

# Yiddish Literature

Yiddish literature may be said to have been born twice. The earliest evidence of Yiddish literary activity dates from the 13th century and is found in southern Germany, where the language itself had originated as a specifically Jewish variant of Middle High German approximately a quarter of a millennium earlier. The Haskalah, the Jewish equivalent of the Enlightenment, effectively doomed the Yiddish language and its literary culture in Germany and in western Europe during the course of the 18th century. At the beginning of the 19th century, however, the Haskalah paradoxically promoted a renaissance of Yiddish literature in those parts of eastern Europe to which the Yiddish language had been carried from the 13th century onward. The Haskalah therefore represents a watershed separating two essentially distinct cultural phenomena. Whereas in eastern Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries Yiddish literature eventually became an autonomous modern mode of literary expression fully comparable with parallel European literatures, the Yiddish literature of medieval Germany and the adjacent territories to which it spread remained in the shadow of the infinitely more prestigious Hebrew literature and, in theory at least, was addressed only to women (who were not taught Hebrew but learned to read and write Yiddish in the community schools) and to untutored men.

The low regard in which the Yiddish language and its culture were held conspired with the ravages of time and the turbulent vicissitudes of Jewish history in the German-speaking lands in such a way that all but a small proportion of medieval Yiddish texts have been lost, though important texts are still coming to light. From what survives, however, it is clear that the literature aimed predominantly at the edification of its readership and was either didactic in character or sought to entertain while serving as an antidote to the supposed moral dangers of Gentile literature. As a result of their traditional respect for learning, the efficacy of their community schools, and their predominantly urban way of life, literacy was much higher among

the Jews of northern Europe during this time than among non-Jews living in the same area. Many works achieved such popularity that they were frequently reprinted over a period of centuries and enjoyed an astonishingly wide dissemination, with the result that their language developed into an increasingly ossified koine that was readily understood over a territory extending from Amsterdam to Odessa and from Venice to Hamburg. During the 18th century the picture changed rapidly in western Europe, where increasing cultural assimilation led to the abandonment of Yiddish in favour of the languages of the ambient societies. In eastern Europe, on the other hand, the Haskalah, as a result of the recognition that its mission to enlighten the Jewish masses could only be accomplished through the medium of Yiddish, unintentionally wrought a renewal of the language it disparaged. The resurgence of Yiddish literature in eastern Europe went hand in hand with the emergence of a new standard literary language based on the eastern dialects, which had been invigorated by contact with the languages of its Slavic environment.

This article provides a historical survey of the development of Yiddish literature. For a discussion of literature in Hebrew, see the article HEBREW LITERATURE.

For coverage of related topics in the *Macropædia* and *Micropædia*, see the *Propædia*, section 621.

The article is divided into the following sections:

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The Middle Ages to the 18th century	
in western Europe	1077
Biblical and religious literature	1077
Secular literature	1078
Modern literature in eastern Europe	
and in emigration	1079
The 19th century	1079
The 20th century	1079
To World War I	
After World War I	
Bibliography	1082

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## The Middle Ages to the 18th century in western Europe

### BIBLICAL AND RELIGIOUS LITERATURE

The earliest recorded sentence written in Yiddish is a blessing inscribed in a mahzor (prayer book for the Jewish holidays) written in Worms in 1272–73. Other rudimentary signs of Yiddish literary activity from the 13th century, or perhaps earlier, are interlinear and marginal glosses found in manuscripts of books of the Bible and of biblical commentaries. Glossaries were made from the end of the 14th century onward. The earliest known printed Yiddish book is a Hebrew–Yiddish glossary and concordance of the Hebrew Bible published in Kraków in 1534 and known as the *Seyfer shel Reb Anshel* ("Book of Rabbi Anshel"). The oldest known printed Yiddish text is a version of the Passover hymn *Addir Hu* ("Mighty is He"), which appears as *Almekhtiger Got* in a Haggadah (a book of Jewish lore) published in Prague in 1526. Actual translations of portions of the Bible appear from the end of the 15th century onward. The earliest example to which a definite date may be assigned is a 1490 Yiddish manuscript version of the Psalms. Printed Yiddish Pentateuchs (the first five books of the Old Testament) were first published in Constance and Augsburg in 1544, while a *Taytsh khumesh*—a Pentateuch accompanied by the appointed portions of The Prophets (Hebrew: *Nevi'im*) and the five Scrolls (Megiles; Hebrew: *Megillot*), together with extracts from the celebrated 11th-century commentator Rashi—appeared in Cremona in 1560.

Considerable popularity was also attained by rhymed adaptations of parts or the whole of the Bible, many of which were embroidered with material from midrashim (anthologies of rabbinic sayings, parables, and tales arranged as expositions of books of the Bible, chapter by chapter). The earliest extant example is a manuscript dated 1382 that was found in Cairo at the end of the 19th century. It is housed in the Cambridge University Library and is known as the Cambridge Yiddish Codex. It includes the stories of Aaron, the Garden of Eden, the young Abraham, and of Joseph and Potiphar.

Greater originality was evinced by the biblical epics that survive from the 16th century, some of which may have been written earlier. Jewish audiences had long been familiar with more or less lightly expurgated German sagas and romances. The Cambridge Yiddish Codex includes a Hebrew-alphabet version of a section of the Gudrun cycle that is approximately 130 years older than the earliest recorded Middle High German version. There are also Hebrew-alphabet manuscript versions of the chivalric romance *Wigalois*, and evidence suggests that there were once Jewish versions of a number of other Middle High German epics.

Though perhaps these Hebrew-alphabet versions of German material should not strictly speaking be accounted a part of Yiddish literature, they certainly served as models for more authentically Jewish biblical epics. By far the most notable of these is the *Shmuel-bukh* ("Samuel Book"), published in Augsburg in 1544. Its anonymous author rendered the story of the prophet Samuel, of King

Biblical epics

Earliest printed Yiddish works

Saul, and above all of King David into the rhymed stanzas of the *Nibelungenlied*. Using material from what at that time was still a single Book of Samuel copiously embellished with legends drawn from the Talmud and from midrashic sources, the author fashioned a dramatic panorama filled with realistically depicted battle scenes and heroic deeds narrated with an element of suspense, together with much broad humour and erotic incident, all centred on the somewhat idealized image of King David. A similar but slightly less successful treatment of the Books of Kings was the *Melokhim-bukh*, published in 1543.

Of all the various forms of Yiddish biblical literature the most popular was the *Tsenerene*, a paraphrase of the Pentateuch with other appointed portions of Scripture enriched with midrashic material. It was written at the end of the 16th century by Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi of Janów Lubelski. The work appears to have been published in Lublin some time between 1590 and 1600; it has gone through more than 200 editions and has remained constantly in print. The *Seyfer ha-maged* was almost as popular and took the form of a sequel to the *Tsenerene*, encompassing the Prophets and the Hagiographa in the original Hebrew text together with a paraphrase and Rashi's commentary in Yiddish.

Though the 16th century had seen numerous rhymed and more or less freely adapted versions of parts of the Bible, it was not until 1676–79 that Yekusiel ben Yitskhok Blits produced a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures in Amsterdam. By then there had been a reaction against the type of embroidered homiletic version used in the *Tsenerene*, and, in emulation of Martin Luther, an attempt was made to produce a translation close to the original that, nonetheless, eschewed word-for-word glossing. This approach was even more pronounced in the case of the second complete Yiddish Bible, which was translated by Yoysel Vitsnhoyzn and published in Amsterdam in 1679.

Freely adapted biblical material eventually found its way into drama around the end of the 17th century. Jewish tradition did not originally permit theatrical performances, and only at the time of the feast of Purim was this prohibition relaxed sufficiently to allow extempore enactment of the Megile of Esther, associated with the feast, and subsequently of other biblical stories. The oldest extant manuscript of such a Purim play (Purim-shpiln) is the *Akhashveresh-shpil*, named after the Persian king, Ahasuerus, in the Book of Esther. Other subjects of the early Purim plays that have survived are the story of the sale of Joseph into captivity and the story of David and Goliath.

Purim  
plays

Collections of prayers either with a Yiddish translation at the foot of the Hebrew text or in Yiddish only, whether for daily use or specially for the holidays, are found from the 16th century onward. The first printed Yiddish prayer book dates from 1544. More interesting, however, are the *tkhines*, which are collections of prayers for the use of women. Whereas the prayers for general use invoke the deity in the name of the community and closely follow the liturgical canon, the *tkhines* articulate the personal supplications of individual women and communicate far more about the joys and particularly the sorrows of everyday Jewish life in 16th-century Germany. This is also the case with the *minhagim*, or custom books, which recorded prevalent ritual usages as they had developed in particular communities. The *minhagim*, together with *musar* books, which prescribe norms of moral conduct, reflect prevailing ideals concerning everyday life. The earliest *musar* books in Yiddish were translations from Hebrew, but at the beginning of the 17th century a number were composed in Yiddish. Among these the *Seyfer brantshpigl* (1602; "The Burning Mirror") by Moyshe Khanekh Altshül was preeminent.

#### SECULAR LITERATURE

A genre that occupies an intermediate position between religious and secular writings is represented by collections of stories and fables, in which free adaptations of midrashic and talmudic material are found side by side with tales garnered from a variety of Gentile sources. The most notable example is *Eyn sheyn mayse-bukh* ("A Beautiful Story Book"), usually referred to simply as the *Mayse-*

*bukh*, published in Basel in 1602 by Yankev ben Avrom of Międzyrzec. Many of the stories are designed to illustrate an edifying moral or to provide models of behaviour.

By far the most accomplished Yiddish writer of this period was Elye ben Asher ha-Levi, known as Elijah Levita or Elye Bokher. Though he was born near Nürnberg, he lived and worked primarily in Padua, Venice, and Rome. He was a noted Hebrew grammarian, and his Yiddish translation of the Psalms, published in Venice in 1545, was the first to be printed and achieved great popularity. He also wrote the verse lampoons *Sreyfe fun Venetsye* ("The Fire of Venice") and *ha-Mavdil* ("Benediction"), but he made his reputation chiefly as the author of the Yiddish romances, the *Bove-bukh* and *Pariz un Viene*. The *Bove-bukh*, or *Bove d'Antona* as it was entitled in its first edition (1541), was composed in 1507–08 and takes the form of an abridged and skillful adaptation of one of the many Italian versions of the *Buève de Hantone*, an Anglo-Norman *chanson de geste*. The molding of the story to Jewish taste and the virtuoso performance in adapting the Italian *ottava rima* stanza to the Yiddish language (at much the same time and place as Giuseppe Sarfati was introducing this form into Hebrew poetry) are both evidence of exceptional literary talent. His *Pariz un Viene*, based on the Italian version of an originally Provençal source, was an even greater tour de force but does not seem to have achieved the same popularity and survives in only two incomplete copies printed in Verona in 1594.

Yiddish  
adaptation  
of the  
romance

The troubled social conditions in which the Jews of Germany lived during the 17th and 18th centuries are reflected in a class of verse narratives that served to disseminate news of blood-libels, expulsions, and pogroms. The narratives are similar to the rhymed chronicles or *historische Volkslieder* ("historical folk songs") that circulated as broadsheets and pamphlets in Germany at the same time. Indeed, the Yiddish songs often constituted rebuttals of the anti-Semitic libels in the German *Lieder*. The earliest and best known example is the *Sheyn lid megiles Vints*, by Elkhonen ben Avrom Helm, which tells of anti-Semitic rioting during a popular uprising led by Vincenz Fettmilch against the patrician oligarchy of Frankfurt am Main in 1612–14. The earliest extant copy is that printed in Amsterdam in 1648. Other examples are a *Meshiakh-lid* (1666; "Messiah Song"), about the false Messiah, Shabse Tsvi (Sabbatai Zevi); and a *Shvedish lid* ("Swedish Song"), concerning events in the Swedish War in 1648, at a time when Jewish refugees were fleeing into Germany as a result of the Khmelnitsky massacres in the Ukraine.

The most vivid reflection of Jewish everyday life in 17th- and early 18th-century Germany is found in the *Zikhroynes mores Glikl Hamil* (1896; *The Life of Glückel of Hameln*). These memoirs, written during the years 1691 to 1719, were not intended for publication but represented a kind of spiritual legacy to Glikl's 14 widely scattered children. The subjects on which she touches are extremely varied and highly informative concerning the social, cultural, and economic circumstances of the German Jews of her time. She tells of wars and plagues, of wedding feasts and bankruptcies, and of the impact on Germany of the hysteria aroused by Shabse Tsvi.

Yiddish literature in Germany and the West came to a virtual end with a handful of didactic comedies written by followers of Moses Mendelssohn and members of the Haskalah, who in principle were proponents of the repudiation of Yiddish in favour of standard German. Typical of this tendency was Arn Volfzon-Hale's *Laykhtzin un fremley* (1796; "Frivolity and Bigotry"). It is subtitled a *Familyen-gemelde*, or "Family Portrait," and bears comparison with the bourgeois drama that had become fashionable on the contemporary German stage. The intention was to provide a modern secular alternative to the traditional Purim play, and this was certainly the first time that aspects of contemporary life had made an appearance in Yiddish drama.

Yiddish  
literature's  
demise in  
western  
Europe

Western Yiddish survived into the 19th century, and in certain areas immediately outside of the frontiers of Germany the language was still alive after World War II. No further literature of any significance was produced, however, in western Europe.

## Modern literature in eastern Europe and in emigration

### THE 19TH CENTURY

A resurgence of Yiddish literature in eastern Europe overlapped chronologically with the decline in the West. To a large extent it was shaped by the struggle between the *Haskalah* and *Hasidism*. The *Hasidic* religious revival, which originated in Podolia in the 18th century, sought communion with nature and spontaneity of worship in song and dance. The emphasis placed on individual fervour naturally favoured the free expression of feeling in Yiddish in contrast to formulaic liturgy in Hebrew. The main literary reflections of this ethos were the eulogies of the movement's founder, Israel ben Eliezer (known as the *Ba'al Shem Tov*); and above all the mystical tales of his great-grandson, Reb Nakhmen (Rabbi *Naḥman*) of Bratslav.

The *maskilim*, adherents of the *Haskalah*, considered such *Hasidic* literature inimical to the enlightenment of the Jewish people and set about combating its influence by means of parody and satire. In particular it was the aim of the *Haskalah* to expose the supposed hypocrisy of the *Hasidic* rabbis and to ridicule the obscurantism of their tales. The Yiddish author most widely read during this period was Ayzik Meyer Dik, whose anti-*Hasidic* tone was less pronounced than that of his contemporaries, Yisroel Aksenfeld and Shloyme Etinger. Dik produced more than 400 sentimental and historical novels, many of which have disappeared because the cheap unbound editions in which they were produced were quite literally read to shreds.

The more committed *maskilic* writers were confined to parody by the very fact of their ideological alienation from their mass audience and from the world they described. This had the somewhat paradoxical effect of concentrating their attention on the use of colloquial language in dramatic dialogue, a fact that played a significant role in the gradual molding of the new eastern European standard literary Yiddish. At the same time, however, this restriction of scope severely limited the dimensions of their narrative perspective. A crucial step in overcoming this limitation and in the development of Yiddish literature in general was taken in 1864 when Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (also spelled Shalom Jacob Abramovitsch) published *Dos kleyne mentshele* ("The Little Man"). It appeared anonymously in 12 installments in *Kol mevaser* ("The Herald"), the first successful Yiddish weekly journal. At the beginning of *Dos kleyne mentshele* Abramovitsh introduced the reader to his narrator, Mendele Moykher Sforim ("Mendele the Itinerant Bookseller"). Mendele's name, also spelled Mendele Mokher Sefarim, came to be regarded as the author's pseudonym, but Mendele is more accurately thought of as a brilliantly conceived narrative voice that permits his creator subtle ironic shifts of perspective. In 1865 there followed the first version of *Dos vintshfingerl* ("The Magic Ring"), which after complex revision was eventually to become his major novel. A play, *Di takse* (1869; "The Tax"), treated economic and class antagonisms within Jewish society for the first time. Abramovitsh's satirical allegory, *Di klyatshe* (1873; *The Nag*), represents the fate of the Jewish nation in the form of a prince transformed into a broken, maltreated horse.

Yoyel Linetski benefited greatly from advances in narrative technique made by Abramovitsh. In *Dos polyshe yingl* (1869; *The Polish Boy*), which became immensely popular, Linetski adopted the device of the *faux-naïf* narrator.

When Shloyme Etinger's tragicomedy *Serkele* was performed by students at the Zhitomir rabbinical academy in 1862 it was the first time that a modern Yiddish play actually had been enacted. In 1876, however, Avrom Goldfaden (Abraham Goldfaden) traveled to Romania, where he joined forces with a group of singers to mount open-air performances. At first these were limited to a scenario-framework for his songs. Music played an important role in Goldfaden's work and many of his compositions acquired almost the status of folk songs. In 1877 the company performed his first play, *Shmendrik*. The play itself was a sentimental comedy attacking the custom of enforcing arranged matches particularly in *Hasidic* families.

Its real significance lay, however, in the fact that it constituted the beginning of a professional Yiddish theatre, which was destined to play to packed houses in London, Buenos Aires, and New York City by the turn of the century, and which before it disappeared made a significant contribution to the Broadway and Hollywood industries. In response to the rising tide of anti-Semitism in the 1880s, Goldfaden's plays became more serious, more critical of superficial *Haskalah* rationalism, and increasingly nationalistic in tone. Though set in 14th-century Palermo, *Doktor Almosado*, which had its premiere performance in St. Petersburg in 1882, reflected the recent pogroms in Russia. Plays set in Palestine, such as *Bar Kokhba* (1883) or his final work, *Ben-Ami* (1907; "Son of My People"), were strongly Zionist in sympathy.

In the 1880s Yiddish literature as a whole saw a movement away from the militant educational campaign of the *Haskalah* and a corresponding tendency to espouse national values and to adopt a less ambivalent attitude toward Yiddish. This shift of emphasis was particularly evident in the works of Sholem Rabinovitsh, or Sholem Aleykhem (Sholem Aleichem), as he called his authorial persona from an early stage. With his arrival on the literary scene Yiddish literature made further strides toward self-conscious maturity. Having already shown early promise in a number of novels, stories, and feuilletons, he made a savage attack in *Shomers mishpet* (1888; "The Trial of Shomer") on the sentimental pulp fiction that in his view demeaned the status of Yiddish letters. Then in the two volumes of *Di yidishe folks-bibliyotek* (1888-89; "The Yiddish Popular Anthology") he provided examples, drawn from authors such as Abramovitsh and Linetski, of writing he thought would stand comparison with works in other literatures.

In 1892 Rabinovitsh adopted the epistolary mode, in which he showed great virtuosity in his ironic handling of the constantly reborn but never gratified dreams of the average eastern European Jew. A series of monologues begun two years later featured the best known of all of Rabinovitsh's characters, Tevye der milkhiker ("Tevye the Milkman"), who narrates to Sholem Aleykhem the vicissitudes of his life. Tevye's tales epitomize the social strains and calamities suffered with faithful resignation by Jewish rural communities.

Rabinovitsh also published tales for the Jewish festivals and children's stories such as the well-known *Dos meserl* (1886; "The Penknife" in *Some Laughter, Some Tears*) and the *Motl Peyse dem khazns* cycle (1907-16; *Adventures of Mottel, the Cantor's Son*).

Returning to the novel in later life, Rabinovitsh dealt with the theme of the Jewish artist in *Blondzhende shtern* (1909-11; *Wandering Star*), giving a picaresque panorama of Yiddish theatre life stretching from eastern Europe to London's Whitechapel and Manhattan's Lower East Side. His comparatively few writings for the theatre include the posthumously published *Di goldgreber* (1908; "The Gold Diggers") and *Dos groysse gevins* (1916; "The Grand Prize"). In addition he adapted a number of his stories for the stage, including *Tevye der milkhiker*. (*Tevye* was made into a successful motion picture in 1939 and later was adapted as a musical comedy and motion picture under the title *Fiddler on the Roof*.)

### THE 20TH CENTURY

To World War I. Together with Abramovitsh and Rabinovitsh, Yitskhok Leyb Perets is regarded as one of the three major classical writers in Yiddish literature. It was Perets who effectively ushered Yiddish literature into the modern era by exposing it to contemporary trends in western European art and literature. He was influenced by Polish neo-Romantic and Symbolist writings, and under their impact he lent new expressive force to the Yiddish language in numerous stories collected as *Khsidish* (1908; "Hasidic Tales") and *Folkstimleke geshikhten* (1908; "Folktales"). In these stories *Hasidic* material is viewed obliquely from the standpoint of a secular literary intellect and becomes the vehicle for an elegiac contemplation of traditional Jewish values.

Perets played an important moderating role as deputy

Struggle between *Haskalah* and *Hasidism*

The works of Sholem Rabinovitsh

Development of narrative technique

chairman at the Yiddish Conference that assembled at Czernowitz in 1908 to promote the status of the language and its culture. He is also remembered for the encouragement that he gave to a whole generation of younger writers who flocked to his home in Warsaw.

Perets and several other writers participated in the extraordinary burgeoning of literary activity that manifested itself above all in the foundation of literary periodicals with aesthetic programs. Particularly influential were the *Lit-erarishe monatshriftn* ("Monthly Literary Review"), four issues of which appeared in Wilno (Vilnius) in the spring of 1908, carrying contributions by Perets, Der Nister (pseudonym of Pinkhes Kahanovich), Perets Hirshbeyn, and Sholem Ash (also spelled Sholem Asch).

World War I and its aftermath transformed Yiddish cultural geography. The war itself severely hampered contacts between the Jewish heartland in eastern Europe and nascent Yiddish intellectual life in the New World, while the Bolshevik Revolution, the Russian Civil War, and the ensuing Russo-Polish War severed the Soviet centres from literary activities in the resurgent Polish Republic. Furthermore, an ideological exchange took place, with Jewish intellectuals both fleeing from and migrating to the Soviet Union. Consequently, in dealing with Yiddish literature after World War I, it is appropriate to give separate attention to developments in the three major cultural centres.

**After World War I.** *The Soviet Union.* Of all the pre-war Jewish parties in Russia, the most uncompromising in their support for Yiddish had been the members of the Jewish Labour Bund. Like the *maskilim* before them, the Bundists saw the language as a means to an end, in this case Socialism. The majority of the Bundists eventually joined forces with the Bolsheviks and took control of Jewish cultural institutions in the Soviet Union. While Hebrew literature and other supposedly chauvinist aspects of traditional Jewish culture were ruthlessly suppressed, Yiddish writers enjoyed unparalleled facilities. Before the war the Bundists had been bitterly opposed to the art-for-art's-sake trends in modernist Yiddish literature, but in the era immediately following the revolution much of what was published had, in fact, been written earlier and was Impressionist or Symbolist in style. Some of the best of this writing appeared in two important collections published in Kiev during the turbulent Russian Civil War era. *Eygnis* (1918 and 1920; "Our Own") was edited by Dovid Bergelson and Der Nister, while *Der oyfgang* (1919; "Ascent") was edited by Dovid Hofshsteyn. In addition to works by the editors, these collections included significant contributions by Leyb Kvitko and Perets Markish that were stylistically innovative; at the same time they drew heavily on the themes of Russian Futurism and recapitulated Romantic and Expressionist developments in the European lyric that had previously been absent from Yiddish literature. All of these writers emigrated in 1920 or soon after but returned to the Soviet Union during the era of the New Economic Policy, when emphasis was placed on the need to win support among the more sympathetic of the émigré intellectuals.

Dovid Bergelson (also spelled David Bergelson) had first made a name for himself with the short story *Arum vokzal* (1909; "At the Railway Station"; translated as "At the Depot" in *A Shtetl and Other Yiddish Novellas*, 1973) and with his masterpiece, *Nokh alemen* (1913; *When All Is Said and Done*), an impressionistic novel that brilliantly captures the atmosphere of unfulfilled longing in a Ukrainian provincial town. While in Berlin in 1924 he and Der Nister edited *Der Milgroym* ("Pomegranate"), one of the most impressive Yiddish literary journals ever produced. Increasingly, however, he thought of the Soviet Union as the only place where Yiddish literature could survive, and he went on to edit *In shpan* (1926; "In Harness"), a pro-Soviet journal that was intended to offer émigré writers an opportunity to align themselves with the supposed march of history.

Der Nister had been known as the author of brilliant Symbolist stories such as *Kleopatre* (1908; "Cleopatra"). In 1929 he published in *Di royte velt* ("The Red World") an extraordinary story entitled "Unter a ployt" ("Under a Fence"), a complex, phantasmagoric tale that expresses

the agonies of artistic submission to external repression and perhaps best articulates the quintessence of Jewish intellectual life in the Soviet Union in those years.

In 1929 ideological rigidity once again gained the upper hand. Socialist Realism became the watchword and Yiddish writers increasingly found themselves accused of "bourgeois nationalism." During the 1930s the rate of Yiddish publishing actually increased, but it consisted largely of simplistic paeans to Stalin and to the system. The more sensitive writers felt themselves limited to the translation of foreign classics, to the production of "corrected" versions of earlier work, and to historical topics. Even within these restraints some remarkable works were produced, such as Bergelson's semiautobiographical novel *Bam Dnyeper* (1932, 1940; "By the Shores of the Dnepr") or Der Nister's outstanding genealogical chronicle *Di mishpokhe Mashber* (1939; "The Mashber Family"), the action of which is set in the 1870s and which thereby sidesteps ideologically sensitive areas. Most remarkable perhaps among Yiddish publications of these years was *Zelmenyaner* (1929-30; "The Zelmenians") by Moyshe Kulbak, who was almost the only writer who dared to look at contemporary reality with a critical eye.

Many writers were victims of the political purges of the 1930s; "proletarian" or Marxist orthodoxy was no guarantee against arrest. The World War II years brought with them a renewed freedom for Yiddish authors to write about Jewish aspirations and causes. Soon after the war, however, the Zhdanovite repression bore down with particular severity on Yiddish cultural life, and by 1948 virtually all of the leading figures of the Yiddish intelligentsia had been arrested. Some died in prison. Almost all those still alive on Aug. 12, 1952, were shot on Stalin's orders.

In 1955 and 1956 many of Stalin's victims were posthumously "rehabilitated," and since then Yiddish books and periodicals have appeared on a limited scale.

*Poland.* During the interwar years the Republic of Poland, independent once again after an interval of more than 120 years, together with Romania and Lithuania constituted the most fertile of the Yiddish cultural areas. An exponential increase in the number of talented writers at work produced a wealth of literary developments existing side by side. Naturalism was exemplified by Oyzer Varshavski's novel *Shmuglars* (1920; "Smugglers"), which depicts underworld life during the German occupation. Shloyme Zaynvl Rapoport, who wrote under the name of S. Ansky, was much influenced by the neo-Romanticism of Perets. His play *Der dibek* (1919; translated as "The Dybbuk" in *The Dybbuk and Other Great Yiddish Plays*, 1966) was performed by the celebrated Vilna Troupe in Warsaw and was received with great acclaim. It went on to attract international attention with performances in translation in Kraków, Berlin, Vienna, and New York City, all in 1925. (Mikhl Vashinski's screen version of *Der dibek* [1937] is perhaps the most successful of all the many Yiddish films made in Poland between the wars.)

The most self-conscious break with the past was made by the Expressionists. In 1919, writing in his short-lived but influential journal *Jung-yidish*, Moyshe Broderzon described the group of exuberant iconoclasts to which he belonged as a "*freylekhe . . . khalyastre*" or "merry gang," and this appellation became the title for the almanac *Khalyastre*, published in Warsaw and Paris in 1922-24, in which they proclaimed their modernist creed. The main protagonists in addition to Broderzon were Uri-Tsvi Grinberg, Melekh Ravitsh, and Perets Markish, who had gone to Warsaw from Kiev in 1921. Influenced both by the Futurism of the Russian revolutionary poet Mayakovsky and the Expressionism of the German Jewish writers Werfel and Else Lasker-Schüler, they sought to participate in the general European modernist movement and to respond to the anguish and chaos of the postwar world with universal images of apocalyptic pessimism. It was in Warsaw also that Markish first published his collection of poems entitled *Di kupe* (1921; "The Heap"), which is a Kaddish, a lament for the victims of a pogrom whose mutilated corpses lie heaped in a Ukrainian market square.

*Di kupe* represented an important station in the history of Jewish artistic responses to anti-Semitism that

Political  
purges of  
Yiddish  
writers

*Khalyastre*  
writers in  
Warsaw

had included the 17th-century *lider* and Hayyim Nahman Bialik's famous Hebrew poem on the Kishinyov pogrom of 1903. Grinberg, who in 1918 had himself narrowly escaped death in a pogrom in Lvov, voiced a more strident reaction in his *Uri-Tsvi farn tseylem* ("Uri-Zvi Before the Cross"), which he published in the second issue of his journal *Albatros* (1922). Grinberg eventually turned his back on both Europe and Yiddish in order to become a Hebrew poet in Palestine. Markish's Socialist ideals took him back to the Soviet Union, while Ravitsh left Poland and traveled widely before settling in Canada.

An associate of the group, while it lasted, was Yisroel-Yeshue Zinger (known in English as Israel Joshua Singer). He was joint editor of the first issue of *Khalyastre*, and he contributed to it an impressionistic story, *In der fintster* ("In the Dark"), written in Kiev during the Russian Civil War. Zinger, however, soon moved away from his neo-Romantic beginnings toward Realism. A semiautobiographical novel, *Shtol un ayzn* (1927; *Blood Harvest*, U.S. title *Steel and Iron*), reflects his wartime experiences. In *Yoshe Kalb* (1932) Zinger returned to his roots and wrote a novel of repressed sexual passion set amid the corruption and hypocrisy of a tyrannical Hasidic court. After the triumphant success of a stage version produced in New York City by Maurice Schwartz, Zinger emigrated to the United States. It was there that he wrote his masterpiece, *Di brider Ashkenazi* (1935; *The Brothers Ashkenazi*), which traces the antagonisms of two brothers against the background of the development of the textile industry in Łódź from the end of the Napoleonic era to the rebirth of the Polish republic.

Itzik Manger was born in Austrian Bukovina and began writing in Romania, but he moved in 1928 to Warsaw, where a year later he published his first book of collected verse. His major achievements were *Khumesht lider* (1935; "Pentateuch Songs") and *Megile lider* (1936; "Songs of the Book of Esther"), in which he feigns the naïveté of an itinerant minstrel and draws on the Purim play tradition to give an anachronistic and vivid account of biblical stories.

The rich and varied Yiddish literary culture of Poland was brought to an abrupt and tragic end by the Nazi invasion in 1939. Nevertheless, poems, plays, and songs continued to be written in the ghettos and camps, and a small proportion survives. (H.F.D.)

*The United States.* With the 19th-century migrations to the United States, and especially to the Lower East Side of New York City, Yiddish literature made its appearance in the New World. A volume of exhortatory, Haskalah verse appeared as early as 1877. This early beginning was followed by a generation of "sweatshop poets." Moris Vintshovski represented a transition from the Haskalah to socialism. He arrived in the United States in 1898 having already made a reputation for himself in London as a writer of propagandistic verse. Moris Roznfeld, like many of his readers, also came to New York City via the East End of London. He worked for many years in the tailoring shops of both cities. One of his famous poems, "Mayn yingele" (1887; "My Little Boy"), expresses a worker's estrangement from his family, resulting from endless hours spent in a sweatshop.

Avrom Lyesin and Avrom Reyzn made a more ironic and Romantic contribution to the development of Yiddish verse in America, while Yehoash Shloyme Blumgartn, who wrote under the name Yehoash, captured the sights and sounds of the metropolis and introduced the world of nature to the Yiddish lyric in the New World. His supreme achievement was a meticulous and scholarly translation of the Old Testament into modern Yiddish.

A significant change of direction occurred with the emergence of Di Yunge, a group of young poets associated with the journal *Di yugnt* ("Youth") that was published in New York City in 1907-08. They had been influenced by the Jewish Labour Bund and the revolutionary ferment in Russia, but when they went to the United States after the disappointments of the failed revolution of 1905 they no longer had any patience with the tendentious rhyming of their predecessors. The paradox of their position was that while their daily experience remained that of immigrant working-class life, they viewed it very largely from the per-

spective of European aestheticism. They were linguistic purists and also adept translators of the French, German, and Russian Symbolists who were their inspiration. The main protagonists of this movement were Mani Leyb, Zishe Landoy, and Moyshe Leyb Halpern. Another who was embraced by the movement was H. Leivick, pseudonym of Leyvik Halpern, who was best known for his verse drama *Der goylem* (1921; "The Golem"). For the most part Di Yunge were unacquainted with English literature, but Yisroel-Yankev Shvarts (I.J. Schwartz) translated Walt Whitman's poetry and adopted something of his manner in the epic poem *Kentoki* (1925; "Kentucky"), in which the exoticism and the wide open horizons of the American South entered Yiddish literature for the first time.

After World War I a more radical rebellion challenged the innovations of Di Yunge. In the anthology *In zikh* (1920; "Introspection") Arn Glants-Leyeles, Yankev Glatshsteyn, and Nokhem Minkov asserted that the world exists only insofar as it is reflected in subjective impressions, each of which demands its own unique formal expression, ideally in free verse. Unlike Di Yunge, the *Inzikhistn*, as they came to be called, had attended universities in London and New York City and were influenced by contemporary English and American literature, in particular by Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and the Imagists. Glatshsteyn was among the finest Yiddish writers of the 20th century. One of his later collections, *Shtralndike yidn* (1946; "Radiant Jews"), expresses sadness and despair following the Holocaust. Y.L. Teller, a younger poet, also confronted the political events of the time, in, for example, *Lider fun der tsayt* (1940; "Poems of the Age").

Sholem Ash became the first Yiddish author to have a truly international following. He visited the United States for the first time in 1910 and spent most of the rest of his life there. He moved from genial portrayal of life in eastern Europe in *A shtetl* (1904) and in his colourful underworld novel *Motke ganev* (1917; *Motke the Thief*) to American locations with *Onkl Mozes* (1918; *Uncle Moses*) and several historical novels. Ash became the subject of controversy when he chose to write novels about early Christianity, so much so that of his trilogy published in English as *The Nazarene* (1939), *The Apostle* (1943), and *Mary* (1949) only the first volume appeared in the original Yiddish, as *Der man fun Netseres* (1943). Critics remained hostile to his subsequent work, including his most successful novel, *Ist river* (1946; *East River*), which looks with sanguine idealism at interaction between Irish and Jewish immigrants of the Lower East Side at the turn of the century.

Lamed Shapiro (pen name of Levi Yeshue Shapiro) and Yoysel Opatoshu (pen name of Yoysel Meyer Opatovski) were prose writers of the same generation as Ash who migrated to the United States in their 20s. Shapiro achieved notoriety with a brilliant series of stories constituting a psychopathology of the pogrom, in which the action is seen through the eyes of the perpetrators of the violence. Opatoshu wrote realistic stories set in New York City and historical novels.

Chaim Grade, who lived in Vilnius until World War II, became a leading figure in the Yung-Vilne movement of the late 1930s. Grade published several highly esteemed volumes of poetry, such as *Doyres* (1945; *Generations*). After his arrival in New York in 1948, he also published novels—many of which have been translated into English—and the philosophical post-Holocaust story "Mayn krig mit Hersh Rasseynner" ("My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseynner").

Since World War II, the only Yiddish author to achieve world renown has been Yitskhek Basheyyvis, known to his English readers as Isaac Bashevis Singer, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978. Born in Poland in 1904, he moved to New York City in 1935. His best novel is perhaps the early, experimental *Der sotn in Goray* (1935; *Satan in Goray*), which begins as a historical novel. As it recreates the aura following the massacres instigated by Bohdan Khmelnytsky in 1648, it refers to the false messiah Shabbetai Tzevi. (Bohdan Khmelnytsky was a Cossack leader who led an uprising against Polish landowners; his forces also destroyed hundreds of Ukrainian Jewish com-

Works of  
Sholem  
Ash

"Sweatshop  
poets"

Innova-  
tions of  
Di Yunge

Works of  
I.B. Singer



munities.) Revolving around a case of possession by a dybbuk, or disembodied spirit, the novel anticipates Singer's later fascination with demons. The final segment, which purports to be the text of a document from the 17th century about "the dybbuk of Goray," is stylistically interesting for its deliberate archaisms. Singer's best-known work is "Gimpl Tan" ("Gimpel the Fool," written in the mid-1940s but first published in 1953; Eng. trans. in *Gimpel the Fool and Other Stories* [1957]), a short story that was powerfully translated by the American novelist Saul Bellow. Using first-person narrative—by a simple man who allows himself to be duped by the community—it evokes the shtetl in a humorous and nostalgic manner. Singer's stories were regularly published in the Yiddish newspaper *Forverts* and in *The New Yorker*; they appealed to American readers who sought to find a connection to eastern European life before the Holocaust.

Yiddish theatre in the United States

Yiddish theatre arrived in the United States by way of London, where it had enjoyed a brief heyday in the 1880s. The first professional production in the United States took place in 1882 (despite much outraged protest on the part of New York City's German Jews) when the young Boris Tomashevsky made his debut in Goldfaden's *Koldumye* ("The Witch"). On the whole, artistic standards were not high, but the efforts of Yankev (Jacob) Gordin brought a considerable improvement. His *Sibirye*, which opened in November 1891, and *Der pogrom in Rusland*, produced two months later, brought a purer Yiddish as well as more serious and realistic content to the Yiddish stage, though his work was often marred by melodramatic moralizing. In his prolific output he frequently contented himself with free adaptations from classical English, German, and Russian drama. His most successful works were *Der yidisher kenig Lir* (1892), based on Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and what is perhaps the most popular play in the entire Yiddish repertoire, *Mirele Efros* (1898), which reworks the same theme with a female protagonist.

The greatest achievements of Yiddish theatre took place in the years following World War I. Dramatists such as Sholem Ash, Dovid Pinski, and Perets Hirshbeyn arrived from Europe and began working with theatre groups subsidized by Yiddish cultural organizations. A major impact was also made by European touring companies such as the Vilna Troupe. Hirshbeyn wrote rural idylls such as *A farvorfn vinkl* (1912; "A Secluded Corner") and *Grine felder* (1916; "Green Fields"), which reflected his experience of Jewish farming life both in his native Byelorussia and in the Catskill Mountains. Both plays were successfully staged in New York City by Yankev Ben-Ami, who had worked in Hirshbeyn's own company in Odessa before the war. While studying in Berlin, Pinski had been influenced by the Naturalist drama of the prolific German writer Gerhart Hauptmann. Pinski arrived in the United States in 1899 and continued his studies of German literature at Columbia University. His *Der oytser* (1906; *The Treasure*) is an ironic comedy satirizing avarice in a Russian shtetl. It was given its premiere performance in German translation by the German-Jewish theatrical director Max Reinhardt in Berlin and became an international success. In *Dovid hamylekh un zayne vayber* (1914; "King David and His Wives") Pinski depicts the growing cynicism and hedonism of the King who, nonetheless, in old age achieves an almost Faustian insight into the elevation that comes from striving after an ideal. In 1949 Pinski, who had for decades been active in the Poalei Zion movement, moved to Haifa, where he became the focus of the Yung-Yisroel ("Young Israel") group.

Survival of Yiddish in Israel

*Israel.* Arguably the most important Yiddish writer in Israel during the 20th century was the poet Avrom Sutskever (or Abraham Sutzkever). Like Chaim Grade, he was involved with the Yung-Vilno group. Sutskever lived for several years in Warsaw, where he published his first book of poetry in 1937. He escaped from the Vilna ghetto in 1943 and wrote poems about his experiences. Some of his poetry that responds to the Nazi genocide is contained in *Di festung* (1945; "The Fortress" or "The Prison") and in *Lider fun geto* (1946; "Poems from the Ghetto"). After

Sutskever moved to Palestine in 1947, he continued Yiddish literary culture in Israel and around the world by editing the journal *Di goldene keyt* (1949–96; "The Golden Chain"). Other Yiddish writers in Sutskever's group Yung-Yisroel were Shlomo Vorsoger, Tzvi Eisenman, Rivka Basman, and Rokhl Fishman.

Rikudah Potash was born in Poland and moved to Palestine in 1934. She published poetry in Poland and in Israel, including the volume *Moyled iber Timna* (1959; "New Moon over Timna"). Both her sense of fantasy and her knowledge of art history enrich this collection of poems. Leyb Rokhman settled in Jerusalem in 1950, where he tried to carry on both the Hasidic tradition and the secular culture of prewar Poland. His second book, *Mit blinde trit iber der erd* (1968; "With Blind Steps over the Earth"), expresses the psychological complexities of life as a Holocaust survivor. Yosel Birshteyn, born in Poland and going to Israel in 1950 by way of Australia, published poems, novels, and stories in Yiddish and Hebrew, including the novel *Der zamlar* (1985; "The Collector"). Tsvi Kanar survived three years in a concentration camp before moving to Palestine in 1946. In 1980 he began writing fiction in Yiddish; among his books are *Ikh un lemekh* (1994; "Lemekh and I") and *Opgegebn broyt* (1996; "Returned Bread" or "Returning the Favour"). Lev Berinsky was a Russian poet who switched to Yiddish. Among his Yiddish works are the collections *Der zuniker veltboy* (1988; "The Sunny World-Structure") and *Fishfang in Venetsie* (1996; "Fishing in Venice").

*Women writers.* In the 20th century women began to contribute greatly to Yiddish literature. Among the more important writers are the poets Anna Margolin (*Lider* [1929; *Poems*]), Celia Dropkin, Kadia Molodowky, and Malka Heifetz Tussman. Selections of Tussman's poetry appear in English translation in *With Teeth in the Earth* (1992).

Yiddish and Hebrew have switched positions in the secular life of Ashkenazic Jewish communities. Until the Holocaust, Yiddish was the dominant vernacular of the Jews in Europe, while Hebrew was the largely unspoken, "high" literary language of scripture and prayer. Afterward, however, Hebrew was revived as the vernacular in Israel, and Yiddish began to lose its voice. Few of the secular Yiddish authors and scholars of the 21st century will have learned Yiddish as their mother tongue. (H.F.D./K.F.)

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