

Language for a Revolution: Yiddish Schools in the United States and the Making of Jewish

Proletarian Culture

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(History)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

2021

Date of final oral examination: 8/18/2021

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2021

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All of us who have been in a doctorate program know that it takes a great deal to reach the finish-line, and that there is no guarantee we will necessarily get there. We can find plenty of reasons to succumb to self-doubt. It therefore fills me with emotion and profound gratitude to the people who helped me reach this moment, who invested in my training, who thought I could offer a contribution as a historian in my field. I hope that all of you who encouraged me during this journey understand how much your support made the completion of this project possible.

In particular, I would like to thank my advisor, Tony Michels, whose shared passion for this topic, commitment to my training as a scholar, and kindness of character has made this journey one of the true privileges of my life. Tony is a uniquely wonderful mentor, who in these past six years pushed me to be a stronger reader, writer, and thinker, while only growing my belief in myself and my enthusiasm for the material. Tony gave me so much of his time, our meetings spilling over into hours of conversation, and somehow it always felt like we were just getting started. This speaks to Tony's brilliance, as I learned so much from him every time I met with him, as well as his generosity and availability to me as an advisor. These years under Tony's guidance has been an incredible gift for which I am deeply grateful.

I would also like to thank Sunny Yudkoff, who read many drafts of this dissertation and was remarkable in her commitment to support me in this process. Sunny was also exceedingly generous with her time, offering insights that ranged from engaging the conceptual frameworks presented in this work to helping me with the details of Yiddish translation. Sunny's investment in this project and in supporting me as a young scholar were crucial in helping me see a place for my contributions in the academy, and played no small role in my motivation to keep moving forward.

I also feel fortunate to have learned from the other phenomenal faculty and staff at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Thank you in particular to my committee members Amos Bitzan, who played a crucial role in shaping me into the scholar of Jewish history I am today, and to Adam Nelson, for his insight and guidance engaging with the field of History of Education. Thank you as well to the professors who challenged me and inspired me during my graduate journey: Kathryn Ciancia, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, Susan Lee Johnson, Cindy I-Fen Cheng, Gloria Whiting, and Leonora Neville. You are all not only brilliant scholars, but also conduct yourselves with a wisdom I deeply admire and have given me a high standard to aspire to. I would further like to thank the History Department's Graduate Advisor, Leslie Abadie, whose dedication, organization, and capacity to support all of us in the History Department I also credit with playing an instrumental role in my completion of this dissertation.

I also could not have done this project without the support for research and language study that I received from the Weil Fund, Lawrence Weinstein Fellowship in Education and Jewish Studies, and Lipton Scholarships, among other funding from the Center for Jewish Studies and University of Wisconsin Graduate School. This project involved several research trips to New York and California, numerous Yiddish language courses, as well as funded time that allowed me to do all the reading, translating, and writing required to get this project done. Every scholarship and fellowship I received was essential to my completion of this work, and I am grateful for the committees who saw my project as a worthwhile investment and the generous donors that made it all possible.

Thank you to my colleagues at the Inyo County Adult Education Program, who worked around my schedule so I could complete this dissertation and who have been an important source of encouragement. I learned from you how I can use my training to be of service to the local

community, and this has been an incredible gift that has also helped me stay committed to seeing this project through.

I would also like to thank the Teaching Assistants' Association (TAA), which grounded me in a sense of community and taught me a great deal about what it means to show up for others in what can feel like a solitary journey. Those of us who have been in leadership in the TAA know how much the union requires, but my time organizing with alongside my fellow graduate employees - as exhausting as it could be at times - nurtured my ability to act courageously when I felt scared, showed my power when I felt insignificant, and kept me giving when I wanted to be selfish. I learned a tremendous amount from my friends in the union, and am grateful for all the work they do.

To my dad, Peter Obstler, who was probably my biggest cheerleader. With a shared love for history, he consistently showed his enthusiasm for my work throughout this process, and always let me know that he was proud of me. I know that his support would have been there regardless, but it was particularly meaningful in those moments when I felt daunted by this task. My dad was wonderful about regularly asking me about my dissertation and my progress, but also gave me room when I wanted to *not* talk about it, which was an equally appreciated demonstration of support.

My mother, Lorin Kaufman, offered invaluable emotional support throughout this journey and never let me doubt that I could finish this. She is also one of the few people who could, if asked, tell you what my dissertation is about and why it matters. She listened to me read some of this work aloud and helped me communicate some of its more challenging ideas. A brilliant writer in her own right, she is also responsible for helping me come up with the title of this work; her ability to think of excellent titles is another one of her many gifts.

There are many other family members who have been incredibly supportive and for whom I am profoundly grateful: my step-parents Ellen Obstler and Al Petrie, my sister Dara Olandt, brother-in law Pete Olandt, my niece and nephew Micah and Ocean Olandt, my aunt and uncle Wendy and Steve Larkin, and my in-laws Roberta Godbe-Tipp, James Godbe, and Jeff Tipp. I also would like to acknowledge my late grandparents, Mimi and Harold Obstler, and Sidney and Eileen Kaufman, who are not here to read this, but are in many ways responsible for my interest in American Jewish history. I thought about them frequently as I worked on this project, and I know they would be proud of what I have accomplished here.

Finally, I am grateful for my husband, Mike Godbe. This whole thing is really Mike's fault. Before meeting Mike, my life could have gone in several directions (including becoming a Rabbi, which is especially amusing in light of the topic of this dissertation). As a history major himself, Mike got me excited about what I could do as a historian and always believed in my intellectual and creative potential. When I decided I wanted to pursue a PhD and uproot everything to go to Wisconsin, Mike was supportive of all of it. "Wherever you want to go," he said, "we'll go." And during this process, Mike continued to show incredible investment in my work: he's read and listened to so much of what I've written, and was always a voice telling me why my contributions are important (but also willing to tell me when something needs more work). How lucky I am, to have someone in my life who treated my work with a seriousness and commitment like it was his own. Mike's support was essential to me finishing this project. Forgive the cliché, but it is true that I could not have done this without him.

I also must acknowledge my two large cats, Wendell and Alinsky, and my sweet dog, Bodie, who laid at my feet for most of the dissertation-writing process. My pets were crucial at times, although they have absolutely no idea about anything at all.

There are many other friends and colleagues who have helped me to arrive at this moment in both big and small ways. Some of you will know who you are, while others may not, but you gave me your loving care, wisdom, and humor. Those moments of support and solidarity helped get me over the finish line, and for that I am more grateful than you can probably ever know. Thank you.

LANGUAGE NOTE

Most of the quotations from primary sources appeared originally in Yiddish and are translated here into English. In cases where changing the Yiddish word to English lost an important or interesting aspect of its meaning, I included the Yiddish transliteration either with the text or with a footnote explanation. The transliterations from the Yiddish are based on YIVO prescribed standards as well as the recommendations provided in “Guidelines for Yiddish in Bibliographies: A Supplement to YIVO Transliteration,” which suggests standards for Romanized spellings for names and capitalization.¹

¹ Isaac Bleaman. *In geveb*. “Guidelines for Yiddish in Bibliographies: A Supplement to YIVO Transliteration.” Accessed June 30, 2021. <https://ingeveb.org/pedagogy/guidelines-for-yiddish-in-bibliographies>.

PROLOGUE

YIDDISH COMMUNISM: A NEW FACE FOR THE OLD LEFT

The term “The Old Left” came into being to distinguish it from the emerging “New Left” of the 1960s. As much as there were continuities between the two movements, there were some important distinctions ideologically. The New Left, out of which poured a variety of movements like feminism, gay liberation, Black Power, the Chicano/a movement, among others, gave the basis of the present-day Left’s understanding of the importance of identity in social activism. This way of organizing around identity, some have argued, was fundamentally different than the project of the Old Left of the early twentieth century. Whereas the New Left took identity to be of critical importance, the Old Left sought to reduce fixations on the differences of identity in order to cohere around a project for workers uniting across racial and national distinctions.

The concept of an Old Left versus a New Left is helpful for thinking through the evolution of social activism in the United States and internationally. Historian of twentieth-century nationalism and an Old Leftist himself, Eric Hobsbawm, remarks how, “We have become so used to terms like ‘collective identity,’ ‘identity groups,’ ‘identity politics,’ or, for that matter, ‘ethnicity,’ that it is hard to remember how recently they have surfaced as part of the current vocabulary, or jargon, of political discourse.”² To be sure, Hobsbawm qualifies this statement, remarking how of course “identity problems” have been around for a long time, “However,” he says, “until the 1960s these problems of uncertain identity were confined to special border zones

² Eric Hobsbawm, “Identity Politics and the New Left,” *New Left Review*, 1/217 (May/June 1996): 39, <https://newleftreview-org.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/issues/i217/articles/eric-hobsbawm-identity-politics-and-the-left>

of politics. They were not yet central.”³ Rather, it was a sense of “universalism” that defined the ethos of the Old Left.⁴

As a matter of ideology, Hobsbawm is correct in his assessment on the values of the Old Left. Hobsbawm himself is an illustration of this, as his remarks speak to an intellectual climate among Marxists who believed that identity should be subverted for a more universalist aim. While they acknowledged that “identity problems” stemming from nationality, race, or gender carried emotional appeal, the aim of Left-wing movements, they maintained, was ultimately to transcend them, and therefore placed little emphasis on the role of identity in the telling of Old Left history.

This way of framing the Old Left, however, can also lead to a minimization of the place that “identity problems” held in the Old Left. Hobsbawm’s description, in its assertion these occupied only a “special border zone of politics,” conflates its ideals with the reality of who actually made up the Old Left and how it functioned. While identity was not the organizing principle of Old Left activism, it was indeed central to the people who made up the base of the Left in the early twentieth century, and was more instrumental for their activism than Old Left Marxists have wanted to acknowledge.

What then was the role of identity in the Old Left? The story of the Jewish labor movement in America – a significant base of the Old Left – shows us a complex and dynamic example of identity as a driver of Jews’ political activism. The Yiddish culture and education that a number of these Jewish immigrants developed, which grew and thrived in Socialist and Communist movements, shows how Jewish immigrants were fueled by a tension between the forces of universalism and particularism, of ideology and practical reality, and that it was the

³ Hobsbawm, “Identity Politics and the New Left,” 39.

⁴ Hobsbawm, “Identity Politics and the New Left,” 42.

result of them harnessing of this tension that brought in tens of thousands of people into the Old Left.

This work tells the story of Yiddish Communist schools, and the way they point us to a paradox of the Old Left: that it was particularism propelling its universalism.⁵ More than any other expression of Yiddish culture, the Yiddish supplementary schools in the Communist movement were among the most contradictory creations of the Old Left. These were not simply a means to communicate Communist ideas to immigrants. The Yiddish schools were designed to educate American-born children in the language and cultural values of their immigrant parents. They were not designed to create American Communists, but to develop specifically American-born *Yiddish* Communists. These schools were to continue a Yiddish-based Jewish identity in the Communist movement as a future aspiration.

Despite its specificity, this project of Yiddish Communist culture and the educational institutions required to sustain it were not marginal to the Communist movement. The Yiddish Communist newspaper, the *Frayhayt* (after 1929 *Morgn frayhayt*), for example, was the largest foreign-language Communist newspaper in the United States, its circulation initially larger than the English-language *Daily Worker*.⁶ The International Workers Order, the fraternal organization that served as an important auxiliary to the Communist movement was created by a Left-wing

⁶ Henry Felix Srebrnik, *Dreams of Nationhood: American Jewish Communists and the Soviet Birobidzhan Project, 1924-1951* (Academic Studies Press, 2010), 2; Gennady Estraiikh, "Professing a Leninist Yiddishkayt: The Decline of American Yiddish Communism," *American Jewish History* 96, no. 1 (March 2010): 36-37; Harvey Klehr, *The Hayday of American Communism*, (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 166. Srebrnik reports 22,000 in 1925, with a higher circulation than the *Daily Worker*. Estraiikh claims that in 1947 the *Frayhayt* and *Daily Worker* would have "almost equal" circulation with 21,000, though according to Klehr the *Daily Worker* would eclipse the *Morgn frayhayt* in the 1930s. However, circulation statistics in the Communist movement are difficult to cite with certainty as reports vary considerably and were often inflated.

split off from the Jewish socialist fraternal order the Arbeter Ring, with its Jewish section dominating the membership rolls. The Yiddish Communist schools in the United States were unparalleled in their scale and position in Communist cultural activity.⁷ Jews were also a significant base of the Party for most of its existence. In the 1920s, fifteen percent of the Communist Party was Jewish, a proportion that would grow to an estimated half in the 1930s through 1940s.⁸ Even if all the Jewish members of the Party were not participating in Yiddish culture, a significant portion of them by the mid 1930s, as this project explores, were nevertheless acting *as Jews* in their Party work. The history of Jews and Yiddish culture in the Communist movement puts us not at the periphery of the Old Left, but into the center of what built the Old Left.

Although they themselves are a counterexample, the Yiddish Communists would have agreed with Hobsbawm's claims about the character of the Old Left. For their project, they argued, was actually a universalist one. They claimed they were not creating a Yiddish culture for themselves, but in service of a wider aim to build a working class in the United States and internationally. Their insistence on promoting Yiddish culture for the health of the whole labor movement, however, was both theoretically and practically problematic. It often pushed against the aims of the Party, which at various stages sought to Americanize immigrants and do away with the national group structures it had inherited from the Socialist Party to instead create a more centralized organization. And yet, the Communist Party, hardly a group to tolerate problematic

⁷ There were other examples of Communist schools in the United States, such as Russian and Finnish schools (See Mishler, *Raising Reds*). More research needs to be done to systematically compare these schools. However, when conducting a search in the *Daily Worker* on children's schools in the United States, there were only references to the Jewish schools of the International Workers Order, suggesting these schools were the dominant school network connected to the Communist movement.

⁸ Srebrnik, *Dreams of Nationhood*, 3. This does not mean that the majority of Jews in the United States were Communist, as the Communists were still a minority in the American Jewish community.

ideas or individuals, never prohibited these expressions of Yiddish culture. Despite how Yiddish grated against what they were trying to achieve, it was because of the importance of these Jewish immigrants for the Party's base that Yiddish culture was allowed to continue.

The Yiddish school activists of this study believed that it was only through Communism that Yiddish culture could reach its potential as a project that could bring together their particular identities as Jews with the more universalist aspirations of working-class solidarity. The intellectuals and pedagogues of the Yiddish schools, first politicized in the Jewish nationalist movements that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, drifted leftward into the Communist sphere, but never abandoned their commitment to build Yiddish culture. What moved and sustained them was their project of identity and class fitting together – of a distinctive Yiddish proletarian culture. It was a vision that could not, in fact, exist on its own terms in the Communist movement, and yet it was only there that they saw a home for their vision.

INTRODUCTION

At their peak in 1937, the Yiddish Communist supplementary schools in the United States reported to serve 8,000 Jewish youth in a single year, making them the largest Yiddish secular school network in the country.⁹ These were auxiliaries, not official Party schools, but they were seen as crucial vehicles for growing and sustaining a Communist culture among Jews. These supplementary Yiddish Communist schools, which were one of four Yiddish secular school networks, were part of a cohesive Yiddish Communist cultural world that had institutions for every phase of life and every kind of cultural endeavor.¹⁰ As Jewish adults enrolled in the Jewish Workers University in order to learn how to become union activists and Yiddish school teachers, Kindergartens went to strike picket lines for field trips. Families spent their summers at Yiddish Communist summer camp, *Kinderland*, where they swam in Sylvan Lake and held dance performances honoring Lenin. They read the Yiddish Communist newspaper, the *Morgn frayhayt*. They sang worker's songs in Yiddish Communist choirs. Through all these activities, they sought to create a vibrant and radical culture based on their Jewish identity, Communist ideals, and shared language.

Their particular Yiddish culture had been steadily building since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before Communism, as Jews emigrated to the United States from the Russian Empire, enthusiastic about the possibilities of Socialism and Yiddish. Informed by their experiences in Jewish nationalist movements in revolutionary Russia, this wave of immigrants saw a role for Yiddish that not a bridge for eventual assimilation but foundational to their lives as socialists in America. They started Yiddish schools, of Labor Zionist, non-party-affiliated

⁹ Naomi Prawer Kadar and David G. Roskies, *Raising Secular Jews: Yiddish Schools and Their Periodicals for American Children, 1917–1950* (Waltham Massachusetts: Brandeis, 2016), 135.

Yiddishist, and Socialist varieties. In the years after the Russian Revolution in 1917, a number of these newcomers who had been so committed to expanding Yiddish cultural work in the Jewish labor movement moved leftward into a nascent Communist movement, and became part of another insurgency within the Jewish socialist sphere.¹¹ Calling themselves *di linke* (the Left), they eventually created institutions for a separate Communist movement —taking a number of the Yiddish schools with them, which they planned to grow to continue their Yiddish Communist culture for the next generation.

The Yiddish schools that became auxiliaries for the Communist movement were especially paradoxical creations. While they ultimately grew into central vehicles for the preservation of Yiddish language and a secular Jewish culture for the American-born generation, they were tethered to a movement that sought to ultimately dissolve national differences. Yiddish Communists had to consistently navigate Communist party policy and their own Jewish communal interests. They built institutions that promoted a distinctive Jewish culture, yet at the same time, echoed the Communist Party's rhetoric about subverting ethnic particularism in the name of the international brotherhood of the working class. Marrying their activism for Yiddish education and Communism required constant intellectual maneuvering from the Yiddish Communists, yet they emphatically asserted putting the two together not only made sense, but was the only true path to a vibrant working-class movement in the United States.

This study is interested in how Yiddish Communists negotiated the desires of the Communist Party and their commitment to Yiddish education. How did Yiddish Communists in the United States remain continuously committed to teaching Yiddish in the face of strong pressures to cast it aside? Without denying the ways these activists changed to align with

¹¹ Isaiah Trunk, "The Cultural Dimension of the American Jewish Labor Movement," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* vol. xi (1976), 342-393.

Communist Party doctrine, I argue there was an underlying and overlooked consistency in their fundamental support for Yiddish language and culture that lasted from the period of the first Yiddish schools in the 1910s to their decline in the 1950s. This consistency shows not only their insistence on maintaining their particularism as Jews, regardless of the desires of the Party, but also that this particularism was central to their purpose as Communists. Their commitment to Yiddish further shaped the cultural work of the Party as well as grew its membership base, demonstrating the key role of identity in the organizing of the Old Left.

Historiography

This study, in its exploration of how the Yiddish Communists circumvented the Americanizing desires of the Party while pointing to their devout Communism, engages in a central debate in the history of American Communism over whether the Party was controlled top-down from the Comintern (the Communist International, the body to coordinate Communist parties internationally) or whether there was significant subversion of this control by the rank and file at the local levels.¹² Yiddish Communists built a number of crucial auxiliaries, the schools being one example, that were both independent of the Party and designed to support the Party. Through their auxiliary work they showed both compliance and subversion simultaneously. They adapted their approach to Communist Party policy as dictated by the Comintern, but they also successfully circumvented aspects of Party policy, by following the Soviet Union's own state policies instead. For example, Yiddish Communists frequently cited the Soviet Union's own

¹² Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (Transaction Publishers, 1960). Draper began this historiographical debate, arguing that the Communist Party followed the dictates of the Comintern in Moscow. Responding to Draper were works by a younger wave of historians, such as Randy Storch's *Red Chicago* which argued for Party disobedience by American Communist membership.

investment in Yiddish schools as a central reason they themselves needed to develop Yiddish schools in the United States, even if these went against the Americanizing orders coming from the Comintern in the mid 1920s. They found additional ways to root their work in Communist ideas, such as selectively citing Lenin, and asserting their own definitions of nationalism, assimilationism, and internationalism. Yiddish Communists saw themselves as fully compliant and dedicated Communists, and did indeed change their rhetoric to fit the Communist Party policy of the moment. Yet at the same time, they fit Communism with their own interests in developing Yiddish culture. Their particular engagement with Communism suggests that while a call from the Comintern was heard and acted upon, the rank and file, when it could, shaped the message to fit its own interests.

The story of Yiddish school auxiliaries has broad application for understanding other ethnic and racial groups' in Communist history. For instance, there is a parallel to the anti-assimilationism of Jewish Communists with the story of Black Communists, reinforcing this idea that as much as the Party became a home to groups that were motivated by particularism, these groups were also constrained when they attempted to express that particularism in the Communist movement. Mark Solomon's *The Cry Was Unity*, for instance, describes the influence of Black nationalism on Black Communist participation that shows similarities with the story of Yiddish Communists. Solomon points to the example of Black Communist Cyril Briggs, who founded the black liberation organization African Blood Brotherhood (which would later dissolve and its members would join the Workers Party), writing, "...his decision to join the Party was based primarily on concern with the national question rather than with the issues of class or socialism per se. His interest in Marxism-Leninism 'was sparked by its hostility to imperialism and specifically by the Soviet solution to the national question, its recognition... of the right of self-

determination of nations formerly oppressed by Tsarist Russia.”¹³ Briggs’ interest in the national question points to a remarkably similar pattern to Jewish attraction to Communism as a solution to national oppression, as well as suggests that Jewish nationalism and Black nationalism were mutually influencing forces. Solomon further describes similar the challenges and contradictions the Black national impulse met within the Party structure and its tendency toward, “strangling political narrowness,” and its “mechanical lumping of race and class,” showing that, like the ways the Party limited Jews’ Jewishness, African Americans too were constrained in their national impulses by the Party, even as the Party declared that African Americans were a national group and prioritized Black organizing.¹⁴ These parallels and the relationship between Jewish and Black experience in the Party demonstrates that, while there are unique features of each group, the contradictions that arose from Jews’ navigating the racial and national frameworks of the Party extend beyond Jewish history alone and are instructive for the full picture of American Communist history.

There are ways, however, that Yiddish Communist activity was distinctive from other groups involved in the Communist movement. Taking Finnish Communists as an example for comparison, who like Jews demonstrated especially high Party density due to how the Russian Revolution influenced the politics of their home country (although Finns were located more in the Midwest), Finnish participation in the Party declined in periods when the Party pushed for assimilation and Americanization.¹⁵ Jewish participation in the Party, on the other hand, expanded

¹³ Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936*, (University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 9.

¹⁴ Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity*, 17.

¹⁵ Auvo Kostiainen, “Radical Ideology vs. Ethnic Social Activities: The Finnish-Americans and the Communist Party of the United States, 1923-1932.” *American Studies in Scandinavia* 21, no. 1 (March 1, 1989): 32.

in such times, even as Yiddish cultural activists encountered the same problems as the Finns during the Party's push for Americanization. This project therefore explores how and why Yiddish culture became increasingly stabilized in the Communist movement in moments when it seemed to contradict the Party's aims. I suggest here that Jews' experiences in the Russian Empire and their particular aspirations for Yiddish culture in Soviet Russia led them to respond differently to the American Party's messaging.

Yiddish Communist education (and all secular Yiddish education) in the United States, was at its core an anti-Americanization project. The force of the anti-Americanization ethos of the Yiddish Communist schools offers a crucial counter example to the current paradigm of Jewish Americanization in American Jewish historiography, which has asserted that Jews by the 1920s collectively embraced the currents of Americanization for themselves and their children.¹⁶ The Yiddish Communist movement, although not the majority of Jews, was a significant segment of the immigrant Jewish Community that does not fit this Americanization pattern. In the 1920s through the mid 1930s, instead of attempting to Americanize their children, they sought to rather, through Yiddish, to *Sovietize* their American-born children.

Their desire for Sovietization, as a corrective to Americanization, was based on Soviet Union's support of Jewish nation-building and its Marxist-Leninism. Whereas America's "melting pot" and capitalist structure were threatening as forces influencing the ideas and development of their children, through their Yiddish schools, Yiddish Communists could expose their children to the Soviet model, within which Yiddish and Jewish nationhood were supported. Many immigrants further continued a transnational exchange between America and the Soviet

¹⁶ Deborah D. Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (Columbia University Press, 1983). Moore's work is foundational to this conception of Americanization.

Union, many going to Soviet Russia for extended periods to teach in schools or engage in Yiddish culture building. To be sure, their project to Sovietize did not mean they did not participate in or invested in American life, but rather, that they looked to the Soviet Union as a way to counterbalance what they saw as the problematic influences of America.

This view of Americanization was different than that of American-born Party members (and even some immigrants), who saw Americanization as way to unify the Party and move it away from nationality-based subgroups by promoting English-language activity. Yiddish Communists' view of Americanization would shift in the Popular Front and World War II, but only insofar as Americanization could accommodate the maintenance of their identities as Jews. Even in moments when Yiddish Communists' attitude towards America changed, the immigrant generation maintained an awareness of how Yiddish culture was still threatened by Americanization and that their Yiddish schoolwork had a role to play to contain its assimilatory pull.

Their relationship to Americanization additionally bears on a related process of Jews' racial whitening over the course of the twentieth century. My findings in this study build on a critique asserted by Eli Lederhendler on studies of Jews and whiteness, in which he asserts that, "scholars of the 'whiteness school' have overstated the rapidity with which immigrant groups adopted and absorbed American racial codes...At the very least, the 'whitening' thesis needs to be qualified. It needs to be anchored in specific historical contexts, neighborhoods, and subgroups, rather than proposed as a general phenomenon of general racist collusion characteristic of the entire process of 'white' integration at every level."¹⁷ The history of Yiddish

¹⁷ Eli Lederhendler, *Jewish Immigrants and American Capitalism, 1880-1920* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 83. This study, however, on the topic of Americanization, departs from Lederhendler, who discusses how during World War I, Jewish immigrants on the whole were "ideological Americanists," who were espousing America as their destiny even at their most

Communists and their educational projects are evidence of context and subgroup that defies notions of linear trends of Americanization, assimilation, and whiteness. For example, the Party cast Jews as white during the Third Period (1928-1934), as part of an effort to organize African Americans into the Party and weed out the remnants of “white chauvinism” among non-Black party members. Alongside this whitening from the Party in the early 1930s, Yiddish Communists engaged their most extreme anti-Americanization rhetoric. Additionally, in the period that the Party insisted on Jewish whiteness, antisemitic ideas of Jews as an inferior and problematic racial group were on the rise in America and internationally. Conversely, in later years, towards the end of World War II and into the Postwar period, when Americanization for the younger generation – despite the efforts of their immigrant parents – was all but complete and antisemitism began to decline, Jews were described by the Party as oppressed and racialized, as well as a community sharing a fight against discrimination alongside African Americans.

This non-linear pattern of whitening and racialization in the Communist movement offers invaluable insights into American Jewish identity in the twentieth century. Like Eric Goldstein’s, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*, this work looks at the topic of Jews and race as fluid and conditioned by the needs to those around them. In this case, it was the needs of the Party that at different times required the whitening or racialization of Jews. Indeed, this study suggests that the Party played a role in defining the racial status of American Jews during the twentieth century. Through its exploration on the changing status of Jewish identity in the Party, and how ideas of Jewish whiteness or racialization filtered into the Yiddish Communist

ethnically defined moment,”¹⁰⁹. Americanism and Americanization contain subtle distinctions that are also worth mentioning, as both terms arise in this project. I largely discuss Americanization as a process by which Jews identify as Americans and absorb American ideas or customs. I discuss Americanism in the context of immigrants and American-born children espousing a belief in American ideals. Americanism therefore appears in this story as part of a process of Americanization.

schools, this work offers a crucial counter example to broad-strokes generalizations about American Jews swiftly and enthusiastically integrating into the fabric of white American life as well as distinguishes the processes of Americanization from that of whitening.¹⁸

Despite the ways that Yiddish Communists resisted assimilation, their Communism at times required shedding their Jewishness and led them to be cast as embracing assimilation. Therefore, the assertion that Yiddish Communists were unwavering in their commitment to Yiddish language and culture therefore goes against the reputation they developed in their time, and one that has remained since. Yiddish Communists were described by their contemporaries as merely instrumentalizing Yiddish for Communist aims, and their own statements about their program in the first half of the 1930s would confirm this characterization. Yet the people who built the Yiddish Communist school movement were also among those who fought for and built *the very first Yiddish schools* in the United States, against a loud chorus from those who saw no place for the continuation of Yiddish culture in America.

I begin this story, therefore, before Yiddish Communists became Communists to show how the label of Communist can overshadow a longer and more fluid story of these school activists' work and the complexity of their intellectual, political, and cultural lives. In this way, I illuminate an expression of Yiddish culture that has been significantly overlooked from being obscured under the label of Communism. As much as Communism informed their decisions and expressions, it is insufficient as an explanation for their cultural activities and was not the starting place of their Yiddish educational project.

This revision of the timeline of Yiddish Communist education speaks to previous studies of Yiddish education and Yiddish culture by placing Yiddish Communists and their contributions

¹⁸ Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006).

earlier and more centrally in the history of Yiddish schools in the United States. While there have been a handful of studies that have discussed Yiddish Communist education, none have taken as relevant the Yiddish Communist activists in the pre-Communist stage of their lives nor explored Yiddish Communist culture in the 1920s in depth. As a result, characterizations of Yiddish Communist education tend to be frozen in the early 1930s, during Third Period Communism, at the peak of when their rhetoric was at its most extreme. This project illuminates that the Third Period was just one temporary stage of Yiddish Communist school work that consists of merely five years of an over 30-year history.

Similarly, other studies of Jewish culture in the Communist movement have understated Jewish Communists' commitment to Yiddish culture. Paul Mishler's work on children's groups and summer camps in the Communist movement, *Raising Reds* again takes the Finnish community as a point of comparison, claiming that "Unlike Eastern European Jews, Finnish radicals were almost unanimous in their belief in the maintenance of their language and cultural traditions."¹⁹ Similarly, Jacob Zumoff in *The Communist International and US Communism*, writes, "While Jewish Communists' ethnic identity was linked to politics, Jewish radicals (especially the second generation) saw politics as a means to assimilate into the American labor movement and American society. Many radical Finns saw radicalism as a way to preserve a distinctive ethnic culture. More assimilated Jewish Americans than assimilated Finnish Americans were active on the left."²⁰ This study demonstrates that these statements are only partially true. While Jews collectively in the Communist party had divergent beliefs about "ethnic

¹⁹ Paul Mishler, *Raising Reds: Young Pioneers, Radical Summer Camps, and Communist Political Culture in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 36.

²⁰ Jacob A Zumoff, *The Communist International and U.S. Communism, 1919 - 1929*. Reprint edition (Chicago, Ill: Haymarket Books, 2015), 178.

identity,” and there were differences between the immigrant and American-born generations in regards to how they viewed the place of Yiddish culture, this study of the Yiddish schools shows that preservation of a distinctive Jewish culture and anti-assimilationism was still a core feature of Jewish Communism, even among those who were Americanized.

Similar to narratives that the Yiddish Communists instrumentalizing Yiddish language for Communist ends, there is a notion that education was also merely a means to build the numbers of their Communist movement. This idea greatly underappreciates the attention Yiddish Communists gave to the question of pedagogy as well as the deeper roots of their interest in pedagogy. A number of the most prominent Yiddish Communist school activists studied education academically in university settings and saw the Yiddish supplementary schools as an opportunity to bring together their Communist ideals and theories in progressive education. Their attention to pedagogy, which they demonstrated in their writings on the schools from their beginning, as well as their eventual launch of their own pedagogical journal, *Proletarishe dertsiyung*, in which they discussed educational ideas and methods at length, show that they thought about education in a more complex way than just a vehicle for Party organizing but were actually enthusiasts for developing their pedagogy.

The supplementary status of the Yiddish Communist schools further offers important insights into the discrepancies between ideology and actual practices of the Old Left this study seeks to illuminate. As other studies of supplementary schools of minority communities have shown, these types of schools have played the role of “socio-political institutions with particular identity construction projects,” positioning themselves to manage the threat to that identity construction.²¹ If the premise of these schools’ existence was one of securing an identity to the

²¹ Amanda Simon, *Supplementary Schools and Ethnic Minority Communities: A Social Positioning Perspective*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 189.

threat of Americanization and assimilation, these particular schools that were organized around Yiddish and Communism offer an instructive twist, showing what happens when an identity project comes under the banner of a universalist ideology.

This work also looks beyond the children's schools to their relationship with adult education. A central component of the Yiddish Communist adult education program was its Yiddish teacher training at its Jewish Workers University, but such a project contradicted the Yiddish Communist narrative their adult educational work in Yiddish was simply a way to communicate Party ideas to immigrants. The Jewish Workers University therefore took on two faces, one for the Jewish street and one in the broader Communist world. An examination of the Jewish Workers University, its place in Jewish Communist life and its role in supporting the children's schools, offers an important perspective on the full scope of their vision for Yiddish Communist education and their efforts to bridge immigrant and American-born generations.

Additionally, noteworthy is the nature of the transnationalism of their educational project in the United States, which was linked to the Soviet Union not only as the region these Jewish immigrants came from, but also because they were involved in a Communist political project. The immigrant identities of the Yiddish Communist school pedagogues, coupled with their Communism, created a complex transnational flow for their educational ideas that speaks to the peculiar hybrid these schools were. While the Soviet Union would follow educational practices come out of the American environment, the Yiddish Communist schools would look at the Soviet example, all the while conflicted over whether they should approach their work as rooted in the American context or emulate the Soviet versions. This tension between meeting their children's educational needs from their American context, in which their children were also attending public school, and their desire to model their Yiddish culture after that in the Soviet Union, also pulled at

the tension between their universalist and particularist desires: if to Sovietize meant to Yiddishize, how should they position their children to participate in the American Communist movement? As much as they tried to Sovietize their children in America, the pull of the differences in the American and Soviet environments created an irreconcilable problem that made their approach to Yiddish Communist education at times inappropriate for their American environment.²²

In sum, this study is a history of Jewish education that aims to redefine some of the dominant narratives in U.S. Communist History, Labor History, and American Jewish History. It analyzes the coexistence of contradictions that fueled the Yiddish Communist movement – that of nationalism and internationalism, secularism and religion, integration and cultural preservation,

²²This study focuses on the Yiddish schools in the United States and their inextricable relationship with the Soviet Union. Within the United States there are also regional dynamics at play between New York and other parts of the country. The Yiddish Communist schools were all over the United States and parts of Canada, but New York City was their epicenter. However, there were other crucial locations as well, in particular Chicago and Philadelphia, where leaders of this Yiddish school movement lived and did their work. The other Yiddish secular school movements present a different geographical picture than those of the Communist Yiddish schools. In Canada and South America, for instance, the Yiddish secular school networks of the Labor Zionist movement were dominant. The Labor Zionist schools in Canada, although less numerous, also created full Yiddish day schools, whereas the Yiddish Communist Schools always remained supplementary schools. Another important location for Yiddish education, Argentina, the Yiddish schools were also predominantly Labor Zionist and less numerous, although proportionally more significant in the larger context of Jewish schools in Argentina. In 1936, Argentina had 28 schools and 1,700 students in all Yiddish secular schools, making up 40 percent of Jewish schools in the country at the time. In the United States, there were 350 Yiddish secular schools and 22,000 students in 1937 (7-8 thousand of which were the Yiddish Communist International Workers Order Schools). These are useful comparisons when evaluating the scope of activity of these institutions. They show how Yiddish Communist activity was centered in the United States and was numerically significant in the larger context of Yiddish schools internationally. However, it was not until the Popular Front years the Yiddish Communists become more connected with other Yiddish school efforts internationally beyond Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The statistics from the U.S. are from Itshe Goldberg, “Di yidish-veltlekhe shul in amerike [“The Yiddish Secular School in America”]. *Proletatrishe dertsiyung* 3 no. 8 (September 1937): 4. I do not have a proportion of Secular Yiddish schools compared to all Jewish schools in the U.S. but Yiddish Communists discussed the student populations of the “Talmud Torahs” (religious schools) being in the hundreds of thousands.

democracy and totalitarianism – to offer a new perspective on Jews and Yiddish education as important influences in the history of the American Left.

On Terminology

Narrating a story of Jews in the Communist movement comes with unique challenges. Many people active in the Communist movement were not card-carrying Party members and many who were active would eventually leave, especially in its most controversial moments. I use the term “Communist” (with a capital C) to describe almost everyone in the Yiddish Communist movement, even if they were just active in an auxiliary organization, because they were still contributing to and largely steered by the policies of the Communist Party. Additionally, I use the term “Yiddish Communist” to describe Yiddish-speaking Jewish Communists even though “Yiddish” is not typically used to signify an identity. This decision makes the description of my primary subjects less encumbered as well as follows the precedent of other scholarly works on the Yiddish-speaking community.²³

Especially in the first decade of the Communist movement, I use the Yiddish term *linke*, which translates as “Left” or “Left-wing” to describe the pro-Soviet radicals in the Jewish socialist sphere in the 1920s. The *linke* was not the exact same as Jewish Communist Party members, although it consisted of Party members, but a more fluid group in which the Communist influence dominated. The term *linke*, which my subjects used to call themselves, describes a group of people who agitated against the *rekhte* “Right-wing” Socialists (to be sure, Right-wing in this context was relative), and competed with them for control of Jewish socialist

²³ See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish, and Jewish Immigrants in the United States*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Tony Michels', *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 2005) are two examples.

institutions. Later, in the mid 1930s, the *linke* activists would call themselves the “progressive element.”

It is also worth distinguishing Socialism and Communism, as this work engages the historical relationship between these two as well as rivalries between their respective parties. Communists represent a movement defined by its loyalty to the Bolshevik Revolution and the Soviet Union. Beginning as a Left-wing in the Socialist Party, the Communist Party was formed in 1919. Whereas the Second International had defined the coalitions of the Socialist and Labor parties internationally since 1889, Lenin established the Third International in 1919, birthing the Communist movement and directing it from Moscow. It took several years for the different left-wing factions in the United States to consolidate into a singular Communist Party, and the Party throughout its existence was the home of internal rivalry and theoretical debates. Despite the fractiousness of the internal dynamics of the Communist Party, what was unique about the Communists was their centralization and coordination. Unlike the Socialist Party, they received their directives from the Soviet Union, and had to negotiate how its geopolitical relationships fit in with their Marxism.

This work additionally explores the meaning of “Yiddishist” as it was understood by its subjects, which was informed by their Communism. Yiddishism today is generally understood as advocacy for Yiddish language and culture.²⁴ However, Yiddish Communists in their time explicitly condemned “Yiddishism,” although what they did not like about “Yiddishism” was nuanced and at times confusing. “Yiddishism,” as they would argue frequently, was an apolitical

²⁴ Harry Garfinkle, “Ideological Elements in the Development of the American Yiddish School Movement” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1954), 1. Garfinkle describes Yiddishists as having “the point of view which held that the Jews in the Diaspora could ensure their national cultural survival through the medium of an interlocking set of cultural, social, and political institutions and through the use of the Yiddish language as the medium of daily communication and creative work.”

commitment to Yiddish that saw the preservation of the language as its primary focus. Yiddish Communists were interested in something different: they wanted to build a movement of politicized Yiddish. That is, they saw Yiddish as the language of the Jewish working class and wanted to draw out those class elements to create a proletarian Yiddish culture that was as much about its content as its form. Yiddish Communist activists therefore launched polemics against “Yiddishism” and claimed their primary concern was not the future of the language. This dissertation essentially asserts, however, not to take their words at face-value. Although Yiddish Communists activists were against “Yiddishism,” and would even act agnostically about the future of Yiddish, this should not be taken to mean they were disinterested in a Yiddish future. In fact, the opposite: their most central focus was to create a Yiddish future, but in their view, it was only worth fighting for if it had a proletarian character. The Yiddish schools, and the way they were an investment in the Yiddish literacy of English-speaking children, are evidence of this commitment to a Yiddish future.

Their conception of their Yiddish work relied as well on a distinction between national identity and nationalism, which was explored extensively by the Bund (a Jewish Socialist party from the Russian Empire) as a way to advocate Jewish autonomy while being true to socialist ideals. The Bund was established in 1897 in Vilna with the aim to organize a Jewish proletariat in support of revolutionary activity in the Russian Empire. Using Yiddish to build a mass movement of Jewish workers, the Bund eventually developed a position for cultural-national autonomy for Jews. The question of whether their interests were in fact nationalist or not propels this study and defies a clear answer. Despite the fine points they insisted on that demonstrated their rejection of nationalism, I sometimes still describe these perspectives as deriving from and being part of a

larger wave of Jewish nationalism(s) coming out of the Russian Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Terms like assimilation and internationalism were core to the vocabulary they used to describe and distinguish their Yiddish work but held meaning that was also contested in their Socialist and Communist contexts. As much as the Communist movement did not tolerate pluralities well, it was also dealing with several levels of translation: there was the broader Marxist theories that undergirded their Communism, the site-specific realities of the Soviet state, the directives from Moscow for the American Party, and the transnational orientations of its larger immigrant base. Therefore, while assimilation in the Soviet Union would be a desirable outcome, assimilation in an American context would be undesirable. While internationalism in the eyes of immigrants might mean allowing a constellation of many national groups, to Americans internationalism meant de-emphasizing the interests of a particular nation for the larger project of an international Communist movement. The Yiddish Communist ideology was built on its own definition of these terms, which invariably were framed to allow them to continue their Yiddish culture as an expression of their Communist commitments, regardless of what others in the Party said or how the general understanding of these terms changed.

To the extent possible, I seek to use the terms my subjects themselves adopted themselves in their time. These words are key to understanding the world of the Yiddish Communists, and in evaluating their meaning, we can make sense of their efforts for a Jewish proletarian culture. Indeed, their own definitions of key words, such as Yiddishism, nationalism, assimilationism, and internationalism are a central component to their story, and show us how they created ideological consistency out of an endlessly contradictory movement.

Chapter Overview

In my first chapter, I explore the contributions of those who would become Yiddish Communist school activists to the very first Yiddish schools in the United States. I examine how their pre-Communist histories shaped their relationship to Yiddish culture and informed their dedication to Yiddish schools in the Communist movement. The individuals who founded the early Yiddish schools and then became Communists had largely a common background. As young adults they were politicized through their participation in Jewish nationalist movements that arose at the turn of the century in the Russian Empire, such as the Socialist, Yiddish autonomism of the The General Jewish Labor Bund of Poland, Lithuania, and Russia (known as the Bund), Territorialism, and the Marxist Zionism of Poale Tsiyon. Arriving in the United States in the early years of the twentieth century, they made up a generational cohort that transformed the Jewish labor movement. Crucial to understanding Jewish Communists' relationship to Yiddish culture are their previous political and intellectual currents they embraced earlier. I also explore their pedagogical writings in this period, in which Yiddish school activists mobilized theories of child-centered learning to make a case for their Yiddish schools. While political lines between Yiddish school activists of different political groups hardened over time, an examination of their work building the first Yiddish schools reveals how the earliest stage of Yiddish school building was one of collaboration and fluidity. The national roots of the Yiddish Communist ideology and their early collaborations for Yiddish secular schools, I argue, are crucial for understanding their approach to Yiddish education.

Chapter 2 examines Yiddish Communist culture in the United States in the mid 1920s, when Communists began creating their own Yiddish institutions but before political divisions with socialists hardened so firmly. I examine their writings on Yiddish schools and Yiddish

culture in the Yiddish Communist daily, the *Frayhayt*, in which they make the case for Yiddish proletarian education and describe a movement for Yiddish culture that is neither nationalist nor assimilationist, an idea stemming from the Bund. By examining their writings from 1922 to 1925, when both the Yiddish schools and the Communist Party are just a few years old, I demonstrate that the *linke* adapted the Jewish nationalist ideas they had supported in their youth to fit Communist internationalism as well as to position itself as the primary champion for Jewish worker education in the years when secular Yiddish education was in its infancy. In 1926, the *linke* separated the majority of the schools from the Arbeter Ring and began its own Kindergarten and University courses. This period of institutional independence and productivity came at an unlikely time, as it coincided with the Americanizing program of the Communist Party known as Bolshevization. As a prism for understanding how Yiddish education fit into an ambivalent Party context in the 1920s, I explore the history of the Yiddish Kindergarten and the Jewish Workers University to show how Yiddish Communists built new schools at the height of the Party's Americanization program.

Chapter 3 explores the transition from the original Yiddish school curriculum to what my subjects called "proletarian education" during Third Period Communism. Here I examine the years immediately after the Communists separated the schools from their original home in the Jewish socialist-aligned fraternal order, the Arbeter Ring in 1926, and began their own independent school network called the "Non-Partisan Worker Children's Schools." In this transition period, the Yiddish Communist school movement fractured again in 1929 over whether to adhere to a progressive model of democratic education or become vehicles for Party doctrine. In the wake of the conflict over pedagogy, the schools in 1930 became part of the newly formed International Workers Order, the Communist fraternal organization that formed from a splitting

off of the Communists from the Arbeter Ring. As I argue in this chapter, in this moment we see a seeming rejection of Jewish themes in the Yiddish school curriculum, but also the clearest articulation from the movement on the crucial role of Yiddish in their educational system.

The Third Period is an especially contradictory time in Yiddish Communist education, as the Party is not only trying to Americanize but also better racially integrate. As part of its organizing effort of African Americans, the Party increasingly cast Jews as white in order to elicit their commitment to fight “white chauvinism.” Yiddish-speaking Jews, however, saw the work of anti-racism as a charge to emphasize more their Yiddish education and culture. Their schoolwork in this period therefore demonstrates how their belief that Yiddish education was thought to combat white chauvinism was misaligned with the Party’s integrationist aims. This examination of the schools during the Third Period shows that beneath their rhetoric which seemed to reject Jewishness was a deeply preservationist impulse for Yiddish.

Chapter Four considers the changed landscape for Yiddish culture during the Popular Front period as well as its continuities. The Popular Front has been understood as a reversal from the previous stances of the Yiddish Communist movement, when the Communist Party, in calling for unity with liberals and socialists to fight against Fascism, also created a permissive atmosphere in which Yiddish Communist school activists could embrace explicitly Jewish themes and Yiddish preservationism. This chapter, however, focuses on the continuities from the earlier periods to the Popular Front, arguing that Yiddish schoolwork in the Popular Front demonstrates less a change from Yiddish Communists as much as a more transparent accounting of the Yiddish Communist school activists’ commitment to Yiddish culture and their sense of Jewish identity. I also examine how the Popular Front was a period, even as it celebrated Americanism, posed a crisis for the Yiddish schools because of Americanization. The Popular Front allowed for new

expressions of Jewish pride and support for Yiddish culture, but it was also in this period that the Yiddish schools had to contend with the increasingly apparent reality that their students did not speak Yiddish well nor see Yiddish as an essential part of their Jewishness. Towards the end of the 1930s and into the 1940s, the Party makes gestures to organize English-speaking Jews qua Jews, demonstrating how Jewish identity remained a crucial component of their political activism, but also how Yiddish became less central to that identity.

This work concludes with World War II and the Postwar Period, as the Yiddish schools decline in enrollment and need to increasingly accommodate an English-speaking Jewish population. This final section explores the factors leading to the end of the Yiddish school movement as well as the transformation of their commitment to Yiddish language towards a commitment to build a Jewish secular culture in an environment that increasingly recognized Judaism as a religious identity. The conclusion further reflects on the initial question of this project – what does this exploration of Yiddish culture in the Old Left tell us about the past and future of political activism in America?

CHAPTER 1

Language Of A Generation: Jewish Immigrant Revolutionaries And The Emergence Of Yiddish Schools In The United States, 1913-1922

In 1915, Ruben Saltzman attended the 15th Convention in Chicago of the Jewish socialist mutual benefit organization, the Arbeter Ring, as a member of its Educational Committee. Saltzman had come to the United States only a few years before from what is today Belarus, and was part of a growing cohort of Jewish immigrants who were passionate about the potential of Yiddish culture for building a Jewish socialist movement in the United States. Saltzman and other similarly minded members of the Educational Committee at this 15th convention were going to try once again to establish Yiddish schools as part of the Arbeter Ring organization. They had attempted to do so in previous years, such as at the convention in 1913, but the resolution for Yiddish children's schools was not considered.²⁵ At the 1914 convention, the resolution for Yiddish schools did not get any votes outside of the educational committee.²⁶ But in 1915, Saltzman and the other advocates for the Yiddish schools found themselves, for a change, in the majority. At this convention, the resolution to have Sunday schools in Yiddish and English (whereas before they were just in English) passed. It would take a few more years for the Arbeter Ring's Yiddish schools to actually operate, as the schools would be underfunded and the subject of protracted debates, but this vote at the 1915 convention nevertheless marked a changing

²⁵ Shmuel Charney (Samuel Niger), *In kamf far a nayer dertsiyung: di arbeter-ring-shuln, zayer oyfshtamm antviklung, vaks un itsstiker tsushtand* (New York: Arbeter Ring Educational Committee, 1940). <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc200490/niger-samuel-in-kamf-far-a-nayer-dertsiyung-di-arbeter-ring-shuln-zeyer-opshtam>

²⁶ Charney, *In kamf far a nayer dertsiyung*, 53.

atmosphere around Yiddish culture in the Jewish socialist fraternal order towards support of the Yiddish school project.

Saltzman's advocacy for Yiddish schools from 1913 to 1915 was among his earliest acts in what became a lifetime devoted to Yiddish education. The schools he would work on in the decades later, however, would become competitors to those of the Arbeter Ring. Saltzman would later join the Communist movement, and after being unsuccessful in an attempt by other Communists to wrest power from the "rightist" socialist leadership of the Arbeter Ring, would become in 1930 the General Secretary of the Communist-affiliated fraternal organization, the International Workers Order, as well as a lead spokesman for its Yiddish school system. Saltzman over the years remained embittered and hostile towards his socialist rivals. Writing in 1940, some 25 years after the 15th Arbeter Ring Convention, Saltzman recalled, "Read over their speeches that they gave at the Arbeter Ring Convention in 1915 in Chicago...who fought for these schools?"²⁷ Saltzman asserted it was "the progressive element," that is, those who would a few years later become part of the pro-Soviet *linke* faction, who built Yiddish education against the wishes of the Arbeter Ring leadership (which he claimed "attacked" the schools).²⁸

Saltzman's recollection of the early fights about Yiddish education, although selectively narrated to support his argument of superiority of his Communist Yiddish Schools, and the significance of his Communist comrades in the story of Yiddish education, bears some truth. While not all of the early school advocates became Communists, a significant number of who were among the earliest Yiddish school advocates in the Jewish labor movement later joined the

²⁷ Saltzman, Ruben. *Farrat in Arbeter Ring* (New York: *Kooperativn folks-farlang*, 1940), 6.

²⁸ Saltzman, *Farrat in Arbeter Ring*, 6.

Communists and went on to build a flourishing Yiddish Communist school network out of the blueprint they developed in their pre-Communist years.

This chapter explores the role of several figures who would become the leading Yiddish Communist school activists in shaping the educational programs of the first Yiddish schools in the United States. Their writings on the Yiddish schools before they became Communists demonstrate not only their long-term commitment to Yiddish education that pre-dates their Communism, but also helps make sense of the choices they made later to continue Yiddish education in the Communist movement. Despite the political changes they went through as well as the many fluctuations in Communist Party policy, the original ideas propelling their commitment to Yiddish education remained largely unchanged after they become Communists and throughout their entire lives as Yiddish cultural activists.

Jewish Revolutionaries and Yiddish Schooling

Saltzman and others advocating for Yiddish education had difficulty establishing Yiddish schools in the Arbeter Ring in those first years because their purpose had been contrary the hegemonic ethos of the earlier immigrants who had founded the Jewish labor movement a couple decades earlier. The previous cohort of immigrants who built the first Yiddish institutions had in the 1880s, and had little interest in Yiddish culture. These were also Jewish intellectuals from Russia, who, inspired by the institutions and ideology of their German socialist neighbors on the Lower East Side, built Yiddish-based socialist institutions for the sake of facilitating the assimilation of Jewish immigrants in America.²⁹ Neither the Yiddish press nor other institutions

²⁹ Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009.

that served immigrant Jews at this time desired to create a distinct Jewish labor movement, but rather to encourage the process of Americanization of Jewish immigrants. Isaiah Trunk, Jewish historian and archivist of the period, describes the Jewish socialist leaders of this early cohort saw Yiddish as a “transitory cultural parochialism, something that should eventually disappear as the immigrant masses mastered English and became culturally integrated into American life.”³⁰ The function of Yiddish language institutions therefore was to communicate with immigrants until Yiddish was no longer necessary. In the American context, therefore, the notion of internationalism was view as the same as American assimilation. As another historian of the period, Jonathan Frankel, explains, until 1897 (the year that the Zionist and Bundist movements were born), “the socialist movement in the United States served to legitimize still further the assumption that internationalism implied an out-and-out Americanization.”³¹ This was the desirable outcome for their socialist work and they also saw it as key for the future of their lives as Jews in America.

This belief in Americanization was reflected in the first schools of the Arbeter Ring, which were at first English-language Socialist Sunday schools. As part of an effort within the broader Socialist Party, in 1906, Arbeter Ring joined early Socialist efforts for Sunday School education for children. Seeing the need to counteract the capitalist messages of the public school system, American Socialists, following the example of the Socialist Sunday Schools emerging from Great Britain in the late nineteenth century and taking a template from the Sunday school movement

³⁰ Isaiah Trunk, “The Cultural Dimension of the American Jewish Labor Movement,” *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* vol. xi (1976): 344.

³¹ Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 454.

that had proliferated in the Protestant movement, began their own Socialist Sunday School campaign.³²

The Arbeter Ring's schools were initially celebrated as models in the Socialist Sunday School movement. As William Reese and Kenneth Teitelbaum write in their article about Socialist Sunday Schools in the United States, "local S.S.S. [Socialist Sunday School] participants openly and frequently praised Workmen's Circle [Arbeter ring] branches for their financial and physical assistance in furthering socialist schools whose curriculum was consciously devoid of ethnic and religious influences."³³ The English schools of the Arbeter Ring, although operating in a Jewish immigrant organization, were intended to be Socialist schools and not have any specifically Jewish features.³⁴

While these early English-language Arbeter ring Sunday Schools were celebrated as models for Socialist education, their English-language element became problematic in the Jewish immigrant world. This was the result of a cultural transformation in the Jewish labor movement that would be led by immigrants like Saltzman, who carried with them, in the words of Trunk, a "national awareness."³⁵ As demonstrated by the change occurring at the Arbeter Ring convention in 1915, this group's interest in Yiddish culture eventually became the dominant one in the Jewish labor movement.

³² Kenneth Teitelbaum and William J. Reese, "American Socialist Pedagogy and Experimentation in the Progressive Era: The Socialist Sunday School." *History of Education Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (1983): 434. <https://doi.org/10.2307/368078>

³³ Reese and Teitelbaum, "American Socialist Pedagogy and Experimentation in the Progressive Era," 433.

³⁴ Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 206-207.

³⁵ Trunk, "The Cultural Dimension of the American Jewish Labor Movement," 344.

The seeds for both Saltzman's commitment to Yiddish education and Marxist fervor were planted in his experience in revolutionary circles in the Russian empire. Saltzman as a young adult joined the Jewish socialist revolutionary party, known as the Bund, before emigrating to America in 1911.³⁶ Figures like Saltzman left the Russian Empire for America after the 1903 Kishinev pogrom, in which 49 Jews were killed and over a thousand homes damaged, which bespoke of an increase in anti-Jewish violence and sentiment, turning to embrace ideas of Jewish autonomy and with it Yiddish culture. Large numbers of members of the Bund entered into the United States' Jewish socialist fraternal order, the Arbeter Ring.³⁷ When their ideas became dominant in the first decade of the twentieth century, they changed the ethos of the Jewish labor movement in the United States that had dominated the 1880s and 1890s.³⁸

The presence of these Bundist members of the Arbeter Ring led a sea change around the issue of Yiddish culture, resulting in Arbeter Ring members to actively protest against the English-language Socialist Sunday Schools. As one witness recounts, some charged that the Arbeter Ring was "a pretense, a Socialist and not Jewish Socialist order."³⁹ Unlike the American Socialist Party, which was focused on the question of whether Sunday Schools at all were valuable for its movement, Jewish immigrants in the Arbeter Ring were waging a debate over whether the project of Yiddish culture had a place for their children growing up in the United States.

³⁶ Shmuel Charney and Yankev Shatski, *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literature* (New York: Alveltlekhn Yidishn kultur-kongres, 1956-1981), 533. Before coming to the United States Saltzman was arrested and sent to prison in Siberia for three years.

³⁷ Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 156.

³⁸ Trunk, "The Cultural Dimension of the American Jewish Labor Movement," 344.

³⁹ Charney, *In kamffar a nayer dertsiyung*, 45.

A crucial figure inspiring their belief in developing a Yiddish secular culture and the need for Yiddish education in the United States was Russian Jewish intellectual Chayim Zhitlovsky. Zhitlovsky was born in the Russian Empire and moved to the United States in 1908 after living primarily in Switzerland as an exiled political revolutionary. Zhitlovsky devoted much of his life to advocating for and strengthening secular Yiddish culture. The United States, with its free press, strong labor movement, and immigrant enclaves, became an inspiring place for Zhitlovsky to realize his vision for developing a socialist *Yidishe kultur*. Zhitlovsky and others sympathetic to the Yiddish educational project sought to counteract the assimilationist processes spurred by American public schooling, arguing that they needed secular Yiddish education.⁴⁰

Zhitlovsky was instrumental in bringing together the different Jewish national political parties to work together to build Yiddish culture. Harry Garfinkle, in his dissertation on the ideological basis of Yiddish education in the United States, writes the following on how Zhitlovsky was able to lead a movement for Yiddish culture across many different Jewish political parties, claiming, “Due to the fact that he was a Diaspora Nationalist, albeit one sympathetic to Palestine, he could gain support of both Poale Zion and the Socialist Territorialists. And because he was an internationalist socialist, but in the sense that included the fullest cultural and social development of all national units the world over, he was able to gain support of both the Jewish National Workers alliance [a Labor Zionist fraternal order] and the Workmen’s Circle [Arbeter Ring].”⁴¹ Zhitlovsky thus cut through many of the party divisions of

⁴⁰ Charney, *In kamf far a nayer dertsyung*, 53. Even Chayim Zhitlovsky himself was not an advocate of Yiddish children’s schools, allegedly writing a report in 1913 for the Arbeter Ring that concieved of the Yiddish schools as for adults.

⁴¹ Garfinkle, “Ideological Elements in the Development of the American Yiddish School Movement,” 65-66.

the Jewish labor movement, developing a following of “Yiddishists” who, dispersed across the different institutions built Yiddish schools according to their respective ideologies.

Zhitlovsky represented a belief, however, that was even more Yiddish preservationist than some of the Bundists. The Bundist position on Yiddish cultural autonomy was always fraught and challenged by the demands of Socialist internationalism. As Frankel describes the emergence of the Bundist platform that came out of the Fourth Congress in Belostok in 1901, it asserted, on the one hand, that Jews were a nationality in Russia who should enjoy “full national autonomy,” free of “oppression of one nationality by another, and the imposition of one language upon another,” and on the other hand, qualified this statement with the declaration that this was premature and they should, “avoid inflating national feelings, which can only obscure the class consciousness of the proletariat and create chauvinism.”⁴² This duality of seeking to assert Jewish national autonomy and condemning nationalism as chauvinism was therefore present long before the Revolution in Russia and remained foundational to the Yiddish socialists who later moved into the Communist movement, who would continue to use this exact language. Later, Bundists asserted the concept of “neutralism” as a way to navigate their work in Yiddish national culture without promoting the nationalism that would disturb their Marxist sensibilities.⁴³ As historian Tony Michels describes the idea, “Neutralism held that Jews existed as a Yiddish-speaking nation in the present, but might or might not continue to exist in the future.”⁴⁴ This allowed Yiddish to serve a function of supporting mass-movement building while maintaining enough agnosticism on the future of Yiddish that they could avoid its dissolution. The neutralist view contrasted with the

⁴² Frankel, *Prophesy and Politics*, 220 – 221.

⁴³ Vladimir Medem was the principal theorist for the Bund who developed the idea of neutralism.

⁴⁴ Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 170.

other approaches of the Zionists and territorialists, as well as Zhitlovsky's perspective, which contained a more preservationist and nationalist agendas, making it just one strain in a diverse landscape of Jewish nationalist movements.

It was also just one strain after which to model Yiddish education, as the Bundists were not the only ones responsible for propagating Yiddish schools in the United States, nor even the first. Even before the Arbeter Ring established its Yiddish schools, in 1910 the Labor Zionist organization, Poale Tsiyon and its mutual benefit society, the *Yidisher natsionaler farband*, had been building its Yiddish secular school network according to its Marxist Zionist philosophy. The beliefs of the Poale Tsiyon movement, revolved around the notion of a proletarian Zionism, and held the goal of achieving a Jewish state while also dedicating itself to the cause of class struggle.⁴⁵ Like all the movements that sought to integrate socialist ideals and Jewish nationalism, the Labor Zionists were also constantly negotiating their contradictions, which for them included questions of Hebrew versus Yiddish and the relationship of the diaspora to Palestine.⁴⁶

When the Labor Zionists of Poale Tsiyon established the National Radical Schools, they initially joined with the Socialist Territorialists. The Territorialists, like those in Poale Tsiyon, believed in the effort for a Jewish-controlled territory, but did not espouse the "Palestinism" of the Zionist movement. As much as they found common cause in the project for Jewish socialist education, they were focused on Yiddish language and culture, rejecting Hebrew and other markers of Zionist ideology.

The Yiddish school movements that emerged in the United States would mirror these intellectual lineages, as well as their splits. The National Radical Schools, divided between the

⁴⁵ Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 346.

⁴⁶ Samuel Kassow, "Po'ale Tsiyon." The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. Accessed June 7, 2021. https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Poale_Tsiyon.

Labor Zionist and Socialist Territorialist members, were consumed by the question of whether to teach Hebrew in the curriculum. The disagreements ultimately caused a split in 1916, when one of the National Radical Schools became a “Sholem Aleichem School.” This presaged a definitive split in which the Socialist Territorialists would end their partnership with the Labor Zionists to create the Sholem Aleichem Folks Institute in 1918, which would be decidedly Yiddishist and not affiliated with a party.⁴⁷

The debates in the Arbeter Ring, which were between the older immigrants of the Jewish labor movement and the newer Bundist arrivals, centered on the question of whether there should be Yiddish education at all. As a result, individuals took it upon themselves to create the socialist Yiddish schools they desired. As contemporary of the movement, Shmuel Charney explains about one of the Socialist schools in Harlem in 1915, “It was built by a [Jewish Socialist] Federation member, together with the Yiddishist-inclined Socialist-Territorialists and other radicals, who were not happy with the [English] Sunday Schools, nor with the National Radical Schools.”⁴⁸ What began as an independent project became another network of Yiddish schools, which would eventually become part of the Arbeter Ring. Thus, by 1918, there were three organizations sponsoring the Yiddish secular Sunday schools: The Labor Zionist Farband schools, the socialist Arbeter Ring schools, and the non-party Yiddishist Sholem Aleichem schools. There were clear ideological distinctions between each of these school movements, but in these early years there was also fluidity, as those who worked to support the growth of Yiddish culture in the United

⁴⁷ Kadar, *Raising Secular Jews*, 3.

⁴⁸ Charney, *In kamf far a nayer dertsyung*, 48. The Jewish Socialist Federation was the Yiddish-language branch of the Socialist Party, and its members overlapped significantly with the membership of the Arbeter Ring. Charney here was describing Yankev Levin, who would be the director of the Arbeter Ring schools and later become significant a leader in the *linke* (Communist-sympathizing) schools. A second shortly after was founded in Chicago, also by a future *linke* activist, Moyshe Bakal.

States, despite their different political lineages and orientations, saw themselves as also being of a common cause.

Linke versus Rekhte

In addition to the national insurgency changing the place of Yiddish culture in the Jewish labor movement was another overlapping insurgency coming out of the Bolshevik Revolution. Many of the same individuals who had fought to develop Yiddish culture also became part of a pro-Soviet *linke*. The *linke* would later conflate the cosmopolitan “Old Guard” that did not want the Yiddish schools and the *rekhte* as part of its argument that the *linke* was the original champion of the Yiddish schools, although this was only partially the case.

The divisions between the *linke* and their *rekhte* opponents that would grip the Jewish immigrant world would take several years to intensify, but would eventually realign the Jewish labor movement. The overthrow of the tsar was initially broadly celebrated by socialists, but factionalism between the more moderate reformists and a radicalized left-wing grew in the years immediately after the 1917 Revolution.⁴⁹ In 1919, with the establishment of the “Third International” (the Comintern) and its call for organizing revolutionary factions, a distinct pro-Bolshevik left wing coalesced in the Jewish Socialist Federation. The *linke* was a disruptive force in the Jewish Socialist Federation (JSF).⁵⁰ The *linke* broke off from the JSF in 1919 and became the Communist Party’s Jewish section as the Jewish Communist Federation.⁵¹ Many of those who did not split from the JSF in 1919 would eventually also join the Third International. The JSF

⁴⁹ Tony Michels, “The Russian Revolution in New York: 1917-1919,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 54, no. 4 (2017): 960-961.

⁵⁰ Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 222.

⁵¹ Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 226.

national executive committee broke from the Socialist Party, but remained for some time independent of the Communist Party. Eventually, the JSF merged with the Communist Party and became the Workers Party, within which there was a Jewish Federation.⁵²

Additionally, from 1919 to 1924, in the years after World War I, hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants came to the United States, many of whom saw the Bolsheviks as liberators from the oppression they experienced in Russia under tsarist rule. The arrival of these immigrants, which would largely cease due to immigration restrictions in 1924, added significant numbers to the *linke* movement.⁵³ As much as there was this growth and enthusiasm in the Jewish labor movement in the years following the Revolution, there was also the limitation of Red Scare in the United States, and its campaign against radical immigrants. The early 1920s were therefore a time of excitement and growth in the realm of radical politics but also constrained by a sense of instability and fear.

The Early Years of the Communist Party

The fluidity of the *linke* was in part because the Communist movement was both underground and unstable for the first half of the 1920s. The broader Communist movement in its early years was also beset by internal disagreements and rivalries, taking years for the Party to unify, which only happened in 1921 after intervention from the Comintern in Moscow. The Party had been driven underground just months after its formation due to Red Scare after the Bolshevik

⁵² Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 236.

⁵³ Tony Michels, "Communism and the Problem of Ethnicity in the 1920s: The Case of Moissaye Olgin," in *Ethnicity and beyond Theories and Dilemmas of Jewish Group Demarcation*. (Oxford ; New York: Published for the Institute by Oxford University Press, 2011): 52.

Revolution and would remain so until 1923, when it would temporarily become the Workers Party in name.⁵⁴

The early years of the Party in this phase were also defined by a struggle for control between the foreign language-groups and the American-born.⁵⁵ In the early years of the Party, the language groups represented the “orthodox” belief among Communists, as the language groups represented an “internationalism” in which many distinct nations collaborated under a single movement. Their idea of internationalism was viewed as the “pure” doctrinal line, against other who saw Americanization as the way to build a mass movement.⁵⁶ The Americanist idea was seen as a holdover from the Socialist Party, a sign that the Socialists had, in the words of historian Theodore Draper, “not yet severed the umbilical cord binding it to the Socialist Party,” thereby expressing the “treacherous ideology of ‘Americanism.’”⁵⁷ This line on Americanism in the Party would also change in the mid 1920s, also after a directive from the Comintern, but in the early 1920s the language-federations would dominate the Party not just organizationally but also ideologically.⁵⁸ The influence of the Jewish section on the Party would come somewhat later, but the structure of language-based federations was nonetheless foundational to how Jewish immigrants participated in the Communist movement.

This initial anti-Americanism, expressing itself as one distinguishing feature of the Communist line from that of the Socialists, was further indication that the Communist movement

⁵⁴ Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism*. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 391.

⁵⁵ Draper, *The Roots of American Communism*, 271.

⁵⁶ Draper, *The Roots of American Communism*, 169, 187.

⁵⁷ Draper, *The Roots of American Communism*, 187. Quotation from *The Communist*, (October 4, 1919): 6.

⁵⁸ Draper, *The Roots of American Communism*, 169.

would support these developing expressions of Yiddish culture. Additionally, many of those who made up the Jewish section, having been active in revolutionary circles in the Russian Empire, were well-versed in how Yiddish culture went together with their revolutionary work as socialists. Carrying with them the neutralist arguments of the Bund that asserted Yiddish was a current reality, and that they should use it to organize the Jewish masses into their movement, they saw a clear home for their Yiddish schools that would support the work of inspiring revolutionaries in the United States.

Yiddish cultural work was also growing in Soviet Russia.⁵⁹ Simultaneous to this consolidation of the American Party in the 1920s was a consolidation of Jewish revolutionaries in the Soviet Russia. In 1921 there was a merger of Bundists into the Communist Party, which led to a proliferation of Yiddish schools, and a parallel hybrid of Bundist and Communist ideology.⁶⁰ With the growth of Yiddish culture in the American and Soviet contexts, Yiddish schools of each region became mutually supporting projects. These Yiddish schools therefore grew up in tandem with Yiddish secular schools in Russia. To be sure, the model for Yiddish education in the United

⁵⁹ V.I. Lenin, “Lenin: The Nationalisation of Jewish Schools,” *Lenin Collected Works*, 19, trans. George Hanna (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 307-308. Accessed June 30, 2021. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1913/aug/18.htm>. Lenin had in 1913 spoken against Jewish schools in Russia, saying it was harmful for Jews, writing, “The extreme expression of present-day nationalism is the scheme for the nationalisation of Jewish schools...It means segregating the Jews into *special* Jewish schools (secondary schools).” Further gesturing toward the Bundist idea of cultural autonomy, he continues, “This most harmful scheme for the nationalisation of the Jewish schools shows, incidentally, how mistaken is the plan for so—called ‘cultural-national autonomy,’ i.e., the idea of taking education out of the hands of the state and handing it over to each nation separately. It is not this we should strive for, but for the unity of the workers of all nations in the struggle against *all* nationalism, in the struggle for a truly democratic *common* school and for political liberty generally.” While Jewish schools would later proliferate in the Soviet Union, the ideas presented here allowed for a longstanding tension between the cultural autonomism of the Bundists and the Communist movement’s ideals of “unity of workers of all nations.”

⁶⁰ Elissa Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 55.

States, despite the ideological connections, was significantly different than in Russia.⁶¹ The Yiddish schools after the creation of the Soviet Union would be on their own course as state-sponsored schools that took on the complete education of Jewish children in the Soviet Union. The Yiddish schools in the United States, on the other hand, were supplementary schools for American-born children in public schools, and would therefore always be tethered to the particularities of Jewish life in America. But the proliferation of Yiddish schools in Russia, despite their clear structural differences, helped invigorate and stabilize the notion of Yiddish Communist schools in the United States.

The early Yiddish schools of the Arbeter Ring were therefore built in the context of several power struggles: those between the younger Yiddish culturalists and older socialist cosmopolitans, the *linke* element and their opposition of the *rekhte*, and the foreign-born and American-born Communists. But rather than dissolving under the weight of political tensions, as the English Socialist schools had (the splitting of the Socialist Party in the 1920s was the unraveling of the Socialist Sunday schools, as the schools were unable to recover from the weakening of the Socialist Party), the Yiddish schools took on more significance. These *linke* Yiddish school activists became, if anything, more committed to the task of building a radical Yiddish culture in a burgeoning Communist movement.⁶²

Pedagogy in the early Yiddish Schools

⁶¹ Charney, *In kamf far a nayer dertsyung*, 21. Yiddish schools in the Russian empire pre-dated the United States, with the first school in which Yiddish was the language of instruction for secular subjects was in 1899 in Warsaw, but these schools would not be legal there until 1914, hampering the expansion of Yiddish education for a time.

There are several figures who participated in the earliest years of Yiddish school building who would remain instrumental as pedagogues in later years after they entered the Communist movement. Moyshe Katz, Kalman Marmor, Yankev Levin, Moyshe Bakal, and Rokhl Holtman did not begin in the same place ideologically, some beginning as Labor Zionists, Territorialists, and Socialists, but they eventually all became school activists in the *linke* and were deeply dedicated to Yiddish schoolwork throughout their lives. Their writings in this period reveal several important aspects of their work as Yiddish pedagogues. Namely, that they early on had an active interest in connecting their Yiddish cultural work with ideas in the wider field of experimental education, seeking to use emerging educational theories for Yiddish preservationist ends. We also see from their work the political fluidity in the realm of Yiddish schoolwork in this period, with these figures collaborating with those of different political affiliations as well as some changing their own affiliations. From attending to their writings during the first years of Yiddish schooling in the United States we see a depth to their commitment to Yiddish education that can be overshadowed by their reputations as Communists.

The first years of Yiddish school building have a relatively light paper trail, especially compared to later years in Yiddish schoolwork. This speaks to the nature of Yiddish schoolwork in the period, which was far less systematic and institutionally organized at this stage. But the pieces on Yiddish pedagogy that are available are also significant for the way they demonstrate how a group of people who were thinking together on how to grow secular Yiddish schools as well as the diverse and collaborative atmosphere of early Yiddish educational work.

By the early twentieth century, there were several movements in education that had an important influence on the educational theories that would be foundational to the Yiddish schools.

One was the focus on child-centered learning, which gave great attention to the different stages of child development and child psychology.⁶³ Yiddish socialists were particularly enthusiastic about these child-centered learning ideas as a way to support their contention that Yiddish education would create fond feelings in the children for Jewish immigrant culture and for Yiddish. At this stage there were several Jewish national strains articulating how the combination of Yiddish culture and Socialism helped build a vibrant movement. But the question facing the Jewish labor movement was not just *why* there should be Yiddish schools, but also *how* they would teach and *what* they would teach.

Even beyond the Yiddish sphere, socialists had been interested in movements of progressive pedagogy and how to use it for their revolutionary aims, harnessing another current that saw the role of education as an agent of social change, which they drew from to support the Socialist dimension of their curriculum. As Paul Mishler writes in *Raising Reds*, socialists were, “unanimous in espousing principals of progressive education,” in particular John Dewey’s theories of child-centered learning as well as the ideas of child independence of Maria Montessori and the from anarchist schools of Fracisco Ferrer.⁶⁴ This orientation around the child as an individual although somewhat contradictory given the collectivist approach of socialism, was also rooted in the notion that the development of a child’s character would have influence on a societal level. Socialists thus believed they could use these practices to generate a new generation of committed and enthusiastic socialists. And, coupled with their critique of schooling in a capitalist environment, reverse any harmful doctrines the children were receiving in the

⁶³ Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958*. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 24.

⁶⁴ Mishler, *Raising Reds*, 26.

public school. For the Yiddish activists, their school curriculum was designed to not only counteract capitalist messages but also assimilationist ones.

Gaining inspiration from these emerging theories in education from the previous decade, Yiddish pedagogues enthusiastically discussed and channeled these teachings into their own work and used them to articulate the necessity of their educational program as well as craft what that program would involve. A number of the individuals would be involved in the *linke* contributed to and edited early writings on Yiddish pedagogy, some beginning their school activity in the Labor Zionist movement. Their writings on pedagogy in this period show their contributions to the earliest work on Yiddish schooling in the United States.

Der nayer dor

The National Radical Schools journal in Chicago, *Der nayer dor* (The New Generation), was among earliest forums for discussion on secular Yiddish pedagogy. Started in 1913, before there were Yiddish schools outside the National Radical Schools and when the organization was an alliance between the Zionists and the Territorialists. *Der nayer dor* was intended to explore the challenges, potential, and purpose of Yiddish schools. Sponsored by the Yiddishist, Territorialist wing of the National Radical Schools, it included discussions on school conferences and schools around the country and in Canada, debates over Hebrew or Yiddish, the role of religion and Jewish history in the curriculum, and children's literature. Major intellectual figures of the Jewish national and cultural movements also contributed articles, such as the leader of Marxist Zionism Ber Borochov, as well as Chayim Zhitlovsky.

Der nayer dor was also a forum in which a few of those who would later be Yiddish Communist school activists would begin to outline their views on Yiddish pedagogy and teaching

methods. Moyshe Katz, who would become an instrumental figure in Yiddish Communist school work, was a contributor to *Der nayer dor*, and wrote on the necessity of Yiddish education for passing on the revolutionary ideology of Jewish immigrants to their children. Katz was also born in Belarus in 1885 and had been a Jewish Socialist Territorialist as well as participated in armed Jewish defense-groups. In his 1913 article in *Der nayer dor*, “National Education in the Home,” Katz describes how a lack of Yiddish literacy leaves children disconnected from their parents and makes giving them a proper political education difficult. He writes, “Our children go away from us, and we don’t pass on to them our *gaystike* [intellectual/ideological] heritage.”⁶⁵ Because of this lack of legacy, he claims, the children cannot learn and appreciate the revolutionary work of their parents. He continues to present the problem of a new generation not possessing the proper revolutionary training in America: “In America we find now tens of thousands of parents, who were in Russia and fervent idealists and revolutionaries. Are their children also idealists? Do they take after their parents as revolutionaries?”⁶⁶ He answers that no, the children are not taking after their parents, because the children cannot understand their parents. He concludes, “The parents do not want to lose their children and have their children be ashamed of their ‘green’ parents, but the opposite, to be proud of them... They must speak with him in the mother tongue [*muter-shprakh*], they must explain the legends and the deeds of their ancestors, of their people.”⁶⁷ For Katz, the revolutionary ideal is tied to Yiddish and a sense of pride in their Jewish immigrant background. Katz here introduces talking points about the importance of Yiddish that he will maintain

⁶⁵ Moyshe Katz, “Di natsionale ertsyung in hoyz.” *Der nayer dor* (National Radical Schools of Chicago: October 1913): 6, RG 117 Box 115, Folder 8. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archives, New York. The Yiddish word *gaystik*, meaning “spiritual,” “mental,” “intellectual,” does not have a perfect translation in English in this context.

⁶⁶ Katz, “Di natsionale ertsyung in hoyz,” 7.

⁶⁷ Katz, “Di natsionale ertsyung in hoyz,” 8.

throughout his life after he leaves the movements sponsoring the National Radical Schools, arguing the central role of Yiddish for passing on the revolutionary ideology of the immigrant generation.

Katz' article in 1913 would sound similar to arguments he would make later from within the Communist movement, showing how although he changed his party affiliations, he did not change his beliefs about the role and importance of Yiddish for passing on a revolutionary heritage. But there were also early architects of Yiddish education who would later join the Yiddish Communist school movement and show starker ideological transitions. Among them was Kalman Marmor, who would later go on to become the cultural director of the Communist-affiliated International Workers Order. In 1913, however, Marmor was a Labor Zionist and a "bilingualist" who believed both Hebrew and Yiddish should be taught in the schools. Marmor was born in 1879 in Mayshagola near Vilna, and as a young adult spent several years in revolutionary circles. Before he became a Communist, Marmor consistently changed his views and political affiliations. In 1897 he intensively pursued Jewish religious study, only to later join the Zionist cause at university and become a delegate at the World Zionist Congress for four years. After University, in 1902, Marmor moved to London where he became a prominent lecturer, writer, and editor in the Labor Zionist movement. Marmor next moved to America in 1906 because the American branch of the Labor Zionist Organization Poale Tsiyon wanted Marmor to edit its new weekly *Der yidisher kemfer*.⁶⁸

Marmor was also a contributor to *Der nayer dor* in 1913, but in it took positions he would later reverse. Writing in the same issue as Katz, Marmor wrote an article in which made his bilingualist case for including Hebrew in the children's school curriculum and giving it priority

⁶⁸ Ezekiel Lifschutz, "Marmor, Kalman (1876-1956) Papers 1873-1955," [finding aid], YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York, 8.

over Yiddish, arguing, “Yiddish simply cannot become a national language like Hebrew.”⁶⁹ Marmor explained that until there was a Jewish country, Yiddish would be seen as a “poor” German dialect. While the Jewish community is in *goles* (exile), “the Jewish children learn three languages equally. Hebrew, the language that connects Israel’s past with the Jewish future; Yiddish, the mother tongue [*mame-loshn*] for the majority of Jews of the region; The *lands-sphrakh*, which connects the Jewish citizens with a country’s society...”⁷⁰ Marmor’s article advocating both Hebrew and Yiddish (but denying that, without a Jewish territory, Yiddish could not be a national language) was representative of the debate in the National Radical Schools between the Hebraist and Yiddishist camps in the Labor Zionist movement. But the editorial board of *Der nayer dor* issued a footnote to Marmor’s article as a disclaimer, in which they said, “As Yiddishists we are, naturally, not in agreement with what was printed from our friend. We have invited our friend Marmor to write his article in order for the readers to be familiar with the two sides.”⁷¹ Marmor’s participation in the school debate over Hebrew versus Yiddish demonstrates the extent of his political transition. Marmor would move far ideologically from his time as a Zionist to become a Communist. Yet at the same time, the long span of his efforts as a leading figure in Jewish education show how he was a consistent presence in developing secular Jewish pedagogy, an authority figure in the realm of education, contributing to dynamic conversations about the meaning of language and the contents of a Yiddish socialist curriculum.

It would not be long before Marmor changed his views about Labor Zionism and Yiddish. The next year, in 1914, Marmor left Poale Tsiyon and joined the Socialist Party and became an

⁶⁹ Marmor, *Der nayer dor*, 9.

⁷⁰ Marmor, *Der nayer dor*, 11.

⁷¹ From the editorial board of *Der nayer dor*, 11.

active member of its Jewish Federation. In that period, he continued his work with the National Radical Schools, becoming the editor of *Der nayer dor* in Chicago in 1916 as well as sitting on the pedagogical committee, teachers committee, and being the director of historical studies.



[Figure 1. This is the cover of *Der nayer dor*, January 1916, distributed by the Chicago Jewish Radical Schools, with K. Marmor listed as the editor although he had left Poale Tsiyon for the Socialist Party two years prior. Document from YIVO Institute for Jewish Research].

Moyshe Katz also continued contributing to the project of building the National Radical Schools and writing for *Der nayer dor* in 1916, such as a piece in a 1916 issue titled, “The Children’s Play in Our School,” in which he discussed the challenges of teaching Yiddish in a supplementary school environment and advocated for encouraging playtime in Yiddish so that students can integrate the language better. Katz claims here that the supplementary structure does not produce the meaningful results they seek for Yiddish education, remarking how a “child maybe speaks beautiful Yiddish and then the same one [child] speaks to his school friend in

Yiddish” (Katz would make a similar comment about the Yiddish Communist schools twenty years later).⁷² To shore up the structure of Yiddish education, therefore, they needed to mimic how the children learned English in the public school: from interactions and play. Katz creative interest in improving Yiddish education through studying other schools’ practices speaks to a commitment to language learning he held in the 1910s that would remain consistent in later years.

Marmor and Katz were among the earliest architects of secular Yiddish education, writing at a time when there were only a handful of Yiddish schools in the United States, and when many socialists in the Jewish labor movement were against Yiddish education. And like many other Jewish socialists, Marmor and Katz were deeply affected by the Russian Revolution in 1917. Katz, for example, after the Revolution, returned to the Soviet Union and helped found the “Kultur Lige,” an administrative and coordinating body for Yiddish cultural work in the Soviet Union, pausing his Yiddish cultural work in the United States.

Even after they entered the Communist movement, those who were early founders of the Yiddish schools continued to write on Yiddish pedagogy. Moyshe Bakal, for instance, was one of the initiators of the first Socialist Yiddish School in Chicago in 1916 and joined the *linke* in the wake of the Revolution and remained a pedagogue in the Communist movement. Bakal published a book in 1920 on modern children’s pedagogy that called for the use of the Yiddish children’s school movement called, *Di moderne kinder ertsyung (Modern Children’s Education)*. In his book, Bakal asserts the importance of modern pedagogy and introduces his readers to its theories, aims, and history so these may be implemented in the home and school. He devotes full chapters to the theories of prominent pedagogues such as Maria Montessori, Francisco Ferrer, and John Dewey, using their insights as a basis to argue that according to modern pedagogical theories of

⁷² Moyshe Katz, “Dos kinder shpil in undzer shul,” *Der nayer dor*, (January, 1916), YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York, 10.

childhood development, child learning happens beyond the school, in the home. The home atmosphere, Bakal claims in his book, is essential to promoting the learning capacity of the child and also shows why Yiddish education, in bringing in the language of the home is useful for instilling socialist values.

Like other socialist writings on education, Bakal's book gives a sharp critique of the public school, saying it is lagging in its pedagogical methods, which are, "from the middle ages."⁷³ Echoing the critiques of other socialists about public schools, Bakal claims that the schools teach conservatism and "the ruling societal order."⁷⁴ He continues, "It is true, that there were reforms instituted in the schools. But these are in majority merely a coat to cover the mold that collects there from the extinct dark times."⁷⁵ While Bakal observes that many Jewish immigrants see these public schools as an educational "garden of eden," these schools do not truly serve the best interest of the child because the rich do not send their children to public schools but to private schools.⁷⁶ Thus, the schools that integrate modern pedagogy are the millionaire's children, who don't mix with the poor.

Bakal further contrasts the public schools with the practices with Soviet Russia, claiming that, "In socialist Russia there the majority of the schools are already organized according to the new educational principals."⁷⁷ These arguments about the superiority of the socialist's approach to progressive pedagogy would be repeated by Bakal later and others who would join in the

⁷³ Moyshe Bakal, *Di moderne kinder ertsiyung*. (Chicago: The Modern Publishing Co., 1920), YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York, 6.

⁷⁴ Bakal, *Di moderne kinder ertsiyung*, 6.

⁷⁵ Bakal, *Di moderne kinder ertsiyung*, 6.

⁷⁶ Bakal, *Di moderne kinder ertsiyung*, 7.

⁷⁷ Bakal, *Di moderne kinder ertsiyung*, 8.

Communist movement. In these comments idolizing education in what would become the Soviet Union, we also see what will become increasingly his *linke* activist perspective informing discussions of what their models should be in the realm of education.

Bakal ultimately uses these theories about childhood development to make the case for teaching Yiddish language in their own socialist children's schools. He concludes the book with a final manifesto, "Yiddish as the Language for Education," in which he argues that because Yiddish is the language of the home, it allows children to be enriched by the benefits of the home atmosphere. Furthermore, children will connect the warm feelings they feel at home toward learning Yiddish in the school. And, he continues, echoing Katz, not only was Yiddish the language of the home, importantly, it was the language of the home for the Jewish working class, "the woodcutter, the shoemaker, the tailor."⁷⁸ Thus, if the children do not know Yiddish, they cannot participate in the fruits of the Jewish working class in the realm of culture. Due to the importance of language as a carrier of culture, Bakal pronounces that teaching Yiddish language and literature must be the biggest subject in the education of children in the home and in school.⁷⁹ But how Yiddish is taught is equally crucial, that it "must be taught in the *folks*-spirit and the *folks*-soul."⁸⁰ Bakal's integration of socialism, progressive pedagogy, and Yiddishism would be the blueprint for the later Yiddish schools as well as arguments for the necessity of Yiddish education in working class movements.

The theories of Dewey and Montessori were inspirations to the Yiddish school activists, who did important work of communicating these ideas to the broader Jewish community so they

⁷⁸ Bakal, *Di moderne kinder ertsiyung*, 54.

⁷⁹ Bakal, *Di moderne kinder ertsiyung*, 54.

⁸⁰ Bakal, *Di moderne kinder ertsiyung*, 55. I translated the word *gayst* as spirit and *neshome* as soul here. *Folks* translates to "peoples'."

could be implemented in the Yiddish schools. Rokhl Holtman, who was also a *linke* activist, was among the more prominent women who actively studied progressive pedagogy and worked on developing the Yiddish socialist schools. Holtman moved to the United States in 1912 and went to the University of Pittsburgh and enrolled her children in the “Dewey School for Childhood,” that was offered there. In 1922, Holtman went to New York and became active in the left wing of the Socialist Party. Her husband was the editor of the left-wing weekly *Der kampf* for which she translated articles from Russian, German, and English and later began to write her own articles. As a member of the Arbeter Ring, Holtman was asked to contribute a series of articles on pedagogy for the Arbeter Ring journal, *Der fraynd*.⁸¹

In her article about Montessori, which appeared in *Der fraynd* in 1922, Holtman extolled the attention to “individuality” and “personal freedom” in Montessori education, enthusiastic about the ways that children “develop their own power through independent investigation and creation.”⁸² Like others in the emerging *linke*, Holtman also celebrated the Soviet Union as the best environment for such models of education. Holtman closes her article on Montessori with an explicitly Pro-Soviet message, remarking how because of the role of the state, the working class, not just the rich, can benefit from the Montessori method of learning. “In a capitalist society,” Holtman writes, “Montessori can very rarely find a place for itself, because it is supported in the generosity of the rich, and in Russia it is supported by the state, so that each worker can use it for their own institutions.”⁸³ This notion that Montessori and other progressive pedagogical practices

⁸¹ Rokhl Holtman, *Mayn lebns-veg* (New York: Rokhl Holtman’s Book Committee, 1948). YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

⁸² Rokhl Holtman, “Dr. montessoris ertsuyng sistem,” *Der Fraynd*, (Arbeter Ring, 1922): 20. RG 1400 Bund Archives, Workmen’s Circle, Box 1320, Fl 20. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

⁸³ Rokhl Holtman, “Dr. montessoris ertsuyng sistem,” 20–21.

will fail in a capitalist system but thrive in a Communist one would become a repeated argument of the Yiddish Communist pedagogues. Indeed, the flourishing of Yiddish institutional building and state support in the years after the Revolution in the Soviet Union provided a clear argument for not only why the Soviet Union was a good model for progressive and experimental education, but also why Yiddish schools were important.⁸⁴

Other *linke* members and founding Yiddish school activists were also writing on Yiddish pedagogy and seeking to integrate progressive educational theories. Yankev Levin, among the most central figures in the development of the Arbeter Ring schools, made a case for blending progressive educational values such as child-centered learning and developing a child's character with their Yiddish educational program. Levin had arrived in the United States in 1915, and was part of founding the first Socialist Yiddish School in Harlem sponsored by the Jewish Socialist Federation in 1915. Levin would go on to making Yiddish school work his primary interest, becoming chair of the Arbeter Ring school committee, director of the Harlem high school of the Arbeter Ring, and director of its Teacher's Seminar.⁸⁵ In 1920 Levin wrote a book called *Di yidishe arbeter ring shul (The Jewish Arbeter Ring School)* in which he, like Katz and Bakal, explained the importance of Yiddish schools in terms of the growing phenomenon of American-born children becoming estranged from their parents and all of their education being managed in the public school system. The result is that, Levin writes, "consciously or unconsciously, the public school has grown in the children something of a disdain for all that is Yiddish and even the

⁸⁴ Kenneth B. Moss, *Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁸⁵ Shmuel Charney, Yankev Shatski, "Levin, Yakob," *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*. (Nyu-York: Alveltlekhn Yidishn kultur-kongres, 1956-1981, 1956).
<https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/999681836402121>. 276-277.

parents of the children themselves.”⁸⁶ The children therefore need “[a] school where they can learn their language, their culture, and the history of their people...”⁸⁷ Importantly, this program is a secular one, as the “Talmud Torah [Jewish religious school] doesn’t give them the life of the Jewish masses or their history. They don’t even prepare them for reading a Yiddish book or writing Yiddish correctly.”⁸⁸ Levin, therefore, outlines six key aims of the schools that would remedy these issues of historical ignorance as well as the capitalist and religious influences:

1. To teach the children how to reach, write, and speak Yiddish well.
2. To familiarize them with the best Yiddish literature.
3. To familiarize them with the life of the works and the Jewish masses in America and other countries.
4. To familiarize them with the history of their people and the struggles for freedom of other peoples.
5. To develop a feeling of love for freedom.
6. To develop a feeling of beauty.⁸⁹

Levin’s attention to developing an appreciation of “beauty” and “freedom,” shows his interest in education as a way to not just impart knowledge but as an avenue for personal development.

Yiddish education was clearly central to Levin, as well as his belief that Yiddish schooling should support the growth of the full character of a child. These principles, due to Levin’s leadership in building the Yiddish socialist schools, would become the basis of the curriculum of Arbeter Ring schools, and later, the *linke*-affiliated Yiddish schools.

⁸⁶ Yankev Levin, *Di yidishe arbeter ring shul: ir tsil un program; vi azoy aza shul tsu efenen un ontsufiren*. (New York: Educational Committee of the Arbeter Ring, 1920): 5. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

⁸⁷ Levin, *Di yidishe arbeter ring shul*, 5.

⁸⁸ Levin, *Di yidishe arbeter ring shul*, 6.

⁸⁹ Levin, *Di yidishe arbeter ring shul*, 8.

In the early 1920s, even as tensions between the *linke* and *rekhte* were increasing, there is evidence of collaboration in Yiddish schoolwork across institutional and political lines. In 1922 Levin and Marmor, now part of the same left-socialist movement, edited a pamphlet on pedagogical theory that could be used in the Yiddish secular school movement called *Ertsiyung* (Education). *Ertsiyung* was also edited by Leybush Lehrer, a founder of the Sholem Aleichem Institute and its camp, Boiberik. The pamphlet featured articles on teaching Jewish history, Yiddish literature, and other topics on Yiddish school curriculum. The editors, notably, spoke of the secular school movement in singular terms and saw their pamphlet as a contribution to all Yiddish secular schools.

In their introductory letter from the editorial board, the editors acknowledged that although there are three different types of schools at the time - Arbeter Ring, Farband Schools, and Sholem Aleichem schools - with important distinctions, they would speak of all of them as equal, as the schools were “connected with all of Yiddish culture.”⁹⁰ Discussing the divisions of the different types of schools, the editors write, “There exists an list of important differences among them, but the largest number of questions that have a connection to the Yiddish school, are touched upon equally. ‘*Erstiyung*’ will give a place to handle the different sides to questions, that divide the different types of schools; but it will avoid superficial polemics and bitterness in doing so.”⁹¹ Therefore, acknowledging the existence of the division and “bitterness,” the editors still wanted to create through their journal a sense of common purpose among all the types of Yiddish schools. These divisions, they believed, were to be explored and debated, but ultimately, their

⁹⁰ Yankev Levin, L. Lehrer, K. Marmor, eds. *Ertsiyung: zamlbikher far algemayner un shul-ertsiyung* (New York: April, 1922), 5. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

⁹¹ *Ertsiyung*, 6.

commitment to developing Yiddish education within all the schools was the motivation behind *Ertsiyung*.

Conclusion

These collaborations in Yiddish schoolwork across Jewish national and political party affiliations are notable in the context of the emerging factional disputes in the early 1920s. They show that while political factionalism and disagreements became increasingly pronounced later, this institutional stratification should not overshadow the fact that these individuals collaborated on the same projects and played a role in shaping the programs and foundations of the Yiddish secular schools as a single movement. The individuals highlighted here who were instrumental in the early discussions of the Yiddish school movement - Kalman Marmor, Moyshe Katz, Moyshe Bakal, Rokhl Holtman, and Yankev Levin – were all coalescing into a movement of Pro-Soviet *linke* activists and would be increasingly agitational in the 1920s. Of course, they were not the only participants in Yiddish schoolwork. But highlighting their contributions to Yiddish school development demonstrates the collaboration among people who would become political rivals. The questions they pondered about how to best connect children to their parent's ideology and approach Jewish history and Yiddish language that would continue endure shifting political alliances.

The early pedagogical writings of these *linke* school activists also give us a picture of their initial commitment to Yiddish education in a time when Yiddish schools were still a question among Jewish socialists. As new immigrants in the United States who had joined Jewish labor institutions like the Arbeter Ring, they were among the earliest advocates of Yiddish schools. They were also students of pedagogy, couching their theories about the importance of Yiddish

schoolwork in progressive ideas of experiential learning and the home environment. When they moved into the Communist movement, they adapted their support of Yiddish culture to fit a Communist internationalist frame, articulating a theory for Yiddish education that was both anti-assimilationist and anti-nationalist that had been worked out prior by the Bund. Although from the 1910s to the 1920s these figures changed their political affiliations, their approach to Yiddish schoolwork changed little in that time and they came to see themselves, the *linke*, as the true founders of the Yiddish schools in the United States.

These individuals would work together to build more *linke*-controlled Yiddish institutions in the 1920s. One of the first and most significant moves of the *linke* activists was the creation of the *Frayhayt*. Funded by the Communist International, the *Frayhayt* was a product of the Jewish Socialist Federation joining the Workers Party.⁹² As the new organ of the Pro-Communist faction of the Jewish labor movement that was set up to rival the Socialist *Forverts*, the *Frayhayt* became an important forum for the *linke* to discuss Yiddish education, differentiate their perspective from the *rekhte*, and explain how Yiddish would serve the aims of the Communist movement.

⁹² Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 242.

CHAPTER 2

TO SOVIETIZE OR AMERICANIZE?: THE EXPANSION OF YIDDISH COMMUNIST EDUCATION DURING
BOLSHEVIZATION, 1922-1927

During the first month of the newspaper's existence, the editor and founder of the Yiddish Communist daily, *the Frayhayt*, Moissaye Olgin wrote on the necessity of a Yiddish schools, claiming that shaping the ideology of their children was of utmost importance. In his article from April 1922 called, "Does There Need to be a Yiddish Workers School?" Olgin emphatically said that yes, there does. He argued that the Yiddish worker school was a critical tool for educating children to be revolutionaries, writing, "It is not only a question of language, though it is very important for the Jewish working class that the younger generation know the Jewish people's language. It is not only a question of culture, although it is very needed that the working youth should not cast off the culture of their people....*this is a question of the future of the worker children.*"⁹³ For Olgin, more than language and culture – despite their importance – was the question of the content of the school curriculum. He continued, "In this school the language is not the main thing. It is no more than a tool, and a tool is a means to support human energy."⁹⁴ While Olgin's point here may have looked like a dismissal of the importance Yiddish, this was not the case. Olgin maintained that Yiddish was crucial, but it was inadequate without the working class and ideological content. In fact, Olgin was not interested in debating the question of Yiddish at all, but rather believed that his comrades should accept Yiddish as a crucial educational tool for their political goals.

⁹³ M. Olgin, "Vos darf zayn di yidishe arbeter shul?" *Frayhayt*, April 14, 1922, 4. The New York Public Library, New York.

⁹⁴ Olgin, Vos darf zayn di yidishe arbeter shul?, 4.

Olgin was also a former Bundist leader, immigrating to the United States in 1914. In the wake of the Revolution and Civil War, Olgin, like many in the Jewish labor movement, took a tour of Soviet Russia. After returning from his trip in 1921, Olgin became “enamored of the Bolsheviks,” but had some misgivings about the Communist Party and even represented a more centrist wing of the Pro-Bolshevik faction.⁹⁵ By 1923, however, Olgin was a full-fledged Communist and became a leader in Yiddish Communist culture and in the Communist movement more broadly.⁹⁶ With a PhD from Columbia, Olgin was unusual in his prominent status in both Yiddish and English-speaking contexts.⁹⁷ Further remarkable about Olgin, as a leading intellectual in the Jewish Communist sphere, was the importance he placed on Yiddish schools, demonstrating the important status of Yiddish schools as instruments for the aspirations of the Yiddish Communism.

Olgin’s 1922 article on the content of Yiddish schools appeared in a time when the Yiddish schools were still not stable in the Arbeter Ring, which would remain these schools’ parent institution until 1926. For instance, the editor of the Yiddish socialist daily, *Forverts*, and one of the assimilationist-minded “Old Guard,” Abraham Cahan, continued to launch polemics against Yiddish schooling as late as the 1930s, in the words of historian Isaiah Trunk, “exhaust[ing] all possible arguments against the schools.”⁹⁸ Olgin’s acceptance of the Yiddish schools at this juncture, albeit with a Communist angle, was representative of the general position

⁹⁵ Tony Michels, “Communism and the Problem of Ethnicity in the 1920s: The Case of Moissaye Olgin,” in *Ethnicity and beyond Theories and Dilemmas of Jewish Group Demarcation*. (Oxford ; New York: Published for the Institute by Oxford University Press, 2011): 47.

⁹⁶ Michels, “Communism and the Problem of Ethnicity in the 1920s: The Case of Moissaye Olgin,” 46.

⁹⁷ Michels, “Communism and the Problem of Ethnicity in the 1920s,” 42.

⁹⁸ Trunk, “The Cultural Dimension of the American Jewish Labor Movement,” 365.

of the *linke* at the time: they believed that Yiddish schooling was crucial as a vessel for proletarian educational content. They would continue to discuss Yiddish as “merely a tool” or “an instrument” in their broader purpose. Yet their intention was not to subordinate Yiddish to their Communist internationalism, but to secure a place for Yiddish as having an important role to play in their movement.

Olgin, along with other *linke* leaders in the Yiddish school movement like Moyshe Katz and Kalman Marmor, wrote regularly in the *Frayhayt* on how Yiddish culture and Yiddish schools fit into the Communist project. Indeed, as the *linke* activists came closer into the fold of the Communist Party in this period, they became even more productive in their Yiddish institution building, creating their own journal called *Der hamer*, a Yiddish Proletarian Theater troupe called ARTEF, a music school, built its own cooperative housing community in the Bronx known as the “Coops,” and expanded their Yiddish educational programming to include kindergartens and universities.

Yet the 1920s were nevertheless an unlikely period for the expansion of Yiddish culture in the Communist movement. Beginning in 1924, under the direction of Stalin, the Communist movement began a program of Bolshevization, during which the Party attempted to dismantle its language federations in an effort to centralize and Americanize the Party. In 1922, a mere ten percent of the Communist Party was in English-language branches, with the rest made up of foreign language federations.⁹⁹ This created a dependence on the foreign-language branches as well as a problem with control and centralization. While the Communist Party did not eradicate the language federations, there was increased pressure for immigrants to Americanize (that is,

⁹⁹ Zumoff, *The Communist International and U.S. Communism*, 172.

move into the English-language spheres of Party work) rather than separate according to nationality and language.

This chapter examines the *linke*'s educational and cultural work in the 1920s as it made its transition to the Communist movement. It considers the intellectual foundation established by *linke* activists in the *Frayhayt* on Yiddish culture within the frameworks of the Bolshevization period. Sidestepping the Americanizing aims of the Party, Yiddish Communists in this period argued that Americanization was actually bourgeois assimilation, and that Yiddish education was necessary to better cultivate their own revolutionary culture that was modeled after the approach of the Soviet Union. It was this process of fitting their Yiddish cultural and educational work into a Communist framework, especially during Bolshevization, that paradoxically led them to develop a distinctive Yiddish proletarian culture that would be passed on beyond the immigrant generation.

The best illustration of how the *linke* navigated Bolshevization with its Yiddish culture commitments are two new Yiddish Communist educational institutions it began building in this time - the kindergarten at the Communist Housing Cooperative, the "Coops," and the Jewish Workers University. These institutions serve as illustrative examples of Yiddish Communist education in the 1920s and its relationship with the broader aims of the Communist movement, as they demonstrate how took concrete steps not only to further ensure a future for Yiddish language and culture for the next generation, but did so in a distinctly Communist idiom. The processes of creating a Yiddish kindergarten and university in this period reveals how the Yiddish Communist school activists on the one hand became more connected with the Communist movement, yet also continued to serve their own communal interests in ways that fit – albeit uncomfortably - with Communism in its Bolshevization phase.

Yiddish Education in the Communist Movement

As Historian of the Communist Party Jacob Zumoff writes, the Communist International (Comintern) in the 1920s, was most concerned about “how to best position the Communist Party to intervene in the political life of the country. The Bolshevik Party’s fight for democratic centralism and against the Yiddish-speaking Bund predisposed them against a Party federated by language.”¹⁰⁰ In other words, the Yiddish schools were tolerated because they helped grow the Party, but the Party did not believe the current national structure was ideal. There was therefore no clear policy on the Yiddish schools, with arguments for as well as against them in Communist circles. Lenin, for example, had spoken in negative terms about the continuation of “national self-interest,” claiming in 1920 at the Second Congress of the Communist International:

Petty-bourgeois nationalism proclaims as internationalism the mere recognition of the equality of nations, and nothing more. Quite apart from the fact that this recognition is purely verbal, petty-bourgeois nationalism preserves national self-interest intact, whereas proletarian internationalism demands, first, that the interests of the proletarian struggle in any one country should be subordinated to the interests of that struggle on a world-wide scale, and, second, that a nation which is achieving victory over the bourgeoisie should be able and willing to make the greatest national sacrifices for the overthrow of international capital.¹⁰¹

Lenin argues here that this concern with the notion of equality was “petty bourgeois” and “internationalism demands, first, that the interests of the proletarian struggle in any one country should be subordinated to the interests of that struggle on a world-wide scale...” and that its task will require “national sacrifices.” Applying this to the Yiddish context, one can understand Lenin

¹⁰⁰ Zumoff, *The Communist International and U.S. Communism*, 47.

¹⁰¹ V.I. Lenin, “Draft Theses on National and Colonial Questions For The Second Congress Of The Communist International,” (June, 1920), *Lenin Collected Works* 31, trans. Julius Katzer (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 144-151. Accessed January 29, 2021. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jun/05.htm>.

as advocating for the subordination of Jewish nationalism for proletarian internationalism. This allowed for Yiddish culture insofar as it was not a nationalist Yiddish culture.

From 1920 to 1923, the Communist Party had been underground. It briefly dissolved to become the Workers Party, and then changed again to be the Worker's (Communist) party of America in 1925.¹⁰² In the Soviet Union, Lenin, after suffering a couple of strokes in 1922 and 1923, died in 1924. With the rise of Stalin as the secretary-general came a program of re-organization known as "Bolshevization." During Bolshevization, the Party sought to re-organize its structure to centralize and Americanize, to create, a "firm and monolithic organization."¹⁰³ To achieve this restructuring, the Party had to name the problems with its federation structure. In a speech at the Communist International in 1925, a top leader in the American Communist Party, William Z. Foster, described how "in America the reorganization of the Party encounters great difficulties. The difficulties not only consist in the numerical weakness of the membership, but especially in the fact that we have not even a united Party. The Party is theoretically united, it is true, but in reality, besides the English speaking organizations, it is divided into 17 foreign language federations."¹⁰⁴ These foreign-language organizations were problematic because, "The Central Committee has no real direct contact with the local organizations, but must depend on the Central Bureaus of the various language federations to act as intermediaries."¹⁰⁵ Furthermore,

¹⁰² Draper, *The Roots of American Communism*, 390.

¹⁰³ Zumoff, *The Communist International and U.S. Communism*, 153.

¹⁰⁴ William Z. Foster, "Speech on Bolshevization of the American Party to the Organizational Conference of the Communist International, Moscow, March 18, 1925." 5, no. 23 (March 31, 1925): 322. Material appeared under the pseudonym "Comrade Dorsey. Accessed January 29, 2021. <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/parties/cpusa/1925/03/0318-foster-bolshevization.pdf>

¹⁰⁵ Foster, "Speech on Bolshevization of the American Party to the Organizational Conference of the Communist International, Moscow, March 18, 1925."

Foster noted “passive resistance” to centralizing the Party structure. Indeed, in this period, many in the German, Italian, and Finnish branches left as a result.¹⁰⁶ But in the Jewish context, the movement for Yiddish culture in the Communist movement was on the whole undeterred. Drawing from the Bundist lineage, Yiddish Communists opted to put forward a coherent articulation that responded to criticisms of national culture from the Communist movement as well as criticisms of decentralization, allowing them to continue their work in Yiddish education as an internationalist Yiddish proletarian movement that supported the organizing aims of the Party.

Yiddish Culture and the *Frayhayt* in the 1920s

The *linke* did much of this theorizing in the *Frayhayt*, which they began in 1922, before Bolshevization. Emerging out of the tensions between the *linke* and the *rekhte* in the Arbeter Ring and as a rival to the Yiddish Socialist newspaper the *Forverts* (Forward), the *Frayhayt* (Freedom) proclaimed its role in Jewish life as the “guide” for the Jewish worker that could elevate the cultural level of the workers movement in Yiddish, with “full respect for the language.”¹⁰⁷ The emergence of the *Frayhayt* was the first step in a series of new *linke* controlled Yiddish cultural institutions that were independent of the *rekhte* influence.

Moyshe Katz, having returned to New York from the Soviet in 1921, joined those who left the *Forverts* for the *Frayhayt*, and was a central voice arguing for Yiddish culture and Yiddish schools in the working-class movement. In an article in July of 1922 of the *Frayhayt* entitled “Yiddish Culture in America,” Katz wrote about the opportunity presented by Yiddish as a

¹⁰⁶ Zumoff, *The Communist International and U.S. Communism*, 183.

¹⁰⁷ Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 245; B. Rozman, “Undzere yidishe oyfgaben,” *Frayhayt*, April 2, 1922, 6. The New York Public Library, New York.

working-class language. Katz begins his article with examining the question of whether Yiddish has a future. He argues this is the wrong question for deciding whether to cultivate Yiddish culture, for the future will always be uncertain. He writes, “The question must be different: does it have enough promise?”¹⁰⁸ Here, in the United States, he says, “Yiddish language can exist, and Yiddish culture is possible and needed.” He continues with his point that Yiddish language has developed a rich literature and his interest is “not because the language is holy.... but because it is vernacular.”¹⁰⁹ It is therefore in the present fact of Yiddish that they must continue to focus on its development. Katz further addresses the belief that Yiddish is merely an immigrant language and will be forgotten in a couple generations by saying this is inconsistent with Jewish history. He notes that the current state of Yiddish itself is the product of intellectuals returning to Yiddish language, that they “went back to Yiddish in public life and to writing and fighting for Yiddish.”¹¹⁰ And while immigrant children will grow up to speak English, they will also know Yiddish from the schools and the working class culture they are building.

The battle against assimilationism, and how it was a bourgeois project, became central to the *linke*’s effort for continuing their work in Yiddish culture. Katz completes his article with a point about how Yiddish stands against assimilationism, and that this is crucial for creating a working-class culture. He writes, “In America there is no exception from other countries: the

¹⁰⁸ Moyshe Katz, “Yidishe kultur in amerika,” *Frayhayt*, July 10, 1922, 7. The New York Public Library, New York.

¹⁰⁹ Katz, “Yidishe kultur in amerika,” 7. If they treated it as holy, he says, they would be like Hebraists. The Yiddish word I translated as “vernacular” appears as *vokhedig*. A “*vokhedike sphrakh*” translates as vernacular; *vokhedik* on its own typically translates as everyday, ordinary, commonplace.

¹¹⁰ Katz, “Yidishe kultur in amerika,” 7.

masses do not assimilate.”¹¹¹ In other words, Katz believes that the working-class immigrants will remain distinctive from the bourgeoisie. “For us,” he says, “bourgeois culture is foreign, as well as its political and social ideas.”¹¹² This idea that Yiddish culture is intrinsically a class culture and has the potential to be the language that distinguishes the Jewish working class from the dominant culture and the Jewish bourgeoisie is central to the Jewish Communist approach to cultivating Yiddish culture. We can see that Katz was responding to a debate about the use of Yiddish language and its future, but we can also how Yiddish Communist leadership declared Yiddish a working-class language that should be cultivated as distinct from a “bourgeois” culture.

Railing against the “assimilationists” was a regular feature of Katz’s work and the *linke* in general. In an article titled “Germans and Hebraists against Yiddish folk schools,” Katz explained that in Latvia there was a question of which language to open a Jewish school. “The assimilated bourgeoisie is for German. In the capitalistic Zionists of all stripes – for Hebrew.” But, as Katz argued, there should be “a Jewish school in Yiddish, because Yiddish is the language of the Jewish folk masses.”¹¹³ Katz’ comments were emblematic of the *linke* defining itself as the promoters of a Yiddish culture for building up a Jewish working class.

In addition to distinguishing themselves from the assimilationists, the *linke* activists also emphasized how they were not “nationalists,” either. At the Philadelphia Arbeter Ring convention in 1922, Kalman Marmor discussed how a “call for Yiddish culture was never narrowly

¹¹¹ Katz, “Yidishe kultur in amerika,” 7.

¹¹² Katz, “Yidishe kultur in amerika,” 7.

¹¹³ M. Katz, “‘Daytshn’ un ‘hebrayer’ hegn der yidisher folks-shul.” *Frayhayt*, May 3, 1924, 4. The New York Public Library, New York.

national...the current Yiddish culture will become the basis of internationalism.”¹¹⁴ He elaborated further on this perspective in an article in the *Frayhayt* from 1923, called “The Communist Youth Journal in Yiddish,” in which Marmor made the emphatic case for why developing Yiddish culture is part of a Communist ideology. Marmor spent little time in the article discussing this Communist Youth Journal itself, opening with an attack against the “Jewish radicals” and “intellectuals” whose “brains become suddenly comically deformed when it comes to Yiddish language and Yiddish cultural issues.” Marmor singles out both “Zionist conservatives” and “assimilationist radicals” as “unfriendly types” who say, “‘Nothing Yiddish!’” But of the two, Marmor notes, “the assimilationist radicals are the worst” because it is “[o]nly the assimilationist radicals who fight Yiddish in the name of humanity’s future and work at the same time for the language of the ruling race, demonstrating insolent, naked egotism: it shows for all, that he searches to get approval from others who can better satisfy.”¹¹⁵ Marmor, in his critique of the “assimilationist radicals,” sets up how the Communist movement has advanced the cause of Yiddish, and that if one does not support Yiddish they are not a true Communist. He writes,

The Communists can’t make distinctions between peoples, languages, and cultures. The Communists are internationalist not as a pretense, as other so-called “socialists” who are preaching of internationalism and practical motar-pestalism. A true Communism is free of egoism, both individually and nationally. A revolutionary has enough respect not to be an assimilator - a slave, who is embarrassed of himself, with his family and state. An internationalist is enough of a *mentsh* to not assimilate (that is, not oppress) the other, not physically or spiritually.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Kalman Marmor, “Di tsuzamenfor fun di arbeter-ring shuln.” *Frayhayt*, April 18, 1922, 5. The New York Public Library, New York.

¹¹⁵ K, Marmor. “A komunistisher yungt zhurnal in yidish.” *Frayhayt*, December 12, 1923, 5. Kalman Marmor Papers, RG 205 MK 495 F1 786. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

¹¹⁶ Marmor, “A komunistisher yungt zhurnal in yidish,” 2.

Marmor's conception of internationalism is thus the antithesis of assimilationism. It is not about dissolving national differences but holding each nation equally, for to be an assimilationist is to assert the superiority of one culture over another. "A Communist assimilationist - a detractor of Yiddish, of Yiddish schools, of Yiddish culture work, or Yiddish literature and art, etc. - is therefore an impossibility. If he is a Communist, he cannot be an assimilator, this is a mistaken Communist. His place is truly among the assimilationist petty bourgeoisie opportunists and Egypt's slaves."¹¹⁷ In Marmor's view, to be a Communist is to stand against assimilationism, and therefore to be supportive of Yiddish culture, and to believe otherwise was the sign of not a true Communist but a "mistaken Communist."

It was on this basis that their Yiddish culture was set up to meet the needs of Bolshevization. The *Frayhayt*, with Olgin at the helm, continued to refine its position on Yiddish culture and Communism, presenting itself as both non-assimilationist but also divergent from other conceptions of Jewish nationalism. In a two-part article called "Yiddishkayt - Theirs and Ours" Olgin argued there was a fundamental difference between conceptions of Jewish culture and identity. He claimed that the "bourgeois bosses" invoke Yiddishkayt as merely a symbol and "not an answer to a real desire..." These "bourgeois bosses," "Hebraists," and "socialist bosses," all used Yiddishkayt similarly, Olgin claimed, and that "Yiddishkayt is for them absolute, a manifestation of something, that stands over a home and fights from a material life. In short - a *mezuzeh*."¹¹⁸ As a symbol of religious Judaism, the *mezuzeh* is a Torah scroll affixed to the doorpost that Jews touch with their fingers and then kiss their fingers. To Olgin, the symbol of a

¹¹⁷ Marmor, "A komunistisher yungt zhurnal in yidish," 2.

¹¹⁸ M. Olgin, "Yiddishkayt, zayere un unzere." *Frayhayt*, January 3, 1925, 4. The New York Public Library, New York. A *mezuzeh* is a small box with a Torah scroll placed on the door post of a Jewish home, intended provide protection over the inhabitants of the home.

mezuzeh represents both outmoded tradition and an enthusiasm for a static object of symbolic value. To not be interested in making Yiddish a “national mezuzeh” is to reject the idea the goal of their Yiddish culture symbolism or traditionalism. Therefore, according to Olgin, like the promise of contracts, rights, and democracy (“all mezuzehs”), this is a kind of false idol that promises no true liberation. This bourgeois Yiddishkayt functions as an illusion to the working class, purporting that “there are absolutes that rule *over all people*” and therefore reduce Yiddishkayt to an ornament in the system of bourgeois life.”¹¹⁹ But, Olgin claims, this “mezuzedike Yiddishkayt” is not needed by the working class, indeed, it is harmful in the way it contributes to the interests of the bourgeoisie. To Olgin, a Yiddishkayt that “strengthens the working class and the workers and struggle” was the only Yiddishkayt worth investing in.¹²⁰

In his second installment on the subject, Olgin elaborates on the meaning of this working class Yiddishkayt. Olgin begins by stating that there is one task: the struggle against capitalism. The question of whether Yiddish “is good or bad - this for us is not an interesting question; for the working class this is not important...The fact is, a hundred thousand Jewish workers in America speak and read Yiddish.”¹²¹ In taking this as a fact, Olgin asserts the way forward is to mobilize Yiddish in service of their larger struggle. Here he distinguishes the interests of the *linke*: “We fight also for the future, but for the future of a class, not for a language or for a national *mezuzeh*.”¹²² Olgin thus contrasts their efforts in the realm of Yiddish culture “Proletarian Yiddishkayt” which should be used for “a different culture for the working masses.” Olgin’s

¹¹⁹ Olgin, “Yiddishkayt, zayere un unzere,” 4.

¹²⁰ Olgin, “Yiddishkayt, zayere un unzere,” 4.

¹²¹ M. Olgin, “Yidishkayt, undzere un zayere,” 4.

¹²² Olgin. “Yidishkayt, undzere un zayere.” 4.

conception of a “Proletarian Yiddishkayt” is pragmatic in its assertion that Yiddish should be mobilized as a tool for working class struggle. While it is emphatically unsentimental in its treatment of Yiddish, Olgin’s point is simultaneously about the importance of creating a proletarian Yiddish culture. He sees Yiddish as a positive force in working class life, and therefore worthy of development and attention. Yiddishkayt as it was in Olgin’s conception was therefore something for the *linke* to claim and tailor for the Jewish proletarian class. This notion that Yiddishkayt became crucial to how they could have their own Communist, internationalist culture in Yiddish. It is from this standpoint that it invested in creating a competing, working class Yiddishkayt that promotes their political objectives.

Moyshe Katz similarly argued the importance of Yiddish for the development and organizing of a Jewish working class through Yiddish due to the practical reality of how many Yiddish speakers exist. In an article called “Why is Yiddish Debated?” which appeared January, 1925, in the same week as Olgin’s series on proletarian Yiddishkayt, Katz addresses the question of the future of Yiddish in America. Katz claims that the questions about whether Yiddish will continue have no basis, for the fact is that the “number of Jews who speak and read Yiddish is now larger than it was before, the language is cleaner and more robust, the newspapers are larger and more widely distributed, and the interest in Yiddish culture and in Yiddish is a lot larger than in the first few years of immigration.”¹²³ Echoing Olgin’s point that the question of whether Yiddish itself is good or bad is not of interest, Katz believed that rather “the question is: what kind of tendencies in Jewish life in America are stronger: tendencies of death and disappearance or the tendencies of building and development?” Katz saw the path for their future in the realm of development, especially given what is at stake with the future of their children: “ And this is a

¹²³ M. Katz, “Farvos debatirt men vegn yidish?” *Frayhayt*, January 10, 1925, 5, The New York Public Library, New York.

very simple question: can we and should we leave the education of our youth in the hands of the governmental, immigrant-phobes, and child-Americanizing public-school. Or, should we help with the education?”¹²⁴ To Katz the answer was obvious – it is their duty to build their movement and use Yiddish to its full potential in their movement for the sake of building the proletarian culture they wanted.

Katz concludes his article with a similar argument as Olgin regarding the difference between proletarian culture building in Yiddish and the other Yiddishists, again using his argument about Yiddish as a tool for building a Jewish working-class movement. He writes,

Because we pose the question about our *activity* and not worn-out sentimentality, we are therefore not interested in the whole discussion about ‘Yiddishism’ or ‘Yiddishkayt.’ We are not ‘Yiddishists’ because for us Yiddish is not another language, it is not an idol, it is not a goal for itself. We are cultural people in struggle to create our culture, the language for us is merely a cultural tool, and therefore with think not about throwing away the tool and remaining for a time mute until somebody with for us will learn how to speak; and therefore we seek to make our tool stronger, upbuilt, sharper, multifaceted; and therefore there are exactly the conscious revolutionary Jewish workers the strongest and most energetic representatives and shepherds of our Yiddish language and our new culture...¹²⁵

Again orienting his argument around the practical needs and the practical questions, Katz distinguished their interest in “activity” versus “worn-out sentimentality,” and sees Yiddish as a tool through which they can productively build their movement. And in language akin to Olgin’s “mezuzedike Yiddishkayt,” distances them from the Yiddishists who treat it like an “idol.”

As much as these *Frayahyt* writers expressed confidence in their position, they also knew their views on Yiddish culture were not held by everyone in the Party and that they needed to negotiate their position with the centralizing push of Bolshevization. In December of 1927 in the Yiddish Communist journal *Der hamer*, an unsigned editorial discussed the Party’s

¹²⁴ Katz, “Farvos debatirt men vegn yidish?,” 5.

¹²⁵ Katz, “Farvos debatirt men vegn yidish?,” 4.

Bolshevization efforts, threading a fine needle between Party compliance and Party critique. The article described the history of the Socialist language-federation structure, and the need to refine it within the Communist Party. At the same time, it argued that Yiddish language work was in the interests of the Party and should not be categorically dismissed. The author noted the existence of “unclear protest against the existence of the language groups in general: a protest that cannot hold the light of the Marxist analysis, whose *alef beys*[*ABC*] is a recognition and maximal use of the existing social cultural circumstances and power.”¹²⁶ In other words, the editorial’s author claimed, without saying the Party line is incorrect, that to be opposed to the language groups “in general” was not Marxist. In one example, the author wrote on the Yiddish children’s schools and how “the social result is a plus” because through the children’s schools, the “children there become connected with the working class and its ideals in the language of their parents,” which importantly brings them closer to the Communist Party. Their work in the language groups, therefore, was not only done in the interest of the Party: “The Yiddish propaganda bureau is factually the organ for the activity in Yiddish This is not a return to the old federalism” because it supports the overall efforts of the Party and its centralization.

The editorial also described the efforts to move Yiddish work closer into the Party, assuaging the concern that Yiddish cultural work would contribute to decentralization. It argued that although it is true that there is a small group of “Jewish comrades still not free” of the nationalist impulses, this should be approached as an opportunity and evidence of the need to continue Yiddish language work in the name of Party interests. By balancing between calls for English only and Yiddish nationalism, their position is the true Communist one: “The assimilator (English nationalist) says: a maximum English; The Yiddishist (Jewish nationalist) says: a

¹²⁶ “Di arbet fun di yidishe komunistn in amerike,” *Der hamer* 3 no. 12 (December 1927): 25.

maximum Yiddish. The Communist says: a maximum class consciousness, organization, battle-readiness, courage, clarity of goals – utilization of the best tool in a given situation.”¹²⁷ Building from previous arguments about how they need to use Yiddish for Communist ends, the argument claimed that Yiddish was the “best tool” for their purpose.

The Jewish Communist approach to Yiddish language work at the end of 1927 therefore shows at once the impact of the Bolshevization program as well as the ways Yiddish educational work maneuvered around it. Bolshevization required a Marxist justification of Yiddish language work as well as a clear distancing from previous forms of Jewish nationalism. Yet at the same time, there is a glimmer of resistance to its full implementation through the assertion that maintaining language work as part of propaganda is not only in the interests of the Party, but the proper Marxist approach.

The *linke* further enforced this position by showing how they were following models pioneered in the Soviet Union. One of the projects vigorously advocated by Olgin and Katz at this time was a Yiddish culture league in the United States, which would be the body that could realize the potential of Yiddish proletarian culture. Olgin lamented how uncoordinated the Jewish socialist cultural work had become: “Each union has an educational committee that works on its own...each folks schools its own program...each library has a separate catalogue.”¹²⁸ He therefore called for a central organizing effort in the form of a culture league, which would be divided into six sections: adult education, literature, drama, schools, music, and visual arts (with a possible seventh section for sports). This league would have a central building, library, museum, archive, large hall for lectures and artist’s studio. This vision was likely influenced by their time

¹²⁷ “Di arbet fun di yidishe komunistn in amerike,” 26-27.

¹²⁸ M. Olgin, “Di kultur-lige un der arbeter-klas.” *Frayhayt*, January, 12, 1923, 4. The New York Public Library, New York.

spent in the Soviet Union, during which Katz was part of establishing a culture league in a similar vein.

The Soviet Union was therefore a crucial touchstone in Yiddish Communist cultural work, especially for Yiddish school building. In June, 1926, *linke* school activist Mikhl Levitan, wrote “The New Yiddish School in Soviet-Ukraine,” in which he discussed the purposeful “Yiddishization” of the schools. Levitan was part of building the very first Yiddish school in a suburb of Kiev in 1911, and like others in the movement began as a Labor Zionist before becoming part of the Communist movement after the Revolution. In the mid 1920s Levitan was a representative of the Education Commissariat for National Minorities in Ukraine, growing the Yiddish schools there significantly.¹²⁹ As Levitan claimed, Sovietization (in the Soviet Union) could best be carried out through Yiddish. Furthermore, to encourage Yiddish will also encourage economic learning, as they would be able to reach more Jews through Yiddish education. Moving on from practical reasons, Levitan then strikes a more emotional tone: “How long until the Jewish masses don’t have to be embarrassed by their language...Thanks to the revolution, Yiddish has a place in societal life.”¹³⁰ Levitan saw the Soviet Union’s embrace of Yiddish as clarifying the direction of school work in the United States.

A few months later, in November, 1926, Levitan wrote another piece called, “Jewish School Building in the Soviet Republic.” Levitan reported that in 1925 there was 70 percent growth in the numbers of Jewish schools and students (460 schools and 74 thousand students). In addition to children’s education, he reported growth in Yiddish-language professional training

¹²⁹ Joshua Fogel, trans., “Yiddish Leksikon: Mikhl Levitan,” *Yiddish Leksikon* (blog), May 18, 2017. <http://yleksikon.blogspot.com/2017/05/mikhl-levitan.html>.

¹³⁰ M. Levitan, “Di naye yidishe shul in sovet-ukraine.” *Der hamer* 1 no 4. (June 1926): 44.

schools, higher education, and night schools. This was in addition to Yiddish theater, publishing, and other cultural institutions. Speaking proudly of Yiddish as the language of the proletariat, he writes, “The Jewish bourgeoisie regarded Yiddish language on a low level.... They did not see Yiddish as a language to build a culture around. They called it ‘jargon.’” Thus, with building a proletarian culture in Yiddish, they are growing it so it can “become a Soviet culture.”¹³¹ To be sure, Levitan frames his support for Yiddish as “merely a tool to the communist education for the Jewish masses,” creating a discordant yet typical message that at once celebrates an emotional connection to Yiddish, while also justifying its use in utilitarian terms. Levitan’s reports on Yiddish school building in the Soviet Union are instructive for understanding the model for Yiddish schools in the United States, as this report essentially functioned to promote Yiddish cultural work by pointing to the Soviet Union as an example and also demonstrates the extent of communication between the Yiddish Communists activists in the United States and in the Soviet Union.

In these ways, Yiddish Communists established a theoretical basis for their support of Yiddish education in the Communist Party during Bolshevization. They saw themselves as counteracting the forces of assimilation, making productive use of Yiddish, and following the example of the Soviet Union. But their argument for Yiddish culture also had an important nuance: Yiddish itself was not the point, but developing a working-class, radical Yiddish culture of their own that did not stand apart from their aims as Communists, but rather, reinforced them.

Tensions with the Arbeter Ring in the 1920s

¹³¹ M. Levitan, “Yidisher shul boy in der sovet republik.” *Der hamer* 1 no 9. (November 1926): 51.

The *linke* crafted its vision for a Yiddish Communist culture that could be built by Yiddish schools in a time when Yiddish schools were still a controversial subject in the wider labor movement. They further used the schools' controversial status to further distinguish themselves from their opponents in the Jewish labor movement. These *linke* activists, arguing their superior commitment to the schools, therefore set out to gain further control of the Arbeter Ring schools so they could shape them to reflect a Communist politics. As many of them were already leaders in the schools, their work for Yiddish education blended with their larger fight against the *rekhte*. Marmor, for example, was not just seeking to convince other Communists on the merits of Yiddish education but also those in the Arbeter Ring in general. At its school convention in April 1923, Marmor, who was on the Educational Committee, focused his discussion on the reasons Yiddish education was necessary. Explaining how there were still elements that "believe that even teaching Yiddish language to the children is a sin," Yiddish education was in fact important, as many people in their community including "good trade unionists" instead "send their children to learn 'Yiddishkayt' in the *hederim* and *talmud torah*."¹³² The Arbeter Ring schools, he argued, could prevent this by offering a Yiddish education that connected the children instead to the worker's movement.

The *linke* regularly emphasized in the *Frayhayt* that the *rekhte* was inadequate in its support for the Yiddish schools. In May, 1922, the *Frayhayt* ran an article attacking the Arbeter Ring *rekhte*'s approach to the children's schools, which the author claimed were "ranked as stepchildren." The article argued, "The Arbeter Ring schools, which are bright stars in the Arbeter Ring activity in the last few years, and are truly the cultural centers of the budding Jewish generation, stand as a thorn in the side of 'the *rekhte*.'" The author criticized in particular the

¹³² K. Marmor, "Der ferter arbeter ring shul-tsuzamenfar in nyu york," *Frayhayt*, April 19, 1923, 4. The New York Public Library, New York.

Forverts, as “the official organ of the Arbeter Ring machine,” believed that “the less Yiddish they know, the better off they are.”¹³³ The implication being that *Frayhayt* readers were pro-Yiddish whereas the *Forverts* was anti Yiddish.

Not everybody in the *linke* movement, however, approved of the *Frayhayt*’s strategy to use children’s schools to attack the *rekhte*. In response to this article, Levin, who at the time was acting as president of the Arbeter Ring Educational Committee and part of the *linke* faction, wrote a piece in the *Frayhayt* titled, “Keep the Arbeter Ring Schools Far from Politics,” in which he condemned the aforementioned article as using “schools in factional struggle” which can “quickly bring damage to the schools, first to benefit probably the desires of the writers of the articles.”¹³⁴ Levin maintained that the struggle in the Arbeter Ring between the *rekhte* and the *linke* was inappropriate for the children. In response to the article’s other assertions, Levin wrote that the article was “factually incorrect” and that “[t]he *Frayhayt* this time would believe a rumor and use it in the factional struggle, even if it was not a truthful rumor.”¹³⁵ Even though Levin was allowed to show his dissent in the *Frayhayt*, his article appeared with a footnote containing a rebuttal to his claims. The footnote said, “Levin does not see the difference between the struggle *around* the school and the struggle in the school body...The school may not participate in it naturally, but the struggle *about* the school is a fact, which Levin knows.”¹³⁶ This debate between Levin and the other *linke* school activists about whether to involve the schools in the factional struggle shows

¹³³ Liliput, “S’halt shoyn bay di kinder” May 26, 1922, *Frayhayt*, 4. The New York Public Library, New York.

¹³⁴ Y. Levin, “Halt di arbeter ring shuln vayt fun politik,” *Frayhayt*, June, 10 1922, 3. The New York Public Library, New York.

¹³⁵ Levin, “Halt di arbeter ring shuln vayt fun politik,” 3.

¹³⁶ Levin, “Halt di arbeter ring shuln vayt fun politik,” 3.

two important features of 1922 and the schools. The first is that it is clear the schools were, from their inception (and whether Levin liked it or not), indeed part of a larger struggle for institutional (and with it cultural and political) control between the *linke* and *rekhte*. Second, the ideology of the *linke* at this point was fluid enough to accommodate individuals like Levin expressing internal dissent.

Although his dissent permissible, the *linke* largely ignored Levin, and the schools indeed continued to be a flashpoint in the rivalry between the *linke* and the *rekhte*. Positioning itself as the best champion for the schools, the *linke* criticized the Arbeter Ring leadership for failing to help the schools realize their full potential. In a report about a meeting of the first national committee, a *linke* activist claimed in the *Frayhayt* that the Arbeter Ring, “did not allow any activity in the realm of education.”¹³⁷ Specifically, the author said that the national committee did not put enough financial and institutional resources toward cultural work. Katz, too, reported in May 1924 that at the Philadelphia school Convention, there was a debate about the existence of the Yiddish schools in the Arbeter Ring. Katz claimed that, “it came to the vote: for or against the schools. 28 for the schools... And 26 against.” Katz continued to express his condemnation of those 26, who “demand that they go back to the good old English Sunday School...”¹³⁸ Although it had been years since the Arbeter Ring Yiddish schools started, they continued to be a source of tension. The *linke* seized on these debates as evidence of their movement’s superiority, which took the Yiddish schools as important for the future of the radical Yiddish culture they were trying to create.

¹³⁷ Lazar Kling, “Di nationale edyukayshional-komite fun ‘arbter-ring’ bay der arbet,” *Frayhayt*, April, 26, 1924, 4. The New York Public Library, New York.

¹³⁸ M. Katz, “Di riter un reter fun der alter yidishkayt,” *Frayhayt*, May, 10, 1924, 5. The New York Public Library, New York.

The Arbeter Ring School Split in 1926

The tensions around the schools reached their breaking point by the mid 1920s. In 1926, the *linke* activists in New York took over 17 of the 24 Arbeter Ring schools, along with the summer camp Kinderland, and split them from the organization. Calling them the “*Umpartayishe arbeter ring shuln*,” “Non-Partisan Arbeter Ring Schools,” the *linke* initially believed the split would be temporary, a strategy for them to have more leverage in negotiating with the Arbeter Ring leadership. The term “Non-Partisan” was strategically chosen to suggest it was the *linke* who were standing against the partisanship of the *rekhte*, despite the irony that what the “Non-Partisan” school stage was a transition period in which they came closer into the fold of the Communist Party.

The *linke* activists argued that separating the schools was a necessary step for the educational future of their children. Saltzman, who had left the Arbeter Ring Educational Committee in 1922, claimed that the schools were rightfully the *linke*’s to take, as it was the *linke* activists who were responsible for the school movement in the first place. “The truth is,” Saltzman wrote, “that the current leadership of the Arbeter Ring, with few exceptions, was against the school movement...The whole time, from the establishment to the separation, the devoted school activists were the *linke* elements.”¹³⁹ Rather than the *linke* dragging the schools into political games, Saltzman claimed the *linke*’s desire to separate was to save the integrity of the schools themselves. He wrote that the *linke* was carrying on this original purpose of developing a “worker’s school,” while also “resisting the nationalistic elements in the Arbeter Ring, which saw

¹³⁹ Ruben Saltzman, “Di shul far ayer kind: di geshikhte, tsiln, un program fun di yidishe kinder shuln baym internatsionaln arbeter ordn,” (New York: Internatsional arbeter ordn, 1935), 4-5. RG 1400 Folder 23. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

the schools as a place to plant their nationalistic ideas...”¹⁴⁰ As implied in Saltzman’s narrative, the separation was akin to a liberation of the schools. It was after the separation that their schools were able to mature ideologically. Whereas within the Arbeter Ring the schools had little class consciousness, the *linke* schools after breaking off, “went on their way to becoming real class-schools.”¹⁴¹

The splitting of the schools from the Arbeter Ring in 1926 mirrored the general dynamic of the *linke* and the *rekhte*, in which the *linke* sought more institutional control and the *rekhte*, as the leadership, blocked its efforts. While both sides argued that the schools should be shielded from the organizational disputes, Charney, who later wrote a history of the Yiddish school effort, claimed that the reality was, “the schools were sparks in the factional struggle” and to believe otherwise was “naïve.”¹⁴² The tensions had been building for years, yet there were specific episodes in the previous months that helped prompt the split in 1926. In 1925, for instance, the National Executive Committee of the Arbeter Ring tried to centralize the school system by increasing its oversight over the schools, which the *linke* believed this was a maneuver to prevent the *linke* activists from exercising power in the schools. At a conference on December 20, 1925, the *linke* sought to elect one of its own as chair for the meeting of the educational committee. The *linke*’s candidate lost, prompting the *linke* to demand a recount. After a recount their candidate lost again, and the *linke* continued to protest the procedures of election, using obstructionist tactics to make it difficult for the conference to proceed.¹⁴³ These tensions culminated at the 16th

¹⁴⁰ Saltzman, “Di shul far ayer kind,” 4.

¹⁴¹ Saltzman, “Di shul far ayer kind,” 8.

¹⁴² Charney, *In kamf far a nayer dertsyung*, 91.

¹⁴³ “Linke brekhen op arbeter ring konferents tsu ervelen shul farvaltung,” *Forverts*, December, 21, 1925, 1. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

convention of the Arbeter Ring Schools, when the Arbeter Ring formed a “peace committee” in order to work out the tensions between the factions. The central issue taken up at the conference was the centralization of school management and who was to control that centralization. The plan for negotiating “peace” between the school factions included the following proposal from the Peace Committee: 1) that all schools come under the control of the central office of the Arbeter Ring and the form of this control shall be decided at the convention, 2) that all written declarations at the convention in connection to the controversy around the schools be removed, and 3) all of the schools are invited to participate at the conference, meaning the *linke* delegates could participate. This third point, however, was untenable to the Arbeter Ring leadership.¹⁴⁴

The Yiddish press broadcasted the disagreements, underscoring the inappropriateness of the *linke* to force its will on the schools. In an article in the *Forverts* entitled, “The *Linke* Interrupts the Arbeter Ring Conference to Elect School Management,” the author of the article condemned the *linke* for bringing the schools into political conflict within the organization, writing, “The current actions of the linke shows that even in the activities of the schools, which must not be engrossed in fractional struggle, they have laid out their personal and political ambitions.”¹⁴⁵ The *rekhte* in the Arbeter Ring and its allies in the *Forverts* depicted the *linke* as childish and petty, as well as controlled by “foreign elements,” willing to disrupt the schools (and school children) with their shameful behavior.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ H. Erenraykh, “Vos iz fargekumen mit di ‘linke’ af dem arbeter ring shul tsuzamenfor,” *Forverts*, May 26, 1926, 3. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

¹⁴⁵ “Linke brekhen op arbeter ring konferents,” 1.

¹⁴⁶ “Linke brekhen op arbeter ring konferents,” 1.

Similarly disparaging comments from the *linke* were wielded at the *rekhte*, of course, which argued that the *rekhte* sought not only to take the schools in the wrong direction, but also wrest them from the people who built them in the first place. As they wrote about the events retrospectively in the Non-Partisan School Almanac a year later, “Desperate and difficult was our long year, when those so-called the ‘bosses’ of the Arbeter Ring sought to pursue a malevolent goal and totally destroy us.”¹⁴⁷ The *linke* authors proceeded to list its grievances against the Arbeter Ring leadership, such as cutting off financial resources and wanting to “expel from the schools their founders and builders.” They further presented the splitting of the schools in righteous tone, and in so doing made the new schools an act of heroism: “Very bitter were our parents and school loyalists... who said ‘No!’ ‘You can perhaps bureaucratically lay down the law with our money, for our cemetery and death benefits, but not with our children. Our future! We do not entrust them to you!’”¹⁴⁸ In rescuing the children from the “Arbeter Ring bosses,” as it was characterized, the *linke* school activists claimed they could finally have a “truly free workers school” and in so doing, they will create “the avante garde of the Jewish secular workers school in America.”¹⁴⁹

In sum, the *linke* claimed the Arbeter Ring leadership was usurping power from a number of the founders of the schools and the Arbeter Ring leadership claimed the *linke* was using the schools as pawns in a power struggle to bring their institution under the control of Communists. The *linke*, after reaching an impasse, decided to split off the schools its leaders controlled. This

¹⁴⁷ “Undzer yom tov,” *Almanac fun der nyu yorker umpartayishe arbeter ring shuln*. (February, 1927), 1. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

¹⁴⁸ “Undzer yom tov,” 2.

¹⁴⁹ “Undzer yom tov,” 2.

was seemingly only intended as a temporary move, but it ended up being permanent. When the *linke* decided to separate 17 of the 24 schools in New York from the Arbeter Ring in 1926, the *Forverts* reported that “the linke made political maneuvers and every time regretted it.”¹⁵⁰ Indeed, the *linke* returned (still as members of the Arbeter Ring) to the next convention to further struggle against the Arbeter Ring leadership and negotiate. The *Forverts* article, defending the position of the Arbeter Ring, found the idea that the *linke* could cause such a disruption, take over these schools, “and then a few months later comes to the convention of the Arbeter Ring schools and desires there to equally report as delegates” to be absurd.¹⁵¹ The result was the Arbeter Ring school committee “expelled the New York School management from the body of the Arbeter Ring,” because the “schools should be managed by representatives from the Arbeter Ring, and not by a few personalities.”¹⁵² It was therefore finalized that the *linke* schools would remain the *linke*’s to control but were no longer part of the body of the Arbeter Ring.

Despite the long history of the *linke* activists in forming the Yiddish schools, the break brought with it the narrative that the *linke* cared little for the health of the Yiddish schools, as evidenced by their tactic of weaponizing them in their fight against the Arbeter Ring leadership. The *Forverts* depicted the teachers who joined the *linke* as non-political people being manipulated by the *linke* and victims of their obstructionist tactics and propaganda. An article in the *Forverts* described the dynamic of the split in the following terms: “At this convention over a hundred and thirty teachers and school activists, intelligent people, with honor and earnestness, met for the education of the children in the Arbeter Ring school. They were not interested in political

¹⁵⁰ Erenraykh, 3.

¹⁵¹ Erenraykh, 3.

¹⁵² Erenraykh, 3.

maneuvers...”¹⁵³ Even among the teachers of the *linke*-allied schools, the author claims that some, “perhaps don’t have political objectives...The misled teachers of the separated schools have come into the hands of the Communists and have lost the way, lost the freedom to come back.”¹⁵⁴ According to the *Forverts*, the *linke* had “misled” what were otherwise “intelligent people,” suggesting that those who went with them were not true believers but conned into following the Communist orders.

Other accounts of those outside the *linke* also questioned their commitment as Communists to Yiddish, furthering the reputation that the *linke* was not interested in supporting Yiddish culture but only interested in using it to grow the Communist movement. In Charney’s retelling of the *linke*’s efforts in 1926, he claims, through quoting Saltzman’s own words, that the *linke* saw Yiddish as a mere “tool.” The Yiddish school therefore was, again invoking Saltzman “not a lasting institution. A socialist movement alone does not need a school in Yiddish.”¹⁵⁵ Saltzman’s perspective, as told by Charney, does appear dismissive of Yiddish. But the larger context of the Communists seeking to secure a future for Yiddish education within the Communist movement reframes our understanding of Saltzman’s intentions when it came to the Yiddish schools. For when against the backdrop of Bolshevization in the mid 1920s, Saltzman’s words are not what is surprising but the lengths he and the other *linke* school activists went to continue Yiddish education after they separated the schools from the Arbeter Ring.

Others who sided with the *rekhte* conjectured that the separation was because the *linke* was following directions from the Communist party. Two years after the split, in a collection of school

¹⁵³ Erenraykh, 3.

¹⁵⁴ Erenraykh, 3.

¹⁵⁵ Charney, *In kamf far a nayer dertsiyung*, 98 – 99.

writings and articles distributed to students and parents, the secretary-treasurer of a Philadelphia Arbeter Ring school wrote, “Maybe it was the Yiddish section of the Communist Party that gave the order? That the section that was against the Yiddish schools and who at their convention never dealt with the Yiddish schools, and yet famously in the year in the *Frayhayt*, Shakhne Epstein at the convention of the section, [said] that “we” built a chain of Yiddish worker schools.”¹⁵⁶ Thus, the opponents of the *linke* found the idea that these Communists actually supported Yiddish to be disingenuous. As much as the *linke* in this time insisted it was the most committed to the Yiddish schools, their intentions were seen, by virtue of their Communist commitments, as otherwise.

In 1926, therefore, the *linke* found itself in charge of Yiddish schools independent of the Arbeter Ring. Documents from the period describe the split as a precarious and acrimonious year, but the general trajectory of these schools was nonetheless expansion. In the first year of these Non-Partisan Schools, the *linke* opened eight new schools in New York, and a “pre-mitlshul,” (middle school) growing the Non-Partisan schools to a total of 30 schools in New York and 41 schools nationally. It also controlled the summer camp, Kinderland, and would soon open its own Kindergarten and a University. But even as it expanded and moved closer to the Communist movement, the *linke* still had to vigilantly defend its decision to build more schools.

The Kindergarten

One of the most revealing episodes in how the *linke* thought about Yiddish education was its discussion of a Yiddish Kindergarten. When the *linke* considered starting a Kindergarten in 1927, it launched another debate in the Yiddish Communist movement about its relationship to

¹⁵⁶ S. Etinger, “Tsu undzer aktn yubiley,” *Kinder ring*, Philadelphia School Committee, April, 1928, 14. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library. Shakhne Epstein was also part of the *linke* and the co-editor *Frayhayt* and *Der hamer*.

Yiddish education. While leading intellectuals of the movement articulated the place of Yiddish culture, it was another matter of whether the rank and file members believed there was a place for Yiddish as well. The question of a Yiddish Kindergarten was raised in a debate in the *Frayhayt*, during which *Frayhayt* readers spent three months wrestling with the tension of their Communist and Yiddishist commitments. Marshalling the arguments introduced by Olgin, Katz, Marmor, and others about resisting assimilation and following the example of the Soviet Union, the Kindergarten debate shows there was in fact broad support for Yiddish Communists counteracting Americanization through Yiddish in the Bolshevization period.

The site of the first Kindergarten was to be the United Workers Cooperative Colony, known as the Allerton Coops. It was founded in 1926 by primarily Jewish workers in the needle trades who were also part of the Communist movement. Like the Sholem Aleichem Cooperative houses, which were built by non-Communist Arbeter Ring members in the same year, they were housing a cooperative that created a social and cultural community for the *linke*-oriented families of the Jewish labor movement. The Coops eventually built classrooms for children's programs, a library, gardens, meeting halls, gymnasium, and even their own stores and restaurants. By 1929 it housed more than 700 families, and was home to prominent Yiddish cultural and school activists, such as the poet Y.A. Rontsh, who was one of the primary contributors to the *Frayhayt* on Yiddish education.¹⁵⁷ The Coops bulletin in its first years shows its full-fledged Communist character, declaring, "The glorious achievements of the working class of the Soviet Union were our inspiration, and the Communist vanguard of the working class is our guiding star."¹⁵⁸ The

¹⁵⁷"United Workers Cooperative Colony, ("The Coops"), Borough of the Bronx. Landmarks Preservation Commission. June 2, 1992. Department of City Planning. http://www.neighborhoodpreservationcenter.org/db/bb_files/1992UnitedWorkerCoop.pdf

¹⁵⁸ MJ Wachman, "Our Fifth Anniversary." Bund Archives American Communism RG 1400, Box 67, Folder 5. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

Coops was a complete ecosystem and a central location for their educational efforts for Jewish children. It represented a utopian vision for a full and thriving Yiddish Communist culture.

Of all the Yiddish Communist schools, the Coops would eventually have the largest number of students and most robust Yiddish educational programming, with classes seven days a week and full-time teachers. The students called the schools, “a republic where each member is active,” separated into sections that included: “administration,” “nature-relations,” “work,” “literature,” “drama,” “singing,” “library,” and “excursions.” In the administration section, for instance, the students would “help the office of our cooperative.”¹⁵⁹ This involved helping the “sanitary committee” clean the grounds as well as raising money for “ICOR” the American Organization for Jewish Colonization in Russia.



[Figure 2. Illustration of “The second block houses that were built for the United Workers Cooperative Colony.” In special edition of the Frayhayt, February 13, 1927, pg. 13. From New York Public Library.]

¹⁵⁹ Beatrice Blum, “Di farvaltung seksiye,” Der yunger kooperativer. Bund Archives American Communism RG 1400, Box 67 Folder 14, 10. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

When it first began, however, the Coops was still making decisions about its programs and structure. In January of 1927, a member of the *linke* writing as P. Gishe, presumably a Coops resident, published an article in the *Frayhayt* about a question facing the Coops residents entitled, “In Which Language Should We Base Our Kindergarten: Yiddish or English?” At that point, there was no kindergarten yet, but the community was engaged in discussions to build one. Although Gishe’s question was intended for the Kindergarten discussions, the Kindergarten discussion turned out to be a much broader debate for the Yiddish Communists on the place of Yiddish in their movement and their vision for the next generation.

In her article, Gishe wrote on the importance of Yiddish education for the children, critiquing the notion that Yiddish was merely a tool for class struggle - a frequent line the *linke* had used to justify Communist work in Yiddish. She argued that Jewish Communists, in considering Yiddish this way, were participating in assimilation. She wrote, “The old assimilationist argument, that we use the language merely to reach the Jewish masses, is not totally coherent.”¹⁶⁰ This is because, she argued, Yiddish is not simply used for communicating information, “[w]e have a cultural function for the Yiddish language...workers choirs, workers universities, seminars...and a Yiddish workers theater.”¹⁶¹ Why, then, as her article asked, would they not follow through with this cultural project and have a Yiddish kindergarten?

Gishe’s article cut to an incongruity at the center of their narrative Yiddish Communist education. “Ask yourself this question,” she wrote, “if this is merely a tool to reach the worker masses of the current generation, is all the effort worthwhile?...It would already be a lot more

¹⁶⁰ P. Gishe, “Velkhe sprach zol banutst vern in undzere kindergartens: yidish oder english?” *Frayhayt*, January 5, 1927, 8. The New York Public Library, New York.

¹⁶¹ Gishe, “Velkhe sprach zol banutst vern in undzere kindergartens,” 8.

logical to sit down and learn the English language and be finished.”¹⁶² This logical inconsistency that Gishe examines, that Yiddish education makes little sense in a context in which the children already speak English. Therefore, instead of disingenuously claiming the role of Yiddish is communication, their movement should embrace what it has begun and support the continuation of their Yiddish cultural work through having a Yiddish language kindergarten.

At the bottom of the article, the *Frayhayt* editors acknowledged that Gishe’s article was provocative and controversial, promising to “give a place for other opinions on this question.”¹⁶³ The responses flooded in, showing, in the words of the *Frayhayt* editors, “strong interest in this important matter.”¹⁶⁴ Thus launched a debate that would last three months (longer likely if the editors had allowed it to continue). The first response they printed was from Sheffi Rabinowitz from Boston, who disagreed with Gishe’s premise, writing, “Comrade Gishe is interested in Yiddish nationalism and not the radical education of our children. We radicals are not language teachers...I can say with certainty, that 95 percent of the children of Jewish workers, ‘who live the struggle of the larger masses,’ speak and think in English and not in Yiddish...We must speak to them in their language.”¹⁶⁵ Articulating the opposite view, Rabinowitz did not even agree with using Yiddish as a tool in their educational program. She further likened the use of Yiddish to Hebraism, claiming “Yiddish in America is not a mass language and serves purely intellectual interests.”¹⁶⁶ This rebuttal of Gishe from Rabinowitz was based on Rabinowitz’s insistence that

¹⁶² Gishe, “Velkhe sprakh zol banutst vern in undzere kindergartens,” 8.

¹⁶³ Gishe, “Velkhe sprakh zol banutst vern in undzere kindergartens,” 8.

¹⁶⁴ Gishe, “Velkhe sprakh zol banutst vern in undzere kindergartens,” 8.

¹⁶⁵ Sheffi Robinovitz, “Tsu di diskusiye: - velkhe sprakh zol banutst vern in undzere kindergartens.” *Frayhayt*, January 11, 1927, 8. The New York Public Library, New York.

¹⁶⁶ Robinovitz, “Tsu di diskusiye,” 8.

they needed to treat the children for what they were - American-born and English speaking. Gishe and Rabinowitz represented two poles of the debate on Yiddish, with Gishe representing the idea that Yiddish is integral to their whole movement and Rabinowitz believing it is a distraction.

Continuing the discussion, the *Frayhayt* published a letter from B. Gordon that argued that it is the Jewish bourgeoisie that disdains Yiddish, while the Jewish working class embraces Yiddish and uses it to deepen their revolutionary work. Gordon writes, “If we want our children to be interested in our ideals, we must root them in the feeling as the parents...We have Yiddish libraries, radical schools, Yiddish lectures, a whole Yiddish environment for radical Jewish, and the children should learn English? They will already know English, because they are already in public school. Yiddish is what we must provide.”¹⁶⁷ As another responder put it, because the children are growing up in an environment that is “reactionary bourgeois” they will “grow up to be reactionaries.”¹⁶⁸ This argument that Yiddish connects the children to their working class parents and their ideals, also implies how their movement needs to counteract the bourgeois influence that comes with English and the children’s experience in the public school. As this theory asserted, Yiddish will bring them closer to their movement, English will turn them away.

As the *Frayhayt* continued to receive letters on the topic, the debate over Yiddish or English kindergarten shifted to becoming a debate about whether to base their program on their American context or the Soviet Union. For example, in another batch of letters printed the *Frayhayt* was an article entitled “Only Yiddish,” which listed all the ways Communists had

¹⁶⁷ B. Gordon, “Tsu der debate vegn shprakh in undzere kooperative kindergartns: an anfer af haverte rabinovitz’ meynung, fun yanuar 11.” *Frayhayt*, January 18, 1927, 8. The New York Public Library, New York.

¹⁶⁸ Etl, “Tsu der debate vegn shprakh in undzere kooperative kindergartns: An anfer dem haverte rabinowitz.” *Frayhayt*, January 29, 1927, 10. The New York Public Library, New York.

supported Yiddish institution building in the Soviet Union. This author wrote, “Yiddish colonization, government, Yiddish theater, stipends for Yiddish writers and artists, etc....desired or not desired, intentional or unintentional, when the Communists develop an intense and vibrant life among Jewish workers, they consequently recognize also the Yiddish language.”¹⁶⁹ The author continued to comment on all the work they had done as well in the United States. This invocation of the Soviet Union’s activity became one of the principal arguments for developing Yiddish culture and education. That because the Soviet Union “recognizes” Yiddish, Yiddish education was already adequately Communist. More than that, they should look more to the Soviet Union for direction than America, which through English seeks to assimilate their children into bourgeois society.

Another reader who signed her letter as Etl, also invoked the Soviet Union’s Yiddish schools as an example for why a Yiddish education should not be a problem in America. “The Soviet Union began to Yiddishize the Russian schools with the majority of Jewish children. The majority of the children said that in the large cities they speak Russian. The generation that speaks Yiddish fades away...The main language is Russian. What does it matter that the child has two languages?”¹⁷⁰ But Etl goes further than making an argument about how Yiddish doesn’t harm the children’s development, she too believes that Yiddish is a necessity to build a Jewish Communist culture, “Where the large Jewish masses learn and struggle,” she writes, “the education must be conducted from the beginning in Yiddish.”¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Eli Grunin, “Tsu der debate ‘yidish oder english in der cooperative kindergartns: Nor yidish.” *Frayhayt*, February, 4, 1927, 8. The New York Public Library, New York.

¹⁷⁰ Etl, “Tsu der debate,” 10.

¹⁷¹ Etl, “Tsu der debate,” 10.

This idea of basing their decision on that of the Soviet Union, however, also was controversial. The *Frayhayt* printed next an article that argued that they needed to think about their own American context in this decision and acknowledge that English is a fact of life in the United States. The author writes, “Comrades make a mistake when they bring in Soviet Russia as an example. They forget that Yiddish is a government language exactly like Russian...”¹⁷² Out of the lengthy back and forth therefore came additional questions about the nature of their work: to where are they culturally connecting their children, to the home of their immigrant parents or to the American Communist Party? Does a Yiddish future make sense for the next generation of Jewish Communists in America?

The kindergarten debate also brought up the concern that if the children begin with learning Yiddish, they risked becoming “outsiders,” showing there was an element in the movement desiring the integration of the children in American society. For example, Rokhl Holtman, one of the early founders of Yiddish education and progressive pedagogy, argued in fact that the kindergarten should be in English, a change from what she had believed in the previous years. Holtman, the only person in the debate thinking about the question from the perspective of kindergarten-specific curriculum, used progressive pedagogy as the foundation of her argument against the notion of a Yiddish Kindergarten, claiming that the “kindergarten is like a home” and should “stimulate play” and their “external nature.” She argues, “Is there a place for two languages? No, there is not. All things need to be done in one language...Which language does it need to be the starting language - as I understand it - English. Later, when the child is older, around 8-9-10 years, can we bring the studies to also teach Yiddish.” Holtman believed that at the

¹⁷² Sholem, “Tsu der debate vegn der shprakh in undzere kooperative kindergartens: m’ken in english lernen dem klasn kamf punkt azoy in yidish.” *Frayhayt*, February 23, 1927, 8. The New York Public Library, New York.

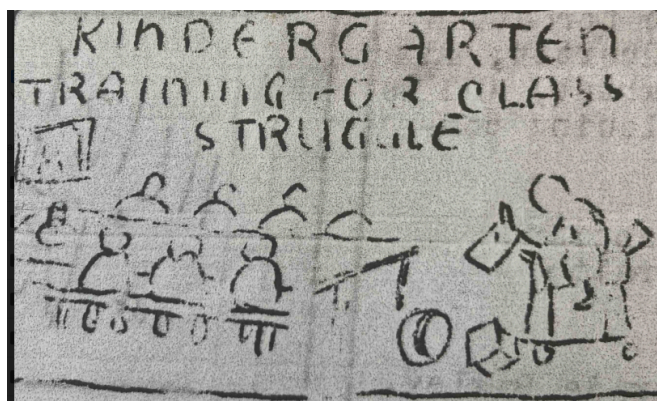
tender age of the kindergarteners, it is crucial to the child's development to reinforce English. But Holtman's approach being rooted in pedagogy that was specific to a kindergarten was an outlier in the larger context of the debate.

After three months and various permutations of similar arguments about whether a Yiddish kindergarten was appropriate for the Communist movement, the *Frayhayt* editors decided to cut off the debate, although they were still receiving letters from readers on the topic. In printing the final article on the subject, they wrote that 75 percent of those who sent in letters wanted Yiddish to be taught in the kindergarten.¹⁷³ That three quarters of these readers supported teaching Yiddish gives us a helpful look into the feelings about Yiddish education in the Jewish Communist movement - while not unified in their belief on Yiddish, there was a significant majority that felt Yiddish language and culture should continue to be part of their work.

The Kindergarten debate makes clear that there was no consensus at the time on what to do about Yiddish culture in 1927, but that there was still a clear majority that wanted Yiddish education and saw it as supporting their Communism. Indeed, the Kindergarten debate was a foil for a larger discussion of the role of Yiddish culture in an American working-class movement. Importantly, these arguments for Yiddish education that were held by the rank and file - that it was sanctioned by the Soviet Union, that it represented a working class Jewish culture, that it would connect the children with the revolutionary spirit of their parents, that it will prevent their children from becoming part of the bourgeoisie- contain in them a clear distrust of and a resistance to Americanization. The debate over the kindergarten, as much as it was a debate about Yiddish, was also a discussion on counteracting the forces that many felt were harming their children. Despite the pressures of Americanization that were coming from the Party, the Yiddish

¹⁷³ "Velkhe shprakh zol banutst vern in undzere kindergartens yidish oder english: zol di yidishe kultur untergayn oder nit?" *Frayhayt*, March 4, 1927, 8. The New York Public Library, New York.

Communist sphere clearly had its own understanding of Americanization as something for them to resist for the sake of their revolutionary movement and its future.



[Figure 3. “Kindergarten Training for Class Struggle.” This illustration appeared in the Coops bulletin, ca. 1933. Author’s possession via YIVO RG 1400, American Communism, Box 67 Folder 15.]

The Jewish Workers University

While the question of what to do with the youngest of the children was being debated, Yiddish Communists were also working out their program for adults. The Jewish Workers University, founded in the same period as the Kindergarten debate took place, presented a related but different conundrum than the Kindergarten to Yiddish Communists. As a learning institution for adult immigrants, the use of Yiddish as a Communist tool was more justifiable as the language its students spoke, and it offered courses in both Yiddish and English with seemingly little controversy. Yet the Jewish Worker’s University, too, reveals the coexistence of several contradictions inherent in Yiddish Communist culture building in the 1920s: their circumvention of the pressures to Americanize coming from the Communist Party and a desire to develop intellectualism and a high culture while also championing the practical work of labor and Party organizing. As much as the Jewish Workers University was designed as part of the educational

aims of Bolshevization, it was also securing a future for Yiddish language and culture beyond the immigrant generation through its Yiddish teacher training, which was its primary program.

The Jewish Workers University was founded in 1926, with the purpose to educate Jewish working-class adults in order for them to be activists in the labor movement and Communist Party, highly literate in Yiddish language and literature, and trained to educate the next generation of Jewish youth in their own image. Calling the Jewish Worker's University the "youngest child of the left-workers' movement," the leaders of the institution as having a great future and being of "practical service to the working class."¹⁷⁴ The Jewish Worker's University's founders were among the most prominent intellectuals and institution builders in the Jewish Communist movement as well as in Yiddish culture; its faculty too included well-known Yiddish educators, activists, and poets. At its debut in 1926, the Jewish Worker's University was elevated to an esteemed purpose in the Jewish Communist movement: "the educator of the international worker activist," "a center" where Jews would concentrate their energies on "freeing the working class from capitalist rule," an institution that would "give us worker intellectuals."¹⁷⁵

In its first year in 1926, the Jewish Workers University had about 250 to 300 students and 35 teachers. It offered a large number of evening classes to Yiddish speaking adults in the left-labor movement, including courses on Yiddish composition and literature, Jewish history, economic development, the cooperative movement, trade unionism, and other subjects central to Jewish and Communist subjects. Its course roster included six classes, totaling six hours a week on Communism; five classes totaling five hours a week on English and Yiddish language; seven classes totaling 13 hours a week on "general sciences" (including history and Marxist theory);

¹⁷⁴ S. Epstein, "Dos ingste kind fun der linker arbeter bavegung." *Ershter friling yontef* (New York: April, 1927). New York Public Library, New York.

¹⁷⁵ M. Epstein, "Der arbeter universist vet undz geben on arbeter inteligents." *Ershter friling yontef* (New York: April, 1927). New York Public Library, New York.

four classes totaling four hours a week on trade-unionism; and two classes totaling two hours a week on literature. It was designed to be either a two or three year program, with the third year for those in the Yiddish teacher training. Teachers in their third year took courses such as History, Philosophy of History, Historical Materialism, Methods, and Psychology. In addition to holding classes at its own campus, The Jewish Workers University also held classes in Brooklyn the Bronx, housing cooperatives, New Jersey, and Philadelphia, and would eventually expand across the country to the Midwest and west coast.

The Jewish Workers University came out of a longer history of worker education in the United States and Europe. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, unions, socialists, and then communists created institutions to educate the working class in the United States, the most radical among them seeking to raise consciousness to serve the larger projects of labor activism. These included the Finnish Work People's College, established in 1903; the Rand School of Social Science developed by the Socialist Party in 1906; the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union's Workers University established in 1918. Building off both the movement for higher education for the labor movement in the United States and the Bolshevik program for higher education in the Soviet Union, the Communist Party created the New York Worker's School in 1923.

In the Soviet Union as well, the movement for workers universities began at the conclusion of the Civil War in 1919. In 1920-1921, the Bolsheviks began to work in the realm of higher education in earnest. As Michael David-Fox explains in *Revolution of the Mind*, the Bolsheviks sought to craft a new academic and cultural order in the early 1920s. The idea of people's universities arose in 1905. These "folks universities" functioned outside of the imperial system in order to give access to women and the broader masses. Revolutionaries saw these universities as a

way of “democratizing” education, but they also go criticized for not being political enough. This tension between the goal of “Enlightenment” of the masses and politicization of the masses became a central conundrum in Communist education, which on the one hand sought to impart Marxist theory (which became a central tenet in the Bolshevization program), yet also was committed to the more practical matters in labor organizing. By 1923 in Minsk, for instance, there was a Jewish Workers University set up by former Bundists.¹⁷⁶

The Workers School, founded also in 1923 in the United States, aimed to be part of a broader effort of Communists to offer an alternative to what they saw as “bourgeois” higher education. In an article in the *New Masses* in 1926 called “Revolt in American Colleges,” the critique of higher education lies in what the author named as taught by “comma hounds and pedants.” The bourgeois colleges dissuade critical thinking and attention to class relationships in favor of timid repetition of a classical, bourgeois order.

The New York Workers School was imagined as playing a critical role in the Communist Party program during Bolshevization. Delivering an address at the Workers School in, then Assistant Executive Secretary of the Workers (Communist) Party, James P. Cannon in 1924 gave a speech called, “The Bolshevization of the Party” in which he described the crucial responsibility of institutions like the Workers School in the effort. Quoting the “propaganda thesis” from the Comintern on Bolshevization, Cannon said, “The Bolshevization of the party is a process and the means towards the end is an ideological struggle. The Workers School, in common with all educational institutions set up by the party, must be a weapon for this struggle.”¹⁷⁷ Furthermore,

¹⁷⁶ Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews*, 60.

¹⁷⁷ James P. Cannon, “The Bolshevization of the Party.” October 5, 1924. *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism*. Selected Writings and Speeches, 1920-1928. (Spartacist Publishing Company, 1992).
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/cannon/works/1924/bolsh.htm>.

the role of the Workers School was to further a new approach for education, away from what Cannon called a previous “class of ‘educators’ who reduce education to the study of books.”

Rather, he claimed, education, “must be partisan”:

Our answer to this point of view is that if there is one place where the united front should not be applied it is the field of education. According to our point of view, the only theory which correctly analyzes capitalist society and correctly maps out the road of the struggle for its overthrow is the theory of Marxism and Leninism. We cannot find a common meeting ground with any other theory or any other brand of education. The Workers School does not represent a united front in the field of education. The Workers School must be a partisan school, a weapon in the hands of the party for implanting the party ideology in the minds of the students who attend its classes.¹⁷⁸

Cannon’s point that “there is no common meeting ground with any other theory or any other brand of education,” represents the tone of the Workers School and the ideology that led the Jewish Workers University to create its own institution. The role of these institutions was to be “a weapon” of the Party through which they could grow their movement.

Bertram Wolfe, who was the former publicity director of the Socialist Rand School for Social Science and then headed the New York Workers School as its director at its founding, gave a report on Workers Education at the third conference of the Workers Party in 1926 in which he defined the meaning of worker education in the Communist movement. Reprinted in *Der hamer* in Yiddish, Wolfe’s “What is Worker Education,” made the argument that the working classes needed to direct its own institutions. “One must look at worker education as an instrument,” Wolfe claimed, “that should organize the working class politics and industry, and that should develop its consciousness for its own needs and goals.”¹⁷⁹ To speak of education as an “instrument” of class struggle was a familiar phrasing in the Communist movement, and also

¹⁷⁸ Cannon, “The Bolshevisation of the Party.”

¹⁷⁹ Bertram Wolfe, “Vos iz arbeter bildung,” *Der hamer*, 1. no 2. (April 1926): 55

shows the ways Yiddish Communist pedagogues also described Yiddish as an instrument for their Communist work as part of a distinct Communist idiom. Indeed, everything that the Communists valued, they valued because of their role as instruments in their central purpose of building their own movement.

Some of the Yiddish school activists were in the process of creating a Communist adult education program at the same time as the Workers School. In a report addressed to the Jewish worker clubs, the Frayhayt association, and cooperative and culture organizations, the Jewish section of the Worker's Party announced that "There are no institutions for the Jewish worker to learn and understand the life of and to better and more energetically lead the fight against the oppressor...The Jewish worker in America should have its own culture center and university, that should serve its interests."¹⁸⁰ Minutes from 1923 further show that they were trying to create a Party school for members of the Jewish Federation and Jewish members of the Young Workers League on Monday evenings. Olgin and Katz, along with Alexander Bittleman, who was also a former Bund activist but came to be against building Yiddish national cultural work in the Party, laid out their vision for a series of classes that predate the Workers School by several months. These courses included topics such as the History of the Labor Movement and the Communist International as well as a history of the Jewish Labor Movement (which was taught by Kalman Marmor). The books they would use for this venture would be a Yiddish translation advancing on of Bukharin's "The ABC of Communism," to which Olgin would write a forward.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Report from Jewish Section of the Workers Party, August 6, 1922, "Stu ale mitglider fun der yidisher federatsiye vorkers partay," Kalman Marmor Papers, RG 205 MK495 Folder 441. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

¹⁸¹ Minutes from the meeting of the culture and publishing committee, January 7, 1923. Kalman Marmor Papers, RG 205 MK 495 Folder 441. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

But something was inadequate about simply mirroring the Workers School, as demonstrated by the ways the Jewish Workers University was also tethered to the Yiddish school movement. Before embarking on building their own institution, the founders of the Jewish Workers University first tried to take over the Sholem Aleichem Institute People's University, where members of the *linke*, including Olgin, were faculty. In a letter from the secretary of the Jewish Section of the Workers Party Culture Committee from 1924, comrades were invited to come to a meeting to discuss "the question of taking over the 'folks universitet' in our hands."¹⁸² But they were ultimately unsuccessful, deciding instead to build their own *linke*-controlled adult school. The Jewish Worker's University was in this way a product of those who built the earlier institutions and was set up to compete with them. According to the founders of the Jewish Worker's University, the Teacher's Seminar at the Arbeter Ring and the Sholem Aleichem Institute's People's University did not adequately serve the Jewish workers. The Jewish workers therefore need a university as "a center where the Jewish workers will get what they need for their education."¹⁸³ What they needed, they believed, was a greater emphasis on the theories of Marxist-Leninism and the training to be organizers in their movement. The education committee of the Jewish section of the Workers Party the project of establishing a university, calling a conference with all the cultural worker's organizations to make a plan.

Many of the first teachers of the Jewish Worker's University, such as Mossaiye Olgin, Kalman Marmor, Moshe Katz, had also been teachers at the Sholem Aleichem Institute's People's University and the Arbeter Ring teachers' courses, and therefore modeled their vision from their

¹⁸² Minutes from the meeting of the culture and publishing committee, January 7, 1923.

¹⁸³ Minutes from the meeting of the culture and publishing committee, January 7, 1923.

time teaching in those courses. Kalman Marmor, for example, had written in the *Frayhayt* about the first graduation of the teachers' course in the Arbeter Ring, where he was an instructor. In his report, Marmor wrote glowingly about the importance of Yiddish teachers education, and stated that one of the principal problems in Yiddish education was a lack of teachers, a problem that the teachers' seminar was built to solve.

Therefore, as much as it was connected to the Workers School, the Jewish Workers University crafted its plans with primarily the Jewish immigrant world in mind and was formed out of the blueprint from Jewish immigrant adult education institutions. As a second-year student of Jewish Workers University, wrote in 1927, "There are people who ask us: why must you have your own university? Why work to build your own when in New York there are two of these schools, like the Jewish teachers' seminar and the Arbeter Ring Teachers' course."¹⁸⁴ Notably, the student was not responding a question about why not just be part of the Workers School, but rather why not be part of the Arbeter Ring schools. His answer was that these other Jewish educational programs took the workers education component as "step-children," relegating them to secondary importance in their curriculum. The Jewish Workers University, was therefore going to emphasize class consciousness as central to its purpose. Like other Yiddish Communist educational institutions, Yiddish, and cultivating an interest in Yiddish, was an essential component of their work in building a proletarian movement.

As a Jewish institution, the Jewish Workers University emphasized its proletarian and secular student body. One student wrote that the students at the Jewish Workers University have "thrown out the kind of Yiddishkayt that is called the truthful Yiddishkayt, as the made people

¹⁸⁴ Moris Payzer, "Undzer proletarishe shul." *Ershter friling yontef*. (New York: April, 1927). The New York Public Library, New York.

know not and do not desire of a Jewish daily holidays.”¹⁸⁵ Therefore, the Jewish Workers University cultivated a different kind of Jewish experience, one that rejected both traditionalism and the socialist institutions of the past. In an article on the accomplishments of the Jewish Workers University, Shakhne Epstein described how in earlier attempts to create the Jewish workers university in the Arbeter Ring was difficult because of the “petty bourgeois spirit” of the Arbeter Ring and the “unsystematic character of the courses.” He writes that the educational committee of the Arbeter Ring was particularly resistant, and had argued that, “The Arbeter Ring was not obligated to “deliver” professors. And those who wanted to make “art” should go to preparatory school.” When the Sholem Aleichem Folks Institute was established, he claimed the courses had a “kol-yisroyl” character and not a proletarian character.

As with the kindergarten and the other Yiddish schools, the Soviet Union also became a model for having a separate Yiddish institution for adult education. In an address to the first year’s class, one person wrote, “Almost every day the newspapers bring news of constant building. Tens of new universities, hundreds of mitl shuls [high schools], and thousands of folks schools that were built in the last couple of years. ...The culture of each people, that lives under the flag of the Soviet flower and spreads among the people.”¹⁸⁶ The Jewish workers University was another addition to a full circuit of Yiddish education and cultural activity, that under the “flag of the Soviet flower,” would build a robust and vibrant Jewish Communist movement in the United States. While the building of these Yiddish institutions in this period seemingly ran

¹⁸⁵ P. Cherner, “Lomir aroyskumen mit di emes,” *Ershter friling yontef*. (New York: April, 1927). New York Public Library, New York.

¹⁸⁶ P.S., “Undzer proletarishe grus.” *Ershter friling yontef*. (New York: April, 1927). New York Public Library, New York.

counter to the project of Bolshevization, the majority of Yiddish-speaking Jewish Communists emphatically felt that these institutions would deepen Communist culture by further connecting their community to the Soviet Union. The Jewish Worker University, therefore, was part of a much broader network of Yiddish Communist education that sought to develop its own Jewish proletarian environment.

The Jewish Workers University, as a product of both of these lineages – that of adult education in the broader labor movement and specifically Yiddish-based adult education - maintained two faces, one for the broader Communist world and one for the Jewish immigrant world. To many in the Communist movement, it looked like simply the Yiddish-speaking version of the Workers School. The Workers School and the Jewish Workers University were seen widely as sister institutions. For example, as later director of the Workers School, Abraham Markoff would write years later in an address at the Jewish Workers University, “The Jewish Workers University, which leads educational activity among the Jewish workers who cannot easily orient themselves in the English language, does good work. Over the years the institution graduated a large number of comrades equipped with the theoretical knowledge that is needed for our work. We, who lead the same work on a larger scale, through the Workers School, are aware of the many difficulties this institution faces.”^{187[2]} Markov’s picture of the Jewish Workers University was that the Yiddish component is about accessibility for the immigrant population, that it is basically an institution for Communist education, just dressed in Yiddish.

Indeed, the Jewish Workers University, in terms of its structure and overarching ethos, had many similar attributes as the Workers School. One aspect that the Jewish Workers University

187 A. Markov, “Fun der ‘verkers skool’ tsum yidishn arbeter universitet” *Tsen yor: yidisher arbeter universitet*. (New York: May, 1937), 28. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

prided itself on was student governance and the “working class character” of the institution. In its first spring celebration in 1927, the director Jacob Mindel, called them “The students are not only students, there are also the managers of the university.”¹⁸⁸ Not only that, but it boasted of a distinctly working-class student body. As a writer in the *Frayhayt* described them, “They are workers. The majority are in the needle industries. 55 percent work in clothing factories.”¹⁸⁹ Additionally, it populated its board with members of unions, cooperatives, and members of the Jewish section of the Workers Party. The Jewish Workers University founders therefore desired to achieve their vision for a Communist community through structuring it as truly an institution of the working class.

Students described the atmosphere of the Jewish Workers University in its first year demonstrate a tone of seriousness and friendliness the Jewish Workers University was aiming to offer. As one student wrote about how the feeling at the Jewish Workers University was distinctive from other educational institutions, “With an eye one looks over to the building on the other side of the street, and thinks: there one learns also, but what is the difference! It is the tense atmosphere, class, dry, whereas for us it is warm, friendly, vibrant...”¹⁹⁰ The Jewish workers University also emphasized that it was also an institution for community building: “There are no bourgeois or civic institution that has not welcomed, among its students should be created a warm, friendly connection. The same can also be said about the connection between teachers to the students. And the opposite - for us the teachers are more than teachers, and we are for them

¹⁸⁸ Y Mindel, “Der yidisher arbeter universitet.” *Ershter friling yontef* (New York: April, 1927). The New York Public Library, New York.

¹⁸⁹P. Shvartsman, “Tsvey yor yidisher arbeter universitet.” *Frayhayt*, May 31, 1928, 3. The New York Public Library, New York.

¹⁹⁰ Shvartsman, “Tsvey yor yidisher arbeter universitet,” 3.

more than students.” There was therefore a great emphasis on the atmosphere of the University, and it prided itself on being a warmer and more collaborative environment than the other “bourgeois” schools.

Student testimonials also reveal how the Jewish Workers University embodied a tension present in all Communist education matters regarding the relationship between Party dogma and free intellectual discourse. For example, as one first-year student vividly wrote, “The teachers apply themselves with their whole hearts to give the students the best they have because they and the students share in one spirit, one idea - the liberation of the working class. This is not the case in the capitalist schools, where the teachers and students have various ideologies, struggles, and separate fights, here all are in one beautiful, heartfelt freedom task, all goals for one point.....”¹⁹¹ As this student emphasized, part of the importance of a Communist school was the sense of singular purpose. And yet, as another student testimonial put it, “According to its goals and tasks, the methods are not dogmatic but flexible, elastic.”¹⁹² Similarly, in his address to the first year celebration of the Jewish Worker’s University, Olgin reflected on what the two institutions – the newly introduced journal *Der hamer* and the Jewish Worker’s University - represented and how they related to each other. He wrote, “We look not for propaganda but for education... We both are young and hungry - still for cultural creation, still for proletarian world building....” Olgin’s point that they “look not for propaganda but for education” is significant in its insistence that the Jewish Workers University and *Der hamer* are not merely meant for Party dogma but have their own creative and intellectual purpose. This declaration of the singular vision but also “not dogmatic but flexible” or “not for propaganda, but for education,” exemplifies the conflicted

¹⁹¹ “Bagrisungen fun studentn,” *Ershter friling yontef*. (New York: April, 1927). The New York Public Library, New York.

¹⁹² “Bagrisungen fun studentn.”

purpose of Communist education, particular higher education. While it wanted to be a democratic institution, it also prided itself on having a singular aim.

This dynamic between Party dogma and democratic education was arguably even more acute in the context of Yiddish education, for the founders of the Jewish Workers University dearly desired a new generation of intellectuals dedicated to both building a working-class movement and Yiddish intellectual culture. In his book, *Progressive Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Democratic Education*, Leon Fink argues that many intellectuals, particularly in the socialist and most especially in the Communist movements, became anti-intellectual and instead moved toward “rank and filism.” The Jewish Workers University seemed to promote both intellectualism and anti-intellectualism at once. For instance, Melech Epstein, a faculty member at the time, wrote at the first graduation of the Jewish Workers University, “we lack the worker intellectuals that played an important role in Europe” and claimed that the Jewish Workers University would deliver such a new cohort. In that same program, however, Shakhne Epstein, in his address, “Our proletarian school” writes that the program of the Jewish Workers University, “is not to prepare one academically, but to offer practical service to the working class.” Shakhne Epstein claims that the main goal was to create “intelligent worker activists” but not to “prepare academics but people who should their education stand in practical service of the workers movement.” Like their purpose to stand between the poles of nationalism and assimilation, the Jewish Workers University was meant to stand between academic cultivation and practical service - to create intellectuals who were also activists.

The even more distinctive feature of the Jewish Workers University that made it a notably different institution than the Workers School was its teacher training program, which was not there to serve immigrants in their language but to continue Yiddish for the next generation. Itshe

Goldberg, for example, who later taught Yiddish mitl shul graduates at the Jewish Workers University, retrospectively explained how the Jewish Workers University's was always conceived of in relation to the Yiddish children's schools. He claims, "there is no coincidence - that the schools and the university are the same age...Our schools have a problem of new teachers."''¹⁹³ In the retrospective remarks from Kalman Marmor, too, who later became Director of the Jewish Workers University, he explains that when the *linke* separated its children's schools in 1926, it had to create a program to develop teachers. So important was replenishing Yiddish teachers with the correct politics and adequate Yiddish education, he said, that "[t]he first years of the Jewish Workers University the concentration was on the teachers' courses..."¹⁹⁴ Marmor's remark about their focus on teacher training, shows how central this project of creating teachers was to the founders of the Jewish Workers University. Although they did not hide the teacher training component of the Jewish Worker's University, it nonetheless reveals that their priority for the institution was not to just educate Yiddish-speaking adults in Marxism for the practical reason that they could not understand English. They concentrated on the teacher's courses because they were seeking to build their Yiddish children's schoolwork and grow their movement for a distinctly Yiddish proletarian culture.

The Jewish Workers University, with its connection to the Yiddish schools and interest in elevating Yiddish intellectual culture, was therefore not just the Workers School in Yiddish. Its position in the Jewish immigrant world was dependent on its distinctly Jewish character. A

¹⁹³ Itshe Goldberg, "Di ordn shuln un der yidisher arbeter universitet," *Tsen yor: yidisher arbeter universitet* (New York: May, 1937), 40. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

¹⁹⁴ Kalman Marmor, "Bildung far masn, firer, un lerer." *Tsen yor: yidisher arbeter universitet*. (New York: May, 1937), 8. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

testimonial of one of the early students of the Jewish Workers University described what drew him to the institution was specifically his interest in the “Jewish question.” This student describes being deeply influenced by what he calls the “the national factor” in Jewish experience.¹⁹⁵ He describes the perspective of being in an early teacher training cohort at the Jewish Workers University in the following terms: “We came to the Jewish Workers University as a group of students with two ideological orientations. One orientation was expressed by the nationalist influence, what the [Arbeter Ring Teachers] seminar offered us. The second orientation was our own passion to connect with the working masses and find a solution for the Jewish question through the working class.”¹⁹⁶ This student’s description of leaving the Seminar and joining the Jewish Workers University claims to be a representative mindset of those entering the Jewish Workers University - that it was their commitment to Jewish national issues, or in his words, to “solve the Jewish question,” that was the dominant factor for their participation, and what actually led them to the internationalist context in which to develop Yiddish culture.

This discussion of the importance of teacher training and the desire of its early students to address the Jewish question demonstrates the relationship between Bolshevization and Yiddish cultural development. The Jewish Workers University was hardly just Communism dressed in Yiddish: it was also, crucially, set up to ensure a future for Yiddish language and culture for the next generation, to develop teachers who could be cultural and intellectual leaders for the movement. As a product of the Bolshevization period, the Jewish Workers University was meant to further its aims for Marxist education by and for the working class. The Jewish Workers

¹⁹⁵ S. Horvat, “Mit tsen yor tusrik.” *Tsen yor: yidisher arbeter universitet*. (New York: May, 1937), 49-51. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

¹⁹⁶ S. Horvat, 49-51.

University did this, but it also was intended to further Yiddish culturalist goals, and in this way worked in some ways against the Americanizing and centralizing aims of the Party at this time.

Conclusion

The period of Bolshevization, as much as it was an unlikely period for Yiddish education to expand, was a productive period in Yiddish institution building. In the 1920s, the Yiddish cultural work of the *linke* had momentum and was able to articulate a place for Yiddish through emphasizing its role in recruitment for the Party as well as citing the Soviet Union's investment in Yiddish culture as an example. The outcome of needing to fit Yiddish culture into the Bolshevization context was based on the premise that Yiddish and Communism were mutually reinforcing. The debate over a Yiddish Kindergarten in the Coops and the establishment of the Jewish Workers University show how the rank and file as well as the leaders of Yiddish schools navigated the question of Yiddish within the Communist movement in a way that allowed them to continue the Yiddish-culture building they began in the previous decade. They maintained that, despite the Americanizing pressures coming from the Party during Bolshevization, Communism still stood against assimilation and bourgeois influences, and they should not attempt to Americanize their children but rather follow the models of the Soviet Union to build a thriving proletarian movement in America. With this contention, they secured a place for Yiddish in the Communist movement for the future. But the existence of these Yiddish schools was not enough: they next needed curricula to match. The next phase of Yiddish development, therefore, was to make their Yiddish school curriculum also more thoroughly and undeniably Communist, although would come at the expense of its other markers of Jewishness.

CHAPTER 3

NATIONAL IN FORM:

THE PROBLEM OF JEWISHNESS DURING THIRD PERIOD COMMUNISM, 1928-1934

In 1930, Kalman Marmor triumphantly presented a new fourth-grade curriculum of the Yiddish Communist schools, which had just joined a new Communist-auxiliary fraternal organization, the International Workers Order. This new curriculum was based on what was called the Project Method, an approach from American progressive education that had been adopted as well by schools in the Soviet Union. Divided into nine months with nine projects, Marmor in his presentation gave the details of the dates for each project, the issues they would discuss, and the children's work that would accompany them. The first project was on "America," which would last from September to October and cover the following subjects: industry in the South, Blacks in the South, lynching, Blacks in Midwest agriculture, workers of the Pacific Coast, Sacco and Vanzetti, criminalization and prisons in America, uprisings, government and the American political system, among even more themes. The children would then work on creating a scrapbook album from these themes, calling it, "All Across America." The second project, from October to November, would cover the Russian Revolution, with its final activity to prepare a celebration of the Russian Revolution, including an album of the revolution and a calendar. The third project was on "pioneers and workers organizations," the fourth was on the "capitalist" versus workers press, the fifth was on "oppressed lands: the struggle against imperialism," the sixth on the Paris Commune and anti-religion, the seventh on May Day, the eight on immigration, and finally the ninth on literature. Most projects culminated with a research activity, presentation, and creation of an "album" of texts and images. Through these nine projects, argued Marmor, "children will learn from their research and they will have their own personal experiences... They

will connect themselves to the struggle through their personal understanding of all the areas of the working-class movement.”¹⁹⁷

The density of political content in this new program, as well as how it was organized, illustrates several features of the Yiddish schools in this phase of their development. The Yiddish Communist school activists charged enthusiastically into their new “class character,” overhauling the previous program that had been the basis for all of the Arbeter Ring schools, and making their curriculum reflect the priorities and perspectives of the Communist Party. While they remained Yiddish schools for Jewish children, the new curriculum gave greater attention to subjects such as Black oppression in the United States and highlighted the multi-ethnic, multi-racial character of the labor movement. The new program of the schools caused a split in the *linke*’s school movement over the purpose of their Yiddish schools, with some advocating for a less dogmatic approach to education (to “leave the children with their own ideas”) while others like Marmor advocated for taking a stronger role in shaping the political ideology of the children.¹⁹⁸

As demonstrated by the fourth-grade curriculum in 1930, Marmor’s camp was victorious, and would dictate the model for the schools in the Third Period. The schools at this juncture went down a path in which they were at once buoyed by great energy and increasing institutional stability, yet also carried the weight of their own contradictions: How do they navigate their Yiddish linguistic and cultural goals as they work to build a multi-racial and multi-ethnic movement? How do they educate children in all of these Communist subjects *and* teach them Yiddish language when they are a supplementary school meeting only a few hours a week? How

¹⁹⁷ Kalman Marmor, “Di yidishe kinder shuln baym internatsionaln arbeter ordn.” *Der funk* 1 no. 1 (September, 1930): 14-15.

¹⁹⁸ Quoted in Ruben Saltzman, *Di shul far ayer kind* (New York: International Workers Order, 1935), 8. RG 1400, Folder 23, International Workers Order. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

do they balance their ideals of democratic, child-centered education that their curriculum had been based on with the strong politicization they felt was required to counter the capitalist messages of the public schools and American environment? All of these questions challenged the Yiddish Communist school activists in the Third Period, creating an era of Yiddish school building that was, at once, a realization of a long-held vision of becoming a true Yiddish “worker’s school,” but required a self-negation that led the Yiddish Communist school activists to distance the schools from not only from their past form but also their identity as Jewish schools.



[Figure 4. "Lenin vinkl" from the second-grade textbook made by Dvoyre Tarant and B. Friedman, 1930. This example illustrates the political content given to children at second grade level. The poem is an ode to Lenin to honor the anniversary of his death. The poem ends with: "You are with us in Lenin's corner/ Decorated in red-black ribbons/ You are the flame and us the spark ---/ Shower us with red light." The children are then instructed

to describe their “Lenin corner.” From Kinder digitized by the National Yiddish Book Center, 94.]

Third Period Communism

It was not a coincidence that the change in curriculum happened when it did. The Communist Party had entered into its infamously sectarian Third Period from 1928-1934 (sectarian internally in the Party as well as sectarian in relation to those outside of the Party). Basing its work on the belief that capitalism’s collapse was imminent, the Communist Party at the time increased its opposition to liberals and socialists, calling them “social fascists.”¹⁹⁹ Since the early 1920s, as the Bolsheviks became increasingly totalitarian, there was a collapse of what had been unanimous support for the Soviet Union. The Third Period, which would be bolstered by the Great Depression and the apparent failure of capitalism, is known as a time of a more ideologically extreme phase in the Party and signaled a breakdown of cooperation with those outside of the Communist movement. While the effects of the Third Period varied according to their context (that what happened in the Third Period looked different in the Soviet Union than it did in the American Party, for instance), its key, overarching feature was an increase in radical, revolutionary rhetoric and a lack of tolerance for anything outside of the Party’s line.

The increased sectarian character of the Communist movement led the *linke* activists to get expelled from the Arbeter Ring. Even as the *linke* had separated to form their own school network in 1926, this was an act to gain leverage within the Arbeter Ring. Their strategy clearly failed, and the *linke* was losing the battle for control throughout the Arbeter Ring as the divisions only became more acrimonious. In the late 1920s, some branches led by the *linke* activists decided to collectively not pay their dues to the Arbeter Ring and organized an “Expulsion night” to give

¹⁹⁹ Randi Storch, *Red Chicago* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 2.

publicity to their leaving of the Arbeter Ring.²⁰⁰ By 1929 the *linke* activists were expelled from the organization. Saltzman called 1929 both “the stormiest year in our history” and “the most important year in the movement.”²⁰¹

Compounding the effects of expulsion and the curriculum change was further turbulence in the Jewish world that would increasingly isolate the Communists. In the Soviet Union, Stalin had begun anti-Zionist and anti-religious campaigns.²⁰² Then in August of 1929, riots broke out in Palestine, after which Jewish Communists initially praised it as an anti-imperial uprising, further separating them from their Jewish peers and causing many previous *linke* fellow travelers to leave their movement.²⁰³ Communist Party policy at the time further entrenched this isolation through changing its approach to union work, organizing its own Communist led unions called the Trade Union Unity League, engaging in a new dual-union strategy. This approach to dual unionism thus illustrated a move during the Third Period towards Communists giving up on trying to gain control of existing socialist and labor organizations (its previous “boring from within” strategy) to building their own Communist led ones.²⁰⁴

The International Workers Order

²⁰⁰ Letter to members of Arbeter Ring on “Expulsion Night,” Branch 637, May 20, 1927. Kalman Marmor Papers. RG 205 495.43, Folder 1441. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

²⁰¹ Ruben Saltzman, “Ayn yor tsurik un itst” *Der funk* 1 no. 1 (September, 1930): 7. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

²⁰² Gennady Estraiikh, “The Stalinist Great Break in Yiddishland,” in *1929*. (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 44.

²⁰³ Estraiikh, “The Stalinist Great Break in Yiddishland,” 47.

²⁰⁴ Zumoff, *The Communist International and U.S. Communism, 1919 – 1929*, 284.

The severing of the Yiddish Communists – a process of their own doing as much as it was their enemies at the Arbeter Ring - was thus complete by the end of 1929. By March of 1930, they would set up a new organization of their own, The International Workers Order (IWO). The IWO became known as a multi-ethnic mutual aid organization that was not an official Communist Party organ but an auxiliary organization. The IWO became an official insurance and benefit organization in July of 1930. In its first monthly Yiddish newsletter in September of 1930, it reported on the status of its medical department, finances, and board protocols. One of the roles of the IWO was to develop “proletarian culture” among its members and to “mobilize it for the struggle against the capitalist order.”²⁰⁵

The IWO, with Olgin, Saltzman, Marmor, and other familiar characters in Yiddish Communist cultural work in its leadership, was modeled after the Arbeter Ring structure. It began as just a Jewish organization but expanded beyond serving just the Jewish immigrant community through a series of mergers with the Hungarian, Slovak, Russian, Italian, Polish, Ukrainian, and other nationally organized benefit societies in the early 1930s.²⁰⁶ Yet even before these mergers, when it had just a Jewish National Section, in its first newsletter in September of 1930 the IWO boasted of having 8,000 members and 160 branches across the country.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ “Prinsipin fun internatsionaln arbeter ordn,” *Der funk* 1 no. 1 (September, 1930): 2. . International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

²⁰⁶ Ruben Saltzman, *Di shul far ayer kind*, 23. These numbers are further remarkable in the context of Communist Party membership. At the time, the Communist Party had 7,500 members. Communist Party numbers found in Randi Storch, *Red Chicago*, 36.

²⁰⁷ Ruben Saltsman, “Ayn yor tsurik un itst,” *Der funk* 1 no. 1 (September, 1930) 8-9. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

In May of 1930 the Non-Partisan schools became part of the International Workers Order. Saltzman described the merger of the Non-Partisan Schools with the International Workers Order as “Unification,” which was codified at the Philadelphia School Convention in May, 1930, just a couple months after the founding of the new fraternal order. On the “Unification” of the schools, Saltzman wrote that the leadership of the Non Partisan Schools enthusiastically took up the question of if the schools should remain on their own or become part of the Order,” giving excerpts from the resolution that passed at the convention, he quotes, “...the *linke* branches have decided to establish the IWO, not only for the sick and death benefits, which stand as foundational, but also the proletarian cultural work in all areas, when the establishment convention underscores, that ‘the work to build the Jewish worker children’s schools must be one of the most important works with which the Order must occupy itself with... the schools can come back to find an organizational place in the fraternal movement.’”²⁰⁸ Saltzman, demonstrating the importance of the Yiddish schools for the organization, cites the declaration that the schools would be “one of the most important tasks” of the Order. He also frames the “unification” as a return of the schools to their “organizational place in the fraternal movement,” where they can get more support. As Saltzman described the unification process of the schools, “the convention unanimously and with enthusiasm decided to join the International Workers Order.”²⁰⁹ Even as there were some logistics involved in transferring institutional leadership, the “Unification” was a natural progression for the schools and their new program, especially considering that many of the same people who founded the IWO were also leaders in the schools, with Ruben Saltzman as the

²⁰⁸ Ruben Saltzman, *Di shul far ayer kind*, 14.

²⁰⁹ Saltzman, *Di shul far ayer kind*, 14.

General Secretary and Kalman Marmor its Cultural Director. The Non-Partisan schools thus became the *Ordn* schools.

The IWO sought to create a strong, centralized structure for the schools. Within the structure of the IWO, the schools were part of an integrated whole and a central mechanism for Yiddish communist cultural work. Ruben Saltzman, as the first General secretary of the IWO, emphasized the message that the schools are meant to become “mass organizations” that demonstrate a “healthy connection between the branches and the school,” demonstrating a vision for a full Yiddish cultural program that was integrated into the rest of the organization.²¹⁰ This was meant to ensure not only that the school ran smoothly, but also that the economic principles were being taught effectively and that the schoolwork was connected to other organizational activities. The vision for the school program was that there would be a National Executive Committee with sub-committees that would work with the School Associations at each school. One role that the national school committee sought to play was to send field organizers to the schools who would inspect the schools and offer suggestions for the programs.

The IWO leaders became particularly interested in making the schools a “mass organization” in which the full community participated, with a vision for these schools was to have a full ecosystem of Yiddish proletarian culture in which all educational, cultural, and political activities were integrated. They created a school association that sought to bring in as many IWO members as possible, which grew to have 2,000 members nationally by 1933.²¹¹ Teachers were also

²¹⁰ Saltzman, “Konen mir boyen di shuln als a masn – organizatsiye?” *Der funk* 2 no 2. (October, 1931): 13. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

²¹¹ R. Saltzman, “Barikht fun der natsionaler shul komitet tsu dem finiftn natsionaln tsuzamenfor fun der yidishe kinder shuln baym internatsionaln arbeter ordn,” RG 205 Kalman Marmor Papers 495.46 Folder 527, 3. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

conceptualized as playing a larger role than just teaching children. In his article “Our teacher as Cultural Carrier,” Yiddish poet and Coops resident, Y.A. Rontsh argued that there is an opportunity for teachers to play an important role in the larger cultural work outside the school. Rontsh writes, “It is not so difficult that a teacher with the help of a culture committee work out a plan of systematic lectures, discussions, culture evenings, and a list of excursions for the season.”²¹² By increasing the role of the teacher, the IWO sought to make its educational plan more comprehensive and integrated into the whole of the organization. In its program for the schools, too, it intended to “reorganize the structure of the school in order for the schools to be part of the other cultural institutions in the Jewish workers movement.”²¹³ All members at all stages of life, therefore, were called to join their educational and cultural work for building Yiddish proletarian culture.

The Era of the “Non-Partisan Worker Children’s Schools”

To fully appreciate the significance of the changes to the curriculum and their entry into the International Workers Order, it is useful to examine the landscape of the Yiddish Communist schoolwork a couple years prior. When *linke* split from the Arbeter Ring schools to form its own “Non-Partisan Worker Children’s Schools,” it continued with essentially the same curriculum it had since it was part of the Arbeter Ring. The nature of the sectarianism in the Yiddish cultural world was ideological but also defined by the specific personal and organizational dynamics within the Arbeter Ring.

²¹² YA. Rontsh, “Undzer shul als kultur-treger.” *Der funk* 2 no. 3 (November, 1931): 19 International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

²¹³ Ruben Saltzman, *Di shul far ayer kind*, 35.

After the schools split from the Arbeter Ring in 1926, but before the Third Period, the *linke* was not completely isolated. For a few years the *linke* maintained connections with the Sholem Aleichem schools, critiquing it in similar ways as they did with the Arbeter Ring and at times seeking to use this relationship as leverage against the *rekhte*. For example, in 1926, members of the *linke* attended the Sholem Aleichem school conference, in which they reported that although the “[Sholem Aleichem] Institute is under the leadership of the petty bourgeoisie,” Levin was welcomed at the Sholem Aleichem conference, and were hopeful about the possibility of “unity of the Sholem Aleichem schools with the Non Partisan.”²¹⁴ Indeed, at the Sholem Aleichem schools conference, the *Frayhayt* reported that there was a “radical element” that passed a resolution welcoming the Yiddish cultural and schoolwork in the Soviet Union and that this was a promising sign.²¹⁵

There was also collaboration during this time between the teachers of the different Yiddish school networks. The Sholem Aleichem Institute organized a teacher’s conference for all the Yiddish schools in an effort to establish a teacher’s union. The *linke* seized on the conference as an opportunity to further its aims against the Arbeter Ring, remarking that, despite all the teachers who joined the call for a union from the Sholem Aleichem schools, Non Partisan schools, and even Arbeter Ring schools, the Arbeter Ring leadership apparently did not support the unionization effort. This teacher’s convention was heavily dominated by the *linke* school activists, such as Yankev Levin and Dvoyre Tarant (Tarant would be increasingly important as a Yiddish pedagogue in the 1930s). At the convention, for example, there was a presentation by ICOR, the Organization for Jewish colonization in the Soviet Union, in which it encouraged teachers to

²¹⁴ “Tsuzamenfor fun Sholem Aleichem shuln,” *Frayhayt*, September 17, 1926, 6. The New York Public Library, New York.

²¹⁵ “Tsuzamenfor fun Sholem Aleichem shuln,” 6.

support its efforts.²¹⁶ In regards to the attempt at teacher unionization, the *Frayhayt* claimed that the Arbeter Ring had a “union-breaker attitude,” as demonstrated by their decision to not recognize the new teachers union. The *Frayhayt* writer, on the other hand, declared this a shame because of the potential for “uniting of the teachers of all types of schools.”²¹⁷ As the effort for the teacher’s union shows, even after the *linke*’s dramatic separation of the schools from the Arbeter Ring, there was still some sense in this period that the Yiddish school movement was a singular project in which they all were participants, not to mention that the *linke* saw an advantage in trying to unify with the other schools against the Arbeter Ring. Their criticism that the Arbeter Ring stood in the way of such efforts for unity would only support the *linke*’s contention that, unlike their *rekhte* rivals, the *linke* was always acting in the interests of the schools.

The allyship between the Sholem Aleichem Institute and the *linke*’s Non-Partisan schools continued into 1927, when the Sholem Aleichem Institute’s leaders made a pitch in the *Frayhayt* for its *Frayhayt* readers to support the Sholem Aleichem schools’ fundraising campaign, claiming that supporting the Sholem Aleichem Folks Institute would mean “activity against the religious educational institutions,” and that it would “bring the child closer to the ideology, efforts, and hopes of the working class.”²¹⁸ Not to mention that the majority of the teachers and school activists, the article argued, hold a similar perspective.²¹⁹ Therefore, even in this moment when the Non Partisan schools were asserting their distinctiveness, they also looked for moments of

²¹⁶ “Der lerer farband un di arbeter ring shuln,” *Frayhayt*, May 3, 1927, 3. The New York Public Library, New York.

²¹⁷ “Bazar fun umpartayishe A.R. shuln groyser erfolg,” *Frayahyt*, May 3, 1927, 6. The New York Public Library, New York.

²¹⁸ D. Flakser, “Di sholem-aleichem shuln un der s.a. institut,” *Frayhayt*, January 29, 1927, 3. The New York Public Library, New York.

²¹⁹ Flakser, 3.

allyship as well as opportunities to exert further influence in the sphere of Yiddish education. As calculated as this friendship with the Sholem Aleichem schools was, that the *linke* believed such transformation or allyship was possible, speaks to lack of hardened political boundaries in the years before the Third Period.

In the years after the split in 1926, the *linke* spent a great deal of effort establishing their support for Yiddish culture was both more longstanding and more sincere than that of their rivals at the Arbeter Ring. In the *Frayhayt* the *linke* would highlight its historic support of the Yiddish schools and contrast themselves with the earlier dismissal of Yiddish among the Arbeter Ring leadership. In 1927, Y.A. Rontsh, Yiddish proletarian poet and leader in the Yiddish schoolwork at the Coops, wrote an article on, “The Forverts and the Radical School Movement.” In his article, Rontsh wrote about the history of when the Arbeter Ring established a Teachers Seminar and *mitl shul* in Boston in 1921, during which “the Forverts published an editorial with the idiotic attack on the teachers of the schools.”²²⁰ Rontsh let his dismay be known that in “the largest Yiddish newspaper in the world,” the following words were printed: “ ‘If one needs the children to learn Yiddish in order for them to understand their parents, then the parents must learn English so they can understand their children...And if the Arbeter Ring needs Yiddish schools for the teachers, then it also needs English schools for the members.’ ”²²¹ Rontsh was using these remarks of Arbeter Ring leaders advocating for English to emphasize how anti-Yiddish and pro-assimilationist the Arbeter Ring was and to highlight how supportive, in contrast, the *linke* activists who left were of Yiddish culture.

²²⁰ YA Rontsh, “The ‘forverts’ un di yidishe radikale shul-bavegung,” *Frayhayt*, May 2, 1927, 5. The New York Public Library, New York.

²²¹ Rontsh, 5.

This dredging up of the past dynamics around Yiddish culture was a consistent theme in the *Frayhayt* in the late 1920s. In April, 1928, Kalman Marmor wrote a piece entitled, “What the American Yiddish Press Once Thought About Yiddish.” In his article, Marmor went back 35 years ago to debates over whether Yiddish was a language, “The whole of the Jewish press did not have the better connection to Yiddish than the assimilated radicals. Both looked with contempt at the wider Jewish masses. Both believed, that the reader of Yiddish did not have ‘a desire for art and science.’ Both preached cultural assimilation.”²²² Marmor called this inclination, “false etiquettes of internationalism and cosmopolitanism.”²²³ By rooting the emerging respect for Yiddish with the Jewish working-class movement and claiming that true internationalism *required* support for Yiddish culture, Marmor argued was Communists were at a more advanced stage of internationalism.

Laying this foundation of the *linke*’s support for Yiddish culture was crucial for the plans of the Yiddish Communists to grow their movement and distinguish their schools and cultural movement from their rivals. They wanted to at once, establish their connection to Yiddish while also distinguishing the present approach to Yiddish culture from the past. These articles were their way of defending themselves as not only historic champions of Yiddish, but also reminding their community of the recent and flexible nature of Yiddish culture, something they will employ as they move further into “Communist internationalism.”

The impact of the Third Period’s radicalized ideology took about a year to show up in the Yiddish school curriculum. Levin, who was a leading school activist among the *linke*, had developed much of the curriculum for the Arbeter Ring schools. For about three years, therefore,

²²² Kalman Marmor, “Vos di amerikaner yidishe prese hot amol gedeynkt vegn yidish.” *Frayhayt*, April 16, 1928, 5. The New York Public Library, New York.

²²³ Marmor, 5.

the curriculum of both school systems – the Arbeter Ring and the Non-Partisan schools - were mostly identical, containing much of the same political, social, and nature-based themes that the children engaged with prior to the split in 1926. The schools were also structurally the same as supplementary schools. Some of the Non-Partisan schools even continued with some Hebrew and Tanakh instruction.²²⁴

In general, student work in both the Arbeter Ring and Non-Partisan Schools focused on student observations of nature, personal stories about their families, important figures in Jewish and Socialist history, and political activism. For instance, the 1928 graduation booklet of the Philadelphia Arbeter Ring schools featured writing from the students such as stories called “The Day of the Miner,” “The Snow Storm,” “The Leader and the Masses,” “We traveled to America,” “Sholem Aleichem in Our School” “The Miner’s Strike,” and “My Kitten.”²²⁵ These kinds of student samples were intended to showcase the Yiddish literacy of the students, their artistic sensibilities, as well as their engagement with Socialist subjects in their school curriculum. Comparing this graduation booklet with the Non-Partisan Almanac, there were few meaningful differences in the majority of student projects.

The Non-Partisan School’s work is notable in the number of essays that seem relatively apolitical. The student’s work in the Non Partisan almanac features similar themes such as poetry about the seasons, personal family narratives, and Yiddish literary figures, with titles such as, “Peretz and Sholem Aleichem,” “When the fall comes,” “A Winters Day,” “The History Lesson in our Mitl Shul.” As demonstrated by comparing the two graduation booklets and their many

²²⁴ “Program fun der umpartayisher arb. ring mitlshul,” *Shul almanac*, (New York: Non Partisan W.C. Schools, 1927), 7. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

²²⁵ *Kinder Ring* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia School Committee of the Arbeter Ring, 28). International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

similarities among student work, the chief difference between the Arbeter Ring and *linke*'s Non-Partisan schools in these three years was therefore about who was in control of them. As much as the *linke* touted their separation as part of a movement for full freedom in their curriculum, their schoolwork was largely the same to that of the Arbeter Ring up until 1929.

The ideals that they should use education to develop the character of the child and help them address social problem remained a key feature of the Non-Partisan School curriculum, as it was in the Arbeter Ring. The 1927 *mitl shul* (high school) almanac described the goals of the high school in 16 points, in which it demonstrated the commitment of these schools to Yiddish and social engagement. The sixteen points guiding the schools, put forward by Levin, included, "expanding the *gaystikn* [spiritual/intellectual] horizons of the children... so they can offer an answer to various problems," "Familiarizing children with socialist ideology and the standpoint of the working class," "perfect the children's Yiddish," "establish children's knowledge of Yiddish literature and its development," "expand children's knowledge of Jewish history – with the economic, social, and *gaystiker* development of Jewish people," "to broaden and deepen in the children understanding for the various forms of art... and artistic creation..."²²⁶ Levin's comprehensive program demonstrates the influences of the broader progressive educational currents that thought of education as "expanding character" and the inspiration the Yiddish pedagogues felt for channeling these concepts into a Yiddish context. Levin held these concepts as essential earlier and was consistent in his commitment to them.

Furthermore, the curriculum of the Non-Partisan Schools and Arbeter Ring schools at this time gave a central place for Jewish-specific content, making teaching Jewish history and Yiddish

²²⁶ *Shul almanac*, (New York: Non Partisan W.C. Schools, 1928), 10-11. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library. *Gaystik* translates as spiritual, mental, intellectual.

literature one of its central goals. Levin in the school almanac gave a list of the subjects, notably beginning with the subjects in Yiddish and Jewish topics. He writes, “In the high school, we learn 1) Yiddish language; 2) Yiddish literature; 3) Jewish history; 4) Jewish demography; 5) history of the revolutionary movements and biographies; 6) political economy; 7) history of the workers movements; 8) historical materialism and socialism; 9) evolution; 10) cultural history; 11) heroes and prophets; 12) Hebrew; 13) singing; 14) psychology; 15) programs and methods; 16) societal questions.”²²⁷ These elements of the curriculum not only underscore the continuities of Yiddish Communist pedagogy from the earlier period and their similarities to the other Yiddish schools, but also show the extent of the changes that would take place just a year later as the curriculum was replaced with more Communist material.

Levin’s program, he argued, was inspired by his observations of education in the Soviet Union. That year Levin took a tour of Yiddish schools in the Soviet Union and reported back as to why the Soviet Yiddish schools were a model for their Non-Partisan schools. Discussing his impression of the Soviet Union’s school system, he wrote enthusiastically, “They gave everybody full freedom to live in their language: to speak in the language at all times, everywhere; to have a school for their children - from youngest to oldest - in their language; to develop their literature and their spiritual life - of their culture - totally free....Kindergartens, elementary schools, high schools, teacher’s seminars, departments, universities - all in Yiddish.”²²⁸ Levin focused his remarks on making a case more broadly for why the models for Yiddish schools in the Soviet Union should be emulated in the United States and that the Non Partisan Schools were part of an

²²⁷ *Shul almanac*, 11.

²²⁸ Levin, “A grus fun yankev levin,” *Shul almanac*, 5.

international network set on developing, “the Jewish workers culture.”²²⁹ Due to its embrace of Yiddish, Levin at the time asserted the future of the schools was for them to become more like those in the Soviet Union.

However, despite the enthusiastic reports from *linke* school activists in the United States, Soviet Union’s relationship to Yiddish was not simply an embrace of Yiddish education and culture that Levin believed, but based its Yiddish work rather in terms of social necessity. In April of 1928, the Soviet Union held its second Yiddish culture conference in Kharkov, in which it put forward resolutions on the meaning and practice of Yiddish language work. As much as the conference suggested a commitment to building Yiddish culture in practical terms, its theoretical justification for Yiddish was discordant.

In one report on the conference that ran in the *Frayhayt*, it depicted the conference as almost apologetic in its acknowledgement that cultural work would continue to be conducted in Yiddish. The report claimed, matter-of-factly, that, “Here Yiddish work remains, because it captures the overwhelming majority of the Jewish people” and that it is a “social necessity.”²³⁰ Importantly, the author claimed, “Work in Yiddish is not pedagogical, only a social task,” suggesting that the point of Yiddish education was not about Yiddish as its own objective, and was not be assigned greater significance than its role as necessary for teaching and communication. While this explanation was not a rejection of Yiddish culture, it implied that the future of Yiddish education as a “social necessity” was not indefinite.

Another explanation for the purpose of Yiddish cultural work in the Soviet Union was that it was used to “transition” Jews into Soviet society. The author of the *Frayhayt* article explains that

²²⁹ Levin, A grus fun yankev levin,” 71.

²³⁰ “Der tsveyter tsuzamenfor fun yidishe kultur tuer in sovetfarband” *Frayhayt*, May 10, 1928, 5. The New York Public Library, New York.

an important utility for Yiddish culture is to make the transition to the changes brought by the Revolution easier, writing how their work in Yiddish, “make[s] more or less painless all the processes...(that is, transitioning Jews).”²³¹ Again, emphasizing Yiddish culture as social necessity, the message coming out of the conference in 1928 was an unequivocal commitment to Yiddish culture in a practical sense as well as a commitment to Sovietizing Yiddish culture, yet also a clear rationale that this was ultimately meant to serve the Soviet Union’s demographic challenges with Jews.

The *linke* in the United States had to translate this idea of using Yiddish culture to their own context. To model themselves after the Soviet Union, with its approach of using Yiddish culture to assimilate Jews in Soviet society, was distinct from the project to prevent assimilation of Jews in America. It was out of this framework, however, that Sovietization was beneficial while Americanization was not, that they sought to grow Yiddish culture in America. The discrepancy between those like Levin who saw the Soviet Union’s approach to Yiddish as a full embrace of its educational potential and the more instrumentalist explanation of transitioning Jews would play itself out in two different visions for the *linke*’s schools that would, again, split their movement.

The 1929 Conference at Kinderland

The turning point in the *linke*’s school curriculum was the conference in 1929 at Camp Kinderland. 1929 represented a momentous turning point in Yiddish Communist schoolwork, as it would mark a radical change in its educational content and a fracturing among its own ranks over pedagogy and Communist curriculum. The change in school curriculum was not a completely sudden shift, as there were indications before the Kinderland conference that the movement was

²³¹ “Der tsveyter tsuzamenfor fun yidishe kultur tuer in sovetfarband,” *Frayhayt*, May 10, 1928, 5. The New York Public Library, New York.

ready for a curriculum change that better distinguished their proletarian movement from the other Yiddish schools.²³²

In April 1929, just weeks before the Kinderland conference, the *Frayhayt* ran a special issue dedicated to the children's schools. It featured articles such as, "Our School is a Class School," "Class Struggle and the Children's School," and "With a Face Toward the Workers Movement," previewing the changes the school leaders sought to make at the upcoming conference.²³³ For example, in the month ahead of the Kinderland conference, Moyshe Bakal, who had started the first Socialist Yiddish schools in Chicago and had written a book on Yiddish and Progressive pedagogy in 1920, wrote an article in the *Frayhayt* called, "The Non-Partisan Children's School Should be Proletarian, not Yiddishist." In his article, Bakal discussed the history of the Yiddish schools and why the current moment demanded more than a commitment to Yiddish language. Bakal wrote that,

When the school movement began in America, there was a hard-fought struggle for instruction to be in Yiddish. The worker's movement around 15 years ago was assimilationist and opportunistic. A large enlightenment [*oyfklerung*] had to be led in regards to the opportunity to teach Yiddish. Therefore, an illusion was created that Yiddish itself was already a symbol of development, idealism, and higher values.²³⁴

Bakal had firsthand knowledge of the first years of their school movement, himself a leader in the first phase of Yiddish school building, when the question of Yiddish education caused a bitter divide in the Jewish labor movement. But, as Bakal writes in his article, "Now the fight is totally different," because Yiddish had become the language of instruction for all the schools, including

²³² Ruben Saltzman, *Di shul far ayer kind*. By the time of the school convention at Camp Kinderland in 1929, there were 57 Non Partisan schools and 3,000 children in those schools.

²³³ "Umpartayishe arbeter kinder shuln," *Frayhayt*, April 21, 1929, 1. The New York Public Library, New York.

²³⁴ Moyshe Bakal, "Di umpartayishe kinder shuln darfn zayn proletarish nit yidishistish," *Frayhayt*, March 28, 1929, 4. The New York Public Library, New York.

the religious schools and those that are “national chauvinist.”²³⁵ Because Yiddish is universally accepted and is the language of a wide variety of schools, he argued, the *linke*’s Non Partisan Schools could not accept Yiddish as their most important aim. In looking forward to the conference, Bakal declared, foreshadowing the discussion ahead of them, “It is time to take up the needed work to formulate a program and line.”²³⁶ And according to Bakal, this line should be fully focused on the issues related to class struggle. In other words, more Communist.

Levin, being responsible for much of the past curriculum, vociferously opposed this suggestion. In an article called, “Our School” in 1928, Levin argued against the idea of inserting Party doctrine into the curriculum, that, “We must leave our children alone with their own ideas...”²³⁷ This more open approach, Levin argued, would allow children to learn about different perspectives and come to their own view of society when they reached maturity. Therefore, at the 1929 Conference, Levin stood on one side of the curriculum question, against his *linke* comrades he had spent about a decade working with on Yiddish schools like Bakal, Olgin, Marmor, and Saltzman. The struggle came down to: do they “leave the children alone with their own ideas” or teach them Communist Party ideology?

Those on the side of teaching Party ideology were the strong majority, and looked upon Levin’s position as inimical to their movement. Ruben Saltzman, who would become General Secretary of the International Workers Order a year later, in his recollection of the 1929 Kinderland conference, wrote that Levin and those in his camp in their “struggle against ‘Party

²³⁵ Bakal, “Di umpartayishe kinder shuln darfn zayn proletarish nit yidishistish,” 4 .

²³⁶ Bakal, “Di umpartayishe kinder shuln darfn zayn proletarish nit yidishistish,” 4.

²³⁷ Quoted from Salzman, *Di shul far ayer kind*, 8.

dogma' and 'Party agitation'" actually espoused a "*class hating* ideology."²³⁸ This is because, he argued, children in society are saturated by bourgeois culture and education, and if left on their own, will start to take on a bourgeois outlook of society. The purpose of the schools is to resist the indoctrination of the bourgeoisie, which children are inundated with through, "the street, movies, school, radio, etc."²³⁹ Saltzman continued to attack Levin's ideas of education "without dogma" as "typical betty bourgeois liberal attitude on the issue of education...no more than a re-printing of a type of *democratic bourgeois educational ideology* that is foreign and harmful to the working class."²⁴⁰ The *linke* school activists who supported overt political "dogma" saw the purpose of the schools as having a strong ideology; to have a more "liberal" attitude worked against the very point of their schools.

Saltzman further criticized Levin's perspective on the role of Yiddish language, arguing that Levin, desiring an absence of political dogma, also disconnected Yiddish language from any political purpose, making "Yiddish a goal in and of itself."²⁴¹ In contrast, Saltzman claimed, "The class-conscious elements in the school movement have also thrown out the theory that Yiddish is a goal for itself. Their standpoint was: teach our children class struggle in Yiddish. Yiddish is a tool exactly like every other language, but not the goal."²⁴² Saltzman thus dismisses Levin's position as "Yiddishism," propagating Yiddish language as the educational goal, when they should instead be using Yiddish as a "class instrument." He claims, "It is not a matter of how

²³⁸ Saltzman, *Di shul far ayer kind*, 8.

²³⁹ Saltzman, *Di shul far ayer kind*, 9.

²⁴⁰ Saltzman, *Di shul far ayer kind*, 10.

²⁴¹ Saltzman, *Di shul far ayer kind*, 10.

²⁴² Saltzman, *Di shul far ayer kind*, 10.

much weight lies in teaching Yiddish in the school, it is about *where* the emphasis should lie: in class struggle or in the language.”²⁴³ Saltzman’s perspective on the role of Yiddish in their school work was not such a significant change from what the *linke* school activists had been saying for years, but the question of how these beliefs would manifest in the details of the curriculum was a different matter, and the conference of 1929 was the moment when they would seek to realize practically theories of using Yiddish as a “class instrument.”

In the final vote at the conference over the program, Salzman (and Olgin, Marmor, and Bakal’s) agenda won overwhelmingly. 157 of the delegates voted for their new program while 19, led by Levin, voted against it.²⁴⁴ After the vote, Levin said he would not participate in the rest of the convention, intending to start his own rival school program. Salzman summarized the dispute at the Kinderland convention as the product of the left wing (that is, the left-wing within the *linke*) faction as victorious over the other:

In the first three years of the existence of our schools, from 1926 to 1929...we were away from the Arbeter Ring and we took up its teaching program almost entirely. As I understand it, here and there in each school little changes were made. Naturally, the atmosphere, the spirit around the school changed.... Two wings fought for two legitimate programs. Well you know what happened. The left, progressive elements took up the principles to explain and orient our schools in the class line and made of them a working-class education.²⁴⁵

The “left, progressive elements” as Saltzman called them, ultimately overhauled Levin’s curriculum, calling their changes a reorientation of the schools and making them more clearly “proletarian schools.”

²⁴³ Saltzman, *Di shul far ayer kind*, 10.

²⁴⁴ “Natsionaler shuln-tsuzamenfor leygt avek a festn bodn far der antviklung fun emes proletarishe shuln.” *Frayhayt*, June 3, 1929, 8. The New York Public Library, New York.

²⁴⁵ R. Saltzman, “Barikht fun der natsionaler shul komitet tsu dem finiftn natsionaln tsuzamenfor fun der yidishe kinder shuln baym internatsionaln arbeter ordn,” RG 205, Kalman Marmor Papers MK495 Folder 527, 2. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

In their retelling of what transpired at the 1929 Kinderland Conference, the Yiddish Communist movement was not kind to Levin, displaying the sectarianism that characterized the Third Period. As the *Frayhayt* reported, when it came to the question of school principles, Levin, “wants to...give them a Yiddishist, instead of a class content.”²⁴⁶ Rontsh, in his explanation of what happened at the convention, labeled Levin an enemy of the working class. Calling Levin and his allies, “enemies of our ideology,” Rontsh explained that Levin’s camp, after the convention, named its rival schools by exactly the same name, the Non-Partisan Workers Children’s schools, because, “Their whole purpose is just to break up our school. They have opened schools near ours, and set them up with teachers who taught earlier in our schools, which they partially with the children, and partially with the parents, away to agitate to the same homes, in order to pry the children away from our classes.”²⁴⁷ These tactics, Rontsh claimed, demonstrated they are “not a friend of the workers” as they “use the same tactic as the *Forverts* and all the obscurantists on the Jewish street. They have a right, we say, to attack us personally, attack our methods but sully the Communist ideal, to use the word Communism as something to throw against us - this was and is an act that stands outside the camp of the working class.”²⁴⁸ It seemed that, almost overnight, Levin moved from being the principal champion of the Yiddish Communist schools to being its infamous enemy.

²⁴⁶ “Natsionaler shuln-tsuzamenfor leygt avek a festn bodn far der antviklung fun emes proletarishe shuln,” 8.

²⁴⁷Y.A. Rontsh, “Der itstiger tsushtand fun undzere shuln.” *Morgn frayhayt*, December 15, 1929. The New York Public Library, New York.

²⁴⁸ Rontsh, “Der itstiger tsushtand fun undzere shuln.”

The bitterness from the feud with Levin even made it into the children's literature. For example, in the 1930 annual school journal from Brooklyn, *Red Star*, two teachers discuss Levin and his supporters without naming him outright:

We remember all...the slander and "enlightenment" against our school system... we were a community in the holy war that flared up after that, as the little group of close "kin" that went away from our school, fearful of our new program that was taken up in the last conference. And they all believed that the *linke* worker movement would remain without their schools, the workers parents would take the children, the board would go away.... And what is the result? A bitter disappointment for them, and a successful education for us. ...Our school was and will remain to offer the principle of class education. The board and activists, those who are around the school, are inspired by new work under the ideology of the Communist Party and are ready to fight off all the attacks.²⁴⁹

The dramatic language of their description, that the aftermath was a "holy war" shows the extent of rupture from the conference, and how Levin's opposition and subsequent threats to create a rival program generated great hostility that was felt for years after.

The Non-Partisan schools therefore carried forward with their new curriculum, without Levin. Quoting the proposed principles put forward at the 1929 Kinderland Conference, Saltzman explained the new pedagogical foundation of the schools: "It is therefore natural that the workers' children's school - and in this respect it stands on the terrain of modern pedagogy - as the pedagogy should not merely be a pedagogy of words, but should be connected to practical work."²⁵⁰ This practical work included, specifically, "Help for strikers, delegations to children of other nationalities, help for political actions of the revolutionary workers movement, participating in picket lines and participate in political demonstrations, to become an integral part of the school

²⁴⁹ *Royter shtern: yerlekher zhurnal, fun der bronzviler umpartayishe yidisher arbeter kinder shul*. No 3. (Brooklyn: New York, 1930). International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

²⁵⁰ Saltzman, *Di shul far ayer kind*, 12.

program.”²⁵¹ Thus, still borrowing ideas of experiential education from “modern pedagogy,” Yiddish Communists sought to appropriate some of the progressive educational practices, but remake them for their own Communist purposes, and actually enact them better. The new curriculum meant the Yiddish Communists effectively had severed themselves from the “Yiddishists” by codifying a Yiddish proletarian culture in their schools. In a detailed report on the result of the conference, the *Frayhayt* reported that the schools had a new declaration of principles and a “clearly expressed class character.”²⁵²

This change represented more than the loss of Levin and the insertion of Communist themes, but a dismissal of some of the democratic educational values the *linke* school activists had previously embraced. On the other hand, they would take up some new progressive pedagogical approaches, albeit shaped to suit their goals to build a movement of bold Communist activists.

The *Linke* Schools, Reborn

Six months after the convention, Rontsh described proudly the progress they made after the conference on getting appropriate textbooks for their schools: “Our comrade teachers are working on biographies of American heroes, on anthologies for higher courses, etc. We are ready to send out our own monthly children’s journal, which should be in our spirit.”²⁵³ This activity, Rontsh asserted, “is a better answer, that we can give Levin and all the enemies of our schools on their allegations, that we degrade the Yiddish language and so on.”²⁵⁴ The Yiddish Communists

²⁵¹ Saltzman, *Di shul far ayer kind*, 12.

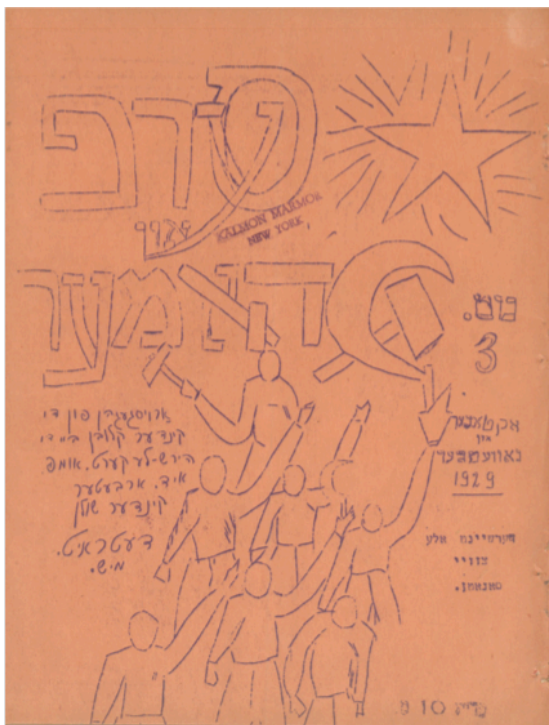
²⁵² “Natsionaler shuln-tsuzamenfor leygt avek a festn bodn far der antviklung fun emes proletarishe shuln,” 1.

²⁵³ Y.A. Rontsh, “Der itstiger tsushtand fun undzere shuln.”

²⁵⁴ Y.A. Rontsh, “Der itstiger tsushtand fun undzere shuln.”

therefore asserted that the change in curriculum should be treated as separate from their commitment to Yiddish. For how, as Rontsh claimed, could one look at all this productivity in Yiddish education and claim that they “degrade” the language?

The curriculum in the Non-Partisan school material after 1929 led to the removal of much of the previous Jewish content that had been so central in Levin’s program. Now the majority of student work had titles such as “Lenin,” “The Trade Union Unity League,” “Celebration of the Russian Revolution,” and “Why Are the Workers Against the Capitalists?” Of course, there was no more Hebrew. The aesthetics of some of the books also changed, with many taking on a more hand-drawn proletarian style.



[Figure 5. This is the cover of the 1929 Non-Partisan Worker Children’s School journal in Detroit, “Sickle and Hammer,” which shows the proletarian aesthetic of the school materials. Serp un hamer, no 3. (Detroit: October-November, 1929). International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.]

Some who had previously been allies working in the realm of Yiddish culture also saw the changes as a betrayal of the schools' Jewish character. It is in this period that Yiddish Communists, with removing much of their previous Jewish content, were accused of the assimilationism they had previously condemned. But the Yiddish Communists, of course, refused this narrative of assimilationism. Armed with the theories supporting their work for a Yiddish proletarian culture that they had developed in the previous years, the Yiddish Communists channeled the efforts to assimilate and Americanize them into arguments for the importance of maintaining their Yiddish educational movement to fight against capitalism in America.

For instance, in December of 1929, a former colleague at the National Radical Schools who had sparred with Marmor on the importance of Yiddish back in the 1910s, A. Glantz, wrote an article called, "Open Assimilation by the Jewish Communists in America," which appeared in *Der tog*. Glantz criticized the Yiddish Communist new school curriculum, which seemed to show that the *linke* was on a course of assimilation for the sake of Communism, as their Yiddish schools were shedding their Jewishness while becoming vessels for Party doctrine.²⁵⁵

Olgin, in response, took to the *Frayhayt* to defend the *linke* schools. Olgin responded with a fiery rejoinder in the *Frayhayt*, writing, "We know Glantz with his friends began an 'outcry' when the worker schools last summer took up a new program. It's still in everyone's ears their wailing about the denationalization of the schools. And those schools have not decided to change their language. They have only decided to make the content of their studies better."²⁵⁶ Olgin's remark on its face was true: the schools remained Yiddish schools, but their content in the

²⁵⁵ M. Olgin, "Yidishe dertsiyung," *Morgn frayhayt*, December 8, 1929, 4-3. The New York Public Library, New York.

²⁵⁶ Olgin, "Yidishe dertsiyung," 4.

summer of 1929 nevertheless had radically changed to look more like a Yiddish vessel for Communist Party doctrine.

According to Olgin, this content change of the curriculum was not toward a goal of assimilationism. “They know not what they cry,” Olgin wrote, “What is such assimilation? It is the *bourgeois culture of one nation imposed upon the members of another nation*.”²⁵⁷ Not only was it impossible for the introduction of Communist content to even be assimilationist, Olgin went a step further to call Glantz and others in his camp hypocrites. He argued, “‘Yiddish education’ for them is national education that is not fulfilled with the language alone. The language is only a *tool* to nationalize the school. The goal is – nationalism.”²⁵⁸ In this way, Olgin asserted that the Communists were not the only ones thinking of Yiddish as a tool (but a tool for a superior purpose), that those like Glantz were doing the same, but for the aim of nationalism. For this reason, “Nationalism and assimilation are two sides of the same coin, two children from one mother: bourgeois rule.”²⁵⁹ Denying that their decisions were an act of assimilation, Olgin fired back at what he saw as the Jewish nationalism masquerading as a Yiddish cultural movement. Rather, their schools were uncompromised in their commitment to Yiddish, just remade “in the spirit of internationalism.”²⁶⁰

The Third Period Curriculum

²⁵⁷ Olgin, “Yidishe dertsiyung,” 4.

²⁵⁸ Olgin, “Yidishe dertsiyung,” 4.

²⁵⁹ Olgin, “Yidishe dertsiyung,” 4.

²⁶⁰ Olgin, “Yidishe dertsiyung,” 3.

It would also be inaccurate to say that all the Jewish content was removed. Rather, Jews in the new curriculum were discussed in relation to the theme of class struggle. One example from their new curriculum was a project Rontsh led for the high schoolers in 1930 which culminated in an anthology called, *New York*. The collection, as Rontsh described it, was “the result of project work in my studies of Yiddish and composition, with the graduating class of the Non Partisan Arbeter Ring mitl shul (November 1929 through April 1930).”²⁶¹ The work was just one small component of the curriculum, included multi-page essays in Yiddish by 15 of the students, making up 148 pages in total. The compositions included topics such as the History of New York, Politics in New York, The Worker’s Life, History of the Jews in New York, New York in Yiddish Literature, and Cooperatives. In the essay on the Jews in New York, student Itsik Garbati begins with the History of Jewish immigration starting in 1654. He opens with a declaration on the history of Jews and class: “It is accepted by the capitalists, that nations are homogenous in classes. This is not true, all nations are divided in classes. And the Jews in New York live exactly as all the other nationalities...As is the nature of classes, they created their own culture. The rich created their capitalistic, religious culture, and the workers created their proletarian culture.”²⁶² It was not all Jewish culture, therefore, that the anthology was meant to celebrate, but specifically the culture of the Jewish working class. This New York Project, among the first examples of the curriculum after the 1929 conference, was an attempt to bring the high school students more thoroughly into the process of creating a new Yiddish culture in the Communist idiom.

²⁶¹ YA Rontsh, *Nyu-York: proyekt-arbet fun graduir-klas umpartayishe arbeter mitlshul, 1930*, (Amherst, Ma.: National Yiddish Book Center), 7. Accessed online April 15, 2021. <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc208793/rontsh-yitshak-elhanan-nyu-york-proyekt-arbet-fun-gradu-ir-klas-umparteyishe-arbeter>.

²⁶² Rontsh, *Nyu-York*, 98.

Of course, the themes that were aggressively anti-capitalist and critical of the public schools that had been a longtime feature of the Yiddish Communist schools remained. In the Coops, for example, a typical assignment for students would be to compare the curriculums of what they were receiving in the Yiddish school of the Coops with that in the public school. As one student wrote that their teacher in public school said that, “America is the best country in the world....and when she would explain that Russia is not a good country, which I would think, that this is really without truth!”²⁶³ Another student complained that in the public school “is a place of strong discipline” where a lot of teachers “hit the children” and “there is also no piano.”²⁶⁴ In contrast, the school at the Coops, as the children described, “The school opens with a lot of joy. The children go hastily into the school.”²⁶⁵ The schools of the Third Period were therefore still of the lineage of their Jewish Socialist schools, but also ready to define themselves against their more moderate rivals through emphasizing their radical nature.

The schools entered their new era with emphatic declarations of their greater purpose as instruments of class struggle. In the wake of the conference in 1929, the Non-Partisan Schools began to articulate their purpose much more in terms of their role in serving a larger movement for the working class and for the building of a future “Soviet America.” In a spring children’s concert in 1930 by a Non-Partisan School in Chicago, the school embraced the beginning of its new program as the beginning of Jewish proletarian education. The board claimed in its graduation booklet, “It has been one year since our schools have crystallized, since our schools took up a program that oriented itself fully to class struggle - a program that taught our children to

²⁶³ Bitris Shvartz, “In publik skool,” *Der yunger kooperativer*, Bund Archives American Communism RG 1400, Box 67 Folder 14, 6. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

²⁶⁴ Rayzl Zinger, “Mayn publik skool,” *Der yunger kooperativer*. Bund Archives American Communism RG 1400, Box 67 Folder 14, 6. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

²⁶⁵ Zinger, “Mayn public skool.”

struggle hand in hand with the revolutionary worker.”²⁶⁶ Casting their more explicit Communist orientation as a new beginning, they framed the stakes of their success less on serving the Jewish community and more on the broader worker’s movement, which they insisted, “the worker’s movement appreciates our work. The worker’s movement awaits us, as we will not disappoint their hope for a young, fighting, revolutionary education.”²⁶⁷ Furthermore, and importantly, “Our school - the class school of the Jewish workers, is part of the international proletariat.” No longer narrowly national, the Non-Partisan Jewish Children’s Worker Schools were there to serve all of the Communist movement.

In showing the last three years as a break from the past, Yiddish school pedagogue of the *linke*, Dvoyre Tarant, continued to lay out the changes that materialized in 1930: “We connected children with the revolutionary workers movement... We threw out of our program the old Jewish history and established a program of revolutionary biographies, events, stories, struggles, and so on... We threw out the old readers and textbooks, which had totally botched the current class struggle and are now used in the Talmud Torah schools.” Tarant, who had been a teacher in Riga, moved to the United States in 1923 and would study psychology and education at Columbia University.²⁶⁸ She was another example of a committed and educated pedagogue who saw the Yiddish Communist schools as an opportunity to merge her studies, Communist sympathies, and Yiddish culture. Under the direction of individuals like Tarant, and having moved away from

²⁶⁶ “Ershter yortog, friling kinder konsert,” Umpartayishe yidishe arbeter kindershuln, Chicago, 1930. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

²⁶⁷ “Ershter yortog, friling kinder konsert.”

²⁶⁸ Joshua Fogel trans., “Yiddish Leksikon: Dvoyre Tarant.” *Yiddish Leksikon* (blog), October 5, 2016. <http://yleksikon.blogspot.com/2016/10/dvoyre-tarant.html>.

Levin, the *linke* at the beginning of the 1930s removed much of the old curriculum and replaced it with of new Communist themes, crafting a new identity for the schools.

The fresh energy of changing their curriculum, joining the IWO, and growing their program led school activists to reflect on how much better their schools were getting. As Kalman Marmor, wrote about the schools in 1930, “The children’s schools in the IWO are greatly different than the Non Partisan Schools that existed a year ago...The goal of the proletarian children’s school is not to learn Yiddishkayt, but to connect the children with the Jewish worker in the spirit of class struggle, in Yiddish.”²⁶⁹ It is revealing that the Marmor cast the previous iterations of the schools as teaching “Yiddishkayt,” as this was not the case in the 1920s. In addition to emphasizing their teaching of class-consciousness, Marmor spoke of how the schools are most effective if they are part of a larger cultural movement and institutional context. Remembering the schoolwork he conducted in 1921 for a “proletarian class school,” Marmor explained that it was disadvantaged for “having only been satisfied with a theoretical children’s education. The school was not enough to connect with the daily struggle of the working class. It did not lead the children directly from the school to the struggle of the proletariat.”²⁷⁰ Marmor thus casted the new form of the IWO schools as an improvement, as the IWO schools became the true instrument through which to connect Jewish children with the struggle of the working class, its slogan: “worker’s children for the working class.”

Similarly, in her reflection on the history of the IWO schools, Tarant in her article “Three Years of Proletarian School Building,” she compared the earlier, Non-Partisan Schools and the

²⁶⁹ Kalman Marmor, “Di yidishe kinder shuln baym internatsionaln arbeter ordn.” *Der funk* 1 no1. (September, 1930): 14. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

²⁷⁰ Marmor, *Di yidishe kinder shuln baym internatsionaln arbeter ordn*,” 14.

current IWO schools. She wrote, “Three years ago, our school was ‘Non Partisan’ in its name and “culturist” in its content...Three years ago, in Kinderland, we rejected the opportunism and “culturist elements, for which the mildew of the ghetto had a romantic tint, for who the ‘Frayhayt’ and the ‘Forverts’ were equal worker newspapers, and the Socialist Party and Communist Party were equal worker’s parties.”²⁷¹ Casting their previous curriculum as “culturist element” that celebrated the “mildew of the ghetto,” Tarant presented the IWO schools as a rebirth and launch in to a new era.

Elevating their sense of distinctiveness from the schools promoting “exaggerated nationalism,” and service to the bourgeoisie, IWO children’s school leaders in the 1930s always juxtaposed their school program with the other Yiddish schools, secular and religious, as well as the American public schools. “The more schools we have,” the IWO reminded its membership, “The more worker children will be liberated from the bourgeois influence of the public school, Talmud Torah, and the Schools of the Sholem Aleichem, National Worker’s Farband and the Arbeter Ring.”²⁷² Abandoning the solidarity they had tried to forge in the previous decade with the Sholem Aleichem schools, the IWO schools cast themselves as the only alternative on the Jewish street, in which Jewish children could get a Yiddish education that promoted the correct societal outlook. Yiddish Communist school pedagogues continued to rail against both the public school as producing “robots for the machines,” the “nationalist chauvinist school” as “reactionary

²⁷¹ D. Tarant, “Dray yor proletarishe shul boyung” *Der funk* 3, no. 1, (April 1932): 23. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

²⁷² “Undzer shul hodesh,” *Der funk* 1, no. 5 (January, 1931): 3. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

and serves the capitalist class,” and the “Talmud torah” schools as spouting “Israelist venom.”²⁷³

The IWO bemoaned the notion that working class parents were sending their children to such schools, and declared it was incumbent upon them to bring in more families to the IWO such that they can build a class conscious future generation and prevent the poisoning that was happening from these other schools. With this objective, they underscored the ideological distinctiveness of their schoolwork. Nowhere, except in the IWO schools, they emphasized, were children getting a true working-class education that supported the larger working-class movement.

They even contrasted their use of Yiddish to that of the other schools. One of the ways that teachers could help further its mission to create a proletarian culture was their Yiddish literacy, as the *linke* activists sought to distinguish their Yiddish from the others. As Rontsh argued, teachers carried an expertise in the Yiddish language that he saw as valuable to the others in the organization. He writes, “Let’s, for example, take this small thing, how to speak Yiddish. In a lot of branches they speak a ‘Forward’ist Yiddish. It is worthwhile for the teachers to leave a half hour and explain this. Equally our teachers can spend a little time in a meeting and explain the rules of the modern spelling.”²⁷⁴ Rontsh’s approach to the role of teachers illustrates the ways the school builders saw themselves as creating a new proletarian culture throughout all the parts of the IWO organization, and as part of this, using Yiddish to further this aim.

That the Yiddish Communist school leaders during The Third period were so aggressive in disparaging their rivals is not surprising, yet it is notable in how it became central to their strategy for recruiting new families to their schools. In an article by A. Mayzl, “To a New School Year,”

²⁷³ “Dos arbeter kind far arbeter klas (tsu undzer shul hodesh),” *Der funk* 2 no. 4 (January, 1932): 3. And A. Mayzl, “‘natsional-progresiver’ shiml,” *Der funk* 3. No. 6 (December, 1932): 9-10.

²⁷⁴ YA. Rontsh, “Undzer shul als kultur-treger,” *Der funk* 2 no. 3 (November, 1931). International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

in the fall of 1932, he discusses why the IWO needs to continue reminding everyone of the problems with the other Yiddish schools. He begins with underscoring “the importance of concentrating against the Yiddishist school” because it is ripe with potential for bringing working-class students into the IWO. “We should not forget,” Mayzl writes, “that around each school concentrates the estranged and misled worker elements.”²⁷⁵ The IWO school leaders therefore felt that, with the correct messaging about the problems of other Yiddish schools, they could persuade families from the other schools to join their movement.

Progressive Pedagogy in the IWO Schools

The Third period, and the way it spurred both organizational change and a curriculum change, provided a kind of new beginning for the schools. Their new program led them to reject of certain elements of the pedagogy that had previously been the foundation of the Yiddish school curriculum. In previous years, Yiddish Communist pedagogues had celebrated the theories of progressive pedagogues like John Dewey and Montessori and their work on child-centered learning. There was a natural affinity between Deweyan progressivism, and Communist beliefs about education, as Dewey believed that education needed to be thought of as contributing to larger societal needs.²⁷⁶ Writing in 1924, for instance, the *Daily Worker*, celebrated Dewey as one of the “greatest pedagogical thinkers” that demonstrates the importance of “less talking and more

²⁷⁵ A. Mayzl, “Tsum nayem shul-yor,” *Der funk* 3, no. 4 (August-September, 1932): 12-13. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

²⁷⁶ Herbert M Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958*. 3rd edition. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 54.

doing,” which had shaped Soviet education.²⁷⁷ But even in the Third Period, the Communists never *fully* rejected progressive pedagogy but rather appropriated it for their own ends, arguing that only through Communism could the ideals of progressive education be realized.

If anything, the Yiddish Communist school pedagogues in the Third Period invested more in their interest of pedagogy for the new curriculum, as they had to merge two distinctive and at times contradictory approaches to education. In part, this was the result of having the leaders of their schoolwork engaged in the academic study of education and pedagogy. Tarant, in her article for the IWO Yiddish newsletter, *Der funk* (The Spark), “What is Our Method,” argued that the IWO schools should use the cutting-edge science of child psychology that was created by the bourgeois psychologists *against* the bourgeoisie. Employing the research of modern psychology at the time, Tarant claimed that, “Modern psychology says: all of the attributes of well-rounded people are a product of habit...all habits form in us through our reactions to the surrounding environment.”²⁷⁸ This leads Tarant to suggest the IWO schools and proletarian education are bringing children back into the correct environment, where they can develop the proper habits fitting for their Communist movement. She continues, “The public school takes the worker children and leads him away from his natural environment, it leads him into a circle of the bourgeois lifestyle, with the whole circle of its interests and ideas. The proletariat, when it takes up the rescue of its young generation for its class, must connect him back in the circle of his life.

²⁷⁷ Juliet Stewart Poyntz, “Education in the Soviet Union,” April 5, 1924 (Page 12). *The Daily Worker* (1924-1958), Apr 05, 1924. <https://ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/historical-newspapers/april-5-1924-page-12/docview/1979869325/se-2?accountid=465>.

²⁷⁸ D. Tarant, “Di gezeshaflekhe dertsiyung un di proletarishe dertsiyung” *Der funk* 1. no. 5 (January, 1931): 7. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

He must bring in his youth in the daily struggle.”²⁷⁹ Similar to when Moyshe Bakal used psychological studies to make the case for Yiddish as a child’s natural environment back in the early 1920s, Tarant used the same theories to promote their vision of a Yiddish working-class education. The central pedagogical strategy of the Yiddish school builders was to harness the tools of “bourgeois” pedagogues and psychologists for Communist aims while criticizing their expression in a capitalist context. Tarant wrote that, “In the details, we use the research that the bourgeois psychological sciences have created. We use them merely for our own goals.”²⁸⁰

One of the problems the IWO schools set out to address was passivity in children, which became a central theme in the Yiddish Communist discussions of pedagogy. Tarant in her article, asks, “Why are there so many passive people?” Because, she claims, knowledge without action creates passivity. The role of the schools must therefore connect knowledge to action, and for the Communist this meant activities that brought children directly in contact with workers’ activism: “We must try to establish the child’s learning in school as a circle of activity. The child should actually take part in the societal life, from which he must be a part. We teach about a strike, a picket, or another workers event, they will sound empty. It will be merely *propaganda*, so long as it will not become a part of their lives.”²⁸¹ In short, the education of the IWO schools needed to reflect its goals of generating activity among the working class. To create children who participate in society, the IWO schools needed to create such a habit of activity, “it cannot be confined to the school walls.”²⁸² This idea of counteracting bourgeois influence was a crucial part of Communist

²⁷⁹ Tarant, “Di gezelshaftlekhe dertsiyung un di proletarishe dertsiyung,” 7.

²⁸⁰ Tarant, “Di gezelshaftlekhe dertsiyung un di proletarishe dertsiyung,” 7.

²⁸¹ Tarant, “Di gezelshaftlekhe dertsiyung un di proletarishe dertsiyung,” 8.

²⁸² Y.A. Rontsh, “ Ekperimentn in dertsiyung vos dergraykhn nit tsum lebn,” *Der funk* 4 no. 1 (January-February, 1933): 21. The New York Public Library, New York.

education, and also helped Communist navigate the problem of teaching party dogma: that once exposed to the truth of class struggle, their work was not propagandizing for the children, but exposing them to the problems of society first-hand.

Rontsh, after going to a conference on education, reported back to the IWO membership all the problems with progressive education in the capitalist environment. Rontsh described how the other schools asked children to do things like make costumes for princes and princesses, which he said critically, “glorify the actions of the rich class.”²⁸³ He further discusses learning about another schools’ curriculum on immigration, observing that the children only focus on “writers, musicians, business men - all people who have become rich.”²⁸⁴ Not to mention, in their material on political parties, there was no mention of the Communist Party. With this information, he concludes, “Progressive education clearly serves the ruling class.”²⁸⁵ Rontsh makes clear, however, that the problem is with the content of progressive education, not its form, that the “capitalist class *uses* the educational system to better fortify and preserve its rule.”²⁸⁶ This was all the more reason to study these methods and use them within their own Communist environment.

In another article, Rontsh critiques the notion of using education to develop highbrow art and intellectualism. Rontsh (a poet himself), writes about how parents want to make their children a “Rembrandt” but “the fact shows that 99% of children become nothing...the ambition to make

²⁸³ Rontsh, 22.

²⁸⁴ Rontsh, 22.

²⁸⁵ Rontsh, 22.

²⁸⁶ Rontsh, 22.

children have a talent is a completely petty bourgeois impulse, which needs to be fought.”²⁸⁷

Instead, the focus should be on giving children a “revolutionary” education and that “their child is needed for class struggle more than “Modern Art.” As much as they wanted to develop the children socially and artistically through their schooling, the point was not cultivating special talents or training future “Rembrandts” to serve the bourgeois order.

The best way the Yiddish School activists believed they could have a Communist curriculum that appropriately used these progressive methods was to follow the approach of the Soviet Union. Rontsh also wrote about the superiority of the Soviet Union’s educational system, of which he said, “The school there is not disconnected from life.”²⁸⁸ In 1932, Rontsh attended a Soviet Education exhibit in New York at the American Russian Institute. He began his report by claiming in the Soviet Union, “the education of the younger generation is the best...”²⁸⁹ Although, he admitted, the exhibit got little attention and was quite small (it was only in one room), Rontsh found it impressive enough to dedicate an article to it. Different than in the American classroom, Rontsh remarks, “to learn means to do, they are active and ready for actually life, creating and building.”²⁹⁰ This example, he hoped, would translate to their own schooling practices.

²⁸⁷ Y.A. Rontsh, “Tsulib vos di yidishe kinder shuln baym internatsionaln arbeter ordn.” *Der funk* 1 No. 3-4, (November-December, 1930): 15. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

²⁸⁸ Y.A. Rontsh, “Af an oyshtelung fun sovetisher kinder dertsyung in nyu york.” *Der funk*, 3 no 3 (July, 1932): 10. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

²⁸⁹ Rontsh, “Af an oyshtelung fun sovetisher kinder dertsyung in nyu york,” 9.

²⁹⁰ Rontsh, “Af an oyshtelung fun sovetisher kinder dertsyung in nyu york,” 10

The IWO curriculum was heavily influenced by the practices in the Soviet Union, which in turn was influenced by the trends in American education. At the Philadelphia Conference in 1930, the IWO adopted the “Project Method,” which was based on American progressive pedagogy but had been adopted in the Soviet school system. The Project Method was popularized by student of John Dewey, William Kilpatrick in 1918. In the 1920s and 1930s the Project Method became widely popular as a “fad” in education, expanding to the point it, in the words of Historian of Education Herbert Kliebard, “it out-grew its original identification with the project per se and came to be more grandly advertised as the activity curriculum or experience curriculum.”²⁹¹ The Soviet Union also celebrated this method for its ability to marry theoretical and practical tenets. As Kalman Marmor explained enthusiastically, the Project Method was a way to connect children experientially to the class struggle of the proletariat, writing it “teaches them to look for answers to a question directly from life. It develops in them a habit to work and live collectively” and “connects the worker school network with the life and class struggle of the working class.”²⁹² There was great enthusiasm, therefore, for taking on the Project Method, especially because it was used by the Soviet Union, as a way to organize the IWO school curriculum.

Communists frequently argued that progressive pedagogy was superior in the Soviet Union than anywhere else because it connected its education to work and the real life of students. In an article on the use of the Project Method in the Soviet Union, for instance, Rokhl Holtman wrote about the Soviet leaders using the methods in their own school, celebrating the project method as the best for children’s growth education. Although acknowledging that the Project Method

²⁹¹ Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*, 143.

²⁹² Kalman Marmor, “Di yidishe kinder shuln baym internatsionaln arbeter ordn.” *Der funk* 1 no. 1 (September, 1930): 14. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

concept came from the United States, Holtman underscored that the Project Method in the Soviet Union was the context in which it could thrive, namely because, whereas “The American is totally disconnected from the life surroundings... The Soviet Project Method is completely connected to surrounding life... Each project must have elements around which we develop social society.”²⁹³ Progressive pedagogical methods, when combined with a Communist emphasis on revolutionary struggle and active work, would undo the damage of capitalism. The Project Method in the IWO schools, she argued, would “teach the child to be active and rouse in him a larger independence,” echoing Tarant’s words on undoing the learned passivity of the children.²⁹⁴

The Expansion of the IWO Schools

By many indications, the Third Period seemed like a time of great expansion and success for the Yiddish Communist schools. The Jewish Workers University, for instance, was becoming a symbol of the great potential as proletarian leaders. An article from a student in 1929 titled, “The Jewish Workers University on the Front Lines of the Workers Movement,” described how important Jewish workers in particular were to the larger fight against capitalism in America, writing, “In the work the students take a large role, there were the first to the location when there was a need for them, the first to help lead the strike, the first in the picket lines, the first to explain the workers in the shop about the necessity to become involved in the new union, that understood that the economic struggle is connected to political struggle in order to build a large revolutionary

²⁹³ Rokhl Holtman, “Der proyekt metod in di shuln fun dem sovetn-farband.” *Der funk* 1, no. 9 (July, 1931): 18. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

²⁹⁴ Rokhl Holtman, “Farshul dertsiyung in sovetn farband.” *Der funk* 1, no. 6. (February, 1931): 11. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

power against American capitalism.”²⁹⁵ This description of the Jewish Workers University students being leaders in activism was a realization of the movement’s vision for itself.

The same Coops Kindergarten, which had sparked such contentious debate in the *Frayhayt* three years earlier, was also by 1930 a source of pride in the Yiddish Communist movement. In an early issue of the IWO’s monthly newsletter, *Der funk (The Spark)*, the IWO celebrated how the Coops mothers and teachers took its kindergarteners to a dressmakers’ strike, exemplifying the commitment of connecting the children with class struggle through their schoolwork. In the article, “The Kindergarten and the Dress Strike,” G. Kamin described how the Coops Kindergarten, recently joining the IWO, was now “thought of as our cultural leader, like a *laboratory* with seeds for the older proletarian children’s school, that will bring with it a kernels of future class fighters.”²⁹⁶ Kamin recalled that as soon as the dress strike was called, the board, parents, and teachers held a meeting, resolving that the mothers of all children in the Coops should go with the children to support the strike. Kamin emphasized, the Coops kindergarten “can and needs to become an educational institution for proletarian school children and a concentrated point for the thousands proletarian mothers, who are still in need of a free hour to participate in general and daily struggle.”²⁹⁷ The Kindergarten, as an example of the IWO’s educational approach, suggested a new triumph of the Yiddish Communist School movement. It fulfilled its vision of demonstrating the schools “new class character,” leading children to participate in local

²⁹⁵ S. Dovidovitch, “Der yidisher arbeter universitet in di ershte rayen fun der arbeter bavegung,” *Frayahyt*, May 10, 1929, 3. The New York Public Library, New York.

²⁹⁶ G. Kamin, “Der kindergartn un der dres-strayk.” *Der funk* 1, no. 7 (April, 1931): 13. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

²⁹⁷ Kamin, “Der kindergartn un der dres-strayk,” 13.

class struggle, and providing a full circuit for participation from the youngest to the oldest members of its movement.

Indeed, all the schools appeared to be flourishing in the early 1930s. In January, 1932 the IWO had 100 schools and 4,000 children enrolled. By the end of that year, it reported to have 143 schools and 5,400 students. Of those schools and students, New York had 62 schools and 3,000 children. In July of 1932, Kalman Marmor reported his observations from visiting the Midwest branches. In “Our Cultural Activity in the Midwest,” he reported that in 1930, there were only two schools in Chicago, run by a couple of activists. By the time of his report two years later, there were 10 elementary schools, a high school, and a Jewish worker’s university.²⁹⁸ Cleveland had grown to a similar status, with eight elementary schools, a high school, and also a Jewish worker’s university. The IWO at this juncture also had schools in Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Canada, St. Louis, Baltimore, Rochester, Omaha, and Youngstown, all under the umbrella of the International Workers Order fraternal organization.

Problems in Their Schoolwork

While there were many successes of Yiddish Communist school work in this period in terms of their energy and sense of purpose, there were also growing challenges: the Party complained about lack of commitment of the Yiddish teachers to the Communist movement, the parents were still not enrolling their children in the schools in the numbers school leaders had hoped, the schools were not as coordinated as they should be, the pedagogical model was too ambitious, and the Yiddish abilities of the children were noticeably weak. The IWO school documents show both

²⁹⁸ Kalman Marmor, “Undzer kultur tetikayt in der mitlvest.” *Der funk* 3 no. 3 (July, 1932): 17-18. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

the frequent boasting from the IWO schools as well as a litany of complaints about all that was going wrong with them. The many problems that the schools exhibited in this period show how transitional this phase of school-building would be, as many, in both the Party and in the Jewish immigrant community, were left unsatisfied with the results and advocated for changes.

Since the early 1920s, Yiddish teachers had been a source of frustration from Party organizers. For example, in 1922, the secretary of the Jewish section of the Worker's Party wrote angrily to Kalman Marmor about the difficulty of getting people to show up to a meeting. As this organizer wrote to Marmor, "This is already the third time I have tried to call together the educational committee. The negligence of the educational committee to work out a plan to lead the educational work among our branches demoralizes the entire organization."²⁹⁹ This difficulty only increased into the 1930s. In 1931, Kalman Marmor received another letter commenting on the "complete lack of support, the total inactivity of the greater number of party members in the League [the Teacher's League], particularly the Yiddish teachers..."³⁰⁰ To make matters worse, the children exhibited behavior problems that wore on the patience of Party organizers. In a 1932, a district organizer complained about the behavior of the IWO school children, calling them "undisciplined" and that the teachers needed to take more responsibility to control the children's behavior.³⁰¹ Such frustrated communications from the Party show that the Yiddish school

²⁹⁹ Letter to Kalman Marmor from Secretary of Jewish Section of Workers Party, April 19, 1922. RG 205 Kalman Marmor Papers, MK495 Folder 441. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

³⁰⁰ Letter from K. Ryder, February 23, 1931. RG 205 Kalman Marmor Papers, YIVO: MK495 Folder 441. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

³⁰¹ Letter from Communist Party USA District #2, February 2, 1932. RG 205 Kalman Marmor Papers. MK495 Folder 441. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

movement did not always deliver in the ways it desired, and were at times seen as problematic to the Party organizers trying to wrangle the teachers and children.

In addition to the Party critiques from the outside looking in, after a few years the leaders of the Yiddish schools had plenty of critiques for themselves and their own curriculum. The Project Method that had been so celebrated, for example, had a rough start. B. Mozer wrote in an article called “Mistakes in our Schoolwork” in which he discussed the many problems with the Project Method. He writes, “Have we had a lot of success with the projects? What are the results? It is difficult to give a positive answer to all these questions. And that is not because the Project Method is not suitable for our school, no! The larger mistake is that have carried these over in a mechanized manner. We have simply carried over a method in our schools and have not considered enough what we can carry out and what we cannot.”³⁰² In short, Mozer argues that the Project Method as it was implemented in the IWO schools was far too ambitious. He continues, “We have forgotten that we are supplementary schools” and thus the projects need to be tailored to such a format. His solution was therefore to prioritize certain topics, make them more age-appropriate, and importantly, “Let’s stop talking so much to the children. Let’s give them work and not propagandize. Let’s educate and not propagandize.”³⁰³ Even as the group that desired Party content in the curriculum was victorious at the Kinderland convention, Mozer’s comments show a lingering discomfort with a dogmatic approach to education, the approach the *linke* fought to viciously over at the 1929 conference.

³⁰² B. Mozer, “Toyes’n in undzer shul-arbet,” *Der funk* 1 no. 8 (May-June 1931): 23. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library. And Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*, 139. Kliebard also describes how some of the critiques of the Project Method were felt similarly outside of the Yiddish Communist context.

³⁰³ Mozer, “Toyes’n in undzer shul-arbet,” 23.

Tarant, an advocate for the Project Method, acknowledged the problems as well, writing on how to make it more successful in the school curriculum. In an article in *Der funk*, “Towards a Method in Our School,” she writes that teachers must carry out a more active methodology and child-centered approach in order for the Project Method to be successful. She claimed that small group activities were the best way to get the children participating, suggesting that teachers should divide classes into groups of 3-5 children. Furthermore, each class should be broken up into three parts, with 20 minutes of group work, 30 minutes of full class assembly, and 30 minutes of instruction. By the end of her article, Tarant offers full structural outlines for classes and approaches for how teachers should relate to the materials.³⁰⁴ Yiddish Communist school pedagogues like Tarant expended great energy trying to make their curriculum successful, balancing their commitments to Yiddish, Party and “proletarian” material, and active engagement in the labor movement.

Several months later, however, in 1931, the Project Method was also rejected in the Soviet Union, leaving the IWO schools in a confusing position about what they should do. In her article, “Why the Project Method was Dismissed in the Soviet Union” Holtman reversed in her previous celebration of the Project Method claiming, “One must remember, that in each country methods are varied. The character of the Soviet Union made it so the method was connected to the surrounding environment. This is not the case in America.”³⁰⁵ Thus, when applied to the Soviet Union, “it was not precise, scientifically rigorous, and did not develop writing, reading, and

³⁰⁴ D. Tarant, “Vos mir lernen fun der ershter inspeksiye in unzere shuln” *Der funk* 3, no 4. (August-September, 1932): 8-10. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

³⁰⁵ Rokhl Holtman, “Farvos men hot opgeshaft di proyektn metode in sovetn farband,” *Der funk* 2 no. 3 (November, 1931): 20. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

calculations.”³⁰⁶ Instead of the Soviet Union being a better context, it was actually inappropriate. And in America, too, it could not serve their aims as a movement. Holtman continues, “The Project Method as it was done in America was declared anti-Leninist, anti-Marxist, because it was vague, and did not build knowledge systematically.”³⁰⁷ Explaining Soviet Union’s abandonment of the Project Method because it was “anti-Marxist,” therefore, created an ambiguity for the IWO schools, which had previously found security with taking the same approach as the Soviet system.

The IWO schools, however, did not abandon the Project Method, but they remarked frequently on its numerous problems implementing their vision. In the name of Marxist “self-criticism” Yiddish school pedagogues reported on their constant frustrations. In reflecting on the state of the schools in April 1932, Tarant celebrated how far the schools have come since their Non-Partisan days. However, she noted, “We are still not sure if we have found the best method.”³⁰⁸ Tarant explained that the Project Method achieves two goals: it focuses on a different aspect of revolutionary history and tries to connect that to the contemporary “struggle of the worker.” Second, it creates a system of organization in which are working on the same themes at the same time. Tarant, however, equivocates in her article, “True” she admits, “The name ‘project’ from the beginning brought with it a little bit of mix ups...we are taking up and taking over conducting the project method that the bourgeois American school practices....But, at the same time, after long discussions and a couple years of practical work, the question became clear,

³⁰⁶ Holtman, “Farvos men hot opgeshaft di proyektn metode in sovetn farband,” 20.

³⁰⁷ Holtman, “Farvos men hot opgeshaft di proyektn metode in sovetn farband,” 20.

³⁰⁸ D. Tarant, “Dray yor proletarishe shul boyung.” *Der funk* 3, no. 1 (April 1932): 24. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

that our projects had to do with the program (curriculum) and not with the method.”³⁰⁹ Tarant therefore places the blame for the problems of the Project Method on that it was the method of the “bourgeois American school.”

Although committed to continuing the Project Method, many seemed dissatisfied with it by the beginning of the school year in September, 1932. In a report from the IWO’s School Association conference, it declared that “the biggest mistake is our Project Method.” Projects did not have logical connections to each other and were too ambitious for their short time frame. The report continued, “Our school is not a university where you specialize in various subjects.”³¹⁰ The association therefore wanted to simplify and connect the projects much more than they had been in the past.

The IWO’s problem with the Project Method was in part a product of a larger tension with the Yiddish schools in the Communist movement straddling Soviet and American contexts. The Yiddish school activists justified their use of Yiddish as a way of resisting American culture, of in effect Sovietizing their children. The Project Method in the beginning seemed to fit well into this position: although a practice originating in American progressive educational environment, it was adopted by the Soviet Union and thought to be superior in a Communist-state context. However, when the Soviet Union decided it was inappropriate for its own schools, it posed a new question for the Yiddish schools in the United States, their ideology conflicted with their practical reality. As supplementary schools in the United States serving American-born children, as others began to remark, following the Soviet Union was not always appropriate. In a report from the teacher’s

³⁰⁹ Tarant, “Dray yor proletarishe shul boyung,” 24.

³¹⁰ A. Mayzel, “Tsum nayem shul yor,” *Der funk* 3, no. 4 (August-September, 1932): 12. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

conference in October, 1932 given by Mozer, for example, he points out teachers' frustration with how the schools were "dominated by Sovietism and not Americanism" when this reflects "little of the reality."³¹¹ The Yiddish Communist schools in the United States during the Third Period thus became isolated, in a category of their own, estranged from the other Yiddish Schools, unable to copy the Soviet system, and needing to create a more successful program that met their unique needs.

In addition to the challenge of finding an appropriate curriculum, there were also issues with coordinating schools that spanned all of the United States as well as into Canada. In its effort to systematize their educational program, the IWO schools began implementing school inspections. The inspections occurred across the country, with each school being inspected by a teacher from another school and two IWO school association members. In their first attempt, the IWO inspected 90 schools, 35 of which were in New York, receiving reports from 75 schools. Although school leaders were frustrated by receiving so few reports, their expectations may have been unrealistic for the task: in the report involved 70 questions about the school and 79 questions about the school association. Questions ranged from quantitative such as "How many rooms are in the school?" and "How many days do they teach?" How large is the deficit" to more qualitative questions about discipline, students' Yiddish abilities, and engagement with the material.

Often the reports often came back with the quantitative questions answered but not the qualitative. Tarant, discussing the inspection efforts, wrote that only 50 to 70 percent of the questions about lessons and activities were answered. "The answers were not systematic," she complained. For example, Tarant noted that the last question, which asked "What is your impression?" only was answered in 54 percent of the reports. "Surely everyone has an opinion"

³¹¹ B. Mozer, "Vos hot oyfgeton di lerer konferents fun undzere shuln," *Der funk* 3, no. 5, (October-November, 1932): 19. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

she wrote in an exasperated tone. What is more, those who did answer were often vague. Tarant claimed, “A characteristic answer....’Not bad’....’The school is like all the other schools’... Among the 43 reports that came in, 16 gave one or two word answers.”³¹² The desire to systematize and the challenges implementing it was an ongoing issue. In part, the problem had to do with the national scope of the IWO schools and variations in its different regions. Additionally, it faced the problem of discordance between IWO leadership and the experience of the teachers. While on a national level the IWO tried to create a clear program and process for the teachers in the schools, this did not always reflect the realities of schoolwork on the ground.

Frustration in Yiddish schoolwork, despite its many successes and continued growth in student numbers, abounded. At the Cultural Convention of the Coops in 1933, the minutes repeatedly referenced a general feeling of demoralization in housing cooperative and Yiddish education. The convention repeatedly discussed the “need for adult comrades to take children’s work seriously.” Therefore, in a resolution on children’s work, the Coops declared, “Whereas: our children, in the past, have been misunderstood, disorganized, and demoralized...” and committed to organizing the children in “class struggle mass organizations.”³¹³ Part of the problem was financial, as the report from the convention proceedings said, “Shule, kindergarten, music school, center, cannot support themselves, have not the means to do it...” and therefore suggested taxing each tenant to help pay for these programs.

³¹² D. Tarant, “Vos mir lernen fun der ershter inspeksiye in undzere shuln,” *Der funk* 3 no. 4, (August-September, 1932): 9. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

³¹³ “Proceedings of the Cultural Convention,” *The Cooperator*, 3 no. 2 (April, 1933). RG 1400, American Communism, Box 67, Folder 15. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

The Problem of Yiddish

Among the sources of their overwhelm in the Coops were the continued disagreements about the place of Yiddish. As one Coops tenant said at the cultural convention, “Every organization is sectarian every organization is self-centered - every organization delegate defends and boosts his own organization school is nationalistic - if we must make revolutionaries why not teach them in English. There are plenty of Italian children in the neighborhood who are in need of being revolutionaries.”³¹⁴ Despite the continued commitment to Yiddish and its increased security, many of the old debates never went away, with people continuing to debate whether Yiddish was necessary.

Taking the opposite view, however, many teachers also had complaints about the schools and the approach to language instruction, but from the perspective that not enough attention was given to Yiddish. According to some teachers, the schools operated under, “the illusion that our proletarian school, with its limited opportunities, could so the same method as a normal school.”³¹⁵ Most problematic and uncomfortable to address for the teachers, however, was the state of children’s Yiddish abilities. Mozer explained that in the discussion among the teachers, “The question of language took a distinguished place. We are not happy with the results. The children do not know enough Yiddish.”³¹⁶ Mozer explained apologetically in his report that there is “the incessant charge that we are against Yiddish, that we help the American melting pot...Of course we are against Yiddishism...But so long as we lead our school in Yiddish we want our

³¹⁴ “Proceedings of the Cultural Convention.”

³¹⁵ B. Mozer, “Vos hot oyfgeton di lerer konferents fun undzere shuln,” *Der funk* 3, no. 5, (October-November, 1932): 19. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

³¹⁶ B. Mozer, “Vos hot oyfgeton di lerer konferents fun undzere shuln,” 20.

children to learn the language and the lessons should be more effective.”³¹⁷ Mozer’s attempt to balance advocacy for Yiddish with condemnation of Yiddishism shows the difficult balance many Yiddish school activists had to strike. Apparently, however, the teachers were ready to do more for the Yiddish instruction of their students, even if this was uncomfortable within the broader atmosphere of the Communist movement.

After the teachers report of October, 1932, school activists continued to voice their concerns about the state of Yiddish and how the IWO was handling it. A. Mazl wrote an article in 1933 with solutions for the oft-held criticisms of the schools. Addressing “backwardness in language study,” he believed that the poor state of Yiddish language study was the result of inaccurate binary between political education and language learning. He writes, “A portion of the teachers who have noticed the good results of our political and societal education and the meager education of language study, that it is slowly infested with the idea that the political education of the child is everything and that language study is inferior and therefore do not have an interest in making an effort. That language study is naturally as a result becoming weak.”³¹⁸ In another article the author argued that the level of language was weak because both “a portion of teachers don’t hold it as important” and the instruction was limited to three hours a week. It was therefore proposed to hold students in the elementary school for a couple years longer. This, way “we achieve two things: 1) the children would be riper for mitlshul, and 2) they would know more or less the language and not need to spend so much energy in mitlshul on it.”³¹⁹ There seemed to be

³¹⁷ Mozer, “Vos hot oyfgeton di lerer konferents fun undzere shuln,” 20.

³¹⁸ A Mayzel, “Vi azoy vert durkhgefirt undzer shul-program,” *Der funk* 4 no. 1 (January-February, 1933): 11. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

³¹⁹ A. Mayzel, Vi azoy vert durkhgefirt undzer shul-program,” 11.

general agreement on the point that Yiddish literacy was a problem, but the source of the problem and correct solution evaded them.

Some believed more radical measures were needed to continue with Yiddish education. One IWO member argued a radical approach to help Yiddish studies move along more quickly: get rid of the printed script. Like the Soviet Union changing Yiddish orthography to remove Hebraisms, he argued they could begin a movement to change the conventions of Yiddish language writing. Observing that Yiddish learning was moving at a sluggish pace, he asked, “Why spend energy learning two types of writing when they are one in the same?” Instead, he proposed, the schools only teach the written form have the printing presses simply print in the handwritten script. This would “free them [the children] up” and “The Soviet Union would surely follow suit.”³²⁰ While perhaps unconventional, it shows the extent Yiddish school activists in the Communist movement understood their work as operating in their own cultural and linguistic sphere as well as the measures they were willing to take to help improve the state of Yiddish literacy in their schools before they abandoned Yiddish altogether.

The schools in the early 1930s therefore generated incredibly energy for expansion but also complaints from those within and outside the Yiddish Communist movement. The question of community participation, pedagogy, and Yiddish literacy were all primary concerns of those leading the schoolwork in the IWO. The discussions of Yiddish literacy were also significant, as they exposed a contradiction that had long been present but ignored. While those like Olgin, Saltzman, Marmor, Katz, and others insisted that their work in Yiddish was based on its present utility, not a commitment to it having an eternal future, this became an increasingly difficult narrative to uphold. Securing a future for Yiddish, through their schoolwork, was clearly an aim

³²⁰ Cashmal, “Duo- shrift,” *Der funk* 3, no. 6 (December 1932): 13. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

of their movement, and they had to decide just how committed they were to Yiddish culture in moments when it would become even more difficult to justify.

“White Chauvinism” and the IWO School Curriculum

The Yiddish schools, and the way they represented Jewish separatism, were especially problematic in a moment when the Party was trying to eradicate divisions between white and Black workers. The Yiddish schools reveal a great deal about how Jews navigated their particularism in the context of the Party trying to break down that particularism for the sake of anti-racism. The Party in the Third Period emphasized a White-Black binary, in which immigrant workers were on one side as whites, and Black workers on the other, as a way to point out and eradicate white chauvinism from its ranks. The basis of this logic was, if immigrants understood their complicity in white chauvinism, the Party would be able to address racism and better recruit and integrate Black workers. Complicating this process, however, was that many Jewish immigrants did not fully understand themselves as white, and in fact resisted whiteness. Indeed, many Jews believed that they had much in common with Blacks in America, even if they understood how they were relatively privileged in the United States. Therefore, while the broader Party asserted Jewish whiteness, many Jews emphasized their distinctiveness as Jews in order to access their own empathy for Black experience as well as resist the prejudices that came with whiteness. This produced two irreconcilable ideas regarding the Party’s anti-racist work: one that required Jews to be white to further its integrationist aims, and one in which Jews tried to distance themselves from whiteness as a way to further developing an anti-racist culture within their Yiddish culture.

The Communist Party had distinguished itself from the Socialist Party in the way it

prioritized Black oppression as one of its principal fights.³²¹ As historian of Communism, Jacob Zumoff argues, it was the intervention of the Comintern that caused the Party to prioritize Black struggle. After the Comintern established a “Negro commission” in 1921, the Communist Party began making the issue of anti-Black racism a priority, although with few gains. During the Third Period, the Communist Party claimed African Americans in the United States an “oppressed nation” and set out to organize in the “Black Belt” in the United States.³²² The Party’s approach to Black organizing was similarly contradictory to its Yiddish cultural work: on the one hand, by declaring African Americans an oppressed nation, it spoke to a recognition of Black experience as distinctive, yet it also believed it must combat “the segregation tendencies of the Negro workers themselves.”³²³ Therefore, although it would not call its interest “integration” at the time, integration was essentially what the Party aimed to achieve, even if it was the declaration of a distinct Black nation that brought many of its Black members into the Party.³²⁴

³²¹ Jacob A Zumoff, *The Communist International and U.S. Communism, 1919 – 1929* (Chicago, Ill: Haymarket Books, 2015), 54. The American Communist Party and the “Negro Question” from “Fourth Congress of the Communist International.” Accessed April 19, 2021. <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/4th-congress/tactics.htm>.

³²² J. Edgar Hoover, “The Communist Party and the Negro: 1956-1953.” Federal Bureau of Investigation United States Department of Justice (October, 1956), iii. <https://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/research/online-documents/civil-rights-eisenhower-administration/1956-10-communist-party-and-the-negro.pdf>

³²³ Mark Solomon, *The Cry was Unity*, 165. Solomon quotes Browder, “For National Liberation of the Negroes!” 13; Briggs, “Further Notes on the Negro Question in the Southern Textile Strikes,” 395; District 2, CP, “Resolution of the district Bureau, CPUSA, District 2 on the Struggle against Chauvinism,” *Daily Worker*, February 19, 1931.

³²⁴ Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity*, xviii, xxv. Solomon writes in his introduction that Communists did not use the term integration. Regardless, integration is still an apt word for what the Communists were trying to do in a practical sense with their base. Solomon points out that the Communists, “On the other hand, they believed that racial separation would sunder the working class and sustain the old order. The conception of the Negro question as a national question negated both sterile absorption into the dominant order and a narrow separatist outlook. While seriously flawed, the theoretical projection of a national question nevertheless suggested a way to

This resistance from the Party for ethnic and racial separation was not specific to Jews but applied to all forms of group separatism. For instance, in a telling example from an article in the *Daily Worker* called, “White Chauvinism is the Main Barrier to Winning Negro Masses,” the author described an encounter with a “member of the Young Communist league who was active in the youth branches of the IWO.” In this example, the author remarked how the youth, “developed ideas that we should have special Negro branches of the International Workers Order, jim-crow branches. It is true that after an explanation the comrade somehow changed his attitude toward the question, but the fact that such ideas can creep out in the minds of the comrades are indications that the basic problems on this question are not known to the membership.” The idea of the youth to have a special “Negro branch,” although described as a belief in “jim-crow,” understood in another way, was based on the model of the IWO that separated national-group branches. Therefore, on the one hand the Party believed that national separatism would perpetuate racism, furthering the process of dissolving allegiance to the national group structure it began during Bolshevization, yet at the same time, that separatism had long been and remained the model for Communist institutions.³²⁵

resolve the historic tension between assimilationism and separatism. It pointed to a third road to liberation based on unqualified equality and self-determination, grounded in the distinct, historically evolved nationality of the Negro people.” In this way they too skirted around the issues of nationalism, assimilation, and particularism by what Solomon names as an interest in “self determination,” but in practice this led to a rather contradictory approach

³²⁵ B.K. Gebert, “White Chauvinism Is the Main Barrier to Winning the Negro Masses,” *The Daily Worker* (1924-1958), Dec 19, 1931, 6.
<https://ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/historical-newspapers/december-19-1931-page-6/docview/1980389291/se-2?accountid=465>.

From the Party's perspective, if they were going to recruit Black workers and successfully integrate, they needed to address racism among white immigrants through pointing out examples of white chauvinism. The concept of white chauvinism, however, was confusing to Jews who had not fully absorbed the racial frameworks of the United States and therefore did not universally accept themselves as white. Intellectuals like Kalman Marmor therefore had to explain the meaning of white chauvinism as something that Jewish immigrants, too, were capable of. In an article in the IWO newsletter, Marmor wrote a piece called, "Scottsboro, Zionism, and Chauvinism," in which Marmor points out there was, indeed, an issue of racism in their Jewish community that they needed to address. He writes, "...White chauvinism is not free even from those who hold themselves as radicals and even for the '*linke*' element."³²⁶ He continues to dispel the idea held by some that Jews that they cannot be white chauvinists, claiming, "A lot believed and still believe today that the Jewish masses are free of chauvinism. The logic is, that because the Jewish masses were in a lot of countries were persecuted through the regional chauvinism, they developed a sympathy for oppressed people and races."³²⁷ Marmor here plays an important role in translating the Party's ideas about race and whiteness to the Jewish immigrant world, reframing the meaning of white chauvinism to a community that did not see itself as complicit by the nature of their own identities and experiences as Jewish immigrants. He therefore has to remind his readers that they need to think differently about their current position, and that they are still susceptible to white chauvinist ideas now that they are in America.

³²⁶ Kalman Marmor, "Skotsboro, tsiyonism, un shovinism," *Der funk* 2 no. 1 (August-September, 1931): 9. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

³²⁷ Marmor, "Skotsboro, tsiyonism, un shovinism," 9.

But Marmor's discussion of the problem of racism, as a Communist, roots the problem ultimately in class divisions. Marmor ultimately does not place the blame for the threat of white chauvinism on their own *linke* community, asserting instead that the problem with white chauvinism comes from the propaganda of the "ruling class," specifically the "nationalist intellectuals." He writes, "The truth however is that the ruling class is everywhere using chauvinism on both fronts. On the one hand the ruling class is stimulating the non-Jewish masses against the Jews, and on the other hand, look to provoke in the Jewish masses a deep hostility to the *goyishe*."³²⁸ Marmor therefore believes the *linke* needs to resist messaging that develops "deep hostility to the *goyishe*," in this context, meaning their Black comrades. He continues, "And the ruling class in America has in its propaganda calls out to provoke hostility among Black and white workers, with full help from the Black bourgeois and intellectuals, that is the way the ruling class in all the countries have full help from the Jewish bourgeoisie, Zionists, and *kley-koydesh*."³²⁹ All the nationalist intellectuals, rouse in the Jewish masses more hostility and distrust for the workers of all the other peoples.³³⁰ Marmor hones in in particular on the role of the Yiddish Press (specifically the *Forverts*), Zionists, as well as Black "bourgeoisie and intellectuals" for stirring up divisions among the working class, arguing that the racial divisions are a product of the class divisions. Just as how they regard Jewish bourgeois intellectuals, they should not trust the Black intellectuals whose ideas serve the bourgeoisie.

Marmor's focus on class as the dividing line was consistent with another current in the Party during the Third Period, in which, in the words of Historian Mark Solomon, the Party sought to

³²⁸ Marmor, "Skotsboro, tsiyonism, un shovinism," 9.

³²⁹ Leaders of Jewish communal or religious life.

³³⁰ Marmor, "Skotsboro, tsiyonism, un shovinism," 9.

“drive wedge between the Black bourgeoisie and working class.”³³¹ Marmor shows this was also true in the Jewish case, and that the Party’s emphasis on class divisions was how Communists sought to develop interracial solidarity.. Indeed, even as Communists were engaged in a project to point out racism, they were also, ultimately operating in a framework of class-based solidarity. This idea meant that as much as Jews were susceptible to becoming white chauvinists, it was something they could overcome if they did the necessary organizing work and understood the class-basis of racism.

Consistent with this bourgeoisie versus working-class framing on the problem of racism, Marmor blames the problem of chauvinism in those in the Jewish community who serve capitalist order, not in the Yiddish work of the *linke*. He writes, “The causes of the white chauvinism in the Jewish masses in America is not an accident. It is the result of the daily agitation of the Jewish *balebatishe* press.”³³² The Jewish bourgeois press with the *Forverts* above all continuously upholds a pogrom atmosphere.”³³³ By placing the blame for white chauvinism on the other Jewish institutions outside their movement, Yiddish Communists like Marmor were able to accept it as a problem address without taking full responsibility as endemic to their Yiddish cultural movement.

By making the problem of white chauvinism ultimately a structural problem of capitalism, Yiddish schools, if they were fighting this order, were still serving an anti-capitalist goal. This did not fully resolve the tension of Jewish (nor Black, for that matter) particularist organizing in the Party, but was enough theoretical grounding that Yiddish work continued as it was: that is, an anti-racist training specifically for Jewish children.

³³¹ Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity*, 18.

³³² Well-to-do.

³³³ Marmor, “Skotsboro, tsiyonism, un shovinism,” 9.

The Yiddish schools made the subject of Black oppression a central feature of their curriculum, even as their efforts were publicly criticized as inadequate. Yiddish schools activists argued that their children, without the Yiddish school curriculum, were at risk of becoming white chauvinists from their American environment. The Yiddish schools, therefore, recognized the whitening of their American children, but also used this to launch polemics against Americanization and pursue their Sovietization aims through Yiddish education. Thus, the Yiddish schools, on the one hand, were important vehicles for education on race and racism within the Party, mobilizing thousands of Jews and educating Jewish children on the importance of fighting anti-Black racism, yet they were nevertheless criticized as continuing to enable racism. As much as many Jews in the Communist movement demonstrated dedication as non-Black actors in solidarity with African American freedom struggle, the institutions they had built, which were effectively separatist Yiddish institutions, required them to again justify their Yiddish cultural work to show they were not of the chauvinist variety.

In a telling example, *The Daily Worker* took more explicit aim at Yiddish schools for being inadequate in their racial education, not categorically calling Yiddish education chauvinist but assuming the schools were poisoned by maintaining “bourgeois practices.” An article called, “Smash the Ugly Head of White Chauvinism” from 1932, the author singled out the Yiddish schools as an example of how white chauvinism was still rampant in the Party:

The Children’s Schools of the International Workers Order. These schools aim to give Jewish workers children a working-class ideology. This is done on the basis of acquainting these workers’ children with all the struggles of the workers. After a period of five years existence of these schools, after all the struggles we have gone through the last few years, after the Scottsboro case, The Orphan Jones case, and the Willie Brown case, in the yearly magazine which evaluates the workers and their children, there is not a word said about race oppression and the word NEGRO is not even mentioned. WHY? Some try to explain this away as a mere technical oversight - a printer’s mistake. Others want to place the blame on individuals. But NO! It arises from the capitalist ideology from which the ruling class wants to corrupt the

workers movement. When white chauvinism is thoroughly exposed, it will expose with it a whole chain of corrupt bourgeois practices that exists in our ranks.³³⁴

The suggestion that this failure of the Yiddish schools also exposes a “whole chain of corrupt bourgeois practices” may or may not be a statement on the practices of Yiddish education, but it certainly was a strong accusation to levy against the schools. Considering the focus on the Black oppression in the curriculum, Platt’s point that “not one word said about race oppression and the word NEGRO is not even mentioned,” is surprising, but was not disputed in the defense it was a “technical oversight” in the graduation program. Platt insists, however, that the problem was not technical but ideological, that there was a “capitalist ideology” in the schools that needed to be “thoroughly exposed.”

Even as there were reports of white chauvinism connected to the schools, and despite this omission, whether a product of a “chain of bourgeois practices” or a “technical oversight,” the topic of Black oppression was in fact central to the IWO school curriculum. For example, In 1931, in the IWO student journal, *Prolet Shul*, in the Bronx a third year student wrote a piece called the “Nine Scottsboro Boys,” in which she imagines what it would be like for one of the Scottsboro boys to not go home to one’s mother but go to prison. She concludes her piece with the statement, “...we abandon the boy to continue thinking about ‘justice’ which exists in ‘our country’ for all the workers and oppressed.”³³⁵ In the same journal, a year later, another third year student writes about the Scottsboro case, saying, “The workers of America must lead protest-

³³⁴ Leon Pratt, “Smash the Ugly Head of White Chauvinism,” *The Daily Worker* (1924-1958), May 18, 1932, 4. <https://ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/historical-newspapers/may-18-1932-page-4/docview/1980390922/se-2?accountid=465> (accessed April 19, 2021).

³³⁵ Rut Shmit, “Di nayn skotsboro yinglakh,” *Prolet shul*, (Shul 1, Bronx: June, 1931), 15. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

demonstrations against legal lynching and race discrimination.”³³⁶ In another school journal called *Children's Journal*, from 1931 a student in his eighth year imagines a dialogue with a Black worker and a white worker. In the dialogue, the white worker asks, “Why don’t you organize in a union with the whites? Together we will fight for a higher wages.” In the story, the Black worker likes this idea and tells his friends about joining the union.³³⁷ In these examples, we see how children in the Yiddish schools the children were taught to think with empathy about Black experience as well as familiarity with vocabulary connected to racial injustice and working-class organizing.

Preventing the children from becoming white chauvinists was emphasized as a reason to enroll children in the Order’s Yiddish schools. Saltzman, in describing the Project Method schedule, took the topic of race discrimination as a crucial example of the importance of their school’s approach to education. He writes, “We want our children to know from their earliest years. We do not want to miss the opportunity in case they develop white chauvinism...we want our children to grow to struggle against it. Race discussion must then take a place from the first year on.” He then goes into detail about their method:

How do we do this? In the first class we explain the story of Scottsboro. In the Second grade becomes the children familiar with the oppression of blacks, resist it and compare it with Biro Bidjan. The third year we explain what happened to the Jews in Russia before the revolution, about blacks in America. The fourth year brings together the ideas from earlier and spreads them out, calling for no discrimination in name, modes without Palestine, Zionism, Jim Crowism, politics from bourgeois to national minorities, and so on.³³⁸

³³⁶ Leon Solokaf, “Di nayn skotsboro yinglekh,” *Prolet shul*, (Washington DC: May, 1932), 9. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

³³⁷ Shmuel Krom, “Der neger.” *Kinder zhurnal* (May, 1931), 12. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

³³⁸ Saltzman, *Di shul far ayer kind*, 27.

Taking seriously the possibility of their children developing white chauvinism without such education by being raised in the United States, the IWO Yiddish school leaders argued that they should be focused on as early as the first grade of instruction in order produce a new generation that is free of prejudiced impulses. Notably, they made this case by making connections to Jewish history, such as comparing Jewish life under the tsars to Black oppression in America. Yiddish Communists, when speaking about combating white chauvinism, emphasized their content as key.

As much as the Yiddish schools learned about the injustices of Jim Crow, lynching, and Scottsboro, however, they were still built to maintain a future of Jewish distinctiveness that itself would have been threatened by integration. In a project that was created to resist assimilation, the racial binary presented by the Party in the Third Period challenged immigrant Jews' view of themselves and what it meant to continue building a separate Yiddish culture. Therefore, in effect, the Party's campaign to eradicate white chauvinism led to a strange period in the schools, in which the Yiddish schools continued to only serve Jewish children in Yiddish, yet also sought to minimize the Jewish character of their content. It was yet another contradiction in their Yiddish program in the Communist movement. They could seek to mitigate the contradiction through curricular changes emphasizing inter-racial solidarity, but they did not question the basis of their whole Yiddish school system, despite its glaring problem for the Party's desire for integration. Instead, the Yiddish schools continued to emphasize their role as the best way for children to receive anti-racist training at a young age. Within this framework, Jews were white but also distinctive, and importantly, needed to be ever vigilant against the racist ideas that came from being Americans. While the Party's attempt to eradicate white chauvinism required an acknowledgement of the whiteness of Jews, Jews also saw it as reason to further resist Americanization.

in their program within the Communist movement. Many, at times contradictory, voices, were calling for a change.

Historian Bat-Ami Zucker, in her article on Yiddish Communist culture in the 1930s, argues that as part of their relationship with the Communist Party, the proponents of Yiddish culture “introduced an equation which put Jewish proletarian culture within international culture...”³³⁹ This equation began in the 1920s and was solidified by 1929 with the new curriculum that served as the basis for the Yiddish schools for several years. Others called it “assimilation,” but in the view of the Yiddish Communists, they were participating in a project of proletarianizing and “internationalizing” their Yiddish culture. With the 1929 change, the Yiddish Communist school movement went through another fracturing within its own ranks over pedagogy and the role of the Party in the school curriculum. The 1929 curriculum was the basis of the Yiddish Communist’s reputation for rejecting Jewish themes, but in the larger context of the history of its school movement, was a temporary phase laden with insecurity, contradiction, and indecision about their curriculum. As the *linke* schools found a new home in their own fraternal organization, The International Workers Order, they continued to struggle between the poles of Jewish particularism and Communist internationalism. This dilemma was acutely felt in the context of the Party’s Black organizing and attempts to eradicate “white chauvinism,” which created a fundamental contradiction in the concept of Yiddish schools, but led to the Yiddish Communists emphasizing the role of the Yiddish schools to further the Party’s anti-racist work.

The Yiddish schools in the early 1930s, on the one hand, grew to be their strongest selves through increased institutional support from the founding of the IWO. Yet the Yiddish schools were also in an increasingly confused stage over their purpose, and the documents suggest that

³³⁹ Bat-Ami Zucker, “American Jewish Communists and Jewish Culture in the 1930s,” *Modern Judaism* 14, no. 2 (1994): 175–85: 176.

morale was low among those engaged in schoolwork. The Yiddish schools faced accusations from without and within - at once too chauvinist to be part of the Communist movement and too weak in their Jewish education to fulfill their goals of teaching its students Yiddish. The IWO schools of the early were caught uncomfortably between the purpose of their past and the direction of the future as well as being caught between the contexts of the Soviet Union and its approach to Yiddish and the Americanization project of the CPUSA.

This chapter showed the process by which the Yiddish Communists enacted their most extreme version of their Communist vision, sacrificing their Jewish content while protecting its Yiddish container. These changes, while seemingly abrupt when they happened in 1929, had been long developing. But, like the previous phases of Yiddish schoolwork, the IWO schools in the Third period represented a phase in the Yiddish schools that would on the one hand grow them to becoming the largest secular Yiddish school network in the United States, and on the other hand hinder their own objectives of educating a new generation of Yiddish-speaking Communists. But as in the other periods of Yiddish Communist schoolwork, this too was a temporary phase and notable for the ways the Yiddish cultural commitments of the Jewish Communists not only remained steady but sought opportunities in the most unlikely of environments for their Yiddish work to expand. The following years, during the Popular Front, the Yiddish Communist schools will reinsert Jewish content into their curriculum and become leaders in the movement for Yiddish culture internationally, yet they will also find a more acute crisis in how to navigate the pull of the increasingly Americanized lives of their children.

CHAPTER 4

COMING TOGETHER, FALLING APART:

CONTINUITIES AND CRISES DURING THE POPULAR FRONT

In 1935, one of the original founders of the Yiddish schools, Moyshe Katz, complained in the International Workers Order's new pedagogical journal, *Proletarishe dertsyung*, about the poor quality of Yiddish that he observed in its schools. Katz called the usage of Yiddish "worse than weak," and that as a result of this failing, "a very large part of our schoolwork goes wasted."³⁴⁰ To be sure, Katz reminded his readership, he was not changing his line on their approach to Yiddish from before, reiterating, "Yiddish is not eternal and is not holy, and we are not Yiddishists."³⁴¹ But Yiddish was still important. To help explain his perspective, Katz offered the analogy of using Yiddish like a shoe: "shoes should be totally strong, beautiful, and clean," he wrote, "and when somebody learns to make shoes that will not collapse on them, he does not learn that the shoe is not important because the shoe will not last forever."³⁴² In his likening Yiddish to shoes, Katz demonstrated an approach to Yiddish education that had been present among the *linke* since they first began building their own Yiddish schools: they had chosen Yiddish as their instrument for their political project, and so they needed to be committed to it.

Katz's remarks about Yiddish were familiar to the Yiddish-speaking audience he was writing for, and his belief about the importance of Yiddish was not especially controversial. But Katz did say something else in his article that prompted a defensive response from others working

³⁴⁰ Moyshe Katz, "Mer gevikht oyf yidish in undzere shuln," *Proletarishe dertsyung*, 1 no 5 (May, 1935): 13. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

³⁴¹ Katz, "Mer gevikht oyf yidish in undzere shuln," 14.

³⁴² Katz, "Mer gevikht oyf yidish in undzere shuln," 14.

in the Yiddish Communists school movement at the time. Katz argued that the primary reason for the poor quality of Yiddish was the teachers, and to some extent the parents, who were allowing the students to speak English. Katz recalled watching teachers speaking in Yiddish to the students and the students responding in English, or a student would ask a question in English and the teacher respond in Yiddish. To Katz, this mixing was unacceptable in a Yiddish school. Katz therefore concluded that this was occurring because Yiddish was not given enough priority, and that teaching Yiddish needed to matter more to the teachers and the parents.

Katz's article generated several responses from his comrades working on Yiddish the schools, who responded that it was not teachers or the parents who were the problem, but the American environment. Bela Pervin, who had been a student at the Jewish Workers University, noted her offense to Katz's article in a response published in the next issue of *Proletarishe dertsiyung*, saying that Katz was "committing an injustice" toward the teachers.³⁴³ While the teacher was certainly a factor, Pervin argued, they had to look at the wider context of American education that the children were receiving during the week, which uses, "the principals of the Yankee imperialism to rule and dominate in all regions...to snatch the youth from the influence that brings them in contact with 'non-American' ideas."³⁴⁴ The problem was therefore much larger and formidable, Pervin argued. It was not the feelings of individual actors in their movement, but American society itself, which was threatened by their schools' introduction of "non-American ideas." Pervin remarked there were of course additional factors for the bad state of Yiddish among the children in their schools: that they only had the children in the Yiddish school for only three hours a week, whereas the children are in public school six hours a day; that

³⁴³ Bela Pervin, "Ken men oyslernen yidish?" *Proletarishe dertsiyung* 1 no. 7 (July, 1935): 15. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

³⁴⁴ Pervin, "Ken men oyslernen yidish?" 15.

new children in the school were placed with peers of their age, not language ability, and therefore could be significantly behind in their Yiddish language skills; that their curriculum was too “abstract” for the children; and finally, there was no Yiddish Communist children’s literature for the students to consume within class or outside of class, leaving them few opportunities for exposure to Yiddish or to cultivate any enthusiasm for Yiddish. For all the reasons Pervin listed, they felt stymied in their goals of developing Yiddish-speaking, American-born children committed to continuing the political work of their parents, in Yiddish. Pervin was not disagreeing with Katz on the nature of the problem – or that it needed to be solved – but she pointed to a different source, one in which they should not blame themselves but were constrained by structures and American context they were operating in.³⁴⁵

Nobody responded to Katz with an argument to abandon Yiddish education or to leave the problem of Yiddish literacy alone. In another article responding to Katz called, “Yiddish in Our Schools,” another member working on their educational program, A. Grossfeld, wrote that Moyshe Katz had identified “a fundamental problem in our school system that we should all take strong interest to resolve.”³⁴⁶ Grossfeld further thanked Katz, saying that his article’s points should be carefully examined and divided into three questions: “1. Are the claims that Moyshe Katz expressed correct or not? 2. What caused us to create this situation? 3. How can we correct the error?”³⁴⁷ Grossfeld ultimately agreed with Katz’s recognition that there is a problem with Yiddish literacy, and that they had some responsibility for the problem, but his point about

³⁴⁵ Pervin, “Ken men oyslernen yidish?” 15-16.

³⁴⁶ A. Grossfeld, “Yidish in undzere shuln.” *Proletarishe dertsyung*, 1 no. 7 (July, 1935): 16. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

³⁴⁷ Grossfeld, “Yidish in undzere shuln,” 16.

teachers not prioritizing Yiddish, he felt, was “a little exaggerated.”³⁴⁸ Grossman believed the problem was still solvable with some reorganization that emphasizes Yiddish, concluding with a list of how he thinks their Yiddish schools should move forward. He writes, “What can be done? First acknowledge these facts as correct. Second, have a better connection to Yiddish studies, more attention given to Yiddish words. Third, orient us to a six-day school instead of a three-day school. Fourth, habituate children reading in Yiddish, create appropriate stories, ‘funny’ play, introduce songs in all the schools, encourage the parents to speak to the children in Yiddish, work to promote them becoming ‘*Morgn frayhayt*’ readers and demonstrate to the parents what to read aloud to the children in our newspaper.”³⁴⁹ Grossman’s approach to increase exposure to Yiddish was a clear example of the pervasive desire to bring increased attention to the subject of Yiddish language education, lest their Yiddish schools completely fall apart. As Pervin and Grossfeld solutions suggest, their effort for the expansion of Yiddish education was also an effort to counteract the pull of Americanization through creating more opportunities to engage in their Yiddish culture.

At the time of their discussion in *Proletarishe dertsyung*, the Yiddish Communist school movement was on the cusp of another transition, politically and culturally. Whereas the early 1930s were characterized by a seeming rejection of Jewish themes and hostility towards those outside the Communist movement like Socialists and Zionists, the second half of the 1930s, during the Popular Front period, were characterized by their reintroduction of the Jewish content that had been evacuated as well as an effort to rebuild alliances among others working in Yiddish culture outside of their own Communist movement. However, as the discussion of Katz’ article shows, there was also an underlying consistency in their approach to Yiddish that had been

³⁴⁸ Grossfeld, “Yidish in undzere shuln,” 17.

³⁴⁹ Grossfeld, “Yidish in undzere shuln,” 18.

present from the very beginning. As much as the Yiddish Communist school activists adapted to the different phases of the Party, their commitment to Yiddish for building a Jewish political movement was remarkably stable.

Their approach to Americanization, and how their Yiddish schooling related to this process, was especially conflicted in the Popular Front period. In the later years of the Popular Front, many of the immigrant generation regarded Americanization with an ambivalent acceptance more than an enthusiastic embrace. Even as America was recast by the Party in a newly positive light, famously under Earl Browder's slogan, "Communism is Twentieth Century Americanism," they understood the continued threat Americanization posed to their work in Yiddish. At the same time, the Popular Front enabled a new celebration of ethnicity that was seen as part of Americanism, what historian Michael Denning refers to as an "ethnic Americanism."³⁵⁰

Therefore, beginning in the Popular Front, both immigrant and American-born Jews began in this period identifying and conducting their work *as Jews*, and this would increase in the war years as the Party increasingly made gestures to reach English-speaking Jews. Whereas Yiddish was once the only way that Jews' could participate in Party work, there was a broader recognition of Jewish identity and how it could play a role in Party life. This change in the Party's attitude came with a new orientation in the Popular Front in which there was a permissive atmosphere to celebrate Yiddish culture as part of a larger celebration of ethnic heritage and folk culture as well as Jewish identity among English-speakers.³⁵¹ It also created an environment in which there was an expansion of Yiddish cultural work in the Communist movement and suggested a new

³⁵⁰ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Verso, 1997), 9.

³⁵¹ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 9.

harmony of Yiddish culture with the aims of the Party (not to mention an acknowledgement of the importance of identity-based cultural work as a way to grow the Party).

There is therefore an irony to the place of Yiddish in the Popular Front period: that as it allowed for the expansion of a Yiddish culture to exist within American culture, it was in this time that Yiddish was the most threatened by Americanization. The American-born children the Yiddish school activists had worked so hard to educate were showing themselves to be maturing into English-speaking, and even proud Americans, whose Yiddish, in the words of Katz, was “worse than weak.” By the late 1930s the youth they had educated in the Yiddish schools were young adults in their 20s, and the Yiddish school activists were able to see the outcome of their school program and respond accordingly. As in the other periods of their schoolwork, the Yiddish school activists had to navigate several countervailing forces – from the Communist Party, from the immigrant Jewish sphere, and now from their Americanized children – influencing their public and private positions on the meaning of their Yiddish school program. What became clear in the Popular Front was that the children had a strong sense of themselves as both Americans and Jews, but sometimes Yiddish felt like a barrier for their sense of common cause with other American Jews. Therefore, it became clear in the Popular Front that within the constellation of the children’s American Jewish identity, as much as their Jewish identities were important to them, Yiddish was not, for many of them, an essential part of that Jewishness.

Jews and Communism during the Popular Front

The years leading up to the Popular Front were an active period for the Jewish Communist movement, as the Great Depression provided opportunities for Communists to point out the failings of capitalism. They also saw in this period how their educational work was allowing

them to effectively become movement leaders, giving them a sense of great potential for their Yiddish programs. Jewish Workers University students, for example, took on a leadership role in organizing others on the Jewish street. As one IWO student wrote on the role of the Jewish Workers University students, “The whole East Side, Harlem, Bronx, where one finds the Jewish worker, were holding tens of street meetings where the students were the main speakers and with their correct information about various problems...”³⁵² They were witnessing their desired outcome of their project, with students at the Jewish Workers University using their education to exercise leadership in political activism.

The Jewish Workers University also began partnering with the IWO to offer more courses training them in organizational leadership, creating a complete and dynamic ecosystem for their Yiddish educational project. By 1934, the IWO had 20,000 members in its Jewish section alone and was trying to expand its work even more in the youth sections and the English section in an effort to make the order a “mass organization.”³⁵³ That year the Jewish Workers University graduated 50 of these “Order students” and had 300 students from the IWO take classes (out of a total enrollment of 700).³⁵⁴ These courses included “Principles of Proletarian Organization,” and “Recording Secretary” as well as more theoretical courses like “Principles of Communism” and

³⁵² S. Dovidovitch, “Der yidisher arbeter universitet in di linke bavegung.” RG 117, Box 79 Folder 4, 3-4. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

³⁵³ R. Saltzman, “20 toyznt mitglieder in der yidishe seksiyeh.” *Morgn frayhayt*, November 10, 1934, 3. The New York Public Library, New York.

³⁵⁴ P. Cherner, “Vos hobn di kursn in dem yidishn arbeter universitet.” *Morgn frayhayt*, June 9, 1934, 3. The New York Public Library, New York.

“Marxism.” In Chicago and Philadelphia too they were building and growing more branches of the Jewish Workers University to have a national reach.³⁵⁵

Further bolstering the Jewish Communists’ sense of momentum was the founding of a Jewish autonomous region in Birobidjan in 1934. On June 2, 1934 thousands of Jewish Communists attended a rally in Madison Square Garden in celebration. 114 organizations attended the rally, with Earl Browder, Moyshe Katz, and Ruben Saltzman among the speakers. In a letter to the “Jewish workers of America” a couple days after the rally, signed by ICOR, Proletpen, The Jewish Workers Musical Alliance, and the Jewish Workers University, among others, spoke of the historic oppression of Jews and the present threat of Fascism. As the letter declared, “Bear in mind that at present one capitalist country after the other is witnessing the rise of Fascism and Anti-Semitism. In this country too, we stand face to face with the spread of Fascism...In light of this condition, the historic decision of the Soviet Government in relation to Biro Bidjan as a Jewish autonomous region becomes even more significant.”³⁵⁶ The letter emphasized that this was not to be confused with the work of the Zionists, who “allied themselves with the British imperialists” and whose path “must inevitably lead to the war between Jew and Arab; this spells the growth of Fascism and chauvinism in Palestine.”³⁵⁷ Birobidjan, as an alternative to Zionism and a testament to the Soviet Union’s support of Jews, was another way those working in Yiddish culture were able to find support in the Communist movement.

³⁵⁵ Dvoyre Tarant, “Der yid. arbeter universitet in shikago,” *Morgn frayhayt*, December 8, 1934, 3. The New York Public Library, New York.

³⁵⁶ “Soviet Grants Jews Autonomy in Biro Bidjan,” *Daily Worker*, 29 May, 1934, 3. <https://ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/historical-newspapers/may-29-1934-page-3/docview/1980410226/se-2?accountid=465> (accessed May 15, 2021).

³⁵⁷ “Soviet Grants Jews Autonomy in Biro Bidjan,” 3.

When the Communist International endorsed the Popular Front in 1935, the entire Party orientation transformed, in which, as historian of American Communism Maurice Isserman describes, “...the 1935 Communist International made it legitimate for the CP to moderate its political position at about the same time that Franklin Roosevelt was moving to the left to build popular support for the New Deal...Supporting both the Soviet Union and the New Deal, the Communists could continue to think of themselves as revolutionaries even as they immersed themselves in reform-oriented day-to-day politics.”³⁵⁸ Therefore, the revolutionary rhetoric of the earlier period, which used terms like “proletarian,” was replaced by more moderate-sounding and inclusive terms like “progressive,” even if their position as representing the leftmost pole of the American politics remained. Words like “progressive” were still indications of their Communism, but reflected the new direction of the Party during the Popular Front that did not fixate on class divisions as much as it strove to find common cause as part of a wider Left.

The Popular Front as a movement for anti-Fascism was especially significant for Jews in the United States and internationally. The increase of anti-Jewish sentiments in the 1930s that came with the rise of Nazism further reinforced Jewish Communists’ belief that they could conduct their struggle as Jews and also led them to take seriously anti-semitism as one of their principal fights within their anti-fascist work. The role of America as an entity that opposed Fascism, coupled with how all Jews had a stake in combating Fascism, created a sense in the Popular Front that emphasizing Jewishness was a political act and could be the basis of alliances with other Jewish groups. It further made it natural for the Yiddish schools not only be unapologetic in their use of Yiddish and Jewish content, but confident in how they were advancing the Party’s aim to build a broad movement under the banner of anti-Fascism. Their

³⁵⁸ Maurice Isserman. *Which Side Were You On?: The American Communist Party during the Second World War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 3-4.

orientation towards unity was helpful for those working in Yiddish culture, as they also understood its survival was dependent on all the different Yiddish institutions working together.

Proletarishe dertsiyung

Yiddish cultural work greatly expanded as a result of the Party's new orientation in the early Popular Front. For example, in 1935 the Yiddish communists also released their own pedagogical journal, *Proletarishe dertsiyung* (*Proletarian Education*). The journal featured many of the same characters in its leadership, with Rontsh as the managing editor, and Saltzman as the editor in chief. They pronounced *Proletarishe dertsiyung* as "The official organ of the children's schools of the IWO," with a goal to "expand our children's schools, to bring more clarity to our school system, more timeliness in our teaching, more understanding in building our organization, to connect the school with the home."³⁵⁹ As its editors claimed, the other Yiddish Communist publications, such as the *Morgn frayhayt* and *Der hamer*, "do not have the opportunity to give a big enough place to explore the problems of that are connected with education."³⁶⁰ *Proletarishe dertsiyung* was, in contrast, completely devoted to the topics of schools, Yiddish education, and pedagogy. It suggested the high expectations the Yiddish Communists had for expanding their schoolwork in the coming years.

At its beginning, the journal was successful in the Yiddish Communist community. IWO school activists boasted that they printed 2,500 copies of the first issue and needed to print 2,000 more, they claimed, out of demand for it. After a year, it circulated to 7,500 people. A central goal of the journal was to involve the parents in the education of children, in honor of the IWO slogan

³⁵⁹ "Proletarishe dertsiyung," *Proletarishe dertsiyung* 1 no. 1 (January, 1935): 3. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

³⁶⁰ "Proletarishe dertsiyung," 3.

put forward at the fourth school convention in 1932, “education not only for the children, but also for the parents.”³⁶¹ The release of *Proletarishe dertsiyung* is a demonstration of the IWO schools in their prime as well as the prioritization of Yiddish education in the Jewish Communist movement.

Although released during the Popular Front, *Proletarishe dertsiyung* functioned as well as another avenue in which Communists laid out their grievances with Yiddishists, public schools, and other expressions of “bourgeois” education. The journal in the early Popular Front years shows a clear evolution and maturation of Yiddish schoolwork, but also how these were built from the previous years of schoolwork and rehashed many of the same ideas on Yiddish education from years prior. *Proletarishe dertsiyung* would evolve as well to incorporate more of the Popular Front ethos, but at its launch in 1935 it was wielded as another weapon against the rivals to the Yiddish Communist schools.

And even as they began implementing changes to their schoolwork during the Popular Front, the Yiddish Communist school leaders would emphasize the continuities from an earlier period. For example, Yiddish school activists and editorial board members of *Proletarishe dertsiyung*, Itshe Goldberg and A. Bergman, in an article called “The Program of Our School,” claimed that the implementation of their program in 1935 was the result of work in prior years, writing, “The current IWO school program, taken up at the December 1933 conference in New York, is not a new program. It is the result of years of study and experimentation.”³⁶² This curriculum included the same Project-based structure as before, with the school year divided into nine distinct themes over the course of four years with a project at the culmination of each theme.

³⁶¹ Ruben Salzman, *Di shul far ayer kind*, 32.

³⁶² A. Bergman and Itshe Goldberg, “Di program fun undzere shuln,” *Proletarishe dertsiyung* 1 no. 1 (January, 1935): 5. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

The authors write, for example, that the program emphasized the place of Jews in the curriculum in relation to Blacks, drawing from their prioritization of teaching about race discrimination from the earlier period,

In the first class we explain the story of Scottsboro. In the Second class the child becomes familiar with the oppression of Negroes and comparing and contrasting – stories about Biro Bidjan. The third year...Jews in Russia before the Revolution, about the Negroes in America. The fourth year they take together all the earlier ideas and have a race discussion explicitly, they talk about Palestine, Zionism, ...politics of the bourgeois nationalist minorities, etc. The children will not only receive an education about the lives of Jews or Negroes...they will learn about the solidarity of the working class, the consciousness, the race discrimination and how national oppression is a capitalist product, against which they must fight.³⁶³

Their schools' primary goal, in the words of Goldberg and Bergman, was still to offer a "class education." Acknowledging the difficulties of the previous years, the authors concede there were indeed problems, but, "It is not correct to think that the problems that we first took to the school conference caused us to revise our program. The opposite - we felt we were just getting started."³⁶⁴ What Goldberg and Bergman express regarding their relationship to changing the curriculum was a pattern of the Yiddish Communist school activists in which they minimized the changes they were making, themselves interested in creating a picture of continuity.

Itshe Goldberg in particular would become the leading voice for the Yiddish school movement during the Popular Front. Younger than the original founders like Katz, Marmor, Olgin, and Saltzman, Goldberg was still of the immigrant generation and had been involved with the Yiddish Communist schools since the 1920s. Born in 1904 in Poland, Goldberg first went to Canada in 1920 and worked as a teacher in the Arbeter ring schools in Toronto beginning in

³⁶³ Bergman and Goldberg, "Di program fun undzere shuln," 6.

³⁶⁴ Bergman and Goldberg, "Di program fun undzere shuln," 5.

1924.³⁶⁵ He later became the director of the Non Partisan schools in Philadelphia, participating in the split from the Arbeter ring in 1926. With years of work in the foundational years of the Yiddish Communist school movement, Goldberg was a key facilitator as a bridge between generations, himself involved from quite a young age in the original premise of creating a Yiddish proletarian movement, yet still only in his 30s at the time of the Popular Front. Goldberg has been described as not being particularly skilled with children, but a “brilliant lecturer,” thus becoming, in the words of somebody who knew him, the “intellectual voice and spirit of the left Yiddish schools,” with “an emphasis on the cultural.”³⁶⁶ Goldberg was therefore be instrumental in carrying the vision of the movement forward, yet also had a realistic sense of what was required to engage the younger generation.

It was clear in 1935 that the leading Yiddish Communist pedagogues like Goldberg, Bergman, and Tarant wanted to change their course from the Third Period but were also invested in de-emphasizing the appearance of change. In an article ahead of the upcoming Teachers Conference called, “More Effective Teaching Methods,” Dvoyre Tarant outlined her plan for strengthening the Jewish cultural content of their program. She began with acknowledging the unfavorable climate in the American context for their work: “It is true, that the environment which the children come to us in the school: the school, the street, the movies, the radios, the newspapers — the whole assimilationist whirlpool of the American capitalist civilization — that

³⁶⁵ Joshua Fogel, trans., “Yiddish Leksikon: Itshe (Itche) Goldberg.” *Yiddish Leksikon* (blog), January 24, 2016. <http://yleksikon.blogspot.com/2016/01/itshe-itche-goldberg.html>.

³⁶⁶ Hershl Hartman, “Hershl Hartman’s Oral History,” interviewed by Christa Whitney on January 15, 2013, at the Workmen’s Circle in Los Angeles, California, conducted by the National Yiddish Book Center. Accessed July 2, 2021. <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/oral-histories/interviews/woh-fi-0000373/hershl-hartman-2013>.

exerts a strong impression on a child, works against Yiddish.”³⁶⁷ But, she asserts, they must *use* this environment to bring the child closer to Yiddish. Tarant here reflects on the history of the school and the momentous year of 1929 in which they radically changed their program and “broke from the nationalist, petty bourgeois, and partisan element and went down the path to become a class school.”³⁶⁸ Tarant makes clear that the 1929 changes were good for their program and necessary. Yet, she also acknowledges that perhaps in that moment their work suffered from an overcorrection, writing “it was natural to go too far to the other side” and that “we have in the haste of the work of reconstruction eclipsed the issue [the Jewish character of the school].”³⁶⁹ Therefore, Tarant argues, the school can be satisfied with its class character but should focus going forward on more on the Jewish element that had been lost.

Tarant, however, does not only fault that they went “too far to the other side,” as the source of their current problem with Yiddish literacy and cultural study. She also claimed that the Project Method set them back and made systematic language study not possible. With using the Project Method, although previously bolstered by the Yiddish pedagogues and Tarant herself, “not only our school suffered, but also the Soviet School, which was captured by the example of the American experimental pedagogy.”³⁷⁰ The problem of following this method was therefore not from the Soviet Union, but again the American context, which Tarant claimed harmed their efforts. The Soviet Union, taken by “American experimental pedagogy,” made a mistake that the

³⁶⁷ D. Tarant, “Mer efektive lern-metodn,” *Proletarishe derstiung* 1 no. 7 (August, 1935): 4. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

³⁶⁸ Tarant, “Mer efektive lern-metodn,” 4.

³⁶⁹ Tarant, “Mer efektive lern-metodn,” 4.

³⁷⁰ Tarant, “Mer efektive lern-metodn,” 5.

IWO schools had replicated in their own work. The problem was not following the example Soviet Union, but the way that the American environment had led them all astray.

It was important for Yiddish Communist pedagogues like Tarant to contextualize all their decisions about the curriculum while also pushing the movement towards change. Bergman had a similar assessment about what the future curriculum should look like as Tarant, recalling that in 1929 they were in an “experimental state.”³⁷¹ He recalls that the Project Method, for all its problems, was “maybe an unavoidable transition period in the development of our class schools.”³⁷² Like Tarant, Bergman, in his critique of the program, explained their early decisions as reasonable yet in need of further work. Bergman maintained the previous position that their job was *not* to promote a national feeling, but “international solidarity.”³⁷³ And yet, he also said that more Jewish history was necessary and it needed to “take a place in our program.”

The conditions were therefore set to begin reintroducing Jewish content, in particular Jewish history and more Yiddish literature, while maintaining the “class character” of the school. When the first National Teachers conference of the IWO met to revise their program in early September of 1935, the IWO schools were the largest secular Yiddish school network in the country, declaring they had between 7,000 and 8,000 students and 148 schools nationally.³⁷⁴ The conference opened with greetings from the longstanding linke school activists like Paul Novick, Ruben Saltzman, and Moissaye Olgin. The conference called for needing to “revise our program

³⁷¹ A. Bergman, “Undzer program.” *Proletarishe dertsyung* I no. 9 (September-October, 1935): 10. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

³⁷² Bergman, “Undzer program,” 10.

³⁷³ Bergman, “Undzer program,” 11.

³⁷⁴ “Ershte natsionale lerer konferents,” *Yidishe kinder shul baym internatsionale arbeter ordn*, Tsentrale yidishe bibliotek ai press arkhib, September, 1935. RG 117, Box 81, Fl 3, 1. YIVO Intitute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

but not our principles.”³⁷⁵ The most important items of discussion were Yiddish instruction and Jewish history, which they planned to emphasize in their new program.

At the conference, they affirmed the central importance of Yiddish education. Bergman, in his address, declared that “the question of no Yiddish or yes Yiddish does not exist for us. For us the problem is how to teach the language and this is difficult work.”³⁷⁶ Similarly, Salzman spoke of how their commitment to Yiddish is central to their work in class education.

There are a large number of our teachers that think the teaching of Yiddish in our school is a thing we “must” have. They don’t understand, that here is a matter of our most important instrument and that without this instrument we will not be able to lead with success in our educational work. And as to the questions about it, like how long Yiddish will exist in the United States and these kind of issues that are brought forward by the Yiddishists, is not the issue for us. We have for this the fact, that hundreds of thousands of Jewish workers fight in the language and the struggle touches upon strongly the lives of our children. For us, there is no question of splitting hairs over it. For us the question is how can we better develop the instrument so that it can effectively serve our school movement.³⁷⁷

None of these points regarding Yiddish as their most important “instrument” were new arguments. Saltzman’s dismissal of Yiddish as a question and discussion of Yiddish as a practical reality for “hundreds of thousands of Jewish workers” was consistent with what the linke school activists had asserted for a long time as a way to explain the need for Yiddish schools.

The conference made clear they had no interest in debating Yiddish as a question anymore. They instead intended to work on their schools’ Jewish content. As much as the teachers conference of 1935 marked a significant turning point for the Order’s Program to prioritize Yiddish and Jewish history, the resolutions that came out of the conference were hardly

³⁷⁵ Ershte natsionale lerer konferents,” 4.

³⁷⁶ Ershte natsionale lerer konferents,” 4.

³⁷⁷ R. Saltzman, “Sakhaklen fun lerer konferents.” *Proletarishe dertsyung* 1 no. 10 (November, 1935): 5. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

sweeping changes. The teachers conference ultimately made recommendations to the Order's National Pedagogical Committee, that included first the statement: "the content of our program remains the same, which we worked out at the Kinderland conference in the year of 1929, on the declared ground principles."³⁷⁸ They further affirmed that Yiddish should be integrated into a conversation of social themes, and included additions of Jewish history in the third and fourth grades as well as Jewish classics and modern literature for the fourth-grade curriculum. The changes were therefore implemented on a gradual course, with the significance of the conference being the beginning of a new orientation toward what they wanted to re-introduce into their curriculum, but not yet a full overhaul of the program.

In 1935 the Yiddish Communists also maintained their ideological separation from the Yiddishists, demonstrating how their rhetorical changes for the sake of "unity" were also slow. In an article called, "The Fascist Foundation of Pedagogical Yiddishism," in the first issue of *Proletarishe dertsiyung*, for example, it argued that other forms of Yiddishist education, particularly at the YIVO institute in Vilna, were examples of "race chauvinism." The author, Professor Y. Resnick of Berlin writes, "Biologism, anti-internationalism, nationalism, and religion have become the foundations of fascist pedagogy," and that "the psychological pedagogical writing for the Vilna Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO) shows, that these principles have also become the foundation of the Yiddishist pedagogy."³⁷⁹ YIVO was a leading entity institutionalizing the academic study of Yiddish and Jewish history, engaging as well with Yiddish secular education through offering training courses for educators and studying Yiddish school data. Its non-political Yiddishism ran counter to the Yiddish Communists' Yiddish

³⁷⁸ Prof. Y. Resnik, "Di fashistishe yesoydem fun pedagogishn yidishim," *Proletarishe dertsiyung* 1 no. 1 (January, 1935): 9. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

³⁷⁹ Resnik, "Di fashistishe yesoydem fun pedagogishn yidishism," 10.

proletarian movement because its Yiddishist pedagogy was based on ideas of a specifically Jewish children's psychology and therefore engaging in a fascist-like Jewish "biologism." In a second installment the article concluded with the statement that the Yiddishists "call forth the envy of Hitlerist fascism."³⁸⁰ The extremity of this condemnation reveals the depth of animosity that the Yiddish Communists felt toward their "Yiddishist" opponents, and it would take some time before they were willing to act in ways that would help unify the Yiddish cultural movement. It made clear that "bourgeois Yiddishism" of YIVO and others was not, in 1935, an acceptable partner for the Yiddish Communists.

The anti-Yiddishism of their movement was a regular feature of *Proletarishe dertsiyung* in its first year. In an article called, "Yiddish or Yiddishkayt," one of the editors, Bergman, wrote about the importance of Yiddish as serving "the working class as an instrument of class struggle," making an old argument of the *linke* that the language on its own is not what is most significant, but the content. He claims, "The Yiddish language of Nadir and Olgin is not the same as the Yiddish language of Abe Cahan and Henri Lang. There is so much in common, as among the German language of Marx and Engels, on the one hand, and the German of Hitler and Goebbels on the other."³⁸¹ Bergman here, by making Cahan and Lang (of the *Forverts*) equivalent in his example to Hitler and Goebbels, did similar work as Resnik in asserting the Fascist character of their opponents in the realm of Yiddish culture. Bergman makes further claims about Yiddishists being "on the road to fascism" and that "For the Yiddishists, Yiddish is merely a pretext. It's not

³⁸⁰ Prof. Y. Resnik, "Di fashistishe yesoydem fun pedagogishn yidishism." *Proletarishe dertsiyung* 1 no. 2 (February, 1935): 4.

³⁸¹ A. Bergman, "Yidish oder yidishkayt." *Proletarishe dertsiyung* 1 no. 5 (May, 1935): 9. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

about the Yiddish language...but about the national content in the language.”³⁸² He argues here that all political strands use language as a tool, though some, like the Yiddishists, use it for nationalist ends. These are incredibly hostile comments, especially in the contexts of the 1930s and their suggestion that Yiddishism shares common cause with Nazism. They were crafted to differentiate their work in proletarian “class schools” in which Yiddish was the language of instruction and served to “lead the struggle against Yiddishists, Zionists, Rabbis with their Judaism,” and not least, “against the capitalist world.”³⁸³ Yiddish, they believed, must be used for proletarian ends in order to be proletarian, and this was the only Yiddish worth fighting for.

In addition to the aggressive anti-Yiddishism, the Yiddish schools also maintained their anti-Americanization and pro-Sovietization language in the early Popular Front. As the editors of *Proletarishe dertsiyung* write in 1935, their mission is inextricably tied to their anti-capitalism:

We cannot compare our schools with the schools of the Soviet Union, where the working class is the basis of all forms of life, where there is full day school, where the school has an educational environment totally around the school. Our fight is totally different. We must fight against the harmful influence of public school, against the corrupting influence of the movie, of the “funnies” in the daily capitalist press. Against the vigorous machine that the capitalism has built education for the child against the interests of the working class. We can learn a lot from our proletarian schools in the Soviet Union and the methods there.³⁸⁴

This statement, at once, situates the schools in the American environment while also rejecting it. While acknowledging the contextual differences between the Soviet Union and American Yiddish schools, and how the “fight is totally different,” Yiddish Communist pedagogues framed their own work as resistance to the “corrupting” American culture, such as through movies and “the funnies.”

³⁸² Bergman, 9.

³⁸³ Bergman, 10.

³⁸⁴ “Proletarishe dertsiyung,” 3.

The delay in Yiddish Communists embracing the call for Popular Front unity not only shows how the changes from the Popular Front period were gradual, but also helps explain why unity would prove so difficult for them to achieve in the coming years. Even as the Yiddish Communists changed their rhetoric, they could not easily undue the hostility they had stoked. It is therefore not surprising that for many, unity with the Communists, despite the stakes for Yiddish culture would never be possible. As much as the late 1930s were a new era, many of them were still waging the battles they began in the mid 1920s.

It would take about a year for the changes to the school curriculum and their rhetoric on the whole became more pronounced. This started with a reintroduction of Jewish content into the school curriculum. In the September issue of 1936 in *Proletarishe dertsiyung* it ran an article called “What is Taught in our School” in which it described, “going deeper into Jewish life” while maintaining its distinctive approach as a class school. The author explains that in previous years the program was “too overloaded” and there was no time to prioritize Jewish history. Now, as the article explained, it has been revised to include much more history and a systematic study of Yiddish language and literature.³⁸⁵ From that point forward to IWO schools became bolder in their insistence on Jewish content in the schools. The IWO therefore continued to further revise its program in December of 1936 at its Fifth convention in New York. As Bergman reported, they were continuing the intentions they had set at the teachers conference in 1935. As he put it, the decisions of 1935 demonstrated they should “put an end to the standing tendency that our school was merely a vestibule to the workers movement, a type of children’s club, that the only point is children’s participation in the movement. Of course the children’s school should be closely connected with the workers movement. But this does not mean that the character of the school is a

³⁸⁵ D. Flakser, “Vos lernt men in undzere shuln?” *Proletarishe derstiung* 2 no. 7 (September, 1936):10-11. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

learning institution can be lost...”³⁸⁶ Bergman’s claims here deal with more than content, but the very approach of the Communist movement toward education. The more critical tone Bergman took on at this convention was a significant departure from how they had previously described their work in the “workers movement.” It demonstrated a new atmosphere in which they could also, in addition to asserting more Jewish content, declare their priorities as pedagogues working in a “learning institution.” Bergman’s statement that the schools were not just a “vestibule to the workers movement,” however, should not be understood as the schools moving away from the Party. They were rather existing in a new atmosphere that allowed for more transparency about their purpose but had in fact been present for a long time.

Bergman also insisted on the Jewishness of their schools in a new way, declaring, “The schools of the International Workers Order are Jewish schools” and therefore, he argued, need a program that reflects this. To be sure, Bergman did not totally break from their traditional line, assuring his audience, “this does not mean we should make concessions to chauvinism.”³⁸⁷ His final comment about chauvinism shows some remaining anxiety about Jewish-specific material in the Yiddish Communist movement. But even as Bergman demonstrated his commitment to Jewish content in the school unapologetically, he also maintained this distinction between *their* version of Jewish and that of the other schools, showing as well in the midst of change an attempt to continue their sense of distinctiveness and reinforce their particular orientation to Jewish history that was connected to a political purpose.

In an answer to these calls for more Yiddish literature for youth that rang among the leaders of the IWO, in 1937 the Yiddish Communist movement also released its own Yiddish

³⁸⁶ A Bergman, “Vos felt undzer program?” *Proletarishe dertsyung* 2 no. 9 (November, 1936): 13. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

³⁸⁷ Bergman, “Vos felt undzer program?,” 14.

children's journal, *Yungvarg*. *Yungvarg* was a response to the crisis of Yiddish literacy and the lack of Yiddish children's literature that Katz and others had identified. As Naomi Kadar argues in her book, *Raising Secular Jews*, "During the first years of the magazine, the Jewish content is minimal and serves only as a link to bind Jewish readers to Communist ideals."³⁸⁸ Indeed, in line with the internationalist focus of the Yiddish Communist schools, a defining feature of *Yungvarg* is that it "places great import on the topic of the non-Jewish hero because this figure serves to instill trust in the ideal of interethnic cooperation that is part of the utopian vision for a new order."³⁸⁹ *Yungvarg*, as much as it was a Popular Front project, had its roots in the Third Period, as it was created as part of a solution to a much-discussed problem of Yiddish literacy that was identified earlier in the 1930s. Despite how the seeds for *Yungvarg* were planted earlier, the journal also shows a change in the tone and aesthetics in the late 1930s, with the journal increasingly emphasizing its Jewish content and recognizing the American identities of the children it aimed to speak to.

Themes in Children's Literature During the Popular Front

The children's literature in the Popular Front period shows a gradual increase in Jewish content, beginning between 1937, but these expressions of Jewish content did not demonstrate many new themes as much as an expansion what was already present in the curriculum. As Kadar explains in her book on Yiddish children's literature, this Jewish content took the form of, "new paradigms for the types of Jewish fiction," which included a focus on Jewish heroes and often emphasize the works of classic Yiddish writers, but still highlighted its traditional Communist

³⁸⁸ Kadar, *Raising Secular Jews*, 136.

³⁸⁹ Kadar, *Raising Secular Jews*, 146.

themes and inter-ethnic collaboration that had long been present.³⁹⁰ The Yiddish Communist schools continued to avoid teaching religious themes in general, except when they were mentioned in classic literature or described to depict a pre-modern era of Jewish life. With the increase of Yiddish literature as well as Jewish history, the Yiddish Communist schools in the Popular Front expressed, in the words of Kadar, a newly “unmediated Jewish point of view,” in which Jewish characters, and their particular identities as Jews, played an increasingly important role in the stories the children read.³⁹¹

An increased emphasis on Yiddish writers and classic literature also served to reinforce their desire to give more attention to Yiddish literacy. The February 1938 issue of *Yungvarg* illustrates how the Yiddish Communist schools increasingly emphasized Yiddish language and literature while continuing to pair it with their commitment Communism. The issue opens with a dialogue called “I Speak Yiddish” in which children at the school are in class without their teacher encounter the Yiddish writers Sholem Aleichem and Yankev Dinezon, who come to life and discuss with the children how they were not hearing enough Yiddish and how these writers used to do everything in Yiddish. Then, suddenly, the character “Yungi” enters, who is the personification of the magazine, who reinforces the message that, “A Yiddish journal speaks Yiddish. And children who go to a Yiddish school – must speak Yiddish.” The children then reply, “Why?” to which Yungi responds, “Very simple – because they are Jewish children.” Yungi continues to explain that there are 11 million children over the world who speak Yiddish and Sholem Aleichem, I.L. Peretz, Mendele, Winchevsky, and many other Yiddish writers, who Yungi explains can only be engaged with in Yiddish. Yungi closes with a speech about the importance of Yiddish, in which he says, “In Yiddish – like in all languages – one can say the

³⁹⁰ Kadar, *Raising Secular Jews*, 149-150.

³⁹¹ Kadar, *Raising Secular Jews* 149.

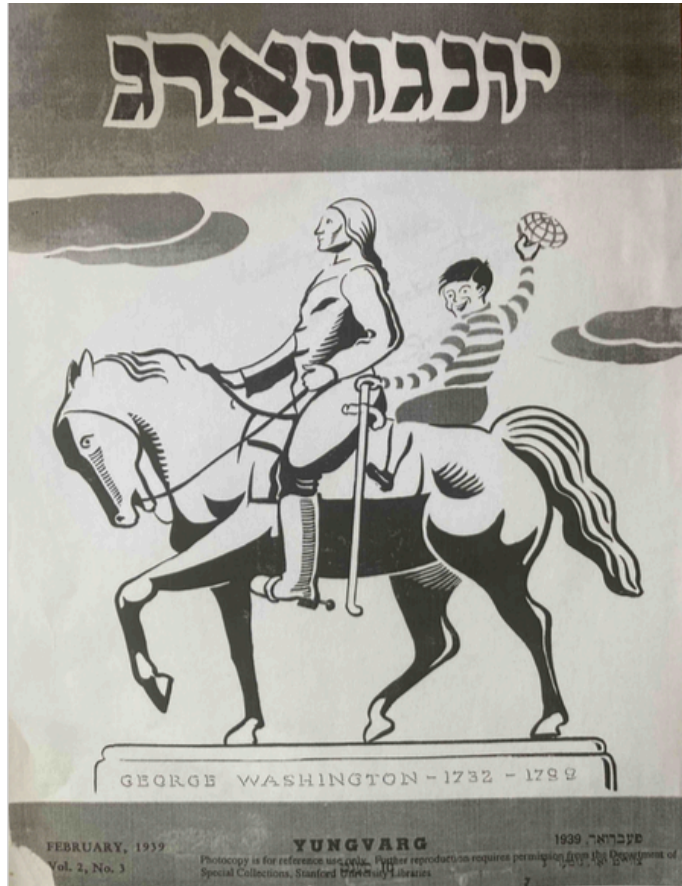
most beautiful and clever ideas, one can teach people and build a beautiful and free world – in all languages together and Yiddish is among them.” The play closes with images on the wall of Peretz, Sholem Aleichem, Marx and Lenin, Hirsh Lekert (Bundist activist) and Naftali Botwin (Jewish Communist in Ukraine who was the namesake of a group of Jewish volunteers in the Spanish Civil War), all together grinning.³⁹²

The play demonstrates, on the one hand, the growing comfort of the Yiddish Communists schools in their advocacy for Yiddish, but also a continuation of the ideas that had been present all along: that Yiddish is both important but not any different than any other language, that Jewish children should engage in Yiddish classic literature, and that speaking Yiddish is ultimately part of a collective project to “build a beautiful and free world.” The collection of characters at the end, featuring Yiddish writers, Marx and Lenin, and Jewish revolutionaries exemplifies their aim of being in the tradition of all these groups, and it is their legacies they are continuing.

One also sees the mixed messages about America in the children’s literature in this period, in which there is a celebration of its ideals while criticism of its realities. For instance, we see in *Yungvarg* a celebration of particular American presidents. For instance, in the February 1939 issue, *Yungvarg* honors George Washington’s birthday with its cover depicting George Washington on a horse and a young boy, presumably a student, also sitting on the back of the horse with Washington, smiling.³⁹³

³⁹² “Ikh red yidish,” National School Committee of the International Workers Order, *Yungvarg* 1 no. 7 (February 1938): 2.

³⁹³ Quoted in Melech Epstein, *Jew and Communism*, 273. This was a reflection of the orientation of the Communist Party in general, which in 1938, put in the preamble of its constitution, “The Communist Party of the United States...carrying forward today the traditions of Jefferson, Paine, Jackson, and Lincoln, and of the Declaration of Independence; it upholds...democracy, the right of ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ and defends the United States constitution against its reactionary enemies who would destroy democracy and all popular liberties.”



[Figure 7. This image is the cover of Yungvarg 2 no. 3, February 1939. Author's possession via Secular Yiddish Schools in North America collection, M0732, Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif].

At the same time, the children's literature in the Popular Front continued to point out the failings of American capitalism. For example, in the Third-grade book of the IWO schools from 1938, "My Book," features a poem by New York Yiddish Poet Y.H. Radoshitsky, "In a Rich Country," which begins with descriptions on America's wealth.

*Groys iz unzer land do –
Breyt un fet un raykh:
Mit honik, fleysh, and broyt,
Mit fish in yedn taykh.*

Large is our country here
Vast and fat and rich
With honey, meat, and bread
With fish in every river.

But then the poem turns to describe the suffering on the streets of New York City, ending with a vastly

different scene than the fecundity it begins with:

*Un mentshn vestu zen,
Farvolgte un dar,
Un fun di oygn glit,
A veynendiker tsar.*

And people you will see,
Homeless and haggard,
And in your eyes will burn,
A weeping sorrow...³⁹⁴

³⁹⁴ R.H. Radoshitsky, "In rakhn land," in *Mayn bukh: lernbukh farn dritn yor* (New York: kooperative folks-farlang fun internatsionaln arbeter ordn, 1938), 64.

The schools in this period continued in many of the themes they began with, teaching the children about the suffering that comes with capitalism. But there is also a new recognition of the children, in the words of Kadar, “as participants both in the American struggle and American life.”³⁹⁵ That recognition of the children’s Americanism was featured frequently into the images and aesthetics of their children’s literature at the end of the 1930s, as the Yiddish Communist school leaders understood they needed to reflect the identities of their students as much as try to shape them. Importantly, these kinds of American images were found in all of the Yiddish school materials in the United States, not only in the Communist-affiliated schools. And as Americanization, at once, threatened and defined the identity of the next generation in all the Yiddish school networks, many in the Yiddish school movement understood the school activists across the different organizations would have to work together again to continue Yiddish culture in America.³⁹⁶

Relationship to other schools

The Yiddish Communists in the Popular Front started to take a new interest in the work of the other Yiddish schools and actively sought out opportunities for coordination, despite their initial hostile remarks. The Popular Front ethos of coalition building with those outside of the Communist movement enabled this gesture, and allowed Yiddish Communists to return to an earlier mindset in which they saw the project of Yiddish education again in the singular, and their role within that singular project as pushing it leftward. The IWO school activists therefore regularly attended conferences of the Arbeter Ring, Sholem Aleichem, and Farband schools, representing their interest as part of an effort for unity that they asserted was essential for the

³⁹⁵ Kadar, *Raising Secular Jews*, 153.

³⁹⁶ Kadar, *Raising Secular Jews*, 48.

survival of Yiddish schoolwork. As a result, their remarks on the other Yiddish schools were more restrained than in previous years, but they still often could not help themselves from criticizing the other schools. And the old animosities from the Arbeter Ring and others persisted, with the Order activists' who were trying to collaborate often disregarded for being insincere and non-transparent with their true aims. The dynamics between the schools during the Popular Front therefore show that, as much as the IWO activists understood the importance of unity for the survival of the whole Yiddish school movement, the bitterness from the previous years' of tensions with the Socialists could not easily be overcome and trust was not easily rebuilt in the Popular Front.

For example, in the April issue of *Proletarishe dertsyung* in 1936 they reported back from the Farband (Labor Zionist) conference, saying casually, "we went to see if we could learn something."³⁹⁷ At the time, the Farband schools had 3,100 children, with half of their students in the United States and half in Canada. The report about the conference was full of suggestions about the superiority of the IWO Schools in comparison to the Farband schools, claiming for example, "There was not one word about the program, about methods. Not one word about the current situation, about the problems presenting the children of the Jewish masses. Not one word about the workers issues. The word 'worker' or 'Jewish worker' in this conference was almost not mentioned."³⁹⁸ The report continued that the majority of the discussion centered on the question of Hebrew versus Yiddish. To the IWO activists, all of this was an example of how their own program was more sophisticated, not only because they had more content about "workers issues" but also their attention to pedagogy and methodology.

³⁹⁷N. Komenetski, "Tsuzamenfor fun di shuln fun natsionaln arbeter farband," *Proletarishe dertsyung* 2 no. 4 (May, 1936):16. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

³⁹⁸ Komenetski, "Tsuzamenfor fun di shuln fun natsionaln arbeter farband," 17.

The conference was also revealing as to how the other Yiddish secular schools thought about the IWO schools at this juncture. At this conference the question of the *Farband's* relationship to the other schools arose, prompting a debate about whether they should work with the Communists. As the IWO representative who attended the conference explained the discussion, the Farband agreed to collaborate with the Arbeter Ring and Sholem Aleichem schools, but there were several who thought the IWO schools should be excluded because they “are not really Jewish schools.”³⁹⁹ In addition, one of the delegates said that the literature of the IWO schools had a caricature of Jewish person that was anti-semitic as further reason to exclude them in collaborations. While the first part of the resolution about collaborating with other schools was taken up at the conference, the part about excluding the IWO schools was tabled for further discussion.

The IWO often responded to such accusations with reminders of their historical relationship with the school movement, dredging up old fights with their previous rivals. In an issue of *Proletarishe dertsiyung* in February of 1937, for example, there ran an article called “How Old Are Our Schools?” in which the authors argued that “...Without the linke element in the Arbeter ring the schools would have never opened,”⁴⁰⁰ and reminded its readers how it was the linke activists who pushed for the Yiddish schools to begin with. This talking point was one they had used for a long time, since the 1920s, as a way of establishing their authority in the realm of Yiddish culture and education. It shows how even at the height of the Popular Front, the Yiddish Communist school leaders felt they had to defend their place in the history of the Yiddish school movement.

³⁹⁹ Komenetski, Tsuzamenfor fun di shuln fun natsionaln arbeter farband,”17.

⁴⁰⁰ Y. Doroshkin, “Vi alt zaynen undzere shuln?” *Proletarishe dertsiyung* 3 no. 2 (February, 1937): 16. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

The IWO activists, despite even more acute and persisting animosities, attended the Arbeter Ring school conference. At the Arbeter Ring school conference in 1937, Itshe Goldberg commented how it “wasn’t well planned,” remarking that only fourteen people attended. At that point the Arbeter Ring had 7,200 students in their school, only a little fewer than the IWO Schools. In his assessment of the Arbeter Ring school convention, Goldberg took on the tone of a concerned peer, stating that there were many similarities to the discussion as went on the IWO schools, but he felt that the Arbeter Ring was “pedagogically not correct” and “ideologically inconsistent.”⁴⁰¹ In his final assessment, “It is totally clear, that the Arbeter Ring schools are in general on the right path to become a worker school to educate the children for their people and their class...It is in the process of becoming truly a worker school, and must be prudent, it must crystal-clearly advance the Socialist as well as the Jewish portions of its school.”⁴⁰² Although generous, and uncharacteristically so in its tone, IWO school activists still took an authoritative and even condescending angle on the direction of the Arbeter Ring schools. They continued to see their role as pushing the Arbeter ring leftward, even if they were outside the organization. These comments further demonstrate that it was not only the Communists that moderated their content. All the schools added in more Jewish content and softened their political tone.

Despite their superior tone, the IWO activists appeared to be sincere in their efforts to collaborate. Of course, this did not mean the other schools were ready to work with them. At the conference of the Arbeter Ring schools in 1937, the IWO sent a telegram with its greetings and well wishes. The telegram said, “In your earlier conference you discussed issues of history, tuition, language study, supplementary and full schools, more social content, curriculum, and a

⁴⁰¹ A. Goldberg, “Der tsuzamenfor fun di arbeter-ring shuln,” *Proletarishe dertsyung* 3 no. 6 (June, 1937): 5-6. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

⁴⁰² Goldberg, *Der tsuzamenfor fun di arbeter-ring shuln*,” 6.

whole lot of other issues, which at our last conference we had a lot of earnest discussion about. We therefore maintain that it is necessary to again renew our proposal that we made with the educational department of the Arbeter Ring in February 1936 about the united alliance of our both school movements. Together we can be very effective solving all the burning questions. Our best wishes for a successful conference, for a unified Yiddish worker school in America!" The telegram was signed by R. Salzman, national secretary.⁴⁰³ As the telegram from Saltzman suggests, the IWO school activists were trying to extend goodwill, establishing the commonalities and shared interests with their work and that of the Arbeter Ring in an effort to collaborate in the future.

But the telegram received no response. Itshel Goldberg wrote bitterly about the fate of the telegram, saying, "What did they do? They threw it out. No discussion." He further framed their non-response as an "anti-progressive act" that was especially harmful in the context of the threat of Fascism.⁴⁰⁴ The stubborn refusal of the Arbeter ring appeared, to the Yiddish Communists, as a thwarting of the unity effort because of petty differences. In this context, the Communists were trying to make amends while the Arbeter ring could not let go of animosities. As a result of this refusal, their whole project to secure a future of Yiddish culture was threatened.

The IWO schools had a very clear idea of what they wanted out of the collaboration, focusing in particular on the needs of coordinating and sustaining Yiddish culture. In his article, Goldberg lists the ways the various schools can work together. These included collaboration on the teachers courses, as both had a problem of replenishing teachers; children's Yiddish libraries; establishing connection with the unions; and demonstrating public support for Yiddish culture and

⁴⁰³ A. Goldberg, "Problemeyn fun di yidishe veltlekhe shuln in amerike," *Proletarishe dertsyung* 3 no. 7 (July-August, 1937): 10. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

⁴⁰⁴ Goldberg, "Problemeyn fun di yidishe veltlekhe shuln in amerike," 10.

the fight against fascism.⁴⁰⁵ These interests can be explained by the orientation of the Party to establish coalitions during the Popular Front, creating a permissive atmosphere for joining together with Non-Communists in the interests of anti-Fascism. There was also a sincere feeling of a dire need for collaboration if Yiddish was to survive. This was couched in framing their work in Yiddish as an anti-Fascist project, yet it was also apparent from their observations on the ground at the Yiddish schools.

As much as these gestures for collaboration were new, they also harkened back to an earlier period in the 1920s in which the Yiddish schools were conceived of as part of a singular effort, with the linke as seeing its role to push the Arbeter ring leadership leftward. In this way, as much as the gestures of the IWO were to re-establish partnerships were a product of their time, they were conditioned by a long history these individuals had with each other in the realm of Yiddish schoolwork.

The Jewish Workers University

The work of Jewish Workers University during the Popular Front also revealed the extent they had been committed to perpetuating a future of Yiddish culture in an earlier period but had not said so as openly. The Jewish Workers University, at that point a decade old, and had changed little programmatically since its founding in 1926. Courses such as History of the Workers' Movement (the Jewish labor movement and general labor movement), Political Economy, Marxism - Leninism, Yiddish Literature, Yiddish Composition, and English were on the roster in 1927 as well as 1937. Added in the years in between were "Order Courses," designed to train activists in organization and mass movement building for the International Workers Order. Over the years the Jewish Workers University refined its program and methodology, dividing its

⁴⁰⁵ Goldberg, "Problemen fun di yidishe veltlekhe shuln in amerike," 10.

student tracks into three parts: those who needed to receive a more foundational education in basic Yiddish literacy, those whose primary interest was to become organizers in the labor movement, and Yiddish teacher training.

But even though the program itself had not changed significantly, the way that the purpose of the Jewish Workers University was explained was different in the Popular Front period. In a telling statement, Itshe Goldberg, who taught a class for the *mitl shul* graduates, underscored the development of Yiddish culture as a priority in their movement. He writes, “Why do the youth come to the Jewish Workers University? Is it maybe to continue their Marxist education? Is it to deepen their knowledge in political economy, in Marxism, for which they have received merely an introduction in *mitl shul*? No...”⁴⁰⁶ The real reason, he says, is that these youth “come there to initiate the development of a proletarian Yiddish speaking intelligentsia in America.”⁴⁰⁷

Goldberg’s comments tell us much about the perceived role of the Jewish Workers University and the interests of its students at that stage. Unlike before, in 1937 they needed to emphasize their work was not just about a Marxist education but also what made them distinctive for their Yiddish educational goals, for creating a Yiddish intelligentsia that would live on.

This was always, in fact, the purpose of the Jewish Workers University. For as Goldberg points out, they could have gone to the Workers School if they wanted simply a Marxist education. It was just that in 1937, with the shifting atmosphere of the Popular Front, Goldberg could state their interest in developing a Yiddish intelligentsia in explicit terms. Many of the features of the Jewish Workers University that the Yiddish Communists began emphasizing in the

⁴⁰⁶ A. Goldberg, “Di ordn shuln un der abeter universitet,” *Tsen yor yidisher arbeter universitet almanac*, (New York: May, 1937), 40. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

⁴⁰⁷ Goldberg, “Di ordn shuln un der abeter universitet,” 40.

Popular Front had in fact been there from its beginning in the 1920s. For example, a student testimonial from one of the earliest classes of students at the Jewish Workers University describes a deep commitment to Yiddish culture as the driving force for student enrollment. This student had a common background to many of the Yiddish school activists, coming to the United States from Vilna and deeply influenced by what he calls the “the national factor” in Jewish experience.⁴⁰⁸ He describes the perspective of being in an early teacher training cohort at the Jewish Workers University in the following terms: “We came to the Jewish Workers University as a group of students with two ideological orientations. One orientation was expressed by the nationalist influence, what the [Arbeter Ring Teachers] seminar offered us. The second orientation was our own passion to connect with the working masses and find a solution for the Jewish question through the working class.”⁴⁰⁹ This student’s description of leaving the Seminar and joining the Jewish Workers University claims to be a representative mindset of those entering the Jewish Workers University - that it was their commitment to Jewish national issues, or in his words, to “solve the Jewish question,” that was the dominant factor for their participation, and what actually led them to the internationalist context in which to develop Yiddish culture.

More than a substantive change in the work of the Jewish Workers University, the Popular Front shows a more transparent accounting of what the institution meant for its students. Its prioritization of Yiddish cultural work was always there. It was just that in 1937 they could do so openly and without hiding or apology. Throughout the various periods of Communist history, the Yiddish Communist movement was always animated by a tension between Communist internationalism and Jewish particularism. The Jewish Workers University documents in 1937

⁴⁰⁸ S. Horvat, “Mit tsen yor tsurik,” *Tsen yor yidisher arbeter universitet almanac*, (New York: May, 1937), 49-51. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

⁴⁰⁹ Horvat, “Mit tsen yor tsurik,” 51.

actually reveal the consistency of their commitment to the future Yiddish language and culture, even in periods when Yiddish Communists looked like they were subordinating it for Communist internationalism. Outwardly, it seemed like the Popular Front marks a sharp turn in support for Yiddish, support that was seemingly not there before. In fact, what the documents actually show us is that Yiddish Communists held a continuous, fundamental commitment to Yiddish throughout all the periods of the Communist Party.



[Figure 8. This image is of the faculty of the Jewish Workers University in 1937. In the front row, third from the left sits Kalman Marmor, who was the director of the Jewish Workers University at the time. Moyshe Katz sits in the front row on the far left. Tsen yor: yidisher arbeter universitet, New York, 1937. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library, Digital Collections. Pg. 3.]



[Figure 9. "Student-rat fun i. a. universitet." This is an image of the student council of the Jewish Workers University, 1937. It is notable how, in contrast to the faculty, the student council is about half women. Tsen yor: yidisher arbeter universitet, New York, 1937. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library, Digital Collections. Pg. 50.]



[Figure 10. This is an image of Itshe Goldberg teaching the mitl shul graduates at the Jewish Workers University, 1937. Tsen yor: yidisher arbeter universitet, New York, 1937. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library, Digital Collections. Pg. 41.]



[Figure 11. This is an image of the choir of the Jewish Workers University, demonstrating its cultural work in addition to academic subjects. Tsen yor: yidisher arbeter universitet, New York, 1937. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library, Digital Collections. Pg. 22.]



[Figure 12. The library of the Jewish Workers University. Tsen yor: yidisher arbeter universitet, New York, 1937. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library, Digital Collections. Pg. 48.]



[Figure 13. A packed lecture hall for a series of lectures on “the international situation,” by Gina Medem, an activist for ICOR, correspondent for the Communist-affiliated magazine, the New Masses, and regular writer and lecturer for linke Yiddish publications. She was also married to Vladimir Medem, the theorist of “neutralism” for the Bund. Tsen yor: yidisher arbeter universitet, New York, 1937. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library, Digital Collections. Pg. 27.]

The National Conference of Jewish Communists

Popular Front created an entirely new framework for the Party’s approach to Jewish culture, in which Jewish identity was highlighted and celebrated. Americanism in this period was recast as a force of cultural pluralism rather than assimilation, allowing both Yiddish culture and English-based Jewish culture to exist within it. With this shift the Party began making gestures to reach out to English-speaking Jews and expanding the ways that the Jews could do Party work *as* Jews.

One of the most prominent ways the Party sought to organize Jews was by focusing on anti-semitism. This outreach began in the Popular Front, as the first English-speaking Jewish magazine affiliated with the Party, *Jewish Life* was established in 1937. In 1938 there was also a Conference for American Jewish Communists, out of which came a report with a plan for “The Struggle Against Anti-Semitism: A Program of Action for American Jewry,” which spoke of the task of unity within the American Jewish Community as well as asserted the importance of developing a progressive Jewish culture in both Yiddish and English within the Communist movement.⁴¹⁰ The report also connected Jewish and African American struggles, speaking of the way Jews were racialized by Fascism, claiming,

The same theory of race inferiority is being applied to the Negro people, like the oppression of Jews, is a serious menace to America. Lynch-law is no less abhorrent to us as anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitic propaganda which is being disseminated among the Negro people, serves to split the united ranks of Negroes and Jews in their struggle to maintain and extend their democratic rights and liberties. We, as an oppressed people, must especially join with the Negro people in the struggle against all race theories and all oppression due to race or nationality.⁴¹¹

Unlike the Party’s stance in the Third Period, in which the Party sought to whiten Jews and create a White-Black binary for its effort to eradicate white chauvinism, in the Popular Front, Jews were acknowledged as racialized and oppressed along with African Americans, and it was their role to fight the Fascist forces. This recognition of Jews as racialized and oppressed came alongside a commitment to Americanism as a movement for democracy and multiculturalism, as opposed to what they called, “Anglo Saxion race superiority,” the Fascist racialization was “a menace to America.”⁴¹²

⁴¹⁰ J Soltin, Report delivered at the National Conference of Jewish Commuists, “The Struggle Against Anti-Semitism: A Program of Action for American Jewry,” (New York: Jewish Buro of the National Committee, Communist Party, December 24-26, 1938).

<https://www.marxists.org/subject/jewish/soltin-action.pdf>

⁴¹¹ Soltin, “The Struggle Against Anti-Semitism: A Program of Action for American Jewry,” 15.

The report from the Jewish Communist Conference also celebrated “Progressive Jewish Culture,” declaring, “The Jewish masses may be proud of the Jewish culture and they have nothing to be ashamed of or to apologize for in this respect.”⁴¹³ The report further echoes the ideas that had long been used in Yiddish school work to support its position on Yiddish culture, claiming that, “Jewish culture, like the culture of all peoples, is an instrument, or rather, a composite of instruments, in the hands of the people as an aid to its growth and development...Only the predatory ruling classes seek to suppress peoples and destroy their cultures....Marx and Engels, Lenin and Stalin, are the great champions not only of social liberation but also of national liberation of all peoples.”⁴¹⁴ These statements, invoking a historic commitment of the most important figures in Communism to “national liberation of peoples,” (and despite how this departed perhaps from the reality), was a new explicitness in the Party’s support for Jewish culture and for Yiddish culture in the Communist movement. While the ideas were familiar and appeared as early as the 1920s, their appearance in a Party-sponsored document was significant and spoke to a clear turn in the Popular Front.

The report, although appearing in English, also gave special attention to Yiddish culture and in particular Yiddish schools, as the primary indicator for the health of Jewish culture. It remarked,

...a healthy change has taken place in the attitude toward Jewish culture on the part of the second and even third generation of Jews. The negative attitude of these sections of the Jewish population toward Jewish culture, which prevailed until a couple of decades ago, is beginning to disappear simultaneously there is an evident desire on the part of American-born Jews not only to become acquainted with the cultural achievements of their people but also to master the Yiddish language and to contribute their share to the further development of Yiddish culture. Our training courses for teachers now have a majority of American-born students who, in addition to their general education acquired at high

⁴¹³ Soltin, “The Struggle Against Anti-Semitism: A Program of Action for American Jewry,” 31.

⁴¹⁴ Soltin, “The Struggle Against Anti-Semitism: A Program of Action for American Jewry,” 32.

school and college, take courses of training to qualify themselves as teachers in our Yiddish schools.”⁴¹⁵

Indeed, in 1938, the Yiddish cultural activists had much to be optimistic about for their Yiddish schools, which reached their peak enrollment in the year prior. They therefore cast their work as a success not only because of their numbers, but also shaping the attitude of the American-born, in which they are seeing a “negative attitude” toward Jewish culture “disappear.”

At the same time, they also understood in a new way the importance of reorienting to include English-speakers in their project of sustaining a broader Jewish culture beyond the language. Quoting the Party’s leader Earl Browder, the report relayed the following notion: “The question of finding the proper approach to the national groups is only incidentally and partially a language problem. It is first of all a question of understanding these groups as *communities* bound together by its ties of custom, tradition, and culture organically bound up with the *community as a whole*...It is by no means identical with the *foreign-born section*, which in fact constitutes a distinct minority.”⁴¹⁶ The report thereby expresses the interest of the Party in making an overt effort to reach English-speaking, American born Jews and to include them in Jewish cultural work in a new way. Whereas before the “foreign-born” were once the gatekeepers of Jewish cultural work, and Yiddish the only avenue to participate in Party work as Jews, in the Popular Front the party recognized English-speaking Jews were now the majority, and the Party greatly needed them.

As always, the report qualified these statements to make sure it aligned with Marxist-Leninism. It asserted that, “[t]his program of ours is not one of national nihilism, national

⁴¹⁵ Soltin, “The Struggle Against Anti-Semitism: A Program of Action for American Jewry,” 34-35.

⁴¹⁶ Soltin, “The Struggle Against Anti-Semitism: A Program of Action for American Jewry,” 35.

isolation, or national chauvinism.”⁴¹⁷ It further advanced a complete embrace of Americanism, seeking to contrast their position with Fascist ideas of Jewish foreignness, saying that “We proclaim that Jews in the United States are part of the great American people...We love our fatherland and part of its creative people.”⁴¹⁸ This pluralistic conception of Americanism they meant to compete with the conception of Americanism that only saw “Nordics or Anglo-Saxons” as belonging.⁴¹⁹

Jewish Communists therefore sought to advance their work with Jews on two fronts, both in expanding Yiddish culture but also recognizing that Yiddish was not the only way to engage Jewish culture. While Yiddish held an important position during the Popular Front, they also saw the need to bring in English-speaking Jews to the Party through celebrating Jewish identity as part of Americanism. This marked an important transition moment in Party history, in which Yiddish was not the only avenue through which Jews could participate in the Communist movement as Jews. Yiddish was still valued and of primary importance, but it was nevertheless a new irony of the moment that as soon as Jewish identity in both its Yiddish and English expressions was emphasized and celebrated by the Party, Yiddish culture began to decline.

YKUF

Without denying that the Popular Front produced a new atmosphere and changed the trajectory of Yiddish Communist schools and Jewish culture in the Communist movement on the whole, their work in this period was still supported and conditioned by a multi-decade history of their Yiddish cultural activism. It was because of this longstanding commitment to Yiddish

⁴¹⁷ Soltin, “The Struggle Against Anti-Semitism: A Program of Action for American Jewry,” 36.

⁴¹⁸ Soltin, “The Struggle Against Anti-Semitism: A Program of Action for American Jewry,” 36.

⁴¹⁹ Soltin, “The Struggle Against Anti-Semitism: A Program of Action for American Jewry,” 37.

culture that Yiddish Communists in fact became leaders in Yiddish culture in the Popular Front period, rising as coordinators of Yiddish cultural production internationally and seeking to lead the future of Yiddish education on the whole. This leadership is best illustrated by the founding of the *Yidishe kultur farband* (YKUF), which was both a distinctly Popular Front effort as well as another example of a longer-held aspiration by the Yiddish Communists to create a central organization to coordinate Yiddish culture internationally.

In the 1920s, looking at the Kulture-Lige in the Soviet Union, Olgin and Katz advocated for developing a coordinating entity for Yiddish culture. With the support from the Party, the call to unify beyond the Communist movement, and the sense of urgency from the threat of Fascism, the conditions for this vision of a coordinated Yiddish culture, not on just a national but internationally scale were ripe in a new way. In 1936, the committee for a Jewish World Cultural Congress met in Paris. This committee, as described by former Jewish Communist Melech Epstein, was “a long letterhead with a few non-Communist men of letters covering a number of known and camouflaged Party workers.”⁴²⁰ Here, Yiddish Communists took up an even more explicit project as Yiddish cultural activists, with some non-Communist company. As a result of the work of the committee, in April of 1937, an international conference was called in Paris that established YKUF. With many of the same characters in the Communist movement among the leaders of the effort, such as Moissaye Olgin, Rubin Saltzman, and Moyshe Katz, YKUF was designed to expand and coordinate Yiddish culture in the time of Fascist threat.

YKUF was made up of a central board of directors with different national branches. These national branches then in turn coordinated chapters at the city-level. The activities of YKUF chapters included organizing Yiddish reading groups, Yiddish cultural exhibits, speakers and

⁴²⁰ Epstein, *The Jew and Communism*, 323-324.

events, youth clubs, fundraisers and celebrations. As figures like Saltzman took to *Yidishe kultur* to insist on the practical role of YKUF as a “organization for organizations” rather than just existing, “for itself.”⁴²¹ As a central component of its work, it also established a press and distributed a monthly journal called *Yidishe kultur*, which included details about YKUF’s international activities as well as essays about secular Yiddish culture and its meaning in the time of Fascist threat.

However, YKUF was also haunted by the tensions between Communists and others working in Jewish cultural life, needing to overcome significant hurdles to repair these damaged relationships work together for Yiddish culture. Although it was denied by its organizers that YKUF was a Communist project, to many the Communist leadership was obvious, with a number of organizations refusing to participate because of the Communist connections among its leadership. Therefore, as much as YKUF was intended to be a unity effort, it was also undeniable that a substantial portion of the YKUF leadership was involved in the IWO and the Communist movement, and that this compromised its ability to achieve true unity for Yiddish culture.

Reporting back to the IWO from the founding conference in Paris in 1937, Saltzman explained the political tensions surrounding YKUF because of its ostensible Communist affiliations (which he insisted were not there). Saltzman in his report claimed there were “false accusations” regarding the Communist influence, noting how there were “Zionists and Communists” working together on the project. He writes, “Already on the first day of the congress we saw the falsity of the argument...that the Congress would be Communist. Among the 124 delegates there are a total 20 Communists.”⁴²² In truth, YKUF was both a product of Yiddish

⁴²¹ Z. Vaynper, “Finif yor,” *Yidishe kultur* 4, (April, 1943): 13.

⁴²² R. Saltzman, “Der alveltlekher yidisher kultur congres in pariz,” *Proletarishe dertsyung* 3 no. 10(November, 1937): 3.

cultural leadership among the Communists as well as a sincere effort for a diverse coalition for the broader effort of preserving and growing Yiddish culture. But it was nevertheless informative that Saltzman had to explicitly separate himself and others in the moving working on YKUF from the Communist Party, insisting they were in fact in the minority.

YKUF was, although a distinct body from the Yiddish Communist schools and not only a group of Communists, nevertheless the result of years of activism for Yiddish education in the Yiddish Communist community. It is also true, that the ways in which they spoke about Yiddish as their primary goal, and their willingness to work with Zionists and (sometimes) Socialists in this effort, was specific to the Popular Front period. A clear encapsulation of the Yiddish Communist line on Yiddish culture in 1937 was an article from Olgin in the weeks after the culture conference Paris, who wrote in the *Morgn frayhayt* that the Congress as an answer to the “destruction of the fascists, antisemites...” and that “we want, as Jews, to know and speak Yiddish, to not be embarrassed by using Yiddish.” Olgin’s remarks are focused on uplifting Yiddish, but he also remarks how Yiddish is still threatened in particular in capitalists contexts and where there is anti-semitism, saying that it is their priority to increase a connection to Yiddish among Jews in capitalist countries.”⁴²³ Although moderated in their speech from earlier, the Communists still pushed on YKUF to make its work in Yiddish culture politicized. Indeed, Olgin’s article is full of the phrase “progressive.” As he claims, “YKUF takes in people of different ideologies. But we maintain our work is for progressive Yiddish culture...”⁴²⁴ Olgin’s

⁴²³ M. Olgin, “Di historisher batayt funem alveltlekhn yidishn kultur-kongres,” *Yidishe kultur*, 9, (September, 1942): 14. The articles were printed in the *Morgn Frayhayt* on October 30, 1937 and November 6, 1937, a few weeks after the culture congress in Paris. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

⁴²⁴ Olgin, “Di historisher batayt funem alveltlekhn yidishn kultur-kongres,” 14.

remarks show his clear investment in Yiddish itself and a less combative tone, yet it still bears the hallmarks of a Communist way of thinking in its insistence that their work takes on a larger struggle against Fascism and that it must have a wider political purpose.

The Yiddish schools were of course connected to YKUF's efforts, not only because of the commonalities of who was leading them, but also because the schools embodied YKUF's purpose in the building and continuation of Yiddish secular culture. Saltzman, in his report back from the conference, made a point about the Yiddish schools as a priority for YKUF, discussing how there was a sense that they needed to build up the children's Yiddish literature and textbooks and the role of YKUF in that effort. One of the tasks of YKUF, therefore, was to assist in the coordination of the school movements, not only in the United States, but internationally.

After YKUF met in Paris, there was a conference in New York among the Yiddish school activists. At the conference, Goldberg delivered a speech there in which he argued that foundational to the project of the Yiddish schools was the "anti-assimilationism" of their premise. This was "Not only the immigrant generation. It is a separate people's instinct - an instinct and consciousness that calls even among the third generation Americans - that stands against the current of assimilation."⁴²⁵ Goldberg's declaration on the anti-assimilationist purpose of the school was not new. What was new, however, was his framing of a "separate instinct" that lived within even the third generation of Jews, something that Communists would not have said in an earlier time. There was also recognition that, as much as Yiddish culture had uniquely flourished in the United States, the American context was also too formidable for growth and that, despite their efforts. As one article in *Yidishe kultur* put it, "Of course we cannot undo what has been lost

⁴²⁵ A. Goldberg, "Di yidish veltlekhe shul in amerike," *Proletarishe dertsyung* 3 no. 8 (September, 1937): 3. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

in the decades of Jewish life in America.”⁴²⁶ Therefore, as much as YKUF therefore celebrated the successes of Yiddish culture in the United States, there was no question that they were still up against an even more powerful force that made their work in Yiddish culture difficult.

The sentiments expressed in *Yidishe kultur* often oscillated between idealism and frustration on the state of Yiddish culture, especially in relation to Yiddish education. In an article in 1938, Moyshe Katz let his disappointment about the coordination schools be known, saying that the schools don’t communicate because of “ideological differences.”⁴²⁷ Katz further expressed how, despite the teacher training offered at the Jewish Worker’s University, it was not expansive enough to truly meet their needs for Yiddish teacher education. Katz was ultimately arguing for YKUF to prioritize creating a more comprehensive educational program, with developing more expertise and academic work in Yiddish.⁴²⁸ Katz spoke longingly about what it would mean to have academics and intellectuals as “shapers of this movement.” In YKUF, he saw the possibility of the realization of a movement for Yiddish culture he had in many ways spent his life building.

Yiddish Culture and the Youth Problem

As much as the work of YKUF shows a maturation and power of Yiddish cultural work in the earlier Popular Front, it also hosted numerous discussions about their fears in passing on

⁴²⁶ “Yidishe yungt in amerike,” *Yidishe Kultur* 6 (May-June, 1940), 54. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

⁴²⁷ Moyshe Katz, “Vos nemt men tuer far undzer kultur arbet.” *Yidishe kultur* 1 (November, 1938), 56.

⁴²⁸ Moyshe Katz, “Vos nemt men tuer far undzer kultur arbet.” *Yidishe kultur* 1 (November, 1938). 56-57.

Yiddish culture to the next generation. In 1939 YKUF called a conference of Jewish youth, organized by its “Youth Committee.” 80 people came to the conference, with the majority connected to the Yiddish supplementary schools. The conference took up questions such as how to bring youth into their movement more effectively. At the meeting, the conference leaders tried to strike a tone of inspiration and hope in the midst of what was in reality a pervasive sense of discouragement. Some of the attendees expressed anger towards the parents whose children did not know Yiddish because they did not speak to them in Yiddish and did not prioritize it, a similar logic that Katz had made earlier about the teachers.⁴²⁹ As one youth participant claimed, the parents “robbed us.”⁴³⁰ But there was also a recognition of the larger forces they had to contend with, as the leaders described the “destructive power of assimilation.”⁴³¹ It is therefore clear that loss was already on their minds, and they sought to fight it through focusing on their youth work.

The conference also made clear there was a generational divide in their assessment of the nature of the problem. While the elders in YKUF were focused on Yiddish as the key, a number of youth pushed back against the focus on Yiddish, insisting instead the focus should be on Jewish identity and history more broadly. For as a number of the youth explained, if their sense of Jewish culture was going to expand, it needed to conduct itself in English as well. By gauging the perspective of the youth in their movement and their frank discussions on the state of Yiddish, what had been a nagging but somewhat theoretical concern about the impact of Americanization on their prospects for a Yiddish future became clearly undeniable.

⁴²⁹ “Konferents fun der yidisher yungt, gerufn durkhn YKUF in nyu-york,” *Yidishe Kultur* 6 (April-May, 1939): 89-91.

⁴³⁰ “Konferents fun der yidisher yungt, gerufn durkhn YKUF in nyu-york,” 90.

⁴³¹ “Tsu der yidisher yungt in amerike,” *Yidishe Kultur* 6 (April-May, 1939): 88.

The discussion happening within YKUF was paralleled by a discussion within the IWO. In 1939, Itshe Goldberg wrote to some of the IWO's *mitl shul* graduates, asking them to contribute a piece in *Heym un dertsiyung* (previously *Proletarishe dertsiyung*) about what their Yiddish education has meant to them, as well as to join the movement for salvaging it for the future. The responses he received, which were published in several issues of *Heym un dertsiyung*, were varied in their taking points and ideas but still gave a clear picture of the perspective of Yiddish-literate, American-born youth on the Yiddish question. When taken together, the responses of the youth make clear that while they, on the whole, felt a very strong sense of a Jewish identity, Yiddish was not necessarily a central component of that identity. They also believed that the future of their educational movement had to move beyond the language, as Yiddish language itself was not so important to their daily lives nor their sense of political purpose. Their discussion therefore posed a broader question the Yiddish Communists would need to figure out: how important, really, was the language for their other cultural and political goals?

The youth spoke about an integration of their Americanism with their Jewish identities, as well as a feeling that Yiddish existed in a separate sphere. As a 20-year-old student, Ruth Rozetski, who graduated the IWO schools in 1935 writes, "I am an American. I am also a Jew. Must I be more loyal American than a Jew? What do I do as a Jew? In daily life I speak English; in college I learn in English; with friends I speak mostly in English. With Yiddish I use it merely when I find myself in Yiddish speaking spaces, and also with students of the Jewish Workers University. I cannot say that I live in Yiddish. But I want the Yiddish language to live and develop"⁴³² This student, the product of the 1930s IWO curriculum, shows how the schools

⁴³² Ruth Rozetski, "Di tsukumft fun der yidisher shprakh," *Heym un derstiyung* 5 no. 5 (April, 1939): 6. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

ultimately were successful in instilling an emotional connection to Yiddish, but could do little towards their aim of resisting the assimilatory pull of American life and the English-based education the youth received. She also commented on this fact, saying the realities of America are different than in Europe: “Here is not Poland, where Jews speak Yiddish among each other, even small children. Here in America the children become educated in American government schools and to them become in the influence of all that is around them, of the movies, of the radio, of the street.”⁴³³ Speaking to the reality of growing up in America, Rozetski describes how their context simply does not support the development of Yiddish. The project of the schools as a way to resist Americanization was therefore too ambitious for the inundation of the reality of the American-born youth’s experience.

There were also some who maintained some of the Third Period rhetoric they had been educated in. Another student, Harry Mark, who was 25 years old and graduated in 1929, had a more pessimistic tone about the future of Yiddish. In his comments one can hear the echoes of the old curriculum. He responds, “Of course I worry about that the Jews will become oppressed politically, economically, and culturally. But I am not more worried about the Jewish situation than let’s say, the situation of the Blacks in America, of the Catholics in Germany, or in general of the oppressed masses in the Fascist countries...I am part of a struggle against reactionaries in all of its manifestations.”⁴³⁴ Mark’s perspective echoes the emphasis of the Yiddish Communist school curriculum in the Third Period, with his comments on not privileging Jewish oppression over the others. But Mark’s comment also rings out of place and even inappropriate in the

⁴³³ Rozetski, *Di tsukumft fun der yidisher shprakh*,” 6.

⁴³⁴ Harry Mark, “Di oyfhebung fun der idisher kultur,” *Heym un derstiyung* 5 no. 5 (April, 1939): 7. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

context of 1939, when violence and restrictions against Jews was a defining feature of Nazism. Mark's comment, although a minority view, therefore illustrates some of the ways Jewish particularism remained uncomfortable to some in the Communist movement, even though Jewish oppression was a focus of Fascism.

With this perspective, he argues, ultimately, that the IWO schools need to reframe how they are thinking about the problem: that they should not think about how to enrich Jewish culture on its own, but how Jewish culture can enrich other groups. Thus, he advocated for a long-held but older belief about the purpose of their educational structure as one in which its primary aim is not just for Jews. This was, he believed, the only way Yiddish culture in fact could survive. Furthermore, he believed that focusing on Yiddish language may not be the way to achieve this aim. Speaking realistic terms about the state of Yiddish among the American-born youth, he writes (in Yiddish), "...almost all my friends graduated from the school. And they can speak totally lovely Yiddish. Nevertheless, when we come together, English is our language. If we, school graduates, who learned Yiddish in our childhood, don't use the language, how can we expect that the broader Jewish youth, who did not have the opportunities to go to a Yiddish school, should now be begin to speak Yiddish?"⁴³⁵ To be sure, this student claimed, he was not advocating that the Yiddish educational work to end, for when "conditions here become ripe for the wider Jewish cultural survival the Jewish masses will be grateful," but as a current practical matter they need to re-evaluate their expectations and strategy going into the future.⁴³⁶ This former student, speaking plainly of the realities that the Yiddish-educated youth also are not speaking Yiddish, raised what so many of the Yiddish school activists had been working to

⁴³⁵ Mark, "Di oyfhebung fun der idisher kultur," 8.

⁴³⁶ Mark, "Di oyfhebung fun der idisher kultur," 8.

remedy by increasing their Yiddish instruction. He proposes, therefore, that the only way is to engage a cultural project that is not dependent on the language.

This urging of the school movement to pivot its emphasis was further reflected in the response of Henek Halpern, graduate of the schools in 1931. In his letter, Halpern addresses Itshe Goldberg directly, and speaks to the limits of his interest in fighting for the future of Yiddish: “Of course I am interested in the Yiddish language, the Yiddish culture in general – I use it often in daily life. I follow a Yiddish newspaper, take a look at a Yiddish book.”⁴³⁷ But, he continues that this is still limited, “Yiddish does not dominate my life.”⁴³⁸ He therefore says that as much as he appreciates the work of the Yiddish school activists, it is not important enough for him to dedicate his own energy to it, “Itshe –” he concludes, “I have a big respect for your work, for the energy that you, and others like you, devote to the development of Yiddish culture....But in the project for spreading a more beautiful, a better Yiddish culture, you go forward, Itshe, and I will come after from a distance, in full spirit with you, not just as a spectator, nor as an activist.”⁴³⁹ This former student, although expressing respect for Goldberg and the broader work of the Yiddish school movement, politely declines any invitation to fight for Yiddish in the future as it is not one of his priorities.

Multiple former students in the symposium expressed that their education in Yiddish actually led them to feeling separated from the rest of American Jewish life. For instance, another student, Sylvia Guberman, made the same point regarding how, despite her getting a Yiddish

⁴³⁷ Henrik Halpern, “Kenen mir aktiv boyen di yidishe kultur?” *Heym un derstiung* 5 no. 5, (April 1939): 8. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

⁴³⁸ Halpern, “Kenen mir aktiv boyen di yidishe kultur?,” 8.

⁴³⁹ Halpern, “Kenen mir aktiv boyen di yidishe kultur?,” 8. The Yiddish word I translated as “spirit” is *shtimung*.

education, she still feels herself to be the minority of the Jewish youth. She therefore argues that they need to find a way to, “harmonize it [Yiddish] with the surrounding environment because the majority of the Jewish youth did not go to Yiddish school.”⁴⁴⁰ Similarly, Elke Lipshitz, 18 years old, spoke about existing in two separate worlds, the English speaking and the Yiddish speaking. She wrote that other Jewish youth her age “speak about and discuss English books and writers but not the Yiddish ones.”⁴⁴¹ Given the difficulty of maintaining Yiddish literacy for the American-born generation, what was the path forward? As one respondent framed it, “We must reorganize around the problem.”⁴⁴² In other words, perhaps Yiddish literacy was not the lynchpin of their Jewish culture, and they could see a divide between their own Yiddish education and the experiences of other American-born Jewish youth.

The symposium of the *mitl shul* graduates ultimately revealed the extent to which their sense of Americanism was something they felt in harmony with their Jewishness, while Yiddish they struggled to integrate into their lives as both Americans and Jews. Several of the respondents repeatedly discussed their American identity as connected to their Jewish identity. As one graduate from the schools since 1931 put it, “With my Americanism, I feel very strongly my belonging to the Jewish people.”⁴⁴³ Another graduate of the schools from 1930, opened his letter

⁴⁴⁰ Sylvia Guberman, “Di yidishe yungt un di yidishe kultur in amerike. *Heym un dertsyung* 5 no. 6 (June, 1939): 15. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

⁴⁴¹ Elke Lipshitz, “Mer oyfmerzamkayt der yidisher yungt,” *Heym un derstiyung* 5 no. 5 (April, 1939): 7. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

⁴⁴² Paydo Poloski, “In a nit yidishe sevice,” *Heym un dertsyung* vol 5 no. 6 (June, 1939): 15. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

⁴⁴³ Halpern, “Kenen mir aktiv boyen di yidishe kultur?,” 8.

with the declaration: “I am an American Jew. I am a Jew. I am American.”⁴⁴⁴ While this was aligned with the general position of the Yiddish Communist movement during the Popular Front period, it is notable that the years these *mitl shul* graduates were actually in the program was during the Third Period. It shows that, as much as the Yiddish school curriculum discouraged positive associations with Americanism, and as much as they themselves were capable of reading and writing in Yiddish, these *mitl shul* graduates reflected a Jewish identity that substantially diverged from their parents’ generation. The students’ reflections further showed how the supplementary schools were ultimately no match for the tide of Americanization and that Yiddish, for some of them, was even seen as marginal to the larger constellation of their Jewishness, or at least the wider American Jewish community they understood themselves to be a part.

With some exceptions, like Harry Mark, is not clear from the answers how ideologically Communist these youth were. Many expressed concern about anti-semitism and fascism, something that the Party focused on. Regardless, the youth responses show an active engagement in how the political realities of the moment affected them *as* Jews. They expressed a kinship with other Jewish youth, but Yiddish language, while perhaps symbolically important to them, was not key to their politicization nor to their sense of being part of an American Jewish movement fighting against Fascism.

The Yiddish school activists in the Communist movement, while frequently discussing youth investment as a problem, also balked at the notion that there was anything to be worried about in terms of the future of Yiddish education. At its conference in 1938, the Order decided to close over 40 of its schools, with 148 of its schools decreasing to 105. Instead of discussing decline, however, Saltzman described that as a result, the “105 schools are stronger.” But the

⁴⁴⁴ Motl Doroshkin, “Di tsukunft fun der yidisher shprakh un kultur in amerike,” *Heym undertsyung* 5 no. 7 (October, 1939): 10. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

closures signaled that the Order's school movement had perhaps reached its ceiling.⁴⁴⁵ Despite the optimism expressed in 1938, there was a pervasive sense by 1939 in the Yiddish cultural world that Yiddish was in a state of crisis in the United States. Ruben Saltzman, at one point in 1939, reprimanded the Yiddish press, saying it was, “full of pessimism about the future of Yiddish secular schools in this country. From where does this pessimism come?”⁴⁴⁶ Saltzman out in particular an article in *Der Tog* written by an Arbeter Ring teacher who called for looking for a “new Yiddishkayt” in response to the falling numbers in the Yiddish schools. Offended by this suggestion, Saltzman responds, “There is really nothing else to say about the secular school? Is there really not another answer to the difficult issues that stand before the school movement, than to look for a new Yiddishkayt? No!”⁴⁴⁷ Saltzman continues to argue that, if anything, the schools (at least the IWO schools) show signs of their success. He points to the improvements to their pedagogy, the expansion of their journals, the thousands of students in the schools.

But the numbers were declining, and the IWO, in its own way, *was* adapting to try to slow the changes. While in 1938 the schools reported to have 7,500 students, in 1939 it had 7,000 students, and the numbers steadily dropped going forward.⁴⁴⁸ Around the same time as these discussions, *Proletarishe dertsiyung* became *Heym un dertsiyung*, again signaling a shift in emphasis in the Yiddish Communist school movement. The reasoning for the change, as the

⁴⁴⁵ R. Saltzman, “Undzere kinder shuln,” *Proletarishe dertsiyung* 4 no. 6 (June, 1938): 7. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

⁴⁴⁶ R. Saltzman, “Vi haltn mir mit undzer shul bavegung” *Heym un dertsiyung* 5 no. 6 (June, 1939): 3. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

⁴⁴⁷ Saltzman, “Vi haltn mir mit undzer shul bavegung,” 3.

⁴⁴⁸ *Proletarishe dertsiyung* regularly published its enrollment numbers at the beginning of the journal. After 1939 it no longer does this and it becomes more difficult to find the numbers for enrollment, a telling sign on its own.

editors conveyed it, was somewhat vague. As the editors stated, “We changed the name not because the journal was not successful. No, the opposite. We decided to end the name exactly because our journal in four years showed it occupies one of the most distinguished places among the pedagogical journals.”⁴⁴⁹ They further asserted that calling the journal *Heym un dertsiyung* reflects the important goal of connecting the school with the home, and therefore the name should be changed. But, they added, “to change the name of our journal is not to change the program of our journal,” as this has been a longstanding goal.⁴⁵⁰ The change of the name, like the other changes, reflects the broader changes happening in the Communist movement at the time as an effort to expand its work. In typical fashion, the Yiddish Communist pedagogues did not want to suggest there was a problem, but create a picture of continuity even as they engaged in changing the aesthetics and tone of their program.

⁴⁴⁹ “Heym un dertsiyung,” *Heym un dertsiyung* 5 no. 1 (January, 1939): 12. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

⁴⁵⁰ “Heym un dertsiyung,” 12.



[Figure 14. This is the cover of Proletarishe dertsiyung 3, no. 5 May, 1937. It shows an image with a father and son with a banner that says 1st of May. The text beside them reads, "The first of May, the holiday of the worker and folk-masses!" From YIVO Institute of Jewish Research, New York.]



[Figure 15. This is the cover of Heym un dertsiyung 5 no.5, May 1939. This is also an image of a May Day parade. The signs read, "Black, white, yellow, red, blend all the colors together. All people are brothers from one father and one mother." The appearance of this message, in Yiddish, shows the universalist orientation of the Yiddish Communists alongside their commitment to using its particular Yiddish (and Jewish) container. From YIVO Institute of Jewish Research, New York.]



[Figure 16. This is the cover of Heym un dertsyung 5, no. 4 April 1939. With the exception of the May Day issue, the covers of the journal frequently featured images of children without any political messaging, representing their efforts to moderate for the sake of broader appeal. From YIVO Institute of Jewish Research, New York.]



[Figure 17. This is the cover of Heym un dertsyung 7 no 6, December, 1941. Image of President Franklin D. Roosevelt during his speech to Congress on December 8, 1941, reflecting Jewish Communist support for the U.S. entry into WWII. From YIVO Institute of Jewish Research, New York.]

Dissolution of the Popular Front

The declining numbers of young Yiddish-speakers was just one form of crisis that demanded the attention of the Yiddish school activists at the end of the decade, as soon the news of the Hitler-Stalin pact would threaten to dismantle YKUF and the other Yiddish organizations that had Communists in their leadership. Like in 1929, when the riots in Palestine brought Communists in an oppositional position to the rest of the Jewish community, and their organizations suffered a decline in membership as a result, the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939 was an even greater catastrophe. In August of 1939, the Soviet Union entered into an agreement with Germany that involved dividing Poland and a non-aggression agreement between the two powers. To enter into an agreement with Fascist Germany was not only the ultimate betrayal of the Popular Front concept, but especially egregious to the Jews who had incredible personal stakes in the fight against Fascism. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the agreement led to another exodus of Party members and fellow travelers. But there were also those who defended the decision, arguing that Western countries wanted the Nazis to attack the Soviet Union and the pact was an important protective measure, as well as the arguments that the Soviet's saved the Jews of their portion of Poland.⁴⁵¹ In one telling example from the IWO, a Yiddish pamphlet circulated in the IWO that cast doubt on the Order and the Communist leadership, saying, “ ‘Where are the leaders of the International Workers Order leading us?’”⁴⁵² Demonstrating how the pact led to distrust and anger from the base towards the leadership.

⁴⁵¹ “Hershl Hartman’s Oral History.”

⁴⁵² Zecker, *A Road to Peace and Freedom*, 185.

The attempt at unity for the sake of Yiddish culture therefore greatly suffered in the wake of the Pact. Six members of the board of YKUF, including their most distinguished member Chayim Zhitlovsky, left because they did not want to be in league with Communists. In the YKUF journal, *Yidishe kultur* there were several articles pleading with people to continue their work in the organization despite the pact. For example, September-October issue in 1939, YKUF commented that the board members had no grounds for their resignation because YKUF was not a Communist organization and that, if anything, the pact “underscores the importance of cultural activism of Jews in the United States for Jews internationally.”⁴⁵³ The remaining members of the board further countered that *they* (the Communists) had been pushing YKUF to take a stronger and more explicit political stand against anti-Fascism in its work, and so it was ironic that the ones who were leaving were those who had before been against such political declarations.⁴⁵⁴

The pact not only led what were already tenuous allies to abandon the concept of collaboration, it also gave the historic enemies of the Yiddish Communists further reason to rebuff their efforts at unity. In September of 1939, the *Forverts* ran an anonymous article called, “The Communist Poison in the Communist Children’s school,” in which it argued that (as retold by the IWO Yiddish school activists), “the children’s school of the IWO are Communist schools, the teachers are Communists, and the schools have a ‘good order of the Hitler-Stalin pact,’ and that one should not send their child there.”⁴⁵⁵ This prompted the IWO school leaders to respond by dredging up some of their old stances from the earlier period, saying, “The *Forverts* has an old

⁴⁵³ Z. Vaynper, “Mit farshtarkte koykhes su gresere dergraykhungen,” *Yidishe kultur* 9-10 (Sept-Oct, 1939): 88 – 91.

⁴⁵⁴ Eventually, they managed to get Zhitlovsky to return to the board about a year after the pact.

⁴⁵⁵ “A farshtunkte ordn-shul-undzer enfer di soynim!” *Heym un dertsyung* 5 no. 7 (October, 1939): 12. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

tradition of breaking and suppressing the Yiddish schools in America.”⁴⁵⁶ It further led to a declaration from the IWO schools that, “A stronger Ordn schools is the answer to our enemies.”⁴⁵⁷ The old bitterness and rivalries by 1939 had therefore quickly reignited.

Whatever sense of “unity” was enjoyed in the previous year, if it was ever even there, was quickly broken. In 1940, Ruben Saltzman published a 24-page pamphlet with 15,000 copies in circulation called, “Treachery in the Arbeter Ring,” in which he claimed that the Arbeter Ring was publicly and inappropriately attacking the IWO. Saltzman described that on the 15th of January, 1940, the executive leadership of the IWO sent a report to the executive leadership of the Arbeter Ring, in which they asked about an “attack” against the IWO from one of the Arbeter Ring leaders. Saltzman “reminded” the Arbeter ring leadership how the Forverts was not supportive of the Yiddish schools, and that it was the *linke* that put life into the Yiddish school movement, who “gave day and night to the work.”⁴⁵⁸ By dredging up this old conflict from fifteen to twenty years prior as a way of fighting back against the Arbeter ring, we see the tenuousness of the alliances of the Popular Front. Although the policies regarding how to treat others outside the Communist movement had changed, it was many of the same individuals fighting with each other over similar-sounding conflicts. In a sense, the schools were the ultimate symbol to the Order of their longstanding grievances with the Arbeter ring and served as a reminder that the personal conflicts that had defined the earlier period had not really going anywhere.

⁴⁵⁶ “A farshtakte ordn-shul-undzer enfer di soynim!,” 12.

⁴⁵⁷ “A farshtakte ordn-shul-undzer enfer di soynim!,” 14.

⁴⁵⁸ R. Saltzman, *Farrat in arbeter ring*, (New York: Kooperative folks-farlag internationaln arbeter ordn, 1940), 6-7. YIVO RG 1400, Fl 23 Bund Archive, American Communism. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

Unity, as much as it was an aspiration of the time and a rallying cry for the American Jewish community on the whole, it was not necessarily the reality. The volatile alliances of the 1940s in the wake of the Nazi-Soviet pact, and the way these threatened Yiddish cultural work, show how much the Yiddish Communists were unable to transcend the divisions of the earlier period. As much as the Popular Front was a change in strategy, it also revealed the ways many old relationships and dynamics, under the surface, remained the same for over 20 years.

Conclusion

In the Popular Front period, the Yiddish Communist schools reached their climax as well as the initiation of their decline. The years 1935 to 1939 show a transformation of the Yiddish schools in terms of their thematic focus but mostly the demographic makeup of their students, who increasingly felt themselves to be, especially during the war years, as Americans shouldering the weight of Jewish culture in a dire moment in modern Jewish history. While the second half of the 1930s appeared to be a moment of full realization of all their earlier efforts pedagogically and ideologically in terms of the harmonization of Jewish and Communist content, what they had been fighting all along - the tide of Americanization - proved to be too strong.

One can attribute much of their later decisions regarding their Jewish content as their integration of their Popular Front orientation. Indeed, like all the periods of Yiddish Communist school building, their educational work filtered the geopolitical relationships between the United States and the Soviet Union. Yet even with all the changes brought on by the Popular Front policy, the Yiddish schools, at their core, were built for the same purpose - to secure a Yiddish-speaking generation in America, to build Yiddish culture, Yiddish literature, and class-consciousness carried forward by the youth. As much as the context of these schools was marked

by the environment of the late 1930s, at various points their work echoed their roots in the 1910s and 1920s. In many ways, the Popular Front gives us a clearer accounting of what they felt in an earlier period, in which we see how the commitment to Yiddish, beneath the veneer of Third Period or Bolshevization rhetoric, was in fact longstanding and constant.

The Yiddish schools in the Popular Front years should not be described as a full reversal from what they were before, but a continuation of them being caught in their desire for continuing the future of Yiddish language and culture, the changing perspectives of the Communist Party, and the maturation of their American-born children. There were undeniable shifts in the moderated rhetoric of the Yiddish Communists and their embrace of Jewish content in their curriculum was unlike it had been even in their “Non-Partisan School” stage in the late 1920s. And even as they participated in the celebration of Americanism, they were also, still, deeply troubled by it.

As the youth symposium showed, Yiddish culture in the immigrant world needed to be translated to an English-speaking generation, lest it speak to an ever-shrinking community. Americanism and Jewishness could co-exist for the new English-speaking generation, whereas it seemed that Americanism and Yiddish could not find the same harmony. And, at least for the Yiddish Communists of the immigrant generation, the incompatibility of Yiddish and Americanization was always the point. Perhaps this meant that the Yiddish proletarian culture of the immigrant generation, a culture crafted with the intention of passing it on to their children, a culture that sought to Sovietize them in place of Americanizing them, proved to be outmatched by America, as the Yiddish schools steadily declined and eventually moved to English-language, secular “progressive” schools.

CONCLUSION

THE YIDDISH SECULAR SCHOOLS, IN ENGLISH

WORLD WAR II AND AFTER

In 1961, Itshe Goldberg reflected on the challenges that faced Yiddish education over the past few decades. At the time, there were 220 Yiddish schools nationally, 85 of which were “Progressive schools” deriving from the Communist lineage. Summing up what was the central tension propelling their schoolwork, Goldberg said,

We were often trapped by the difficulty of reaching a *synthesis* in our work. How to equalize Jewishness with Americanism? How do you equate your Jewishness with your humanist approach to life in general - are they not mutually exclusive? How do you raise *Secular* Jews in a Jewish community in which the Synagogue seems to be on the rise? How do you give a sense of national identity without isolating your child from the American community? What of Yiddish - are we not foisting upon an innocent generation a relic of the past? Are we not imposing upon the Jewish American child a sense of double loyalties, if not downright divisiveness, by insisting on Jewish values?⁴⁵⁹

Although situating his analysis in the Postwar period, referencing a “humanist approach” where Yiddish Communist school activists would have spoken about “internationalism” in an earlier period, as well as noting the rise of the Synagogue (a Postwar phenomenon), the central point of Goldberg’s words map onto the entire story of Yiddish education. They were unable to find a “synthesis” between America and their version of Jewishness, transmitting their values of the past onto the generation of the present, their particular concerns as Jews with their universal concerns as fighting for a broader labor movement. And now, with the next generation, were they just foisting a “relic of the past” that had little meaning for the next generation? Goldberg’s questions

⁴⁵⁹ I. Goldberg, “Report to Workshop,” 1961. Box 55, Folder 19. Secular Yiddish Schools in North America collection, M0732. Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.: 2.

point to a lack of reconciliation almost fifty years later of the forces animating Yiddish Communist education since its beginning.

But the leaders of the schools like Goldberg had still done important work to bring the schools into a new era. The schools of the Postwar period were different creatures than they had been. Whereas the earlier decades were characterized by their attempt to create a distinct Jewish proletarian culture and circumvent Americanization through Yiddish education, in the Postwar period – as Goldberg referenced – their work was about maintaining a sense of Jewish secularism in the midst of the rise of the Synagogue. Offering an alternative to religious education had been a longstanding goal of the Yiddish Communist schools, but what was happening in the Postwar period, with a rise of a liberal Judaism and the decline of immigrant organizations, was reshaping the character of American Jewish identity as it was broadly understood. It turned out that America did not just pose a problem for Yiddish, but also for their understanding of secular Jewishness.

The central task of Yiddish education at this juncture, therefore, was to continue to build a Jewish *secular* education that maintained its “progressive” values. Goldberg explained the importance of a secular Jewish identity in terms of a historic tradition that, “refutes the need for one single mode for Jewishness.” He continues, “We also see secular expression as an integral part of a *historic tradition*, in Jewish life, appropriating and re-discovering many values.”⁴⁶⁰ Indeed, for decades, these schools were set on reconfiguring what it meant to be Jewish, inspired by their founder’s revolutionary past to create a synthesis of class identity and ethnic identity, with the hope that this version of Jewishness would expand. Even in a moment of declining Yiddish literacy, Goldberg saw how their work was essential to counteracting the forces that led Judaism to supplant the secular Jewish identity carried forth by those of the immigrant generation.

⁴⁶⁰ Goldberg, “Report to Workshop,” 3.

Also keeping with a long tradition of the Yiddish Communist schools, Goldberg saw the work of secular schools as pulling the other schools away from the religious trap. He quotes the secretary of the Sholem Aleichem schools as saying, ““We have ceased to fear religion...”” as evidence of a betrayal of a foundational principal of their schools as being secular. He also writes how in the Workmen’s Circle (Arbeter ring) schools, “Hebrew is introduced in the third year (at the expense of Yiddish, of course)”⁴⁶¹ and that, he claimed, they likened secularism to “heretic prejudices, ” demonstrating “confusion and contamination of ideas.”⁴⁶² This tendency of accepting religion and incorporating Hebrew disturbed Goldberg, who believed the Workmen’s Circle needed to “halt this process of throwing away secular values and compromising with religion...”⁴⁶³ In this way, Goldberg maintained the tradition of his school’s lineage of representing a critical voice in the direction of the whole Yiddish school movement.

Goldberg further used terms that had been constant in the Yiddish Communist school vocabulary: anti-assimilationism and anti-chauvinism. In speaking of the historic and present role of the secular schools, Goldberg asserts that they are “adverse to assimilationism in all its manifestations, as it is to chauvinism with all its shadings.”⁴⁶⁴ As Goldberg shows, even in the Postwar period, when it seemed that assimilation was all but complete, the leaders of these schools sought to reject it, using similar terms they had even used in the early 1930s. And, like before, he took aim at a push for Hebrew education in place of Yiddish education, calling such perspectives the, “*residue of immature, cosmopolitan, assimilationist negation of the*

⁴⁶¹ Goldberg, “Report to Workshop,” 9.

⁴⁶² Goldberg, “Report to Workshop,” 9.

⁴⁶³ Goldberg, “Report to Workshop,” 9.

⁴⁶⁴ Goldberg, “Report to Workshop,” 11.

language.”⁴⁶⁵ As much as the context had changed, Goldberg understood the stakes in similar terms, asserting the importance of maintaining a movement that stood against an American Judaism that would erase the lineage of what was once a powerful movement in Jewish life in the United States. The schools could still change the course of American Jewish history, if they were strategic and careful not to succumb to the ascendant Judaism of their age.

Writing in 1992, historian Arthur Goren, in an essay called, “A ‘Golden Decade’ for American Jews: 1945-1955,” reflected much of Goldberg’s observations and concerns regarding the dilemma of Jewish secular culture. As Goren argues, after World War II, the distinction between Judaism and Jewishness was blurred, that “[t]he synagogue...became the primary guardian of Jewish identity.”⁴⁶⁶ Although acknowledging the continuation of a secular Jewish expression built by the Yiddish-speaking immigrant generation, Goren remarks it was not significant enough to challenge the religious expression. Noting Zionism as an exception, he writes, “... the considerable numbers who were brought up in this milieu in the urban neighborhoods of the years before 1945 failed to seriously challenge or to qualify the religious identification of American Jewry that so quickly became so universal in the post-1945 decade.”⁴⁶⁷ Goldberg appeared to be watching this trend in real-time, as the Postwar American landscape, not only threatened the movement linguistically but the secularism that was core to their identity as Jews.

⁴⁶⁵ Goldberg, “Report to Workshop,” 15.

⁴⁶⁶ Arthur Goren, “A ‘Golden Decade’ for American Jews: 1945-1955,” *Studies in Contemporary Jewry : Volume VIII: a New Jewry? America since the Second World War*, edited by Peter Y. Medding, (1992): 4. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/wisc/detail.action?docID=431114>.

⁴⁶⁷ Goren, A ‘Golden Decade’ for American Jews,” 9.

Between WWII and Goldberg's remarks in 1961, a lot had transpired to not only compromise their Yiddish school effort but the Communist movement that it had been tethered to for so long. The U.S. entry into World War II at the end of 1941 brought the IWO schools deeper into an enthusiastic Americanism alongside their identity as Jewish schools. As a history of the IWO claims, "With the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union on June 24, 1941, a second reaffirmation of the school's dedication to the instruction of Jewish tradition and its relevance to the present day and within the Jewish community was pronounced."⁴⁶⁸ The Yiddish school material also featured increasingly patriotic, pro - America material, that highlighted a multi-cultural Americanism. For example, in a teacher bulletin from 1942, it featured a poem by Yiddish writer Ber Green, which began with the refrain, "I am America, I am America."⁴⁶⁹ The themes of Yiddish school work during World War II included an emphasis on "Heroic Jewish History," Yiddish classics and new Yiddish literature, and "the struggle against fascism and anti-semitism."⁴⁷⁰ This was a continuation of what began in the Popular Front, but the theme of Americanism coupled with Jewishness – two emphases that were largely absent in previous years – was only more pronounced.

The IWO tried to continue to forge unity with the larger Jewish community especially in English-speaking contexts, the exceptions being those in the Socialist movement with whom they had outstanding bitterness. In 1943, for example, Ruben Saltzman as the National secretary of the Jewish section of the IWO, wrote in a pamphlet, *Unity of the Jews for Victory*, expressing his

⁴⁶⁸ Thomas Walker, *Pluralistic Fraternity : The History of the International Worker's Order*. (New York: Garland, 1991), 62. <https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/999678488102121>.

⁴⁶⁹ Lerer buletin, 1942. Box 55, Folder 10, pg. 28. Secular Yiddish Schools in North America collection, M0732. Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

⁴⁷⁰ "Der graduant," Bronkser mitlshul, JPFO (New York: May, 1946). Bund Archive, American Communism, RG1400 Folder 24. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

desires to “help the constructive and patriotic elements,” and “ a *new approach* to our tasks.”⁴⁷¹ In his pamphlet, Saltzman documents the tragedies coming out of Europe, remarking that, “It requires little arguing to show that, had the Jews been fully united, according to the dictates of their deepest interests, they would have been able to contribute much more to the efforts of this country which is straining its resources to win the war; and they would have been able to contribute much more to the cause of the Jewish people!”⁴⁷² On his list of groups to work with are members of the Jewish Community that had previously been dismissed as part of the bourgeois institutions, like B’nai Brith, American Jewish Congress, the Zionist movement, and the Jewish Labor Committee, which Saltzman recognizes as having important influence in the Jewish community.

Despite the clear changes in attitude regarding Jewish unity and culture that began in the Popular Front, many of the old discussions and controversial subjects had continued through the war years. The older resistance to the separatism of the Yiddish Communist sphere continued to be a flashpoint, exposing the tension between nationalism and internationalism in the Communist movement that had never truly been resolved. In 1940 there was a report called, “The IWO and its Work Among National Groups,” which addressed the perennial question: as a Communist-affiliated organization, “Why Work Among National Groups?” The pamphlet acknowledged that the division of national groups is a product of capitalism, and the ruling classes uses divisions between national groups as something to exploit for their own ends. Using these divisions to

⁴⁷¹ Ruben Saltzman, *Unity of the Jews for Victory*, (New York: Cooperative Book League International Workers Order, 1943), 8. Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, Los Angeles, California.

⁴⁷² Saltzman, *Unity of the Jews for Victory*, 13.

nefarious ends, “The efforts of these leaders are designed to keep the American people divided along national lines.”⁴⁷³

There was also, however, an odd twist to its argument about the problems of nationalism. As the pamphlet claimed, the most dangerous nationalism was American nationalism, yet it also, for the first time, made a positive comment about assimilation as a separate and even welcome force. In a divergence from their previous discussion of the term, the IWO in this pamphlet makes a positive comment about assimilation, saying that this American nationalism, by creating “‘Americans’ on one side, and all the immigrants on the other,” is in effect trying “to interfere with the natural and progressive process of assimilation; the assimilation of America by the immigrants and the assimilation by America of the immigrants.” Assimilation here, as the IWO describes it, goes in two directions, and importantly, it is the immigrants who are affecting what American culture is, they are a force themselves of assimilating America. American nationalism was therefore rejecting the absorption of immigrants, when it should be embracing them. Yet again, the terms of assimilation were remade, but this time assimilation was in fact desired and it was American nationalism standing in the way.

To be sure, the IWO was not advocating here for changing its nationality structure, despite these new comments about how to understand assimilation. The distinction between nationalism and doing work among national groups was critical to how the IWO understood its structure, a point they insisted on from the beginning. As the IWO defined nationalism, it existed in various phases and ultimately needed to be combatted. The first was “an ideology of superiority of one

⁴⁷³ “The IWO and Its Work Among National Groups: Purposes of the Order.” (New York: International Workers Order, 1940). 3. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

race or one nationality or their culture over another.”⁴⁷⁴ The second phase was a cultural nationalism, which “veils class divisions and class antagonisms,” which also “must be combatted by our Order.” Third was the “democratic and progressive traditions,” which were “the only element of national traditions useful for a workers organization.” It was this third aspect that the IWO sought to develop, and it was under this reasoning that the Yiddish school curriculum was so important. This more democratic and progressive element, the report claims, “contain no nationalist poison; rather, they are an antidote. They are international traditions. They represent the traditions of a class rather than a nation.”⁴⁷⁵ The national group work of the IWO was therefore extracting the progressive, class-conscious element within nationalism and using that to combat the “poison” of nationalism.

This semantic maneuvering was a consistent feature of Yiddish Communists throughout their entire educational project. Like in their earlier definition of the meaning of assimilation, Communists often inserted exceptions for their own activities that made their work more logical in their own context. The Communists sought to distinguish good national traditions from bad national traditions, good assimilation and bad assimilation, in order to pursue their own projects and aims.

But not everyone was convinced that the national group work of the IWO was so different than the bad kind of nationalism. In 1941, there was a resolution proposed at an IWO conference that called for a reorganization of the IWO not along national lines, because such an organization followed a so-called bourgeois nationalistic model. Appealing to nationalism, this resolution claimed, was a sign of the influence of bourgeois ideology among the masses, and it should be the

⁴⁷⁴ “The IWO and Its Work Among National Groups: Purposes of the Order,” 4.

⁴⁷⁵ “The IWO and Its Work Among National Groups: Purposes of the Order,” 5.

work of the Order to counteract this tendency, not strengthen it. The author of the report, citing Lenin, wrote, "Here again Lenin points to the way. He says, 'Contrary to bourgeois liberal national slogans, the workers democracy raises the demand of absolute unity and unqualified unification of the writers of all nationalities, in all trade unions, in all groups, in all consumers organizations, in all educational and other working class organizations.'"⁴⁷⁶ Thus, the report argues, the Bolshevik program, while acknowledging the reality of oppression of national groups, never "lost sight" of its ultimate aims. And again, quoting Lenin, the resolution asserts, "The propagation of national culture and its autonomy...despite all good intentions of individuals or groups, divides the nations and brings the workers of one nation nearer to their bourgeoisie."⁴⁷⁷ For these reasons, the IWO should change its structure, as national cultural work was only going to reinforce bourgeois ideas.

In this resolution's polemic against the work of national groups in the IWO, through the invocation of Lenin, the author gives particular attention to Jews. Although acknowledging antisemitism as "a real problem," the author claims, "But does that problem justify the organization of Jews as Jews? Would the Jews serve the purposes of that struggle better by organizing along these lines? Most assuredly not, the Jews will serve the purposes of struggle against antisemitism much better by being part of the organizations of Americans? This seems obvious."⁴⁷⁸ Clearly, the leaders of the Yiddish school movement that they did not agree or seem swayed by this idea. Indeed, in 1941 after the report was written, Yiddish school activists were

⁴⁷⁶ Benjamin Herbert, "Draft Report Regarding Work Among National Groups." (New York: February 22, 1941). International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library. 6.

⁴⁷⁷ Herbert, "Draft Report Regarding Work Among National Groups," 9.

⁴⁷⁸ Herbert, "Draft Report Regarding Work Among National Groups," 12.

even more forceful in their embrace of a distinct Yiddish culture and the role of the IWO in advancing that culture. Therefore, despite the Party's embrace of organizing Jews as Jews, many Communists were unswayed by this logic, falling back on a Marxist-Leninism that rejected national divisions.

This report from 1941 further shows how little the discussion on nationalism and national groups, in all these years, had in fact changed. Yiddish communists already had made their counter points to these arguments they were getting from their comrades, and continued to assert the importance of developing a distinct Yiddish-based Jewish identity as Communists. As Moyshe Katz wrote, the “detractors of their schools,” who are within their movement but stand outside of Yiddish cultural work, “[n]ot only know not what our schools stand for –they simply do not want to know, and advance the reasoning, that this work does not matter to them. Not only do they not help with the school -- only the opposite, they often reach the accusation that the school activists are devoted to and faithful to nationalism, to chauvinism, would-be religiousness and try hard to lead astray the school activists from their work.”⁴⁷⁹ These people, Katz continues, misunderstand Leninism. “They do not know –and therefore do not understand –that an important part of Leninism is the Leninist theory of the national question, that the national form has important significance in the cultivation of a unified socialist culture.”⁴⁸⁰ Katz, by pointing to their work in Yiddish culture as supported by Leninism, rather than a departure from it, shows how the arguments for and against Yiddish culture came from the same Marxist authorities, but

⁴⁷⁹ Moyshe Katz, “Dertsiyung un klasnkampf” in *Moyshe katz bukh*, (New York: Moyshe Katz Book Committee, 1963), 92. Digitized by the National Yiddish Book Center. Article was from *Proletarishe dertsiyung* in January, 1936.

⁴⁸⁰ Katz, “Dertsiyung un klasnkampf,” 92.

selectively cited and interpreted, allowing the people to continuously oppose Yiddish education and support Yiddish education on the grounds of Leninism.

Name Changes During World War II

A number of the Yiddish institutions that had been built in the earlier period had to be reimagined to fit the significant demographic shifts that took place. Contributing to the cultural and linguistic changes of the next generation was the class ascension of American Jewry. While into the 1950s a proportion of Jews were still working class, that proportion was in decline, with over half Jews employed in the United States in professional, managerial, and technical roles.⁴⁸¹ Therefore, in addition to a cultural Americanization taking hold of the next generation, there was also a shrinking proletarian Jewish identity. The proletarian and immigrant character of the founding generation of the Yiddish schools could not replicate in the next generation. This demographic shift meant that much of the basis of their Yiddish programs were unsustainable.

The Jewish Worker's University, for instance, as it had been previously modeled, did not live through the end of the war in the midst of such demographic change. In 1941 it became *Der yidisher lern-institut* (The Jewish Educational Institute) and continued its activity in this form until 1943. In late 1943 the Workers School became the Jefferson School of Social Science, taking on a number of courses such as Yiddish language and political economy, that used to be taught at the Jewish Workers University. Indeed, the Jefferson School for a time had a whole Jewish studies division, again reflecting the desire to organize Jews while bridging the English and Yiddish-speaking worlds. As its course roster from 1944 shows, they had courses in English

⁴⁸¹ Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made*, (New York: New York University Press, 30th anniversary ed., 1976), 608.

on “National Question and the Jewish People,” courses in Yiddish on Political Economy, as well as Hebrew language courses.⁴⁸² The IWO at the same time continued, with *hekhers kursn* for the children’s school *mitl shul* graduates so they could continue their studies in Yiddish literature, culture, and teacher training. But the model of the original version for its Yiddish adult education as an entity that would feed both its schools and the larger labor movement did not continue on.

The IWO also rearranged its Jewish section structure. Previously the IWO was organized by language, with Jews in the Yiddish section organized separately from the English speakers. This question of how to organize Jews in fact came up in 1940, during which it was asked: “why this work could not be done best by assigning all English lodges of common national origin to the jurisdiction of the present language section, thereby transformation these sections into national group organization...”⁴⁸³ To which the IWO replied, “The answer is an emphatic NO...”⁴⁸⁴ The reasoning behind this “emphatic no,” the IWO argued, was this would strengthen the elements of nationalism they were trying to eradicate. In short, the IWO at the time defended the structure of language-based national groups, but did not want to expand the national structure beyond language. This left English-speaking Jews and Yiddish-speaking Jews in separate sections.

In a reversal from this policy in 1944, however, IWO’s Jewish section became the Jewish People’s Fraternal Order (JPFO), which contained within it an English-speaking and Yiddish speaking sections. These changes were done in the name of broadening their focus, which the time clearly called for. In the case of the JPFO, “in its Yiddish and English-speaking lodges,

⁴⁸² Pamphlet from The Jefferson School of Social Science for “Winter Term, February to April, 1944,” Bund Archive American Communism, RG1400 Folder 34. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

⁴⁸³ “The IWO and Its Work Among National Groups: Purposes of the Order,” 9.

⁴⁸⁴ “The IWO and Its Work Among National Groups: Purposes of the Order,” 9.

unites the two generations of Jews.”⁴⁸⁵ Broadening was tied to what was required for their work going forward. As Gedalia Sandler, a Yiddish educator and Executive Secretary of the JPFO would write, “...in the unity between those two elements lies the guarantee for our future growth; that our JPFO has the beginnings of a magnificent youth generation.”⁴⁸⁶ At the same time, the JPFO organized an Emma Lazarus Division as its Jewish women’s organization. The ELD also devoted much of its energy to the school curriculum, such as supporting the schools in transitioning English-speaking children to the Yiddish curriculum, thus keeping with the effort of harmonizing the English and Yiddish components of the IWO.⁴⁸⁷

In the period of the 1940s, the IWO re-defined the meaning of anti-assimilationism and Americanization. With the shift to the JPFO including both Yiddish and English components under the banner of a Jewish Section no longer defined by language, it allowed for Americanism and Jewishness to exist alongside each other. This process had been taking place for years, but the recognition of national groups no longer defined by language was still significant. This was further sanctioned by the Communist Party, which had begun to recognize American Jewish identity in the Popular Front. As much as this move was an effort, in the words of Sandler, to “unite the two generations of Jews,” and was viewed as a positive step for bringing the younger

⁴⁸⁵ “Declaration of Principles of the Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order of the International Workers Order,” 1. International Workers Order (IWO) Records #5276. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.

⁴⁸⁶ Gedalia Sandler, “Organizational Problems: Opening Remarks in the report for the Panel on Organization at the Seventh National Convention of the JPFO, June 12-5, 1947,” 1. RG 205 Kalman Marmor Papers MK495 Folder 490. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archive, New York.

⁴⁸⁷ Jennifer Young, “The Scorched Melting Pot: The Jewish People’s Fraternal Order and the Making of American Jewish Communism, 1930-1950.” In *A Vanished Ideology: Essays on the Jewish Communist Movement in the English-Speaking World in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Matthew B. Hoffman and Henry F. Srebnik. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 66.

generation in contact with immigrant Yiddish culture, this transition that began in the Popular Front also meant that Yiddish was no longer the only way that Jews engaged in Party-affiliated work as Jews. This created an environment in which Jewishness was increasingly celebrated, however Yiddish was no longer necessary for living a culturally engaged, Jewish life in the American Communist movement.

The Postwar Period

Despite the need to make peace with what was perhaps the inevitability of Americanization, after World War II Americanism became threatening again. In fact, as soon as the war ended, the Communists, shifting again according to the geopolitical alliances of the Soviet Union, returned to their more aggressive rhetoric, naming the Fascist threat to be growing on American soil. This was reflected in the school curriculum as well. For example, the graduating program of a Yiddish mitl shul in 1946 stated, “It is true that officially the war against Fascist aggression and murder already long ended and we celebrate our holiday this year in a better time than two or three years ago. But the struggle against reactionism, antisemitism, and discrimination continues on.”⁴⁸⁸ These themes echoed the new Communist declaration on Jews in the United States, in which the Party articulated for the first time a theory for organizing Jews as a distinct group and linked the existence of antisemitism to capitalism.⁴⁸⁹ Regarding America with renewed suspicion, emboldened by their continuation of a fight against anti-semitism in which they got unique support from the Communist Party, all the while speaking to a generation that

⁴⁸⁸ “Der graduant,” 1946.

⁴⁸⁹ Resolution of the National Groups Commission of the C.P.U.S.A, “Communist Work Among the American Jewish Masses,” *Political Affairs*, (November, 1946): 1025. reel 26 P78-3911, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.

was increasingly settling into an American Jewish identity, was the next task of the Yiddish schools. The school graduates themselves, profoundly affected by the war years, displayed sense of responsibility to their Jewish identity, arguably in a similar way as the immigrant generation albeit in different terms. The postwar years were therefore a continuation of a familiar cycle: adjusting to the challenges of their moment, embracing a new set of vocabulary that fit with their time, the leaders of the Yiddish Communist schools looked for ways that their Yiddish culture could live on.

After the war, the Communist Party snapped back into its sectarianism, but did so while also embracing the fight against anti-semitism. This was, as always, a strategic move, as Jews made up about half of the Party's membership in the late 1940s.⁴⁹⁰ In October, 1946, the CPUSA's National Groups Commission, for the first time, expressed an explicit policy regarding Jews. In its, "Communist Work Among the Jewish Masses," it warned of a growing anti-semitism on American soil, inherently tied to the very nature of the capitalist structure.⁴⁹¹

Continuing its new orientation toward Jews that it began in the Popular Front, the Party connected Black and Jewish political struggles, seeking to "build alliances between the Jewish masses and Negro people, " as the sources of their oppression were linked by the same root cause.⁴⁹² And, the resolution declared, "The fight against anti-Semitism and for equal rights for the Jewish people is a fight against all reactionary, imperialist, and pro-fascist ideologies of race superiority and supremacy, against Jim Crowism and all forms of national oppression of the

⁴⁹⁰ Gennady Estraiikh, *Yiddish in the Cold War*, (London: Routledge, 2008), 9.

⁴⁹¹ "Communist Work Among the American Jewish Masses," 1025.

⁴⁹² "Communist Work Among the American Jewish Masses," 1034.

Negro people, against the theory of Anglo-Saxon or white race ‘superiority.’”⁴⁹³ In contrast to Jews being the perpetrators of this race superiority as they had in the Third Period, in 1946, they became the victims of it, moving away, in the eyes of the Party, from their identity as simply whites but rather a crucial group that stands against “Anglo-Saxon race superiority.” Therefore, rather than whitening Jews in the Postwar period, the Party increasingly insisted on the particularities of Jewish experience.

Yiddish, however, was no longer as important in defining the distinctiveness of Jews. By 1949, school-related material appeared in English, even as some Yiddish instruction remained. As Goldie Dubitzkie, who was affiliated with the school in the Coops put it, “... the schule began to change: it started teaching in English. For the first time, the Yiddish language, history, and literature were being taught not in that language, but in English. In part this was done because too many children came to Schule without a good grounding in the language in the home, but it also helped to reduce the value of the Schule in the eyes of some of the more traditionally minded parents.”⁴⁹⁴ The question of language still had not been resolved, and the schools continued to be pulled in different directions. Was Yiddish most important or were they satisfied with asserting a progressive, Jewish secularism without Yiddish?

It became clear to even the original leaders of the movement too that the Yiddish secular schools needed to continue their work in some cases without Yiddish to survive the demographic shifts. In 1950 Moyshe Katz, then sixty-five years old, delivered an address to YKUF on the current situation of Yiddish and where to go from there. In his overview of Yiddish cultural

⁴⁹³ “Communist Work Among the American Jewish Masses,” 1026.

⁴⁹⁴ Goldie Dubitzky. Semi-Centennial Coop Reunion Magazine, 1994. Box 42 Folder 17. Secular Yiddish Schools in North America collection, M0732. Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

efforts from the beginning of the century Moyshe Katz wrote that, now, at mid-century, there was “continuous growth of progressive youth and intellectuals, who show a growing interest in Jewish culture, but are not growing in the Yiddish language.”⁴⁹⁵ Katz, who had written so many articles in the 1920s about not trying to predict the future end of Yiddish, was now living in that future moment. But his tone in the piece did not seek to bemoan the loss of Yiddish, but to say something about the time of his generation. In what appears to be him directly addressing these youth, he concludes with the following, almost like a eulogy of their Yiddish cultural project: “We were a generation, who were honored by the history with the destiny of a large historical struggle for a new Jewish worker-folk, for a new Yiddish culture, for a new humanity. Because of this, we often needed to break traditions that were holy to our parents, and overcome obstacles that were seemed unconquered. We now wait for the moment when *you* will stand with us in the line of struggle not only politically and economically, but also in the realm of Jewish culture, and we hope, that you will not do worse than us - to continue to better is our continual struggle!”⁴⁹⁶ It was apparent to Katz that it was time for others take over the future of Yiddish culture and secure its place in the political work of the next generation.

But the schools as they had been connected to the Communist movement, regardless of the Yiddish question, could not survive in the anticommunism of the Postwar environment. Therefore, in 1950, the Committee for Progressive Jewish Education was founded as independent of the IWO schools, with its stated purpose “to disseminate the idea of progressive, secular Jewish

⁴⁹⁵Katz, “Der kultur-kampf in yidishn lebn, 1900-1950,” in *Moyshe katz bukh*, 82.

⁴⁹⁶Katz, “Der kultur-kampf in yidishn lebn, 1900-1950,” 83.

education.”⁴⁹⁷ The Progressive schools described themselves as continuing a much longer tradition, that they were an “outgrowth and a part of the Jewish Secular school movement, which came into existence in this country some 40 years ago.” These schools, no longer under the umbrella of the International Workers Order, coordinated programmatically but operated independently and carried the financial responsibility on their own.

Despite the Committee for Progressive Jewish Education’s insistence on its independence from the JPFO, it was forced to disband in 1955. Those involved in the Yiddish Communist movement were hounded by investigations and lawsuits, despite their institutional reorganizing. A lawsuit against the International Workers Order, brought on by the New York State Insurance Department in 1951, also resulted in the eventual dissolution of the IWO. The Committee for Progressive Education was not spared in this process. As it claimed about the need to disband, “After five years of independent existence, the committee was suddenly pounced upon by the Liquidation Department of the New York State Insurance Commission with the arbitrary allegation that it is considered part of the now defunct Jewish Peoples Fraternal Order.”⁴⁹⁸ As part of an investigation of the Progressive schools, the New York Board of education apparently assigned a committee to investigate the schools, appointing people to examine textbooks and observe classes for “subversive activity.”⁴⁹⁹ The committee called it a “malicious and groundless allegation” and called for “joint resistance to McCarthyite forces.”⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁷ Statement on the Dissolution of the Committee for Progressive Jewish Education, 1955, pg. 2. Box 56 Fl 9. Secular Yiddish Schools in North America collection, M0732. Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

⁴⁹⁸ Statement on the Dissolution of the Committee for Progressive Jewish Education.

⁴⁹⁹ Statement on the Dissolution of the Committee for Progressive Jewish Education.

⁵⁰⁰ Statement on the Dissolution of the Committee for Progressive Jewish Education.

The strength of this anticommunism of the 1950s, coupled with the de-Stalinization in which adherents were reckoning with what took place in the Soviet Union, meant for the collapse of the Communist movement in America. The Party fractured in a new way in 1956, as Communist leaders began questioning and criticizing the Soviet government in a way that had never happened before. Then, with the release of Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" documenting Stalin's crimes, there was something akin to a "religious crisis" in the Communist movement.⁵⁰¹ The Jewish base of the Communist Party, too, had unraveled. In the late 1940s, members of the Jewish Antifascist Committee were arrested, tried for treason, and executed in 1952 by firing squad.⁵⁰² While it took years for the full facts of the situation to be made public, eventually there was a reckoning among Jewish Communists as part of this larger process of de-Stalinization that showed a different picture of Jewish life in the Soviet Union from the one they had previously advanced. Itshe Goldberg, for instance, renounced his Communism in this period and YKUF organized an annual commemoration of the murdered members of the Jewish Antifascist Committee.⁵⁰³ Therefore, while Jewish secular schools could perhaps find a way to continue on, the era of the Yiddish Communist school, as a Yiddish school and a Communist school, was effectively over. It had to, yet again, remake itself.⁵⁰⁴

But the continuation of the struggle was a difficult one to realize, even after the crisis of Communism had passed. Generational divisions also consumed Yiddish cultural work, as the

⁵⁰¹ Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 19.

⁵⁰² Rob Adler Peckerar, "August and After: Remembering Soviet Yiddish." Yiddishkayt (August 2018). Accessed May 28, 2021. <https://yiddishkayt.org/august-12-and-after/>.

⁵⁰³ Kadar, *Raising Secular Jews*, 155.

⁵⁰⁴ Most of the original founders of the movement had died by the 1960s. Olgin died in 1939; Marmor in 1956; Saltzman in 1959; Tarant in 1957; Katz in 1960.

founders of the immigrant generation and the American-born generation had different desires, and the process of transferring authority was a bumpy one, to put it mildly. In a letter to Itshe Goldberg in 1965, a stressed-out school activist in Los Angeles writes (in English), “Itche, a person has, literally, to be made of iron to survive. The structure is a sick one – the older people raise the money and want a say in things. The ‘say in things’ would fit the situation 25 years ago (maybe). As Jeanette says: ‘They want us to go back to Brooklyn Ave, while we want to reach out!’”⁵⁰⁵ She continues, “I have tried, in vain, to get across to the older generation that we are not an organization but an educational institution.”⁵⁰⁶ The generational tension described in the letter shows how those in the younger generation saw the older on as out of date and out of touch – wanting them to go back to the immigrant neighborhoods in New York and thinking in fundamentally different ways about the structure of their school system. Indeed, this experience was widely felt by those who continued Yiddish schools work. As Thomas Walker, in his history of the IWO writes, “... following WWII, some returning veterans found the JPFO’s educational and cultural programs to be out of step with the times, as they perceived much of it to be based in part on a pre-war economic and social conditions and therefore irrelevant for the late 1940s.”⁵⁰⁷

But it was going to become in due time, inevitably, an institution of the emerging generation of the American-born, regardless. Goldie Dubitzkie, again, she gets at the heart of the situation that gripped the schools,

Although originally the schools has [sic] come to life primarily to satisfy the needs of immigrant parents in their struggle to keep their children close to their life and way of thinking, in their struggle against Anglo-Saxon culture which was being forcibly foisted

⁵⁰⁵ Letter to Itche Goldberg from Lena Kornfeld, June 23, 1964. Box 55 Folder 3. Secular Yiddish Schools in North America collection, M0732. Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

⁵⁰⁶ Letter to Itche Goldberg from Lena Kornfeld, June 23, 1964.

⁵⁰⁷ Walker, *Pluralistic Fraternity*, 63.

upon them, in their struggle against assimilation and against a school system which completely negated a Jewish background and even their contributions to American life - the school has, within the last generation become the educational institution for the American born Jews.⁵⁰⁸

In Dubitzkie's comment, we hear an appreciation of the older generation but also a clear sense of their work as being of the past. While the nature of the schools were a form of resistance to that "single mode of Jewishness" that Goldberg had warned against, Yiddish had to incorporate English, their Jewishness had to engage with Judaism, their Old Left lineage would have to make room for the social movements of their present time.

* * *

This study of the Yiddish Communist schools and their origins demonstrates a central conflict animating Jewish experience in the Communist movement between particularism and universalism. As much as the study of Yiddish Communist schools looks at a specific project within the Communist movement, it asserts these themes are crucial to understanding a broader story of identity in the Old Left. To show the place of identity in building the Old Left, this work attended to the continuities in Jews' commitment to Yiddish culture that withstood changes in Communist Party policy. While their rhetoric shifted to comply with the Party at various stages, the Yiddish school activists were consistent in their desire to develop a Yiddish culture that also supported their Communist vision. In the 1910s a number of individuals who would later become leaders in the Yiddish Communist schools participated in building and theorizing about the first Yiddish schools. At that stage they had been influenced by their context of a diverse landscape of Jewish nationalisms, engaging the ideologies of Labor Zionism, Socialist Territorialism, Diaspora

⁵⁰⁸ Letter to Itche Goldberg from Lena Kornfeld, June 23, 1964.

Nationalism, and Bundism. The influences of those nationalist movements never disappeared but rather shaped their approach to Communism. Even as the Party sought to Americanize during Bolshevization and the Third Period, they found a way to continue their Yiddish culture. The Popular Front and World War II, as much as it was a drastic change in the Party's relationship to Jews and America, enabled more transparency in their prioritization and preservationist impulses towards Yiddish, while also introducing a new enthusiasm for Jewish identity that mobilized English-speaking Jews in their movement.

As an anti-Americanization and anti-assimilationist endeavor, the Yiddish Communist schools also offer a prism for understanding a non-linear trajectory of Jewish immigrants' racial status within the fabric of American life. While in the Third Period the Party sought to whiten Jews at the height of their rejection of Americanism, in the Popular Front it recognized their racialization while they newly embraced a cultural pluralist notion of Americanism. The way Americanization and whitening had an inverse dynamic should lead American Jewish historians and American historians more broadly to re-examine the ways Jews have been depicted to progressively Americanize and whiten over the twentieth century.

This dissertation also demonstrated the Yiddish schools' engagement with progressive and experimental theories of education, and how Yiddish Communist school activists shaped educational theories to suit their Yiddish culturalist and Communist needs. At first, they based their work on the ways the theories of child-development supported Yiddish education and how ideas about developing a child's character to participate in society supported socialist causes. Later, their commitment to teaching Party ideology pushed against the values of democratic and independent inquiry, but they continued to channel some of progressive ideas and sought to fit them into a Communist framework. They did this in part by modeling their pedagogy on the

Soviet Union, which had adopted educational practices from the American environment like the Project Method. But ultimately, the progressive educational theories they were so enamored with were found to be inappropriate both for the Soviet schools and the Yiddish Communist supplementary schools. As supplementary schools, they were often burdened by seeking to do too much in their program and too ambitious in their vision. The question of pedagogy also introduced a broader issue of how these schools should balance the influences of American and Soviet environments.

The Yiddish school activists were pulled not only between their universalist and particularist beliefs, but also the tension between Americanizing and Sovietizing. In the 1920s and early 1930s, they attempted to Sovietize their children as a way to preserve a Jewish national identity that was threatened by American assimilation. However, as Communists living in America, they also had to navigate the policies of the American Party (as directed by the Comintern in Moscow), which sought to Americanize and centralize its immigrant base. In the Popular Front and World War II, when they were able to find a new harmony as proud Jews and Americans while maintaining their focus on the Soviet Union, they encountered a new threat to the continuity of Yiddish culture and language for the American-born generation.

In each decade, the shape of what they were fighting changed, and they adapted their rhetoric to fit their Yiddish culture into their Communism. In the 1920s and early 1930s, they were building an international, revolutionary movement in which they were remaking Jewish culture to fit a Communist idiom. In the Popular Front and after, they were part of a “progressive” movement, but still straddling the Jewish community and their place in the Party. By the 1950s, however, not only did they struggle to find a place for Yiddish, but they struggled to assert a basis of their identities as secular Jews: without a Yiddish-literate generation and without a political

movement to identify with, what was left? Without the immigrant generation, large-scale class migration, the rise of the synagogue, and the anticommunism that had threatened the Jewish institutions of the Left, little remained of what had been the foundation of the Yiddish proletarian culture.

Yiddish would, however, never cease to play a role in American Jewish life. As Jeffrey Shandler calls in his book, *Adventures in Yiddishland*, a postvernacular Yiddish took shape in the Postwar era. In Shandler's definition, although the use of Yiddish as a tool of communication decreased, there was also a "secondary, or meta-level of signification—the symbolic value invested in the language apart from the semantic value of any given utterance in it..."⁵⁰⁹ This "postvernacular mode" is perhaps not what those like Katz or Goldberg wanted, but it was the clear requirement for the continuation of Yiddish culture in the Postwar period. Shandler claims that with the decline of the Yiddish schools in the Postwar period was a different kind of, but still powerful, awakening. That, "the secondary significance of Yiddish as a vestige of a 'lost' culture flourished," allowing a postvernacular celebration of Yiddish to emerge.⁵¹⁰

But as much as there has been an admirable maintenance of Yiddish culture in the postvernacular, as well as a continuation of Yiddish learning and even Jewish secular schools today, it is difficult to describe what happened to the Yiddish schools in any way other than decline when the development of vernacular Yiddish was so central component of their program and purpose.⁵¹¹ Therefore, when telling the story of the Yiddish schools, one cannot arrive at the

⁵⁰⁹ Shandler, Jeffrey, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture*, (University of California Press, 2005). *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/wisc/detail.action?docID=239226>.

⁵¹⁰ Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland*, 82.

⁵¹¹ "Hershl Hartman's Oral History"; "Camp Kinderland: Summer Camp with a Conscience." Accessed July 2, 2021. <https://campkinderland.org/>. Camp Kinderland, for example, still exists as

ending without coming up against a sense of loss and failure. But the loss was not just of Yiddish, but also the loss of what made the Old Left and the Jewish role therein.

This story of the rise and decline of the Yiddish Communist schools beckons an autopsy of the movement: what were the forces that caused it to fail? Was this outcome contingent or inevitable? Scholars have already devoted some attention to these questions regarding Yiddish, but it is worth considering them in terms of the specific Yiddish proletarian culture of this movement, which was always in tandem with the larger sphere of Communist politics and the American Left. For the Yiddish Communists, the universalism of their Marxist-Leninism and their priorities stemming from their Jewish identities went together. Therefore, as much as this story is about the fate of Yiddish, it was never *only* about Yiddish, but how Yiddish was held alongside a commitment to their political activism. They understood that identity alone will not deliver their revolutionary desires. This was why the Yiddish Communists were critical of the “Yiddishism” of their time, as they wanted class politics always in dialogue with what we today call “identity politics.” It was the balance of the particularism and the universalism that was always the project, never one without the other.

The history of the Yiddish schools shows how, for the group that made up such a significant portion of the Party, their Yiddish identity was a crucial component of how they were Communists. With a conviction equally powerful to their Communist sympathies, they insisted on

a camp that “honors our progressive secular Jewish roots through our commitment to economic, racial, and social justice,” and has a shule. And the Sholem Community in Los Angeles, whose educational director, Hershl Hartman, went who grew up going to the Coops schools and was a student and colleague of Itshe Goldberg, has a “Secular and Progressive” Sunday school or from pre-K to 12th grade, which teaches Jewish history, culture, and progressive values in a secular mode as well as “A *bisl* (little) Yiddish and a *ksat* (little) Hebrew.” The Sholem Community, according to Hartman, was founded by “mental health professionals” serving children whose parents who were swept up in the anti-Communist investigations and was founded independent of the Arbeter Ring because the Arbeter ring participated in anti-Communism.

continuing Yiddish culture for the American-born generation and held on to this idea even in the most impossible of conditions. For years, Yiddish institutions were unparalleled by any other ethnic group involved in the Party in the United States, even by English-speakers. Yiddish-speaking immigrants were not on the periphery of the Old Left. They were the lifeblood of the Old Left.

Maybe, then, when comparing the ideologies of the Old Left and the New Left that emerged in the 1960s, the issue that is most bothersome is not the presence of any new “identity politics” but more how the identity politics came to exist in the Left in an absence of the universalism that had held it. As much as the Yiddish schools show the continuities of their commitment to Yiddish, the immigrant generation that was so transformed by the Russian Revolution shows a continuity of ethnic identity as the driver of their social activism, and one that they wanted to continue for their children. And maybe, although their precise vision failed, and despite their numerous faults, the Yiddish Communists were right about something. They knew that they needed to, through creating schools for their children, declare a space for the universalism and the particularism to exist together. For if they did not, not only would they lose the part of themselves that inspired them to be activists, but also their place in the movement that they, as Jews, were so central in building.

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