints, of the Jewish imagination."[40]

Not nearly as popular as Reisen but far more polished and a consummate artist was Lamed Shapiro (1878–1948).[41] Shapiro first came to New York in 1906 and contributed to *Di Tsukunft* and the *Forverts* but returned to Warsaw in 1909, only to come back to New York on the eve of the First World War. He continued a pattern of wandering among various cities in the United States until the end of his life. This restlessness, compounded by his chronic alcoholism and frequent periods of depression, did not, however, prevent him from writing some of the most finished and aesthetically perfected stories in all of Yiddish literature. His best work, written in the decade between 1908 and 1918, is included in the collection *Di Yidishe Melukhe* ("The Jewish State," 1919). Later he was to write *Nyu-Yorkish* ("New York Stories," 1931) and *Der Shrayber Geyt in Kheydr* ("The Writer Goes to School," 1945). Howe and Greenberg correctly indicate that Shapiro was "one of the first 'art' writers in Yiddish prose, one of the first, that is, to study and model himself after such masters of European Impressionism as Chekhov and Flaubert.... Shapiro's best stories are remarkable for their tightness of structure, their electrical terseness of style, their power of compressed metaphor. While many of them deal with *shtetl* life, they are far removed from the folk manner of early Yiddish literature. Their subject matter is rooted in the past; their mode of organization is entirely modern."[42]

Perhaps the most talented and celebrated novelist of the period, next to Sholem Asch, was Joseph Opatoshu (1886–1954).[43] Arriving in New York at the age of twenty-one, Opatoshu studied at Cooper Union in New York City and graduated as a civil engineer in 1914. However, he had already begun writing and found literature preferable to engineering. When the New York daily *Der Tog* was founded in 1914, he became a member of its editorial staff, and until his death four decades later he contributed stories, sketches, and novels in serialized form, most of which were later reprinted in book form. Opatoshu first attracted critical attention with his *Roman fun a Ferd Ganev* ("A Novel of a Horse Thief," 1912). The hero of this novel, who was based on Opatoshu's acquaintance as a boy with his real prototype, is a very extraordinary Jew, quite different from the heroes of Sholem Aleichem or Peretz. He is a Jewish thief who smuggles horses across the border from Poland into Germany and is killed while defending his fellow Jews in an attack by their gentile neighbors. Opatoshu's fiction was inspired both by his adopted country and by the Polish home that he left as a young man. He portrayed the conflicts and ambiguities of the immigrant's attempt

at Americanization in such novels as *Farloyrene Mentshn* ("Lost People," 1919), a novel dealing with the problems of Hebrew teachers and Jewish education in New York; *Di Tentserin* ("The Dancer," 1929), depicting the decay of Hasidism in the metropolis on the banks of the Hudson; *Rase* ("Race," 1923), a collection of short stories revolving around the conflict of different ethnic and religious groups; and *Arum Grend Strit* ("Around Grand Street," 1929), dealing with the life of the immigrant Jews in the tenements of the Lower East Side. The attraction to his native Poland is best expressed in one of the novels of the trilogy that brought him international fame, *In Poylishe Velder* (1921, translated into English in 1938 under the title *In Polish Woods*).[44] In this richly textured work Opatoshu graphically described the decay of the Hasidic court of Kotzk in the generation after Napoleon and presented a vivid panoramic view of the relationships between Jews and Poles up to the Polish rebellion against Russia in 1863. The second volume of the trilogy, entitled *1863,* was less widely read, and the last volume, *Aleyn* ("Alone," 1919), which was the first to be published, received relatively little notice in comparison with *In Poylishe Velder.*

Opatoshu always maintained a strong interest in the historical past of the Jewish people. In 1933, the year of Hitler's accession to power, he published his *A Tog in Regensburg,*[45] in which he carries the reader back to the world of Yiddish minstrels, or *Shpilmener,* of several centuries earlier who sang in their verses about King Arthur and his knights, Dietrich von Bern and Meister Hildebrandt. This work, as well as the novel *Elye Bokher* ("Elijah Bahur"), published in the same year and depicting three scenes from the life of the renowned author of the *Bove-Bukh,* is characterized by Opatoshu's use of the stylized Old Yiddish that was just becoming known to scholars of the language through the publication by the YIVO Institute of Vilna of old manuscripts and printed booklets from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. At the time when German Jewry was about to undergo its final and fiercest agony, Opotashu portrayed in *A Tog in Regensburg* this Jewry, which had rarely been a stranger to agony, on a happy day four hundred years earlier when one of the richest Jews of Regensburg married his daughter to the son of a patrician of Worms. Not long before his death in 1954 Opotashu finished what is perhaps his most important historical novel, the two-volume *Der Letster Oyfshtand* ("The Last Revolt"), on which he had been laboring for many years. The first volume, entitled *Rabbi Akiva,* dealing with the preparations for the rising of the Jews in Palestine against the Roman emperor Hadrian in the second century, appeared in 1948, and the second volume, *Bar Kokhba,* focusing on the revolt itself, its strange leader Simon Bar Kochba, and its cruel suppression by the Romans, was published posthumously in 1955.

In a sense, perhaps the most "American" of the Yiddish novelists who came to literary maturity in the period between the two World Wars was Isaac Raboy (1882–1944).[46] After emigrating to the United States in 1904 he worked in a hat factory in New York for four years

before enrolling in the Jewish Agricultural School near Woodbine, New Jersey. Upon his graduation in 1910 he went to North Dakota and worked happily there on a ranch for three years. Returning to the East, he failed in a farming venture in Connecticut and had to work in a New York factory for the remainder of his life. Only in the evenings and during the periods when he was out of work could Raboy devote himself to writing. His experiences on the prairies of North Dakota inspired his two best novels, *Her Goldenbarg* ("Mr. Goldenbarg," 1913) and *Der Yidisher Cowboy* ("The Jewish Cowboy," 1942). The first novel, which was adapted for the stage and produced in 1926 under the direction of Peretz Hirschbein, was hailed, according to one distinguished historian of literature, "as a pioneering work which broadened the horizon of American Yiddish literature and which introduced a new type of Jewish toiler, one whose heart went out to horses and cows, forests and prairies."[47] *The Jewish Cowboy* is characterized (quite unjustifiably, in my judgment) as a "masterpiece of fiction" by this historian, who adds: "Largely autobiographic and going beyond realism, this narrative contrasted the beauty of the prairies throughout the changing seasons with the cruelty of man to man."[48]

It was not long after the end of the First World War that the United States clearly became the foremost center of Yiddish literature in the world. Indeed, it is possible that it was such even earlier. Poland, as has been noted, continued to produce a rich literature in the language that had been spoken by its Jews for seven hundred years. But, with the progressive deterioration of the economic situation of the country and the intensification of anti-Semitism in the 1920's and 1930's, many of its best writers left the land of their birth and migrated to the United States. As for the Soviet Union, the relatively brief efflorescence of Yiddish literature in the years immediately following the Bolshevik Revolution soon came to an end, and Yiddish prose and poetry were not only cramped into the stifling mold of "socialist realism" but effectively cut off from potentially fructifying contacts with Yiddish literature elsewhere in the world.

After 1918 writing in Yiddish in America, as well as in Poland, came ever closer, both in subject matter and in style, to the dominant trends of world literature. The more notable of the Yiddish writers had long since become avid readers of the best literary products of the non-Jewish world, but these products were now made increasingly available to the Yiddish reader through an enormous number of translations. And what Samuel Niger has written about post–World War I Yiddish literature in general applies also to Yiddish writing in the United States.

> New themes were developed and new trends formed. Novels, stories, poems, memoirs and various sociological studies of war and revolution were published. The social theme was treated in many variations. Universal themes gained ground at the expense of purely Jewish ones. The number of non-Jewish characters in fiction increased. There was experimentation with form, style, and language. Nearly all modern trends in world literature (expressionism, imagism, the use of myth, socialist realism) had their spokes-

men in Yiddish, and frequently even special publications to popularize a particular point of view. From within there arose some new trends such as the religious trend and "folklorist" trend.[49]

In the years after World War I, Abraham Liessen, who upon his arrival in the United States, at the end of the nineteenth century, had been associated with Joseph Bovshover, Morris Rosenfeld, and other "proletarian" poets, began again, after a lapse of some years, to write poetry.[50] In this period also Yehoash (Solomon Bloomgarden, 1872–1927), after spending most of the years from 1900 to 1910 recovering from tuberculosis in Denver, wrote some of his best work and shortly before his death completed the monumental translation of the Bible into Yiddish which he had begun twenty-five years earlier and which represents one of the greatest achievements of modern Yiddish literature.[51] The Lithuanian-born Yehoash had been encouraged as an adolescent to continue writing Yiddish and Hebrew poetry by the great Peretz himself. In 1890, when he was eighteen, he came to America, working for some years as a bookkeeper, tailor, peddler, and Hebrew teacher and, in his leisure hours, writing poetry. After his release from the sanatorium in Denver, where he began his Bible translation, Yehoash, whose first book of poems, *Gezamelte Lider* ("Collected Poems"), brought him international fame in the world of Yiddish letters immediately after its publication in 1907, again had to struggle at distasteful work to earn his bread. In 1914 he had gone to Palestine and returned to New York only after Ottoman Turkey entered the war. In 1922 Yehoash's translation of the Book of Genesis began appearing in installments in the New York daily *Der Tog* ("The Day"). At his death only the translation of the Pentateuch had been published; his rendering of the remainder of the biblical books was printed posthumously. Deeply learned in Hebrew as well as other Semitic languages, Yehoash produced a masterful translation of the Bible which was accorded a place of special honor and read with reverence in thousands of Yiddish-speaking homes not only in America but throughout the globe.[52] Besides writing hundreds of hauntingly beautiful lyrics of his own,[53] Yehoash also translated into Yiddish Longfellow's *Hiawatha* and the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* and reworked into Yiddish words fables not only from Aesop, La Fontaine, and Lessing but from the Talmud, medieval Jewish sources, and Hasidic literature.

During the years after World War I the group that had once called themselves *Di Yunge* grew older and more mature and continued their struggle for the refinement of their poetic artistry. The emphasis of the Yunge on self-expression was challenged and rejected, however, by a group of poets who arose and clustered around a new journal entitled *In Zikh* ("In Oneself"), launched in 1919 by Aaron Glanz-Leyeles (1899–1966), Jacob Glatstein (1896–1971), and N. B. Minkoff (1898–1958). These poets, who came to be called the *Inzikhistn,* were characterized by their intellectualism and their interest in the theoretical and technical problems of the poetic art. From the contemporary American imagists, who in turn had been inspired by the French imagists, they

borrowed the fundamental ideas of imagist introspection and encouraged the liberation of Yiddish poetry from the restraints of meter and rhyme. Their basic striving, according to Minkoff, was to pass "from chaos to the kaleidoscopic, from the single to the multi-dimensional image, from directness to suggestion, from monotonous versification to free verse."[54] Besides its three founding spirits – Glanz-Leyeles, Glatstein, and Minkoff – *In Zikh,* which continued to appear until 1940, attracted to itself such distinguished poets as Eliezer Blum-Alquit, Bernard Lewis, Michael Licht, Eliezer Greenberg, Celia Drapkin, and Anna Margolin.

Undoubtedly the greatest Yiddish poet (and perhaps also the greatest Yiddish dramatist) writing in the United States in the period between the wars was H. Leivick (pseudonym of Leivick Halpern, 1886–1962).[55] Arriving in New York in 1913, after escaping from Siberia, to which he had been sentenced to exile for life following several years of imprisonment in Minsk and Moscow for his revolutionary activities on behalf of the Bund, Leivick continued to dwell on the theme to which he first addressed himself in *Di Keytn fun Moshiakh* ("The Chains of the Messiah"), written in the prison of Minsk. The yearning for the redemption of man and society to which he gave utterance in that work found its greatest depth and intensity in his most famous poetic drama, *Der Goylem* ("The Golem," 1921). In this drama, based on the robot which was created and animated, according to legend, by the great Rabbi Loew of Prague in the sixteenth century in order to protect the Jewish community in a time of peril, but which, once it had been taught to strike and kill, ran amok and had to be again reduced to dust by its creator, Leivick expressed his horror at the cost in bloodshed and brutality of the Bolshevik Revolution, with whose aims he was in fundamental agreement. *Der Goylem* was first produced by the Habimah Theater in Moscow in Hebrew in 1924 and later, upon the removal of that company to Tel Aviv, in Palestine. It was also staged in Yiddish, English, and Polish before audiences all over the world. But his worldwide fame brought Leivick little in the way of monetary reward; for almost two decades after his emigration to the United States he earned his living paperhanging New York apartments until tuberculosis forced him to spend the years 1932 to 1936 in the Jewish Sanatorium in Denver.

During his years in Denver Leivick produced some of his best and profoundest work. There he completed his *Geula Komedya* ("Comedy of Salvation"), his *Lider fun Gan-Eden* ("Songs of Paradise"), his biblical dramas *Di Akede* ("The Sacrifice") and *Sodom,* and his drama of martyrs' love in the Middle Ages, *Abelard and Heloise. Geula Komedya* is a comedy only in the sense of Dante's *Divine Comedy,* which rises from the depths of Inferno to the heights of Paradiso. In essence it is a kind of sequel to *Der Goylem* and deals, as does the largest part of Leivick's work, with the longing for redemption and the redemptive power of suffering.

The years of World War II and the Holocaust were a period of intense mental and spiritual anguish for Leivick. The verses that he wrote during this period were collected in a volume entitled *In Treblinka Bin Ikh*

*Nit Geven* ("I Was Not in Treblinka," 1945) in which he expresses his sense of guilt for not having shared the fate of his sister, his brothers, their families, and the six million other Jews who were cruelly done to death and depicts the God who permitted such atrocities as an exhausted, silent beggar with a face that seems to plead for forgiveness from the people who have served Him for three thousand years. At the end of the war Leivick was invited to visit the displaced-persons camp in the American-occupied zone of Germany and made an enormous impression on the survivors of Maidanek, Treblinka, and Fernwald. His encounters with the walking skeletons who managed to live through the Holocaust found expression especially in the drama *A Khasene in Fernvald* ("A Wedding in Fernwald," 1949), which describes the marriage of two survivors whose first mates had perished. In this marriage in the midst of the lingering atmosphere of death the poet saw a symbol of the new Jewish life that would rise from the ashes of the old. A few years later in his In *Di Teg fun Iyov* ("In the Days of Job," 1953) Leivick returned to his obsession with the idea of the redemptive power of suffering and martyrdom. In 1957 he was invited to participate in the Ideological Conference convened by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion in Jerusalem. The experience of witnessing the Jewish state that had risen out of the tragedy of the Holocaust and the magical impact of Jerusalem's sunrises and sunsets inspired some magnificent poems filled with a mood of peace and joy that were included in Leivick's last volume published in his lifetime, *Lider tsum Eybiken* ("Songs to the Eternal One," 1959). "In these twilight poems, the poet curbed his earlier rebellion against the destiny allotted to him and his people. He sought refuge in the faith that good would somehow be the final end of evil, a faith that did not come easily to him. As the greatest Yiddish poet and dramatist of his generation, Leivick absorbed and expressed its tragic reality, its dream of salvation, and its emergence to new hope."[56]

**Yiddish Literature: The Struggle for Survival**

Before Polish Jewry was annihilated in the firestorm of the Holocaust, some of its best writers left their homeland and came to the United States to enrich its Yiddish literature. Undoubtedly the most talented of these were the brothers Israel Joshua Singer (1893–1944) and Isaac Bashevis Singer (born 1904). The elder Singer had already achieved a very distinguished reputation when he arrived in New York in 1933. His *Perl un Andere Dertseylungen* ("Pearls and Other Stories," 1922) was lauded by the critics as a work of acute insight and remarkable style, and his novel *Yoshe Kalb* was phenomenally successful.[57] Both readers of *Yoshe Kalb* as a novel and viewers of its dramatized version were intrigued by the enigma of the sinner-saint hero. Singer's best work, however, was written after his arrival in the United States. He achieved an international reputation with his "family" novel *Di Brider Ashkenazi*

(1936; translated into English under the title *The Brothers Ashkenazi,* 1936), a panoramic work that spans a century of Jewish life in Lodz from the period immediately after Napoleon to the Polish Republic of the 1920's and tells the story of that once-great industrial center and its Jewish textile barons. His *Khaver Nakhmen* ("Comrade Nachman," 1938; translated into English under the title *East of Eden,* 1939), in which Singer expressed his disillusionment with the new Soviet order that he had initially greeted with enthusiasm, and his *Di Familye Karnovski* (1943; translated into English under the title *The Family Carnovsky,* 1969), tracing German-Jewish assimilation up to the Hitler period, were also popular but less vividly written and their characters less realistically drawn than those of *The Brothers Ashkenazi.*

Isaac Bashevis Singer had been encouraged in his literary development by his older brother, and by the time of his arrival in New York in 1935 had already written his first major fictional work, *Sotn in Goray* (1935; translated into English under the title *Satan in Goray,* 1955). Here the younger Singer's preoccupation with the occult, the erotic, and the phenomenon of "demonic" obsession is already obvious. In the United States Singer began to publish his stories and serializations of his novels in the daily *Forverts,* and in the 1950's some of his stories began to appear in English translation in respected magazines. His first serialization, *Di Familye Mushkat* (1950; translated into English under the title *The Family Moskat,* 1950), is a realistic novel of epic proportions about Jewish life in Warsaw before and up to the beginning of the Second World War. In the years since then Singer has been continuously and dazzlingly creative, producing one volume after another of short stories, novels, and personal reminiscences that have been immediately translated (quite often the English translation has appeared before the publication of the original Yiddish) and have made him the foremost living figure in Yiddish literature and a commanding personality in contemporary world literature. The award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to him in 1978 was a richly deserved honor.

An extremely talented writer who has enriched Yiddish literature enormously since his arrival in the United States in the late 1940's is Chaim Grade (born 1910), a native of Vilna and a product of its *yeshivot* who had already achieved a worldwide reputation before settling in New York. In his *yeshivah* days Grade was drawn strongly to the *musar* movement, with its ideals of individual moral perfection and spiritual purification and its contempt for worldly beauty and glory and for secular knowledge. But there was an ambiguity within him; he simultaneously experienced the allure of natural beauty, of scientific knowledge, and of revolutionary movements directed toward securing social justice. Ultimately the latter won out, but a deep nostalgia for the *musar* ideals remained. In his long poem "Musarnikes" ("Followers of Musar," 1939), Grade portrays himself in the figure of Chaim Vilner, a troubled *yeshivah* student torn by an inner struggle over conflicting sets of ideals.

In 1932 Grade published his first poems in the Vilna newspaper *Der*

*Tog* ("The Day"); thereafter his poetry began to appear in the foremost Yiddish publications of Europe and the United States. He quickly gained recognition as one of the leading protagonists of the literary movement know as *Yung Vilna* ("Young Vilna"), which aimed at producing a rapproachment between Yiddish culture and the dominant tendencies of world literature and between the Jewish masses and the progressive elements of the larger society. His first book of poems, *Yo* ("Yes," 1936), gives expression to this aim. It also includes a touching tribute to his mother, who was then still earning a living selling fruit in Vilna, and who remained there, destined to perish with thousands of other Jews on the Day of Atonement in 1941, after the Nazis occupied the city. The piety and self-sacrificial devotion of Grade's mother also are celebrated in his later book of verse *Der Mames Tzvoe* ("Mother's Testament," 1949) and in his prose volume *Der Mames Shabosim* ("Mother's Sabbaths," 1955). The latter work describes the author's childhood in Vilna, his life during World War II (when he found refuge in various towns of Asiatic Russia), and his return after the war, in 1946, to his native city to find its Jewish population decimated and its once-flourishing Jewish religious and cultural institutions gone.

Grade laments the terror of the Holocaust in a series of poems entitled *Mit Dayn Guf Oyf Mayne Hent* ("With Your Body on My Hands"), dedicated to his wife, a nurse in the Vilna ghetto, who was murdered with its last Jews in 1943. The ghetto's victims and survivors are also mourned in the volumes of poetry *Doyres* ("Generations," 1945), *Pleytim* ("Refugees," 1947), and *Shayn fun Farloshene Shtern* ("Light of Snuffed-Out Stars," 1950). With this body of work Grade achieved renown in the world of Yiddish letters as one of the foremost poets to have confronted the greatest tragedy in twentieth-century Jewish life.

In 1946 Grade moved to Paris, where he participated in the attempt to revive Yiddish cultural life and presided over the Yiddish literary society. Two years later he was sent to America as a delegate to the Jewish Culture Congress. He decided to settle in New York and began writing for the Yiddish daily *Der Morgen Zhurnal* ("Morning Journal"). Among the longer works he has composed in the United States are *Di Agune* ("The Abandoned Wife," 1961), a novel centering around the plight of a woman of Vilna whose soldier-husband had disappeared years before, during World War I, and who, according to the strict interpretation of rabbinic law, could not remarry. The work portrays in rich detail Jewish religious life in the "Jerusalem of Lithuania" in the 1930's and the conflict between traditionalists and liberals. It was translated with an introduction by Curt Leviant and published under the title *The Agunah* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974).

In America, Grade also wrote the three novels of *Der Shulhoyf* ("The Synagogue Courtyard," 1958), describing in loving detail the shabby Jewish quarter of Vilna in which he had spent his childhood and youth. The longest of these novels, *Der Brunem,* appeared in an English translation by Ruth R. Wisse as *The Well* (Philadelphia: Jewish

Publication Society of America, 1967). Another work of his American period is *Tsemakh Atlas* (2 vols., 1967–68), a long novel about *yeshivah* life, translated into English under the title *The Yeshiva* by Curt Leviant (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1976–77). Among his poetic creations written in America are the collections *Der Mentsh fun Fayer* ("The Man of Fire," 1962), including poems on Israel and elegies on the Hazon-Ish as well as on the Russian Yiddish writers executed in 1952; *Parmetene Erd* ("Parchment Earth," 1968); and *Oyf Mayn Weg tsu Dir* ("On My Way to You," 1969).

One of Grade's most poignant stories, "My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseyner," a dialogue between two survivors of the Holocaust, one a skeptical Yiddish writer and the other a *yeshivah* scholar whose faith remains unbroken, is included in Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, eds., *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (New York: Viking Press, 1954, pp. 578–606). Some of his poems in English translation are to be found in Joseph Leftwich, ed., *The Golden Peacock* (New York and London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1961), and in Ruth Whitman, *Anthology of Modern Yiddish Poetry* (New York: October House, 1966).

We have observed that already in the 1920's many of the foremost Yiddish poets in the United States were writing with nostalgia about the vanishing world of the *shtetl* and comparing its spiritual richness with the emptiness and rootlessness of American Jewish life, which was drifting ever more perilously close to the boundary of total assimilation. Hitler's rise to power in Germany in 1933 and the subsequent twelve years of horror for the Jews of Europe put an end to whatever attractiveness Yiddish writers had felt toward Western (including American) civilization and decisively destroyed the American optimism that had informed some of their work. Turning in bitterness and disgust against the "values" of Western culture by which he and others had been so enchanted not many years before, Jacob Glatstein roared:

> Goodnight, wide world,
> big stinking world.
> Not you but I slam shut the gate.
> With a long gabardine,
> with a fiery yellow patch,
> with a proud stride,
> Because I want to,
> I'm going back to the ghetto.
>
> Damn your dirty culture, world.
> I wallow in your dust,
> Even though it's forsaken,
> Sad Jewish life.[58]

Since the Holocaust, the relatively few Yiddish writers remaining in America have found their major motif in celebrating, in elegiac tones,

the brutally annihilated world of the *shtetl.* This motif finds striking expression in works such as Glatstein's *Shtralendike Yidn* ("Radiant Jews," 1946) or, more recently, Eliezer Greenberg's *Gedenkshaft* ("Memory"), in which he exclaims: "How great were the riches we once had, / How great were the riches we now have lost." In recent years, in addition to mourning the Holocaust, the Yiddish poets of America have expressed their resentment over the continued persecution of the Jews in the Soviet Union and the suppression of Jewish life in Russia. The only tones of joy have been found in their paeans to the State of Israel, and the hope and promise for the Jewish future they perceive in its establishment and continued vitality.

Aside from the towering figures of Isaac Bashevis Singer and Chaim Grade, only a handful of Yiddish writers of stature are left in America today. Most of those who remain are old, and few, if any, talented younger Yiddish writers are visible on the horizon. If Yiddish literature survives in the United States for more than a decade or two, it will be, it would seem, only by a miracle. But miracles in this instance should not be lightly written off, for Jewish life throughout the centuries has been replete with them.

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NOTES

1. Daniel J. Silver and Bernard Martin, *A History of Judaism* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 2:305.
2. On Cahan's life and work, see his autobiographical *The Education of Abraham Cahan* (1969). See also Moses Rischin, *Promised City* (1962) and Ronald Sanders, *Downtown Jews* (1969).
3. In his *The History of Yiddish Literature in the Nineteenth Century,* 2d ed. (New York: Hermon Press, 1972; the first edition appeared in 1899), Wiener, who taught at Harvard University from 1896 until his retirement in 1930 and was Professor of Slavic Languages from 1911 on, writes: "It was left for a Russian Jew at the end of the nineteenth century to see and paint hell in colors not attempted by any one since the days of Dante; Dante spoke of the hell in the after-life, while Rosenfeld sings of the hell on earth, the hell that he has not only visited, but that he has lived through" (p. 130).
4. Quoted in Charles Madison, *Yiddish Literature: Its Scope and Major Writers* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1968), p. 137.
5. An anthology in English translation of *Bintel Brif* was published by Isaac Metzker in 1971.
6. Samuel Niger, "Yiddish Literature in the Past Two Hundred Years," in *The Jewish People: Past and Present,* vol. 3 (New York: Central Yiddish Cultural Organization, 1952), pp. 191–192.
7. On the life and work of Morris Rosenfeld, see L. Goldenthal, *Toil and Triumph* (1960); Madison, op. cit., pp. 151–164; Sol Liptzin, *The Flowering of Yiddish Literature* (1963), pp. 138–143; idem, *A History of Yiddish Literature* (Middle Village, N.Y.: Jonathan David Co., 1972), pp. 96 f.; A. A. Roback, *The Story of Yiddish Literature* (1940), pp. 172–182; and Wiener, op. cit., pp. 124–130.
8. Morris Vinchevsky was a pseudonym. The poet's real name was Benzion Novakhovichi. On his life and work, see *Leksikon fun der Nayer Yidisher Literatur* 3 (1960): 432–443 henceforth referred to as *Leksikon*); N. B. Minkoff, *Pionern fun Yidisher Poezye in Amerike,* vol. 1 (1956): 1978; Sol Liptzin, *The Flowering of Yiddish Literature* (1963), pp. 136–139 (henceforth referred to as *Flowering*); and the biography by Kalman Marmor in Vinchevsky's *Works,* vol. 1 (1927).
9. On Bovshover, see *Leksikon* 1 (1956): 207–210; Kalman Marmor, *Yoysef Bovshover* (1952); and N. B. Minkoff, op. cit., pp. 131–191.

10. On Edelshtat, see *Leksikon* 6 (1965): 554–563; Kalman Marmor, *Dovid Edelshtat* (1950); E. N. B. Minkoff, op. cit., pp. 89–128; H. Leivick, *Eseyen un Redes* (1963), pp. 195–207; and B. Bialostotsky, ed., *Dovid Edelshtat Gedenkbukh* (1953).
11. Shomer was the pseudonym of Nahum Meyer Shaikevich (1849–1905). On his life and work, see Zalman Rejzen, *Leksikon fun der Yidisher Literatur Prese, un Filologye* 4 (1929): 758–808; Samuel Niger, *Dertseyler un Romanistn* (1946), pp. 84–95; R. Shomer-Bachelis, *Unzer Foter Shomer* (1950); Sol Liptzin, *Flowering,* pp. 83–86; and Madison, op. cit., pp. 29–30.
12. Elias Schulman, *Di Geshikhte fun der Yidisher Literatur in Amerike* (New York: I. Biderman, 1943), p. 86.
13. Ibid., pp. 89–90.
14. On Liessin, see Rejzen, op. cit., 2 (1927): 259–266; Bialostotsky, *Lider un Eseyen* (1932), pp. 79–130; Schulman, op. cit., pp. 200–206; Leivick, op. cit., pp. 167–174; *Leksikon* 5 (1963): 171–191; I. Ch. Biletzky, *Essays on Yiddish Poetry and Prose Writers* (1969), pp. 15–22; and Madison, op. cit., pp. 290 f.
15. Kobrin, *Fun Daytshmerish tsu Yiddish in Amerike* (New York: YKUF, 1944), p. 28.
16. It is noteworthy, I think, that Bovshover himself wrote essays on all of these American and British writers.
17. Landis, "America and Yiddish Literature," *Jewish Book Annual* 33 (1975–76): 23–24.
18. On Goldfaden's life and work, see *Leksikon* 2 (1958): 77–87; Liptzin, *Flowering,* pp. 33–51; Jakob Shatzky, ed., *Hundert Yor Goldfaden* (1940); N. B. Minkoff, *Literarishe Vegn* (1955), pp. 29–40; *Goldfaden-Bukh* (1926); N. Meisel, *Avrohom Goldfaden* (1938).
19. According to the *Jewish Messenger* (New York), October 1882.
20. He had written his first play, *Di Tsvey Shmelkes,* in 1876, and by 1880 his Lateiner-Mogulesco troupe was already a major competitor of Goldfaden in Odessa.
21. Hurwitz was popularly known as "the professor."
22. On Gordin see Kalman Marmor, *Yankef Gordin* (1953); Abraham Cahan, *Bleter fun Mayn Lebn,* vol. 3 (1926), pp. 186–194, and vol. 4 (1928), pp. 344–377; *Leksikon* 2 (1958): 142–153; Samuel Niger, *Dertseylers un Romanistn* (1946), pp. 193–203; Morris Winchevsky, *A Tog mit Yankef Gordin* (1909); and Zalman Zylbercweig, *Di Velt fun Yankef Gordin* (1964).
23. He and his wife jointly produced the rather remarkable total of fourteen children.
24. Sol Liptzin, *A History of Yiddish Literature,* p. 81.
25. On Kobrin, see Schulman, op. cit., pp. 129–133; Rejzen, op. cit., 3 (1929): 359–370; and Liptzin, *Flowering,* pp. 154 f.
26. Quoted in Madison, op. cit., p. 143.
27. In collaboration with his wife, Kobrin also translated into Yiddish from the writings of Turgenev, Emile Zola, and Tolstoy, as well as the complete works of Guy de Maupassant.
28. On Libin, see Rejzen, op. cit., 2 (1927): 113–116; *Leksikon* 5 (1963): 44–49; Zalman Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn Teater* 2 (1934): 1026–1038; and Niger, *Dertseylers un Romanistn,* pp. 204–216.
29. On Pinski, see Rejzen, op. cit., 2 (1927): 85–98; Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun Yidishn Teater* 3 (1959): 1762–1806; Madison, op. cit., pp. 182–196; Liptzin, *Flowering,* pp. 118–130; and M. Singer, ed., *David Pinski Zikhrono Li'verachah* (1960). The last-mentioned volume contains Pinski's diary in Yiddish.
30. English translation, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1928.
31. The Yiddish title is *Dos Hoyz fun Noyakh Edon.* It was published in 1931.
32. Liptzin, *A History of Yiddish Literature,* pp. 138–139.
33. Ibid., p. 140.
34. On Hirschbein's life and work, see Rejzen, op. cit., 1 (1926): 839–847; Samuel Niger, ed., *Peretz Hirschbein* (1941); Jacob Glatstein, *In Tokh Genumen* (1956), pp. 70–91; *Leksikon* 3 (1960): 147–58; and Liptzin, *Flowering,* pp. 156–162.
35. The play, which was later made into a film, was published in English in Joseph Landis, trans., *The Dybbuk and Other Great Yiddish Plays* (1966).
36. Niger, "Yiddish Literature in the Past Two Hundred Years," p. 204.
37. Landis, "America and Yiddish Literature."
38. On Ignatoff, see Liptzin, *Flowering,* pp. 202, 213; Madison, op. cit., pp. 295–298; and F. Zolf, *Unzer Kulturhemshekh* (1956), pp. 147–180.
39. On the life and work of Abraham Reisen, see Rejzen, op. cit., 4 (1929); 349–364; N. B. Minkoff, *Yidishe Klasiker-Poetn* (1937), pp. 181–224; Glatstein, op. cit., pp. 48–63; Liptzin, *Flowering,* pp. 118–122; and Madison, op. cit., pp. 197–220.
40. Irving Howe and [redacted]eenberg, *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (New York: Viking

Press, 1954), p. 80. On Shapiro, see Madison, op. cit., pp. 291 f.; Glatstein, op. cit., pp. 82–91; Rejzen, op. cit., 4 (1929): 465–469; and the biographical notes by S. Miller to Lamed Shapiro, *Ksovim* (1949), pp. 19–33.

41. On Shapiro, see Howe and Greenberg, op. cit., p. 82. Three of Shapiro's stories are translated in this work, pp. 325–341.
42. Howe and Greenberg, op. cit., p. 82.
43. On Opatashu's life and work, see Madison, op. cit., pp. 326–347; Liptzin, *The Maturing of Yiddish Literature* (1970), pp. 10–18; *Leksikon* 1 (1956): 145–149; B. Rivkin, *Yoysef Opatoshus Gang* (1948); Glatstein, op. cit., pp. 145–156; I. Freilich, *Opatoshus Shafungsveg* (1959); and N. Meisel, *Yoysef Opatashu* (1937).
44. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1938.
45. Translated into English as *A Day in Regensburg* (1968).
46. On Raboy, see Rejzen, op. cit., 4 (1929); 1–8; David Ignatoff, *Opgerisene Bleter* (1957), pp. 52–56; Madison, op. cit., pp. 300 f.; and Liptzin, *The Maturing of Yiddish Literature,* pp. 3–9.
47. Liptzin, *A History of Yiddish Literature,* p. 163.
48. Ibid., p. 164.
49. Niger, "Yiddish Literature in the Past Two Hundred Years," p. 217.
50. His complete poetic works, *Lider un Poemen* ("Songs and Poems"), were published in three volumes in New York in 1938.
51. On Yehoash's life and work, see Liptzin, *Flowering,* pp. 190–197; Madison, op. cit., pp. 165–181; and the appreciative essay in Yiddish of Yudel Mark, "Yehoash: 1870–1970," *Jewish Book Annual* 29 (1971–72): 86–93.
52. In 1949 Yehoash's notes to the Bible were edited by Mordecai Kosover. These notes not only provide a mine of invaluable information to the scholar but indicate how conscientiously and painfully he struggled to achieve absolute fidelity in both form and content to the Hebrew text.
53. An anthology in English translation, under the title *Poems of Yehoash,* was published by Isidore Goldstick (1952).
54. Minkoff, "Di Kvaln fun A. Leyeles Lid," *In Zich* (December 1939).
55. On Leivick, see *Leivick-Bukh* (1963); Samuel Niger, *H. Leivick* (1951); Ruth Whitman, *Anthology of Modern Yiddish Poetry* (1960); Joseph C. Landis, ed. and trans., *The Dybbuk and Other Great Yiddish Plays* (1966); and Madison, op. cit., pp. 348–381.
56. Liptzin, *A History of Yiddish Literature,* p. 310.
57. The novel was translated into English by Maurice Samuel under the title *The Sinner* (1933) and dramatized by Maurice Schwartz for staging at New York City's Yiddish Art Theater.
58. From "Goodnight, World," translated by Ruth Whitman.